

64th Westminster Seminar on Parliamentary Practice & Procedure

Monday 30 November – Friday 4 December 2015

Hon Samantha Rowe MLC

I was one of three delegates from Western Australia to attend the 64th Westminster Seminar on Parliamentary Practice & Procedure in London, UK from Monday 30 November to Friday 4 December 2015. Members of Parliament and Parliamentary Clerks from around the Commonwealth attended the seminar in London to enhance their knowledge of Parliamentary practice and procedure.

The aim of the Seminar was to strengthen the knowledge, skills and confidence of first-term Members of Parliament in the core aspects of our work of parliamentary practice and procedure within a Westminster framework.

The itinerary below illustrates, that the week-long seminar was a stimulating, valuable and enjoyable way to learn about Parliamentary practice and procedure and build practical skills to more effectively represent our constituents in Parliament.

Monday 30 November 2015

Welcome and Introductions Overview of the Seminar Program

Session 1: Introduction to the Westminster System; key current challenges

Guest Speakers

- Chair: Rt Hon David Hanson MP, Shadow Minister for Foreign & Commonwealth Office
- Lord Lisvane KCB
- Charlotte Leslie MP, Parliamentary Private Secretary, Department for International Development and Foreign & Commonwealth Office

The first session began with an introduction to the Westminster System of parliamentary democracy. We discussed what some of the key challenges are that parliaments face as an institution. Charlotte Leslie gave a very interesting briefing on the UK's expense scandal of 2009.

Session 2: Overview of the legislative process

Guest Speakers

- Chair: Tim Loughton MP
- Liam Laurence Smyth, Clerk of Legislation, House of Commons
- Jessica De Mounteney, Senior Parliamentary Counsel, Office of the Parliamentary Counsel

The second session allowed us to explore the passage of legislation and in particular the Westminster bicameral system.

Session 3: Parliamentary administration, finance & governance

Guest Speakers

- Chair: Nigel Evans MP

- David Natzler, Clerk of the House of Commons
- Ian Allies, Director General, House of Commons
- Andrew Makower, Finance Director, House of Lords

The third session allowed delegates to compare Parliamentary administration, finance and governance. One of the main issues that was raised during this session was around the restoration of the Palace of Westminster so that it would be fit for purpose as a modern Parliament.

Session 4: Role of the Speaker

Guest Speakers

- Chair: Rt Hon Sir Alan Haselhurst MP, Member CPA UK Executive Committee
- Rt Hon John Bercow MP, Speaker of the House of Commons
- Rt Hon Baroness D'Souza CMG, Lord Speaker

The fourth session was one of my favourites during the seminar, in part thanks to the highly entertaining speakers. We heard from both the Speaker of the House of Commons and the Lord Speaker on their positions and the very different role that each one plays.

A Conversation: What gives Parliament its power?

Guest Speakers

- Chair: Charles Walker OBE MP, Chair, Select Committee on Procedure
- Prof Meg Russell, Professor of British and Comparative Politics and Director, Constitution Unit, University College London
- Sarah Champion MP, Shadow Minister for Preventing Abuse

The first day ended with an interesting lecture on 'What gives Parliament its power?' followed by a reception hosted by Ian Liddell-Grainger MP, Chair, CPA UK Executive Committee.

Tuesday 1 December 2015

Session 5A: Role of an MP

Guest Speakers

- Valerie Vaz MP
- Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh OBE MP, SNP Spokesperson for Trade and Investment; Shadow Deputy Leader of the House

During this session we explored the role of an MP and how we deal with conflicting priorities. There are a number of similarities between the role of an MP in the UK and Australia in that we both have our constituents, our political party and our parliamentary work competing for our time. I personally found Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh to be a very inspiring speaker as she shared her insights on what it means to be an MP and the role we play in society.

Session 6A: Role of the Loyal Opposition

Guest Speakers:

- Chair: Stephen Pound MP
- Rt Hon Cheryl Gillan MP
- Kirsty Blackman MP, SNP Spokesperson for the House of Lords

- Hon Patrick Yaw Boamah MP

This session was a good reminder that an effective Opposition must act as a credible alternative to the Government. There was also discussion about the importance of strengthening cooperation between different opposition parties.

Session 7A: Business of the House

Guest Speakers

- Chair: Baroness McIntosh of Hundall
- Rt Hon Chris Grayling MP, Leader of the House of Commons
- Chris Bryant MP, Shadow Leader of the House of Commons
- David Nuttall MP

The Leader of the House of Commons and Shadow Leader outlined how they organise the business of the chamber and work with Members of Parliament.

Session 8A: Party discipline in Parliament

Guest Speakers

- Chair: Dame Angela Watkinson MP
- Rt Hon Alan Campbell MP, Opposition Deputy Chief Whip
- Anne Milton MP, Government Deputy Chief Whip

I found this session very informative and interesting as I am the Opposition Whip in the Legislative Council in WA. Good communication is key to being an effective Whip. The speakers stressed that if you aren't talking to people then you are not doing your job. Anne Milton made the point that a Whips role goes beyond party discipline and now includes more of a supportive role to party MPs.

Session 9A: Legislative process pre-legislative scrutiny and committee stage

Guest Speakers

- Chair: Rt Hon Caroline Spelman MP, Past Member, Joint Committee on Draft Modern Slavery Bill
- David Lloyd, Head of Scrutiny Unit, House of Commons

In this session we heard from Caroline Spelman and her experiences on the Draft Modern Slavery Bill Joint Committee to illustrate how beneficial pre-legislative scrutiny in committee can be. During discussions we heard that New Zealand subjects all its draft legislation to pre-legislative scrutiny.

Session 10A: Legislative process amending legislation

Guest Speakers

- Chair: Hon Antoine Borg MP (Parliament of Malta)
- David Slater, Clerk, Environmental Audit Committee, House of Commons
- Dr Louise Thompson, Lecturer in British Politics, University of Surrey

This session explored the process of amending legislation throughout the different stages in Parliament. It was really interesting to hear from Antoine Borg some of the significant legislative developments in Malta, specifically around legalising abortion and divorce.

Session 11A: Role of a Committee Member

Guest Speakers

- Chair: Bernard Jenkin MP, Chair, Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee
- Iain Wright MP, Chair, Select Committee on Business, Innovation and Skills
- Dr Ruth Fox, Director and Head of Research, Hansard Society

In this session we examined the role of the Westminster select committee system. I thought it was particularly interesting to hear that committees in the UK can have quite an influence on Ministers when formulating a policy.

Wednesday 2 December 2015

Session 12: Giving MPs a voice Private Member's legislation, adjournment debates, parliamentary questions & motions

Guest Speakers

- Andrew Stephenson MP, PPS to Robert Halfon as Minister without portfolio, Cabinet Office
- Fergus Reid, Clerk of Private Members' Bills, House of Commons
- Mike Hennessy, Table Office Clerk & Clerk to the Backbench Business Committee, House of Commons

During this session we heard from Andrew Stephenson on the different ways that MPs can raise issues on behalf of their constituents and causes that are important to them, which is not too dissimilar to what we can do in Western Australia.

Session 13: Holding the Prime Minister to account – Prime Minister's Questions

We watched a screening of the previous week's question time and heard from Graham Stringer MP on how PMQs works. It was fascinating to watch their question time as it is not at all comparable to question time in the Legislative Council in Western Australia. At the time of this session the Parliament was debating the UK's response to the crisis in Syria which we were able to observe.

Session 14: The Accountable Parliament Ethics & Standards

Guest Speakers

- Chair: Rt Hon Sir Kevin Barron MP, Chair Committees on Standards and Privileges, House of Commons
- Eve Sampson, Clerk, European Scrutiny Committee, House of Commons
- Gwen Harrison, Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards
- Lord Bew, Chair Committee on Standards in Public Life

In this session we heard how parliamentary ethics and standards had evolved. We also discussed the role of the Parliamentary Commissioner, which included, maintaining the four registers (most notably the Register of Members' Interests, maintaining the Code of Conduct, which regulates MPs' parliamentary and public life and investigating complaints.

Session 15: Dispersing Sovereignty Devolution and Localised Governance

Guest Speakers

- Chair: Patrick Grady MP, Member, CPA UK Executive Committee

- Lord Purvis of Tweed, Spokesperson for Energy & Climate Change, and Vice Chair of the SDGs All-Party Parliamentary Group
- Meka Whaitiri MP, Spokesperson, Water; Associate Spokesperson, Regional Development; Finance; Primary Industries, Parliament of New Zealand

During this session we heard how Scotland's devolution arrangements had developed in recent years. We also had an overview of New Zealand's political arrangements in terms of the way in which the self-determination of indigenous populations can be guaranteed.

Session 16: Knowledge is power parliamentary research and information services

Guest Speakers

- Penny Young, Librarian and Director General, Department of Information Services, House of Commons
- Dr Chandrika Nath, Deputy Director, Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology
- Rollo Hope, Chief of Staff to Sir Gerald Howarth MP

This session explored the way in which parliamentarians access information services, such as the House of Commons Library. It is imperative that MPs have access to up-to-date, reliable and independent information services.

The day concluded with a reception hosted by the Clerk of the House.

Thursday 3 December 2015

Session 17: Parliament in the age of modern democracy education & outreach

Guest Speakers

- Chair: Chole Smith MP
- Louise Palmer, Education Visits Manager, Parliamentary Education Centre
- Meg Hillier MP, Chair of the Public Accounts Committee

In this session we heard about the importance of engaging with younger voters to build their trust in Parliament. We also learnt about the Parliamentary Education Centre and the innovative way it connects with children to get them to engage in the parliamentary process.

Session 18: A Parliament for all ensuring equality and good working environment

Guest Speakers:

- Chair: Baroness Barker, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Voluntary Sector and Social Enterprise
- Prof Sarah Childs, Professor of Politics and Gender, University of Bristol
- Ann Mughaddami, Chair ParliAble

I found this session very informative and enjoyed the discussion from Baroness Barker on workplace equality in the UK. It is always interesting to learn what other countries do to make sure that Parliaments are becoming more accessible to women. Whether it be through practical developments such as a crèche or the establishment of a Women & Equalities Select Committee.

Session 19: Working Parliament – Observing the UK Parliament in Action

This session was certainly a highlight as we were given the opportunity to observe the UK Parliament in action. I was able to observe the debates taking place in the House of Commons.

Session 20: The role of the media

Guest Speakers

- Diane Abbott MP
- James Landale, Deputy Political Editor, BBC
- Hon Sunjeev Kaur Birdi MP, Chair, Nominated Members, Kenya Women Parliamentary Association

This session explored the role of the media and also the relationship that MPs have with journalists. The common theme from all three panellists was that cooperation and transparency was key to facilitating a good working relationship between politicians and journalists.

Session 21: Parliament, NGOs and CSOs

Guest Speakers

- Klara Skrivankova, Europe Programme Coordinator, Anti-Slavery International
- Suse Latta, CPA UK, Head of Conferences and Projects

During this session we discussed the relationship between civil society organisations and parliamentarians. Civil Society and NGOs can certainly support parliamentarians' work and I think in Australia and particularly in Western Australia, MPs have very strong relationships with a number of stakeholders to help inform their decision-making process.

Closing Plenary: Common path to democracy Commonwealth Oral History Project

Friday 4 December 2015

The final day of the Seminar was the Constituency visits. I was assigned to the Rt Hon. Tom Brake MP (Liberal Democrat) for Carshalton & Wallington. Tom is what I would classify as a 'continuous campaigner', someone that understands the importance of building relationships and securing victories for the community he represents.

Tom and his staff were incredibly generous with their time and organised a number of visits for us within the constituency. We started at a local school where Tom made a presentation to the students on the role of a Member of Parliament followed by an impromptu Q&A from the children and teachers to the visiting MPs.

The delegates were then taken to the office to meet the constituency staff. This was a great opportunity to talk to the staff about the local issues facing the constituency and how they deal with such issues on a day-to-day basis.

We finished the day with a visit to a local voluntary sector organisation, the Diamond Centre for Disabled Riders. A charity based in the constituency which provides therapeutic riding and carriage driving for children and adults with disabilities. A fantastic organisation that does a lot of good work in the local community.

I was accompanied by Valerie Sharpe-Patterson MP (Guyana), Shafei Ngah MP (Malaysia), Ali Shah MP (Maldives), Brett Hudson MP (New Zealand) and Oluwasola Olabode MP (Nigeria). Throughout

the day I think we all benefited from sharing our experiences as new parliamentarians and comparing our own country's variations on the Westminster system.

It was a great highlight of the trip to spend a day with an MP in their constituency. Tom is a very committed and dedicated local Member of Parliament and I thank him for sharing his wealth of information and expertise with us.

The 64th Westminster Seminar on Parliamentary Practice and Procedure was incredibly valuable as a first-term Member of Parliament. The program is tailored for new parliamentarians and I found the discussions and sessions that we participated in very beneficial and highly informative. I appreciate the opportunity to participate in such a program and thank the CPA and all the organisers involved for all their hard work in making it such a great experience.