

Canada and the Commonwealth: Celebrating Shared Values

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association – Canadian Branch is pleased to report on some of its recent activities and support of exciting initiatives. In this article, the author highlights CPA Canada's support of Equal Voice's Daughters of the Vote event and its own celebration with Commonwealth High Commissioners in honour of the 150th anniversary of Confederation.

Yasmin Ratansi, MP

Canada's sesquicentennial is an important occasion for the country to reflect on its past with a view to strengthening its future. Canada has been a member of the Commonwealth family and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) for a large part of its history. It is undeniable that membership in these two organizations has contributed to Canada's prominent role on the world stage over the past 150 years.

With this in mind, the Canadian Branch of the CPA is participating in numerous activities this year around Parliament Hill, highlighting Canada's long-standing relationship with the CPA and underscoring its ongoing contribution to Canada's evolving landscape.

While the year has been especially busy and our members have participated in numerous activities, two functions stood out in particular: the Daughters of the Vote initiative, supported by CPA Canada and funded by an unprecedented investment from the Federal government exceeding one million dollars; and CPA Canada's reception on Parliament Hill for Canada's 150th anniversary of Confederation.

Daughters of the Vote

This year's International Women's Day coincided with the celebration of an important milestone for women's suffrage in Canadian history: Canada's centennial for women's right to vote. It was in 1917 that some women first won the right to vote in Canada – first in provincial elections and later in the federal elections.

Yasmin Ratansi is the Chair of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association – Canadian Branch. She is MP for Don Valley East.



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Yasmin Ratansi

To commemorate this important day, Parliament welcomed 338 young women between the ages of 18 to 23 to represent every riding in Canada. During their time on Parliament Hill, they were given the opportunity to represent their communities in the House of Commons, where they shared their vision for Canada in the seats of their respective Members of Parliament.



The Daughters of the Vote gather on the steps of Parliament Hill to mark an extraordinary event.

The goal of the initiative was to help young women “become familiar with Canada’s political institutions and those women and men serving in them – so they are equipped and inspired to participate in the formal political sphere in the years and decades to come.”

The event was a resounding success. These future leaders finished their week on Parliament Hill with a greater network of peers who want to make a difference in their communities, and they left many parliamentarians inspired by their enthusiasm and perseverance.

This group of young women from diverse Indigenous, racial, ethnic and religious groups were a good snapshot of Canada’s cultural landscape. It was this mix of backgrounds that truly contributed to the event’s success. Some Daughters of the Vote described the historic event as powerful and emotional as they were moved by their peers who spoke to issues that touch their lives. Many of their speeches, delivered in the House of Commons, were met with standing ovations from participants and parliamentarians alike.

The Daughters of the Vote also heard from many female leaders from both Houses of Parliament, some of whom are part of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians – Canada Region. They also heard from former Prime Minister Kim Campbell and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who fielded questions during a mock Question Period.

Looking at the diverse group of women in the House of Commons on March 8, 2017, one could not help drawing parallels between this unprecedented event and the great work of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians. Both groups are empowered by their diversity and their common understanding that equal representation is the only way forward. Though the event was a success by all measures, it was a reminder that the road to equality is still long.

CPA Canada Celebrates the 150th Anniversary of Confederation on Parliament Hill

On March 22, 2017, CPA’s Canadian Branch celebrated the 150th anniversary of Confederation on Parliament Hill. To underscore this momentous occasion, CPA Canada invited all High Commissioners in the Ottawa region for a celebratory reception.

As Chair of CPA Canada, I invited those present to begin the evening with a moment of silence for the tragic events that took place outside the Palace of Westminster in London that same day. I also expressed solidarity with the British parliamentarians whom I recently visited. There was genuine display of the Commonwealth's strength and a moving sense of solace from the participants. As Geoff Regan, Speaker of the House of Commons, stated during his address at the reception, "in times of grief, there is consolation and reassurance to be found in gathering with your friends."

The strength of the Commonwealth lies in its unwavering commitment to democracy. As the Clerk of Senate, Charles Robert, stated in his remarks that evening:

More than ever we must remain committed to democracy and the rule of law and work together to overcome the threats that undermine the peace and stability necessary to build a successful future for the member nations of the CPA and all its citizens. It is a goal worth striving for; it is a goal we must achieve.

While the evening was inevitably dampened by the terrible attack in London, the reason for gathering was not forgotten. Each speaker drew links between the CPA and Canada's 150 years of Confederation. The evening's theme was grounded in the Commonwealth countries' shared values and principles in human rights, equal opportunity, tolerance and rule of law. These values are the foundation of democracy and what binds the Commonwealth family. As such, they are found in both the CPA's constitution and at the core of Canada's identity.

His Excellency Anu'a-Gheyle Solomon Azoh-Mbi, the Cameroon High Commissioner and Dean of the Commonwealth Heads of Mission, closed the official part of the reception with these moving words:

Individuals and institutions rise and fall, countries and civilisations wax and wane by the vision and values they embrace. The great Canadian nation marches on, 150 years after Confederation thanks to the values of freedom and democracy, respect for human rights, the rule of law, peace and security. These Canadian values are also Commonwealth values, defended and upheld on this Hill and in other global fora by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

By fostering diversity within its borders, Canada distils the best out of pluralism and inclusiveness. Canada is a shining example of a society where difference and diversity need not be translated into discord and division.

In its relations with the rest of the world, Canada maintains a remarkably benign and benevolent



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House of Commons Speaker Geoff Regan addresses the audience at CPA Canada's 150th Anniversary of Confederation event on March 22.



Attendees at CPA Canada's 150th Anniversary of Confederation event, including MP Yasmin Ratansi and the High Commissioners of Cameroon, Kenya, Malaysia and Sri Lanka.

touch. Canada, "the true North," not only sits on top of the world; it enjoys a place of honour in the hearts of many around the world.

As Canada celebrates this important milestone, Canadians can look back with pride on their history and achievements. It is a history of palpable patriotism, progress and prosperity, though sometimes punctuated with pain and peril.

Conclusion

While Canada's 150th anniversary of Confederation is not official until July 1, 2017, celebrations have already begun across the country. To underscore this historical event, members of CPA Canada have been busy planning and participating in events around Parliament Hill and in their home provinces. Since Canada has been part of the CPA from its inception, these occasions are a good opportunity to highlight

the Association's contributions to Canada's history and vice versa.

The Daughters of the Vote initiative and CPA Canada's reception for the 150th anniversary of Confederation are only two examples of how CPA Canada's members are using every opportunity to shed light on the Association's small but meaningful contributions.

Though the CPA's work often goes unnoticed, its contributions are significant and have benefited Canadians and many other Commonwealth nations for some time. As the Association itself explains: "The CPA is recognized by Commonwealth Heads of Government and intergovernmental agencies as an organization which actually does strengthen good parliamentary governance and contributes tangibly to the development of all Commonwealth people."