

Summary Report

Attendant at the 66th CPC in Accra (Ghana)

Minister Martin Henry

The 66th CPA conference once again brought together over 600 delegates (Parliamentarians, Speakers, Clerks, Legislatures) from across the entire Commonwealth with only 2 nations not present because of elections taking place in their respective countries (Gibraltar and New Zealand).

The overall theme for this annual conference event was 'The Commonwealth Charter 10 years on: Values and Principles for Parliaments to Uphold' which outlines the principles and values of the Commonwealth family as a whole and agreed in principle.

Personal Summary:

After a very late arrival in Ghana because of delays (2:30 am) on 1st October 2023 and settling in, my first engagement was the 39th CPA Small Branches Conference and business meeting.

Day 1 – Workshop 1 (1st October 2023)

'The Impact of Population Changes on Small Jurisdictions'

The four panellists comprised of representatives from four very different Islands (Guernsey, Isle of Man, Anguilla, Nauru) and gave accounts of their own individual circumstances and unique challenges. Contributions from the floor from a number of other nations such as Malta, Turks and Caicos, British Virgin Islands (BVI), Fiji and others provided very useful and counter insights into the current situation on St Helena.

Nauru and a number of other South Pacific Islands have very similar issues to St Helena such as the "brain drain" with a decreasing labour market, shrinking tax base, limited job opportunities and economical outputs with an increasing decline in population.

However on the other end of the spectrum the net impact of economic success and growth can be both a blessing and a curse, with social and cultural impacts and pressures on infrastructure, services, limited resources and house prices (land availability) all having a high toll on the local populations.

Malta spoke of a very unique circumstance whereby it is one of the most densely populated nations yet still requires a larger labour force to fulfil all of its economic activities.

Reflection

It is extremely important that St Helena re-directs its population stats and current demographics by increasing its economic activity to present greater opportunities, however we must do so in a progressive and structured manner and be fully aware of the cultural, social, and physical impacts of rapid economic success as reflected by our Commonwealth communities.

Day 2 – Workshop 2 (2nd October 2023)

Small Parliaments Working Together: Services and Resource Sharing;

Personal Summary:

The panellists (Newfoundland, Fiji, Jersey, and Guernsey) all gave accounts of the limited access to sufficient parliamentary resources which can undermine jurisdictions/governments and lead to conflicts in relation to the separation of powers. Contributions from other members highlighted with genuine reasons, some of these issues in smaller parliaments where the expenses required to keep such separation is sometimes hard to justify depending on the financial position and resources of smaller nations.

Panellists gave examples of areas where they share services with other neighbouring states/nations such as a number of Ombudsmen, Hansard services and the role of the CPA in up skilling clerks, etc.

Members were asked to discuss common services that could be shared in smaller groups.

Reflection

It was somewhat more difficult to gain actionable insights from this workshop as most jurisdictions that spoke and worked together were neighbouring entities with similar parliaments, social and economic outlays. One of the areas discussed with the Isle of Man and Jersey was shared investigatory services as this has worked for the British Isles, however the cost associated was beyond the current financial capacity of St Helena.

Day 2 – Workshop 3 (2nd October 2023)

Building Independent Parliaments: Ensuring Financial and Administrative Autonomy;

Speakers from Belize, Australian Capital Territory, Seychelles and Head of Programmes, CPA Headquarters (Matthew Salik) gave very informative accounts of the importance and need for a high degree of autonomy and independence. It was highlighted that “even on the 20th anniversary of the Latimer House Principles, many Parliaments continue to face challenges in asserting and exercising their autonomy and independence, due to legal, political or practical constraints”.

Most of the discussion centred on parliamentary autonomy with regards to managing their own budget, staff and facilities with adequate infrastructure and the necessary resources.

Reflection

The workshop and following discussions was highly informative and gave a number of accounts of the overreach of the Executive. However St Helena with a newly established Ministerial Government has historic high levels of oversight by FCDO through the current local administration (largely due to the Island's dependence on Financial Aid). This has led to a potential overreach around decision making, through predetermined financial arrangements which is of huge concern, for both the Executive and Parliament alike.

Day 2 – Workshop 4 (2nd October 2023)

Tackling Climate Change through Environmental Impact Assessments.

Panellists from Australian Capital Territory, Jersey, BVI and Arizona State University spoke of the significant threat that climate change has/will have on small jurisdictions with rising sea levels, increased frequency of extreme weather events, and shifts in ecosystems, among other impacts. The panellists raised issues faced by small isolated communities with limited resources, lack of expertise, and sometimes conflicting interests between development and environmental concerns.

Reflection

Another highly informative discussion which looked at the current impacts already experienced by some Small Island Developing States (SIDS), the pros and cons of green and blue carbon credits and ways of accessing green funding/investment to support energy infrastructure and local food production.

Day 3 (3rd October 2024) – Visit to the Cape Coast Castle (a sobering reminder of the cruelty in the slave trade).

Day 4 - 66th CPA General Assembly (3rd October 2024)

The General assembly was opened by the Vice-President of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) - His Excellency Nana Akufo-Addo, followed by the President of Ghana (2022-2023) - Rt Hon. Alban Bagbin, Speaker of the Parliament of Ghana and CPA Secretary-General, Stephen Twigg. There was a number of presentations which was followed by voting to endorse the below statements:

- Parliaments should collaborate with stakeholders to improve governance architecture and ensure equitable distribution of resources; benchmark best practices for the involvement of Parliaments in combatting terrorism; perform their oversight responsibilities to ensure accountability; make appropriate legislation to combat cross-border terrorism; and address the root cause of terrorism.

- Parliaments of the Commonwealth, with less than 30% women Members, should implement a percentage of gender quotas through legislative means or via political party candidate selections.
- The Commonwealth's Parliaments in the smallest jurisdictions should collaborate to promote fair and sustainable international trade.
- Commonwealth Parliamentarians should champion peace building initiatives, actively involve youth and collaborate across the Commonwealth network, in order to bolster the Commonwealth's role in international security for a more peaceful, secure future.
- Parliamentarians across the Commonwealth must seek to ensure there is secure, reliable, efficient, affordable and environmentally sustainable energy provision available to all.
- The Commonwealth Charter should apply to all Commonwealth citizens irrespective of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age or political views and Parliaments should be actively working to promote the human rights of all.
- Parliaments should embrace their representative function, both in the diversity of its membership and through engaging with the public, including via appropriate and innovative approaches.
- Parliamentarians must actively engage in crafting and implementing strategic policies to address population changes in small jurisdictions, including social, economic and environmental factors.
- Where possible, small Parliaments should consider pursuing opportunities to share or pool resources and services for mutual benefit in strengthening collective parliamentary good governance.
- Parliaments must be sufficiently independent of the Executive, and have access to resources and control mechanisms to function effectively, including those outlined in the CPA Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures.
- Parliamentarians must ensure that Environmental Impact Assessments align with and support sustainable development goals, avoiding conflicts and promoting a harmonious approach to climate resilience in small jurisdictions.

Concluding remarks

The 66th CPA in Ghana was highly informative but more importantly an event which allowed 600 Parliamentarians to connect, discuss common issues and solutions through collaboration, and shared intelligence. This is the largest annual CPA conference and it is my personal opinion that if St Helena can only attend one event this would be the one.