Root and branch: the UK and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

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Background: UK and Commonwealth

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) is the parliamentary arm of the Commonwealth. It aims to advance parliamentary democracy by enhancing knowledge and understanding of democratic governance and to build an informed parliamentary community that is able to deepen the Commonwealth’s democratic commitment and further co-operation among parliaments and legislatures.

The professional association of all Commonwealth parliamentarians, the CPA is an active network of over 17,000 people and autonomous branches formed in legislatures worldwide. Members of state and provincial legislatures within the Commonwealth are eligible to form a branch and join the CPA. In this way the CPA values national, state/provincial and overseas territories’ legislatures equally, and extends this equal voice to parliamentarians from government, opposition and minority parties – the only organisation of its kind so to do.

The origins of the Commonwealth lie in Britain’s colonial past. However, the fact that two of the Commonwealth’s newest member states, Mozambique (joined 1995) and Rwanda (joined 2009), have no historical links to the British Empire illustrates how the Commonwealth has evolved. The voluntary nature of the organisation distinguishes it from other international bodies such as the United Nations (UN) or the European Union (EU), for it has no founding treaty to bind its members. On issues such as the global economy, food security and climate change, it allows a range of viewpoints to be shared from more varied circumstances than organisations such as the G8/G20.

As of 2011, the countries of the Commonwealth collectively were responsible for more than 20 per cent of world trade, about 20 per cent of investment and approximately 20 per cent of world GDP, with over US$3 trillion in trade taking place within the Commonwealth every year (House of Lords, 2011). Membership of the Commonwealth is of particular benefit to the smallest states—32 Commonwealth members have populations of less than 1.5 million, providing them with access to a diplomatic infrastructure of immense value.

What we are going through, even though we have had the parliament for many years, is the creation of the institution... Everything has to be invented within the Maldives, but while it exists elsewhere it is foreign culturally... We are very young and sometimes it is scary watching this process. We have been entrusted with this huge responsibility in making sure democracy is consolidated in the country.

Abdulla Shahid, Speaker of the Maldives Parliament (2011)

CPA UK activities

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK Branch (CPA UK) is one of the largest and most active branches in the CPA community, and delivers a unique annual programme both in Westminster and overseas. Governed by an Executive Committee of parliamentarians from all main parties, and with a membership from both Houses of Parliament, CPA UK undertakes international parliamentary outreach on behalf of the UK Parliament and the wider CPA. Its specific focus is on parliamentary diplomacy and parliamentary strengthening, seeking to foster co-operation and understanding between parliaments, promote good parliamentary practice and advance parliamentary democracy.

Through activities such as conferences, seminars, workshops, bilateral delegations and fellowships, CPA UK offers parliamentarians – from the UK and around the world – the opportunity to deepen their understanding of international issues and to explore first-hand the challenges faced by countries across the Commonwealth. Topics discussed at our events vary, ranging from peacebuilding and climate change to aid effectiveness and human trafficking. CPA UK activities often serve as a launch pad for co-ordinated international action between parliamentarians, laying the foundations for long-lasting positive relationships between individuals, committees and All Party Parliamentary Groups.

Women in politics and parliaments

In 1911, the same year that the CPA’s predecessor organisation was founded (the Empire Parliamentary
A delegation of women MPs from Pakistan and Afghanistan meeting with the Rt Hon Baroness O’Loan, UK Houses of Parliament

Association), International Women’s Day was observed for the first time. We have recently, therefore, marked not only 100 years of international parliamentary diplomacy within the Commonwealth, but also a century of collective international effort promoting gender equality – a milestone that was celebrated in the Commonwealth’s 2011 theme of ‘Women as Agents of Change’.

As an organisation that subscribes to the Commonwealth’s values of development, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, CPA UK sees the role of women in parliament and parliaments’ impact on women throughout society as key priorities in its parliamentary strengthening work. Programmes focusing on women’s participation in the political process have long been a cornerstone of our activity, reflecting the position of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians at the heart of the CPA.

The headline event for CPA UK in 2012 will be the International Parliamentary Conference on Gender and Politics taking place in November. As part of an ongoing commitment to undertake more work in partnership, thereby increasing efficiency and leveraging expertise, CPA UK is running this conference in conjunction with the British Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, an organisation for which women’s status in politics and society is also very much a priority.

CPA UK has also run a series of successful parliamentary strengthening programmes for women parliamentarians, with notable recent examples including: the first phase of a trilateral programme for women parliamentarians from Pakistan and Afghanistan held in Westminster in May 2012 (to be followed by the second phase in November 2012); an in-country knowledge-sharing seminar in Kenya in January 2012 – the second phase of a bilateral programme between CPA UK and the Kenyan Women Parliamentarians’ Association (KEWOPA); a Westminster-based programme with Tanzanian Women MPs in January 2012; and most recently an in-country seminar with the Ugandan Women Parliamentarians’ Association (UWOPA) in September 2012. These programmes, each with a clearly defined set of objectives, have combined targeted briefings with peer-to-peer exchanges and dialogue, with the overall aim of increasing women’s effectiveness in oversight, advocacy, decision-making and representation.

Rt Hon Alan Duncan MP underlined the importance of a gender-focused approach when addressing delegates at CPA UK’s International Parliamentary Conference on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), stating that ‘a major part of [the UK’s] development philosophy is that we have to put girls at the heart of everything we do’.
This philosophy is embraced wholeheartedly by CPA UK and with continued emphasis on long-term programmes and parliamentary strengthening partnerships, we believe that our gender-related work will have lasting impact.

Public accounts committees and 21st-century challenges

The year 2011 marked a further important anniversary: 150 years since the creation of the UK Public Accounts Committee (PAC), with the remit of examining ‘the accounts showing the appropriation of the sums granted to parliament to meet the public expenditure, and of such other accounts laid before parliament as the Committee may think fit’ (Standing Order No 148). With its assessment based on value-for-money criteria that are unrelated to the merits of departmental policy, it is a fair and non-political model of scrutiny of public spending that has been adopted and adapted throughout the Commonwealth.

Over the last century and a half, the government administration landscape has changed dramatically. The increase in the number of governmental institutions, subsequent moves towards privatisation, proliferating methods of audit and accounting, and the risk of politicisation of scrutiny have all had an impact on the PAC’s methods of ensuring transparency and value for money. With huge developments in the delivery process for public services, questions about the remit of the PAC arise, notably which bodies are subject to its scrutiny – for instance, with the current localism agenda meaning services are increasingly delivered at local level, as is becoming the case in the UK.

As an established body working with a developed public administration, the PAC in the UK faces very different challenges to equivalent bodies in the legislatures of fledgling democracies in the Commonwealth. Any PAC is highly dependent on the country’s Supreme Audit Institution (SAI), the independent body that inspects public spending on behalf of parliaments (in the UK, the National Audit Office), for high quality audit reporting. It is a symbiotic relationship in which the SAI equally depends on the PAC to ensure that its audit findings are given due weight by government departments. However, in countries where budgets are tight, the national SAI is under-resourced and accounting skills are scarce, audit information can often only be acquired at a delay of several years (despite much shorter statutory requirements) and of a quality far below the optimum. In some legislatures, under-resourcing of SAs may even be a political tool where the Executive sees transparency as undesirable.

Another issue faced by PACs in democracies with a less developed ethos of good governance is lack of cooperation from the Executive. The PAC’s remit is to draw attention to its concerns, to place them in the public domain, rather than to force action, and where the government refuses to address the issues all the PAC can do is ensure that the issue remains the focus of media discussion. There is scope for the international community to give the PAC’s findings more authority – for instance, by making financial assistance conditional on their implementation.

These challenges and more were explored at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) UK’s Public Accounts Committee workshop, which took place on 12–15 March 2012, coinciding with Commonwealth Day. It followed the 61st annual Westminster Seminar on Parliamentary Practice and Procedure, held on 5–9 March. The workshop enabled some 70 MPs, clerks and representatives of SAs from legislatures across the Commonwealth, including the parliaments of Rwanda, Nigeria and Pakistan. With sessions minutely examining the respective challenges of small and large legislatures, the PAC’s relationship with the media, corruption and fraud, public procurement, and support and resources, the programme took the Westminster model as a starting point in a course designed to enable delegates to address these and other issues in their own legislatures in a robust and constructive manner.

CPA UK will hold its second Westminster Workshop on the Public Accounts Committee 24-27 June 2013, seeking to build on last year’s discussions and findings. It is envisaged that the work of these two workshops will be carried forward through a long-term programme focusing on PACs, rolled out at a regional level and coordinated by CPA UK and other partners.

Conclusion

We see an even greater role for the organisation to speak out against political oppression, religious intolerance and racism, with all the authority its broad membership affords, and building on its proud track record from South Africa to Sierra Leone. ...In our view, the Commonwealth could and should become one of the leading voices in the global economy, working to liberalise trade and break down barriers for international business. ...Third, we would also like to see the Commonwealth assert an even greater role in development and conflict prevention in the coming years.

UK Foreign Secretary William Hague1

How are such objectives interrelated – and what are the Commonwealth’s opportunities, strengths and weaknesses in pursuing them? At a meeting in Westminster just prior to the 2011 Perth Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), the most significant and affirmative theme of the discussion was the universally held view that the Commonwealth had a great deal of potential for a future at the centre of international diplomacy.
development and democracy. This optimism ‘was tempered by a collective view that this could not be achieved without significant reform, and that the upcoming CHOGM would constitute a defining crossroads.’

Leveraging resources and avoiding duplication is crucial in tough economic times with greater need for a strengthened sense of accountability. Seeking value for money is also in accordance with another recommendation of the EPG (87), calling for increased co-ordination and collaboration. CPA UK strives to partner with other Commonwealth bodies, non-governmental organisations and civil society organisations more than ever. Recent examples of this in practice include a recently signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with VSO (an international charity that uses skilled volunteers to help combat poverty around the world), paving the way for combining CPA UK’s expertise in designing international parliamentary strengthening programmes with VSO’s extensive in-country networks, and working with IIED on climate change programmes with parliamentarians.

CPA UK has also sought over the past year to assert its relevance and fitness for purpose in its second century. In this period of global turmoil, never has there been greater need for an inclusive global ‘soft power’ network (borrowing the UK’s Commonwealth Minister, the Rt Hon. Lord Howell’s words) to promote democratic principles. The CPA is ideally suited to this task, and its UK Branch aspires to provide a forum in which parliamentarians from the national and provincial legislatures of a hugely diverse – and possibly expanding – group of countries can meet to work towards a better understanding without confrontation.

Endnotes
2 House of Lords, Library Note (briefing) for 8 September 2011 debate, ‘To call attention to the “Century of Excellence”of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and to the continuing role of the Commonwealth’. (Nicola Newson 25 August 2011)
4 Houses of Parliament, Report of the Pre-CHOGM Round Table Discussion ‘Options for Reform: Issues and Challenges Facing the Commonwealth’.

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