

Interview: Hon. Robert Speller MP



The fiftieth Conference of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association will take place in Canada from August 30 to September 9, 2004. The current Chairman of the Executive Committee of CPA is a Canadian, Robert Speller. He was interviewed about his political career and specifically his involvement with CPA by the Editor on November 25, 2003. On December 12, 2003 Mr. Speller was sworn in as Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food.

What was your background before being elected to the House of Commons

As a student I studied political science and Canadian Studies at York University. I subsequently obtained an internship at the Ontario Legislative Assembly in a programme sponsored by the Canadian Political Science Association and the Ontario Legislature. I was not active in the Liberal Party at the time. Each of the six interns has to spend half a year with one government and one opposition member. The other five interns were all women and were all lobbying to work for one dynamic young female member of the Ontario legislature, Sheila Copps. The Director of the Programme, Dr. Graham White,

decided to resolve this problem by assigning me to Ms Copps. As a result I met many people in the Liberal Party and eventually worked on her campaign. From 1986-87 I travelled extensively and returned home a few months before the 1998 federal election. The Progressive Conservatives were in office at that time and the individual holding the seat in my home town had won a large majority in 1984. There was not much competition for the Liberal nomination but after being approached by a few people I decided to let my name stand. I won the nomination easily and in the General Election I wiped out an 18,000 vote majority and won the seat by less than 200 votes even though the Conservative government of Brian

Mulroney was easily returned to power.

When you arrived at the House of Commons was it different from what you expected?

Not really. My intern experience at Queens Park gave me a very good understanding of what the job entailed. Being in opposition is relatively easy and enjoyable. You can pick out the areas you are interested in and which are important to your constituents. In my case it was agriculture and international trade. I had no trouble getting the floor during Question Period or serving on committees that interested me. You get excellent training in opposition but of course being on the government side, after the 1993 election, was much better.

How did you get involved in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association?

New members are advised of all the parliamentary associations they can join and I went to the annual meetings of the Canadian Branch of CPA. I applied to go to some conferences but was never selected. Most places were taken by members on the Conservative side or by senior Liberal members or Senators. When the Liberals came to office in 1993 I decided to run for the position of Chair of the Canadian Branch. There were several candidates including Beryl Gaffney who had been a member for several years. I lobbied for support from all members of all parties in both the House and the Senate and after an election by secret ballot I became Chair of the Canadian Branch.

What is the role of Chairman of the Canadian Branch?

The main responsibility is to lead the Canadian delegation to CPA international Conferences and to the Canadian Regional Conferences. Over the next ten years I missed only one international conference, in Australia, and I attended all the Regional Conferences which are held in different provinces on a rotating basis. At both international and Regional Conferences the Chair co-ordinates the participation of the federal delegation. I would usually seek volunteers to speak on the various topics or if necessary designate specific individuals to speak. Since members speak as individuals rather than as party members there is no need to come up with a federal or a Canadian position on every issue. Internationally members do recognize that what they say will be taken as the Canadian position and they tend to take that into account when making comments.

Are there any CPA conferences or experiences that stand out in your mind?

My very first CPA conference was in 1994 when Canada hosted the international Conference at Banff. As Chairman of the Canadian Branch I immediately met the senior parliamentarians from around the world and this was a fascinating experience.

The Conference was memorable in another respect in that my wife, who was expecting, had to be rushed to the hospital and for a while it looked like our son might be born in Banff but it turned out to be a false alarm.

I hesitate to single out other conferences as all are memorable and one learns something from each and every one. I do recall one meeting in Africa where I met a legislator from Zimbabwe who told me that his town was unable to come up with \$12,000 to drill a new well to provide drinking water to the inhabitants. I told him about some of Canada's foreign aid programmes and helped to put him in touch with the appropriate person in the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). A few months later he sent me a very nice letter thanking me for my help and advising me that the town now had a new well thanks to my intervention. That is a minor example of what can be done but it stands out in my mind. Of course there are also many discussion about how things are done in various parliaments around the world and it is useful to compare our practices with others.

How did you become Chair of the Executive Committee of CPA?

This is an elected position. All the members who are present at the annual meeting, usually about 300, have a right to vote. There are usu-

ally candidates from several of the eight CPA Regions. I actually ran for this position twice. The first time, in Trinidad and Tobago in 1999 I lost to an African candidate by a very few votes. I ran again at the Namibia Conference in 2002 and this time I was successful.

The process is similar to a nomination meeting. Candidates make a formal speech and try to meet and convince as many of the voting delegates as possible. In my speech I spoke about the need to make the Association more transparent, to communicate more with the local branches, to support the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians and to partner with other international associations interested with trade and other areas of importance to our members. Because of my many years involvement with the Association I probably knew personally about half of the voting delegates and that was a great advantage. My Canadian colleagues helped my election, particularly my "organizer" Sarmite Bulte MP who is very well known in CPA circles.

How does the CPA Executive Committee work and have you accomplished what you set out to do?

The day to day operation of the Association is done by a Secretariat in London. The Executive Committee considers and Reviews issues raised by staff. We consider and approve the budget of the Association. We meet twice a year, usually for two or three days. Meetings used to be spread over four days but I have tried to consolidate the committee meetings and to keep the Executive focused on large issues while leaving our Secretariat to deal with routine matters. At the request of the Executive Committee the Secretariat has devised a Strategic Plan for the Association which was sent out

to every branch in order to receive feedback.

The Executive Committee consists of about 30 persons from all over the Commonwealth. We usually decide matters by consensus although I sometimes ask for a vote in order to see where everyone stands.

What arguments would you use to convince a newly elected member that he or she should get involved in the CPA?

First of all it depends on the Member and his or her interests. There are other very important parliamentary groups such as Canada-US, the NATO Parliamentary Group for persons with an interest in defence, Canada-Europe, and a couple of organizations of particular interest to francophone members. As for the CPA it offers a variety of experiences. Aside from the large conferences there are smaller seminar, bilateral activities, election monitoring, publications and research for members. I would

also suggest three very specific reasons.

First I think it is very important to take part in an organization who members represent half the population of the world. Second I like the format where we discuss issues as individual parliamentarians and do not spend a lot of time drafting resolutions or arguing about motions or amendments to motions. Thirdly, the Canadian Regional in particular offers the only opportunity for federal and provincial/territorial legislators to come together to discuss matters of common interest. The practice of holding these meetings at a time and in way that spouses and children are not excluded is a way to help alleviate strains that are all too familiar to everyone in public life.

Has the time you spent on CPA caused you any problems either in the media or with constituents?

The amount of time I spend on duties related to being Chair of the

Executive Committee varies but it is not nearly as demanding as some of the other offices I have held such as Chair of a parliamentary committee, head of a prime ministerial task force on Agriculture or parliamentary secretary. I am usually on the phone to London a couple of times a week about CPA business and of course before the meetings there is considerable time devoted to preparation.

In ten years I remember only one very negative story that had to do with a bilateral visit to Barbados in the winter. In general the press does not seem interested in our conferences or seminars. As for constituents I am sure that my involvement in CPA is neither a plus or a minus insofar as them voting for me again. I hope that at least some of them recognize and appreciate possible advantages for themselves and for Canada in being represented by a Member of Parliament who has gone to considerable efforts to build up contacts in so many countries around the world.