

REPORT ON ATTENDANCE AT THE 65th COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE HELD IN HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA, CANADA FROM 20th TO 26th AUGUST 2022.

I arrived in Nova Scotia from London Heathrow on the afternoon of 20th August. Immigration and security procedures were very lengthy and there were additional checks related to Covid status. When all these were completed, delegates were transported to their hotels in Halifax. The Sutton Place Hotel where I stayed was opposite the Convention Centre in which the Conference was based which was very convenient.

The conference meeting programme commenced on Sunday, 21st August. Unfortunately, the Small Branches Programme (SBP) and Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Programme (SWP) clashed as I would have liked to attend both to gain as much information as possible that could be beneficial to St Helena. In order to make an informed decision as to which programme to follow, I went to the first Workshop of the SWP – “Empowering Women Parliamentarians and Promoting Diversity/Intersectionality” - and the second Workshop of the SBP – “Building Sustainable Economies in Small Branches.”

Although the SWP Workshop was interesting and an eye-opener regarding how much gender inequality still exists even in what are thought to be quite liberal jurisdictions, most of the session had little direct relevance to St Helena, whereas the SBP Workshop was applicable directly. I, therefore, decided to attend all the SBP activities. I will not describe these here as we have been supplied with the relevant links and downloadable version of the Parliamentarian which provide detailed overviews of each Workshop.

However, some key points emerged which could be of importance to St Helena going forward:-

- The Commonwealth Enterprise and Investment Programme has given funding to Cayman and could potentially assist other British Overseas Territories. St Helena might be precluded because it is grant aided, but this needs to be checked,
- The Scandinavian island of Samsø has become fully dependent on wind power and demonstrates that this is both achievable and affordable,
- Population retention is a major challenge to Prince Edward Island. (A student from the PEI Institute of Island Studies has visited St Helena to inform his own research). PEI is just starting on developing strategies to reduce/mitigate population loss, but in response to a question from me, it was stated that a sense of identity and belonging appear as key factors,
- A number of small jurisdictions, including some such as Malta and Fiji which are large by comparison to St Helena, are experiencing challenges due to an increasing immigrant population with permanent resident status entitling them to the same services and access to land and employment as locals,
- Several jurisdictions, including British Overseas Territories such as Turks and Caicos Islands, have an Expenditure Committee which includes non-Ministers and monitors Government spend in real time – not post-facto.

In the fringes of the Small Branches Programme, I approached Lord Foulkes, who formed part of the United Kingdom delegation, regarding the issue of access to our Council Chamber for disabled persons. He requested that I send him the full details in order that he explore possible contributions towards the cost of installing lifts. I did this and we were going to have further discussion at the Trade Workshop which was cancelled subsequently.

I also discussed, with PAC staff, the training needs which Elected Members had identified (those on the list we matched to the proposed Training Programme last week) relating to the up-coming Post-Election training. I emphasised the importance of one of the team being a Minister from a small jurisdiction which, if possible, has moved to a Ministerial system of governance relatively recently.

In addition, I explained in detail why it would not be possible to host the BIMR Conference in St Helena next year and why this should take place in 2024. Initially, there was some resistance to this date as other Branches had already expressed interest, but I stated that the reasons for the deferral were beyond our control and that with a General Election due in 2025, hosting a Conference that year would be both difficult and inappropriate.

On Tuesday 23rd August, delegates had an opportunity to see something of the history, culture and natural environment. I opted to visit Lunenburg, a traditional fishing port. It is very sad that this area has since been devastated by a hurricane. That evening, the official opening of the 65th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference took place which was a very moving event which included items from the indigenous people of the region and a breathtaking display of acrobatics by amputees.

Wednesday's Workshops were generic, with the first item relating to helping former politicians who have lost their seats, or chosen not to continue, to transition to mainstream life. It was interesting and concerning to learn how traumatic this situation has been found to be by all the research undertaken to date.

I then attended the Workshop on "Accessibility Through Innovation." This related primarily to the use of virtual platforms to communicate with constituents and other out-reach methods. Two approaches which are relevant to St Helena are having meetings for target groups (e.g. parents only when discussing aspects of changes to education policy/legislation) as well as wider consultation, and the possibility of having key individuals to act as a focal point for communication on specific issues – these could be Elected Members or persons feeding information to Elected Members. The latter was tried in some districts many years ago.

That afternoon, I went to the "The Climate Emergency – Are Parliamentarians Holding Governments to Account?" Workshop which gave food for thought but was of greatest relevance to jurisdictions already facing, or on the brink, of climate-related natural disasters.

The General Assembly took place on Thursday, 25th August. This included the Election of Officers of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Executive Committee and Motions relating to procedural and governance matters. A number of delegates were very vocal about their conviction that the position of Chairperson of the Executive Committee should

rotate so a different region fills this every year, while others felt that it was more important to choose the strongest candidate and that the logistics of having a Chair from some regions would be difficult. The latter view was adopted, but I could sense that the issue of rotation is very likely to be aired again next year.

Another contentious issue was that of equal gender representation, not only at the CPC but all CPA Conferences. It was proposed that all Branches should be compelled to send a representative of each gender to all events as they would not be permitted to participate if they failed to do so. The question of funding arose and it was stated that additional funding could be raised by doubling Branches' annual subscriptions.

I addressed the General Assembly to point out that the proposal was counter-productive for small and/or less affluent jurisdictions which would be unlikely to participate in CPA activities, or even remain as Members, if the proposal was endorsed and implemented. An amended Motion which was acceptable was presented and passed. Following the Assembly, Ian Liddell-Grainger MP, Chair of the Executive Committee, congratulated me on my intervention as he said it was crucial that someone indicated the risks of the original proposal.

On Friday 26th August, I returned to England after a very demanding but also enjoyable programme. In particular, it was good to be reunited with colleagues from the Falkland Islands, UK, Gibraltar, Fiji, Malta and the Isle of Man and to establish new contact with jurisdictions such as Singapore and Barbados.