
Guest Editorial

Democracy in the 21st Century: New Opportunities for Women Parliamentarians

Since its inception in 1911 the Commonwealth (formerly Empire) Parliamentary Association has undergone an amazing transformation. From an all male, all white organization representing six national Parliaments the CPA has evolved into a multi cultural, multi-racial association of over 170 national, state, provincial and territorial legislatures grouped into nine Regions of which Canada is one. Restrictions against women disappeared but only recently have female legislators begun to play a prominent role thanks in large part to a body known as the Commonwealth Women's Parliamentarians (CWP).

The origins of the CWP can be traced to an informal meeting of women held at the 35th Commonwealth Parliamentary in Barbados in 1989. A women's caucus was initiated by Senator Norma Cox Astwood of Bermuda. Thanks to her efforts and that of other women, including the Hon. Maria Minna, in 1992 the Executive Committee of CPA recognized the CWP and allocated time in the annual conference agenda for the women to meet and elect a steering committee. A Task Force was established which produced a report entitled *Barriers to Women's Participation in Parliament* reported to the 1994 Conference in Banff. Since that time provision has been made in the annual conference for the CWP to meet at a time that did not conflict with any other conference business. A significant change took place in 2004 when the CWP became a funded body within the CPA and its Chair, Lindiwe Maseko (Gauteng) took a seat on the International Executive Committee representing the Group.

Despite progress at the international level, and in some regions such as Australia where an Australian Women's Parliamentary Association was created in 2003, we did not seem to be making much progress in establishing a Canadian section. I and Hon. Sarmite Bulte raised the issue at meetings of the Canadian Regional Council of CPA

which consists of the Speakers of all the legislatures plus the Canadian Regional representatives on the International Executive Committee.

At the summer 2004 meeting Speaker Harvey Hodder of Newfoundland and Labrador suggested that women interested in forming a group take the opportunity to meet in conjunction with the CPA Regional Conference in Newfoundland the next summer.



The full day meeting took place in St. John's on July 19, 2005. Sixteen parliamentarians from seven Branches were represented including: Saskatchewan, Quebec, Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, Manitoba, Alberta and the Canadian Branch. We agreed on the following recommendations that were presented to a special Council meeting the next day.

- That the council amend its rules to formalize the creation in the Canadian Region of the CWP to be composed of women parliamentarians of all CPA Branches in Canada.
- That the Region designate to the CWP Steering Committee (International) a woman parliamentarian from the Canadian Region, provided that at any one time both a federal and a provincial parliamentarian will be designated by the Council, so that if a federal parliamentarian is the international representative, the provincial parliamentarian becomes the alternate and vice versa.
- That the alternate succeed the designated representative when her term of office ends.

- That there be no formalized system of rotation among the province/territories but that the Council nominate the Canadian alternate upon the recommendation of the CWP-Canada.
- That the President of each Branch communicate to the Regional Secretary the name of a woman parliamentarian who will be that Branch's representative on the Steering Committee of the CWP – Canada.
- That each annual regional conference include, prior to the start of the conference, one day for the CWP-Canada to meet; that a report of that days work be presented to the plenary conference for its consideration; that at least one gender issue be selected as one of the topics for the full conference.
- That a proposed work plan and annual budget be submitted as soon as practicable by the CWP-Canada to the Regional Council for consideration and adoption.

Four names were put forth as potential Canadian representatives on the International Executive Committee. The following day the Regional Council met to consider the recommendations. There was considerable discussion about how the position would be filled and specifically whether there would be a fixed schedule of alternation as used for many other CPA functions.

The Council agreed to postpone a final decision to another meeting which was held on July 21. In order to make some progress it was agreed to proceed by secret ballot with the selection of Canada's representative. Two persons were nominated, Sarmite Bulte MP and Char-

lotte L'Écuyer of Quebec. After the votes were counted Ms. Bulte was named Canadian Representative for a three year term with Mme L'Écuyer as alternate. As Ms Bulte lost her seat in Parkdale-High Park in the January 23, 2006 election, Mme L'Écuyer became Canadian Representative for the remainder of the term.

The founding meeting of the CPW-Canadian Region marked an important milestone in the effort to increase the number of women in politics and to help those who are elected to be more effective legislators. The next meeting will be held in conjunction with the Canadian Regional CPA Conference in Ottawa in July 2006.

We will work to share ideas and information on initiatives being taken in various jurisdictions. We will develop outreach capacities at the national level so that orientation and mentoring of newcomers is feasible and systematic. We will strive toward a work environment in legislative assemblies that favour a healthy family balance and that allows parliamentarians to meet head on the huge challenges of a political career. Finally we will work to see that delegates chosen to go to CPA meetings are selected on the basis of interest and expertise rather than as a reward or as a lottery prize. The end result will not only be good for women but also good for parliament, good for politics and good for Canada.

Hon. Sue Barnes represents London West in the House of Commons. She is a former Chair of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, a former member of the International Women's Steering Committee and a current Canadian Regional Representative on the International Executive.