

Report on Attending the 75th Commonwealth Day celebrations and the 72nd Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Westminster Seminar

Hon. Karl Thrower MLC

Report on Attending Parliament on Sunday, 10 March 2024, for the Commonwealth 75 Anniversary Reception and Dinner and attending the 72nd Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Westminster Seminar.

Introduction

I travelled to London to attend the 72nd CPA Westminster Seminar. However, just before I commenced my travel, I received an invitation from the Speaker's office to attend an Anniversary Reception and Dinner at the Speaker's House and in the Palace of Westminster to celebrate the 75th Commonwealth Day.

The 72nd Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) Westminster Seminar was held in London from March 11 to 15, 2024. The first day of the seminar was particularly significant, as it coincided with the 75th Commonwealth Day celebrations held at Parliament and Westminster Abbey.

London has been pivotal in shaping the modern Commonwealth, serving as the historic heart of its formation and evolution. As the capital city of the United Kingdom, London has been the stage for significant events and treaties that have defined and strengthened the bonds between Commonwealth nations. The presence of members at the 75th Commonwealth Day ceremony and celebrations underscores the unity and shared values of the Commonwealth, fostering cooperation and mutual respect among its diverse members. Representing St Helena at these prestigious events was not just an opportunity but a profound honour that I deeply cherish.

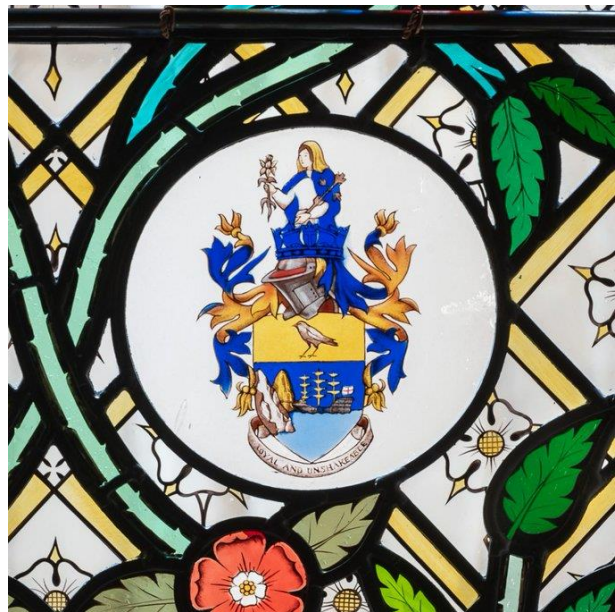
The seminar was a gathering and a unique platform that facilitated active dialogue among legislators, enabling them to share best practices and enhance their parliamentary skills. This report provides an overview of the event, highlighting the number of attendees, the countries they represented, and the significant networking opportunities it offered, underscoring the value and importance of the seminar.

75th Commonwealth Day Anniversary reception and dinner

The anniversary reception and dinner were genuinely unique experiences, and they were one of the highlights of an incredible week. The reception was held at the Speaker's House in the Palace of Westminster, and the dinner was in the central lobby of Westminster. Delegates from various occupations attended the events, including ambassadors, Lords members, MPs, and overseas representatives.



Attendees in the House before the reception dinner.



Stephen Twigg spoke at the reception, and a picture of the St Helena crest in the door to the speakers' residence.

CPA 72nd Westminster Seminar on Effective Parliaments

Attendees and Representation

The seminar, with 67 delegates from a wide range of countries, was a testament to the Commonwealth's diverse and inclusive nature. This diverse representation, including participants from Africa, Asia-Pacific, the Americas, the Caribbean, Europe, and Overseas Territories, truly reflected the Commonwealth's global reach.

- **Africa:** Cameroon, The Gambia, Kenya, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Zambia
- **Asia-Pacific:** New South Wales, Sri Lanka, Tonga, Western Australia, Victoria, Pakistan
- **Americas, Caribbean, and Europe:** Alberta, Antigua & Barbuda, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Canada, Cayman Islands, Falkland Islands, Grenada, Guernsey, Jamaica, Jersey, Quebec, St Helena, St Kitts & Nevis, St Lucia, Trinidad & Tobago, Senedd Cymru

Programme Highlights

The seminar's programme was meticulously designed by the CPA to cover various topics pertinent to parliamentary work. Key sessions included:

- **Celebrating the Commonwealth:** The opening day featured a celebration of the Commonwealth, with delegates donning national dress, lounge suits, or day dresses. This session underscored the shared heritage and values of the Commonwealth nations.

- **The sessions, which included workshops and panel discussions, were theoretical and provided practical insights and tools that delegates could immediately apply to their legislative work. Workshops and Panel Discussions:** Various workshops and panel discussions focused on enhancing parliamentary skills, understanding legislative processes, and promoting good governance. These sessions gave delegates practical insights and tools to improve their legislative work.
- **Networking Events:** Numerous networking events were interspersed throughout the seminar, allowing delegates to build connections, share knowledge, and discuss common challenges.



Attendees of the 72nd Westminster Seminar on Effective Parliaments

Summary of Seminar Sessions

Session 1: The Role of the Speaker

The seminar opens with an examination of the Speaker's role in a legislature, including interpreting Standing Orders, maintaining order, and ensuring neutrality.

Chair: Sarah Dickson, Chief Executive, CPA UK

Speakers:

- The Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle MP, Speaker of the House of Commons, UK Parliament
- Hon. Dessima Williams, Madame President of the Grenada Senate
- Hon. Leo Cato, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Parliament of Grenada

Session 2: Members Session: Effective Parliaments and Responsibility of Members

Explores how parliaments can ensure effectiveness in a global environment and the role of parliamentarians in maintaining functionality.

Chair: Rt Hon. Dame Maria Miller MP, Chair of CPA UK & Member, UK House of Commons
Speakers:

- Hon. Alexandra Mendès MP, Member, Parliament of Canada
- The Baroness Merron, Member, UK House of Lords
- Hon. Lobin Clarke Lowe MP, Member, Parliament of Malawi

Session 3: Interactive Exercise: Parliamentary Systems Analysis

Delegates conduct a SWOT analysis for parliamentary functions to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

Facilitator: Charlotte Geary, Project Assistant, CPA UK

Session 3b: Interactive Exercise: Parliamentary Systems Analysis

Continuation of the SWOT analysis exercise for parliamentary functions.

Facilitator: Mr Liam Laurence Smyth, Clerk of Legislation, UK House of Commons

Session 4: Members Session: Democracy in Practice and Practicing Democracy

Analyses practical dimensions of democratic governance through case studies and success stories.

Chair: Hon. Chris Elmore MP, Member, UK House of Commons

Speakers:

- The Lord German OBE, Member, UK House of Lords
- Senator Sherene Golding Campbell, Senator, Parliament of Jamaica

Interactive Exercise Facilitator: Maggie El Beleidi, Programme Officer, CPA UK



Session 5: Members Session: Pressures on a Parliamentarian

Discusses balancing commitments, prioritising time, and working within political frameworks while serving constituents.

Chair: Rt Hon. Lord Foulkes, Member, UK House of Lords

Speakers:

- Hon. Sabrina Turner MP, Member, Parliament of the Cayman Islands
- Hon. Gystave Chonde MP, Member, Parliament of Zambia

Session 6: Members Session: Leadership and Communication Skills Workshop

A session on leadership and communication skills tailored for parliamentarians.

Facilitator and Coach: Ginny Radmall, Director, The Ivy Way

Session 7: The Role and Impact of Select Committees - Insight into Public Accounts Committees

Provides insights into the work of select committees and their impact.

Chair: Dame Meg Hillier MP, Chair of the UK PAC and Member, UK House of Commons

Speakers:

- Hon. Alhagie Mbow MP, Chairperson of the Committee on Education & ICT and Vice Chairperson of the Committee on Finance & Public Accounts, Parliament of The Gambia
- Tim Jarrett, Clerk, UK Houses of Parliament

Session 8: Holding the Prime Minister and Executive to Account

Fosters dialogue on ensuring accountability and effective scrutiny of the executive branch.

Chair: Hon. Dessima Williams, Madame President of the Grenada Senate

Speakers:

- Hon. Natalie Ward MLC, Legislative Council, Parliament of New South Wales
- The Rt Hon. Philip Dunne MP, Member, UK House of Commons

Session 9: Committee Hearing Exercise - Cyber Security

Witness: Dr. Pia Hüsich, Research Analyst for Cyber, Technology, and National Security, RUSI

Facilitator: Dr. Josh Pike, Committee Specialist, Science, Innovation, & Technology Committee, House of Commons

Session 10: Members Session: Committee Recommendations and Follow-Up

Explores how committees follow up on recommendations and the challenges involved.

Chair: Hon. Dr. Joyelle Clarke, Senator, Parliament of St Kitts & Nevis

Speakers:

- Hon. David Scaife MLA, Member, Parliament of Western Australia
- Hon. Anthony Mangnall MP, Member, UK House of Commons

Session 11: Diversity and Inclusion

Explores how diversity within Parliament enhances its effectiveness and the initiatives to improve inclusivity.

Chair: Hon. Belinda Wilson MP, Member, Parliament of Victoria

Speakers:

- The Baroness Barker, Member, UK House of Lords
- Ajeet Dosanjh, Senior Inclusivity & Diversity Manager, House of Commons

Session 12: Equal Rights to Political Participation? Addressing Gendered Challenges in Elections

Highlights female parliamentarians' election experiences and the need for inclusive political participation.

Chair: Hon. Alexandra Mendès MP, Member, Parliament of Canada

Speakers:

- Hon. Dr Harini Nireka Amarasuriya MP, Member of Women Parliamentarian Caucus and Member of Select Committee on Gender Equity, Parliament of Sri Lanka
- Hon. Chrizoster Halwindi MP, Member, Parliament of Zambia

Session 13a: Members Session: Privileges, Standards, and Behaviour

Initiates dialogue on the privileges and conduct of parliamentarians.

Chair: Hon. Yvonne Fovargue MP, Member, UK House of Commons

Speakers:

- Hon. Christopher Saunders MP, Member, Parliament of the Cayman Islands
- Daniel Greenberg CB, Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, UK Parliament
- Nicolas Besly, The Lord Registrar, House of Lords

Session 13b: Clerks & Officials Session: Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

An opportunity to learn about IPSA's role and how it works with Parliaments to uphold standards.

Chair: CPA UK

Speakers:

- Will Curwen, Acting Chief of Staff, IPSA
- Nicole Casey, Head of Policy, IPSA

Session 14: Utilising Social Media

Explores the responsibilities and best practices for MPs and committees when using social media.

Speakers:

- Lucy Dargahi, Lord Speaker's Communications Office, UK House of Lords
- Anikka Weerasinghe, Director of Select Committee Communications and Engagement, UK Houses of Parliament
- Stacy Jo Dixon, Researcher, Statista



Session 15: Parliamentary Outreach

Discusses outreach and engagement strategies to expand communication with constituents.

Chair: Hon. Adama Bangura MP, Member, Parliament of Sierra Leone

Speakers:

- Hon. Theo Clarke MP, Member, UK House of Commons
- Mariam Keating, Clerk, UK Houses of Parliament
- Shaila Anwar, Clerk Assistant, Senate of Canada
- Kerrie Carpenter, Senior Education and Engagement Outreach Officer, House of Commons

Importance of Networking Opportunities

The seminar's networking opportunities were invaluable. As an attendee, interacting with peers from different countries and legislative systems was a highlight of the event. These interactions fostered a sense of solidarity and mutual support among parliamentarians, which is crucial for tackling global challenges.

Key benefits of networking included:

- **Exchange of Ideas:** Engaging with fellow delegates allows for exchanging innovative ideas and strategies that can be implemented in one's legislative context.
- **Building Relationships:** Establishing connections with legislators from other countries helps create a network of support and collaboration, which can be leveraged for future initiatives and projects.
- **Professional Development:** Interacting with experienced parliamentarians and participating in workshops contributed to personal and professional growth, enhancing one's ability to serve effectively in a legislative role.

Events/meetings outside of the official programme.

There were many opportunities and events outside of the programmed sessions, including discussions about gender-based violence against female MPs.



On day 5, there was also an opportunity to visit one of three local UK MPs; I was lucky to be chosen to meet with Virendra Sharma, the MP for Ealing, Southall. Mr Sharma has been an MP for five terms and is one of the most down-to-earth people I have ever met.

During our visit, he took us to the Shree Ram Mandir Temple to meet the volunteers who run it and some of his constituents. The Temple is the oldest in the UK (1965).

His perspective of being a grassroots MP for over 18 years representing one of the most culturally diverse constituencies in the UK was genuinely enlightening and has already profoundly affected how I view certain issues. Unfortunately, Mr Sharma has chosen not to run in the 2024 election.

I met with Speaker Hoyle and discussed the separation of powers and other issues with which he was helping St Helena move forward. This led to our UK rep Kedell Worboys arranging a meeting with Liam Laurence Smyth, the clerk of legislation who 'might' be coming to the island on a secondment to help us.

Kedell also arranged a meeting with the CPA Sectary General, Stephen Twigg. During our meeting with Stephen Twigg, we discussed several issues, including youth participation, developing stronger links between CPA members for resource sharing, linking the requirements of different countries, and establishing an online communications platform for CPA members. This conversation directly led to my submission of the Digital Transformation and E-Parliament as a theme for the BIMR, which has now been adopted. The CPA has also released information about an information network they are moving forward with.

Dame Hillier chaired a session on the role of Select Committees (session 9), which included an exercise. Which I participated in as a member of the scrutiny committee.

Conclusion

Attending the 75th Commonwealth Day celebrations and the 72nd Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Westminster Seminar was a highly enriching experience. The diverse representation of countries and the comprehensive programme facilitated a robust exchange of knowledge and best practices. The networking opportunities were crucial in building professional relationships and gaining insights that would benefit parliamentary work. This seminar underscored the importance of collaboration and continuous learning in enhancing the effectiveness of legislators across the Commonwealth.

The 72nd CPA Westminster Seminar was a significant event that provided valuable insights and learning opportunities for all participants. It reinforced the importance of effective parliamentary practices and fostered a spirit of cooperation and mutual support among Commonwealth nations.

Special thanks need to go to our Islands UK rep, Kedell Worboys, who helped me throughout my stay in London. Without Kendell's introductions, insight and guidance, it would not have been possible for me to have had such a successful visit.