

**COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE - ABUJA, NIGERIA**

*Statement*

**HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [9.56 pm]:** I cannot possibly do justice to the topic about which I want to talk tonight in the few minutes available. I do want to at least signal to the house something about the experience I had a couple of weeks ago when I travelled as a delegate of the Western Australian branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to the fifty-second annual CPA conference held in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria. This was my first visit to Africa. As members who have been there will understand, I find it quite hard to be coherent about the experience. I have the feeling that it is something that will live with me for the rest of my life and shape many of the things that I do both as a parliamentarian and as a citizen of Australia.

It is very hard to summarise in any brief way what puts together the component parts of that experience. I found it an extremely challenging situation to be in, looking around and seeing oneself surrounded by AK-47-toting soldiers and police, teargas guns and people with canisters strung around their belts and to travel for the whole week in either bulletproof cars or with police escorts with flashing lights and sirens. On one occasion I found myself in the back seat of a clapped-out Toyota with a couple of staff and felt distinctly underprotected after my experiences during the rest of the week. The high commission staff made us feel extremely welcome and extremely secure the whole time we were with them, as did our Nigerian hosts. It is very difficult to start contextualising these experiences as a white Western woman in a country that has such security concerns.

The other 599 delegates who were with me for the week would probably agree with me when I say that the highlight of the week was the visit way up north of the country into Kaduna State, where we were very privileged to have a durbar presented to us. A durbar is a welcoming ceremony usually reserved for royalty. It was almost an unspeakably overpowering experience to be sitting in the heat of the African sun watching thousands of horses parade past, along with monkeys, snakes, tribes dressed in every conceivable colour and even some hyenas, which I found a little less invigorating than some of the other displays. It was certainly an absolutely mind-blowing experience to be part of that welcoming ceremony. Of course, the main purpose for being there was to participate in the conference. I am sure that those members of this house who have served as delegates at CPA conferences will agree with me that one experience that is first and foremost in our minds when we return from these events is the contact we have made with our colleagues in other countries. I was particularly interested to speak with parliamentarians from Fiji, the Maldives, our closest neighbours such as Singapore, Bangladesh and India, some people from further afield on the other side of the world such as the Bahamas and Bermuda and all the African nations. I should mention that the Indian delegates were there in force, as the next conference in 2007 is to be held in India.

I want to draw the attention of the house tonight particularly to three workshops and plenary sessions in which I took part. They had a real impact on me in the sense that they brought to the forefront of my attention issues that I was already very well aware of, but they contextualised them for me in a way that I had not experienced before. The first was a workshop on the issue of climate change. I have spoken in this house about issues of climate change and global warming. I must also say that this was part of the small-countries conference that I was able to sit in on the first day I arrived. I heard for the first time these smaller countries, particularly developing nations, tell the more developed countries that although they could put all sorts of measures in place to cope with the effects of climate change, they looked to the developed countries to make substantial changes to their lifestyles, which is the only way that we all now know will bring about any effective reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. It is therefore all very well to have international conferences about issues such as climate change, but unless the First World is prepared to bite the bullet, it is unfair to look to developing countries to make those kinds of substantial changes. They can certainly build flood barriers and they can certainly take action to protect their countries, but it is we in the developed countries who must make the significant changes to the way we live, consume and run our economies. I think it is fair to say that it was a source of considerable embarrassment to the majority of Australian delegates that Australia has yet to sign the Kyoto agreement. My colleague Hon Sheila Mills has already referred to the policy U-turn made by George W. Bush, but I note that in the United Kingdom Gordon Brown made quite a significant contribution to the debate during the Labour Party conference by committing the UK to some radical action.

I want to mention another two areas. One is a workshop I attended about AIDS and HIV orphans. I must say that even for someone who considers herself fairly au fait with all the literature about the spread of HIV and AIDS and the extent of that problem, particularly in Africa, I was not prepared for some of the absolutely staggering data that was presented in an extremely coherent way by many African countries that are doing some groundbreaking work on the control of HIV, particularly in the area of mother-to-child transmissions. It is a fact, of which some members will be aware, that the overwhelming majority of children under the age of 15 years who are HIV-positive were infected through their mothers. However, the staggeringly tragic statistic is that fewer than 10 per cent of pregnant women are offered services to stop the spread of HIV to their babies. There is

an awful lot that we in countries like Australia can do to help developing nations cope with this massive tragedy. It will, of course, because of the nature of the disease, get worse before it gets better. We were shown projections that prove that there is a long way to go before the graph starts tending downwards. One of the issue lies in the area of data collection. Sadly, a lot of developing countries still do not have proper systems for registering births. Therefore, it is very hard to get on top of the extent of the problem when there is such a fundamental failure of systems that we, at least in Australia and other western countries, take for granted. The other problem, of course, is that we still tend to impose western models of medical service delivery. There was a lot of talk about that at the conference, which I found extremely illuminating.

I will close by drawing attention to one further issue, which I think is something that I will spend a lot of time thinking about in the weeks and months to come; that is, the extent to which many developing nations are still very much developing their democratic processes. Considerable concern was expressed among some of the smaller nations about the ways in which some First World countries, in their response to the terrorism threat, are putting in place some laws and measures that reduce the transparency of their systems. There is a real *cri de coeur* coming from the developing countries that the West should take heed of the need to set an example in terms of its democratic processes as it moves to contain those threats.

*House adjourned at 10.05 pm*

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