

**REPORT ON THE  
COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION  
26<sup>TH</sup> COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY SEMINAR  
DHAKA, BANGLADESH  
18-21 MAY 2015**

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Participants at 26<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Parliamentary Seminar, Dhaka, Bangladesh, May 2015

## **1. Introduction**

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) held its 26<sup>th</sup> Parliamentary Seminar in Bangladesh in May 2015. The theme of the seminar was *Strengthening Parliamentary Democracy* and examined Parliamentary practice and procedure and the relationship between the Parliament and contemporary issues. The program was designed for relatively new Members of Parliament. I was honoured to participate as the CPA WA Branch representative. Representatives from nine regions and twenty four CPA branches participated in the seminar.

This report outlines some of the issues that were discussed and reports on other components of the program. It does not do justice to the detailed presentations made by the chairpersons, resource persons and other participants to whom I am very grateful for their input and expertise. The program was very full and the contributions were very detailed. I offer my sincere thanks to the Members and staff of the Bangladesh CPA Branch, the CPA Secretariat, the various session resource people and the CPA WA Branch.

## **2. Parliamentary procedure sessions**

CPA Seminar participants were welcomed to the inaugural session by the Honorable Speaker of the Bangladesh Parliament Dr Shirin Sharmin. Dr Sharmin is also the Chairperson of the CPA Executive Committee (see picture page 1).

The first part of the program considered issues relating to parliamentary practice and procedure. This first of these was an introduction to the *CPA and its programs*. Participants discussed some of the key current organisational issues including the need to increase the number of women members, not only through the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians, but throughout the organisation as a whole. Participants highlighted the CPA Code of Conduct as a useful document to assist their parliamentary practice and suggested the need for a CPA ongoing committee on strengthening parliamentary democracy. Participants were also briefed on the *parliament and political scene* in Bangladesh including an historical perspective on the development of democracy in Bangladesh.

The program considered the *role of the Presiding Officer and the staff of Parliament*. The historical precedents of the role were discussed as well as the various roles undertaken by Presiding Officers. This included legal, constitutional, educative, ceremonial and administrative roles. As a Deputy Chair of Committees in the WA Legislative Council I found this discussion particularly relevant and interesting. The discussion on the importance of independence of the chair was particularly central.

The role of *political parties and the relationship with the Member of Parliament* provided fruitful discussion for members given the importance of political parties as a ‘cornerstone’ of democracy. This session focussed on the need for strong political parties to enhance democracy and the importance of opposition parties in providing a layer of scrutiny to governments. The challenges facing political parties in emerging democracies was also discussed in detail.

The session on *parliamentary ethics, transparency and accountability* prompted a detailed debate on ethical practice as a cornerstone of democracy. The more common mechanisms for parliamentary accountability such as question time and the committee system were discussed. There was also detailed discussion on personal accountability of MPs including conflict of interest issues. The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative also made a presentation on the right to information and human rights frameworks that support this right. Details of regional mechanisms were discussed.



Discussing human rights issues

The *role and functions of parliamentary committees* in facilitating parliamentary democracy was also discussed in detail. Several features of parliamentary committees were discussed including the live broadcasting of meetings to encourage civil society participation as well as transparency and accountability. Many participants reported this was a feature that was slowly developing, depending on access to internet service providers and cost to parliaments and that it was an important mechanism for accountability. The range and type of parliamentary committees were discussed. This included the importance of the referral of legislation to committees in order to enhance detailed examination of the legislation and this subsequently becoming important in second reading debates. The accountability role of committees was discussed, in particular the role of estimates

and finance committees was discussed. The introduction of specific portfolio committees. These are effectively standing committees which consider not only legislation related to the portfolios but also public accounts and public works.

The session on *Parliament, the Member and the Media* drew much interest with participants discussing the centrality of the media to democracy as well as the importance of maintaining a good working relationship with media representatives. The challenges in working with the media were also discussed. It was also noted that social media now also plays an important role in disseminating information to the public and that this could be discussed in future seminars of the CPA.

The *relationship between Parliament, the Executive and the People* was discussed with an historical perspective on the evolution of representative democracy as well the various mechanisms for communication between the Parliament and the people.

### **3. The Parliament and contemporary issues sessions**

The contemporary issues of the program discussed human rights and gender; HIV/AIDS and provided a forum for lively debates on these issues.

The session on *Parliament and HIV/AIDS* was informative and challenging. Reports from The Kenyan representatives indicated that an estimated 1.6 million people are living with HIV/AIDS and 2.5 million children are orphaned as a result of AIDS. A range of strategies for parliamentary responses to the epidemic included advocacy for increased funding and development of rights based legislation which ensures effective citizen engagement as well as access to affordable medications. This session also saw debate around the role of human rights in prevention of HIV.



Women participants from South Africa, Scotland, Australia and New Zealand

Following on the human rights theme, the seminar discussed *parliament, gender and human rights*. The Speaker of the Bangladesh Parliament and Chairperson of the CPA Executive Committee, the Hon Dr Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury MP discussed that parliament, as the ultimate representative institution, must have gender equality. Mechanisms to address underrepresentation of women in parliaments were discussed including quota systems and reserved seats.

#### **4. Other activities**

The seminar participants were treated to a special private meeting with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, the Honorable Sheikh Hasina. The Prime Minister was very generous with her time and spoke about the history of democracy in Bangladesh and in particular the role of her father (Sheikh Mujibur Rahman) in the founding of the nation.



Participants meeting the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Hon Sheikh Hasina

Participants were also given a special guided tour of the Jatiyo Sangsad Bhaban (National Parliament House). The building is a unique design, representing the culture and heritage of Bangladesh in a modernist perspective.



Participants touring the Jatiyo Sangsad Bhaban

As there was a little spare time I also organised meetings and visits with local non-Government organisations to gain a better understanding of their activities and deeper insight into Bangladesh. I was fortunate to meet with the Asia Foundation (AF). Many of the projects of the AF Bangladesh aim to foster democracy, including strengthening the effectiveness and transparency of parliament. I was briefed on aspects of the AF Bangladesh voter education and election observation project conducted during the local government elections. I visited Kumudini Welfare Trust which provides a range of social and welfare programs for women including Kumudini hospital, women's medical college and small business programs through the production and sale of handicrafts. I also visited Viator Bangladesh which supports low-income artisans through marketing products directly and also provides tourism projects and a local guesthouse.

## 5. Conclusion

The seminar was very valuable to me as a new Member of Parliament. The topics were well chosen and were covered in a great amount of detail. There was some overlap between session content and this was useful to reinforce key concepts such as ethics, transparency and accountability. It was also important to meet many other Members from various Parliaments and share information and experiences as well as gaining a deeper understanding of the role of the CPA from a regional perspective. I am very grateful for the opportunity extended to me by CPA WA and CPA Bangladesh branches.