

6th British Isles and Mediterranean Region Commonwealth (BIMR) Women Parliamentarians Conference - Hon. Christine Scipio

The BIMR Commonwealth Women Parliamentarian's Steering Committee met on Thursday 19th September 2019 at the Merton Hotel, St Helier. The BIMR is represented by Women Parliamentarians from Alderney, Cyprus, Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Guernsey, Isle of Man, UK, Jersey, Malta, St Helena, Scotland and Wales. Not all regional reps were able to attend this session.

Margaret Mitchell MSP, of the Scotland Branch was appointed as Vice Chair of BIMR Commonwealth Women Parliamentarian's Steering Committee; Roberta Blackman-Woods, British Labour Party politician is currently the Chair.

The main topics for discussion at this meeting was the review of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarian Strategic Plan for 2019 to 2021 and exploring options for bidding of funds to strengthen the regions functions. The main priority within the Strategic Plan is to increase the number of women in parliament by running programmes within the Branches involving stakeholder groups and creating peer to peer learning opportunities. It was agreed that a realistic budget should be submitted to CPA Executive Council to achieve this.

In depth discussion was held about the nominations for the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarian Chair election at CPC in Uganda. Three candidates had expressed an interest - Shandana Gulzar Khan (Pakistan), Michelle O'Byrne (Tasmania) and Tara Rivers (Cayman Islands).

It was agreed that each region will be entitled to two places on the Steering Committee. Branches do not have to use the full entitlement, but they are strongly recommended to do so. It is recognised that during the transitional phase it may not be possible to fill the second place with a parliamentarian, therefore it can be filled by an official on an interim basis. Where possible and applicable, Steering Committee members should represent different political parties. A rotation schedule will no longer apply and Branches are encouraged to decide their own arrangements to rotate membership of the Steering Committee to ensure continuity and expertise, as well as to refresh, renew and extend the opportunity to others. This may tie in with election cycles.

In the evening of Thursday 19th an opening ceremony took place at the Highlands Great Hall and a warm welcomed was made by Sir William Bailhache, Bailiff of Jersey and President of the CPA Jersey Branch. The Falkland Islands and St Helena were commended for making the effort and journey to attend this conference. 2019 marks 100 years since the States Assembly, Jersey's parliament passed a law – the Franchise Bill, which allowed some women (aged over 30) to vote for the first time in Jersey. This bill came in force on 12th July 1919 and was the first in a series of milestones in the fight for democratic equality. Today in Jersey, 14 women are currently members of the States Assembly out of 49 seats which represents 29%. Pre 1948 there was 0% female representation and in 1948 2% representation.

The student committee gave an excellent performance on a play written especially for this event that brings together six women from the history of Jersey – Claude Cahun, Elinor Glyn, Marcel Moore, Caroline trachy, Florence Boot and Lilian Grandin.

On Friday 20th, delegates were spilt into groups and participated in workshops on diversity, women in tech, sustainable political future, political art and the next 100 years. Emphasis was made on how female politicians can ensure diversity and equality in Commonwealth parliaments, exploring ways to ensure the voices of women are heard over the next century, especially within the political arena. Women have come a long way over the past 100 years, but they and minority groups still have a long way to go to achieve equality in the political sphere.