

Parliament and Democracy in the 21st Century: Canada and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

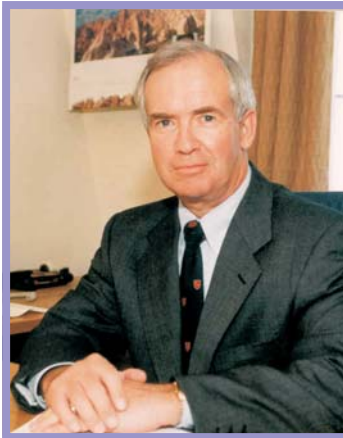
Most observers consider that modern Parliaments have three main functions which are identified as the legislative function (including participation in the making of public policy through lawmaking and parliamentary enquiries); oversight (carried out mainly, but not exclusively, by the “loyal opposition”); and representation (which allows members to address the problems of their constituents and promote their interests). One unfortunate feature of modern life is widespread disillusion with the process of government, with the institution of Parliament and with the way Parliamentarians carry out these functions.

One aim of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association is to counteract this attitude by developing strategies to strengthen parliaments and their members. This is done in part by providing opportunities for legislators to meet to discuss parliamentary issues at regional conferences and seminars, parliamentary workshops, post-election seminars, study groups and of course the Annual International Conference which will be held this year in Canada.

Another objective is to assist members in their capacity as members of a particular profession. Parliaments are governed by a series of seemingly arcane orders and rulings, which are often daunting for a newly-elected MP (and for some who have been in Parliament for a long time). Parliament is the only institution composed of members who enter with no specific educational requirements, who receive little or no formal on-the-job training and who must immediately make complex policy decisions in the face of rival demands from all sectors of domestic society and the wider world. Parliamentary support staff, while expert in other disciplines, often take on legisla-

tive posts with little specialized training - sometimes without even the support of experienced colleagues.

Some Commonwealth Parliaments are able to offer basic training for newly-elected MPs, either by mentoring or by arranging special introductory seminars. Others, notably the Parliament of India, produce handbooks explaining various parliamentary practices and procedures in an easily-digested format. But many Commonwealth Parliaments lack sufficient staff and resources, and are unable to provide such orientation. Endeavouring to fill this gap was a primary focus of my activities during my nine years as Secretary General of the Association.



For example, after eleven years of military dictatorship, an election was held in the West African country of Ghana in 1992. Two hundred members were elected to the new Parliament, of whom only two had previous parliamentary experience. A request was sent to the CPA Headquarters in London to assist the neophyte MPs by providing them with training to help them deal with the duties they were undertaking and to introduce them to the intricacies of parliamentary practice and procedure.

As the then new Secretary-General of the CPA, I assembled a team of experienced parliamentarians from around the Commonwealth who travelled at CPA expense to Accra. A seminar was conducted over four days during which the visitors spoke about how their own parliaments worked and fielded many questions from the newly-elected MPs. This sharing of experience, for which the CPA is well-noted, was designed not to tell the Ghanaians how to conduct their affairs, but rather to make them aware how parliaments function in other jurisdictions so

they could adopt or adapt those processes and procedures to meet their own needs.

It was a source of great satisfaction that many members of the Parliament of Ghana told me how much they had benefited from the Seminar and how helpful it was to them as they embarked on their parliamentary careers. The Ghana Seminar became the first in a long series during my term. Parliamentarians everywhere benefit from learning that there are ways other than their own to achieve desirable goals. The CPA is the vehicle through which parliaments and individual parliamentarians can expand their knowledge.

We have held seminars or conferences on the role of committees in improving the accountability of government, on the relationship between Parliament and the Judiciary, on the relationship between Parliament and the Media; on the interface between Parliament and the Executive, the Role of the Opposition and many others.

Efforts to enhance the representation of women in Parliaments and Legislatures and their participation in CPA activ-

ities and outreach programmes for youth are also features of recent Association activities. All of these efforts are brought to the attention of members through a substantial programme of publication and the use of modern means of communication.

In short, participation in activities of the CPA can only improve the performance of individual parliamentarians and help them achieve the desirable goal of being better representatives for the people who have elected them. I encourage Canadian legislators be they federal, provincial or territorial members, to take advantage of the opportunities afforded them by the CPA and whenever possible contribute their skills and their knowledge to the improvement of parliamentary government in the Commonwealth.

Arthur Donahoe was Speaker of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly from 1981 to 1991. He was named Secretary General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in 1993 and held this position until his retirement in 2001.

