



# The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the British Council:

The role of parliamentarians in addressing diversity

## The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)

The CPA promotes the advancement of parliamentary democracy by enhancing knowledge and understanding of democratic governance. It builds an informed, inclusive and gender-sensitive parliamentary community able to deepen the Commonwealth's democratic commitment and to further co-operation among its Legislatures.

The Association carries out a wide range of inter-parliamentary activities and collaborates with parliaments and other organisations to achieve its mission. Increased awareness of the potential of parliaments and parliamentarians to contribute to global understanding and a current international focus on good governance have increased demands on elected representatives and on the CPA to strengthen parliamentary performance.

## The British Council

The British Council's purpose is to build mutually beneficial relationships between people in the UK and other countries and to increase appreciation of the UK's creative ideas and achievements. This work is driven by a strong belief in internationalism, a commitment to professionalism and an enthusiasm for creativity.

One of the British Council's three areas of work is intercultural understanding and positive social change. This programme, with the UK at its heart, seeks to strengthen understanding between and within different cultures, promote active and constructive participation in society and counter deficits of trust. Projects in this area build capacity and skills as well as creating platforms for debate and space for voices to be heard.



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# Summary of findings and conclusions

During the course of 2007–08, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and the British Council undertook a series of video-conferences exploring the role that parliamentarians can play in addressing diversity. Participants from across the Commonwealth discussed the issues of gender, religious pluralism, disability and indigenous minorities and the main findings and conclusions demonstrated that while there are clear differences in what should be done in relation to gender, religious pluralism, disability and indigenous minorities there are also underlying similarities. Parliamentary processes are already in place in respect of diversity in all the participating countries. However, in order to embed good equality and diversity practices across the Commonwealth, there is a need to understand the differing practices better, and to exchange information on them. In addition, of course, each country has the opportunity to learn from the good practice of others. While examples will need to be assessed and evaluated for relevance to an individual country's needs, there are a number of underlying principles.

While each video-conference reached its own set of conclusions, the following principles seem to be common. They were not all agreed by all the participants in all the video-conferences:

- That parliamentarians should support and work with their human rights and equalities commissions where these exist, using them as a source of background material on diversity issues, and working with them to promote diversity.
- Good and appropriate legislation is vital in taking forward the diversity agenda and parliamentarians have a critical role to play in making sure that legislation is passed, that it is effective and that it is monitored and enforced.
- Legislation should provide protection for minority groups.
- In some countries positive action has been found to be useful, particularly in reserving specific numbers of positions for representatives. In some cases this was a gender 'quota'; in others, reserved seats for disabled people. Where there were representatives, this had a direct impact on policy and its implementation.

- Alongside equal treatment and anti-discrimination legislation should sit positive action and positive promotion legislation. Participating countries had found this kind of legislation a critical lever for change in relation to diversity issues.
- Parliamentarians should take all opportunities to include advancing the understanding of diversity issues in their role as representatives of the population. This should include representing constituents' issues, lobbying for appropriate action and policy change.
- Parliamentary processes in some countries included scrutiny and monitoring roles in respect of equality legislation and policy implementation. Ensuring that appropriate processes are in place to hold deliverers to account was found to be crucial to delivering change.
- An approach of bringing equality and diversity into the mainstream was mentioned in some form in all the discussions. This approach ensures that diversity is embedded into all parliamentary activity and that cultural change is achieved more quickly. By ensuring that diversity issues are considered in all aspects of business, an acceptance of the relevance and benefits of addressing different groups' needs has become part of how everyday business is conducted.
- Ensuring that international agreements are ratified and implemented in countries was found to be a useful tool for holding people to account on delivery.
- Consultation with representative groups and individuals from groups was found to be critical in all the debates. Good and effective consultation ensures that individuals' views and needs are directly reflected and addressed. Consultation should take place across all sectors. In some countries, consultation had been widened to involvement and representation. This ensured that groups had the opportunity to be involved in the implementation of policies and processes to address their needs.
- In some countries it has been useful to link diversity to the human rights agenda in order to speed up change and action.

# The project purpose and scope

The joint CPA/British Council project was undertaken to develop a greater understanding of the role that parliamentarians can play in addressing diversity.

The project was underpinned by the following principles:

- that an understanding of diversity, including equality, freedom, and the protection of human rights, is critical to implementing democratic governance
- diversity is a positive construct indicating the richness that exists when people from a variety of backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities bring different talents, skills, and experiences to a group
- a democratic system requires meaningful participation and representation that integrates all societal groups — religious, ethnic, tribal, political, socio-economic and cultural — into the decision-making process; improving the representation of minorities in parliament strengthens its ability to reach out to all sectors of society.

The 2004 report of the CPA/World Bank Institute Study Group on the Role of Parliament in Conflict-Affected Countries stated that:

‘Parliament is a prime institution through which to address the divergent interests of multiple groups because of the nature of the parliamentary process and parliament’s ability to build relationships within parliament and within the broader community. Parliament must provide an enabling environment for diverse groups to come together and speak.’

In 2007 the report of the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding (*Civil Paths to Peace*) was presented to the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Uganda. In their *Munyonyo Statement on Respect and Understanding*, the Heads stated:

‘Accepting diversity, respecting the dignity of all human beings and understanding the richness of our multiple identities has always been fundamental to the Commonwealth’s principles and approach.’

With these principles and background in mind, the joint project was formulated to:

- develop a greater understanding of the role that parliamentarians can play in addressing diversity issues

- share lessons learned from parliamentary participation in the promotion of diversity
- produce a report on the main findings of the series of video-conferences, including recommendations of what parliamentarians and the CPA can do to further address diversity issues.

In order to achieve these aims, the CPA and the British Council convened a series of four video-conferences during the course of 2007–08. Participants were invited from across the Commonwealth to engage in discussion with the assistance of a facilitator. Each video-conference addressed a specific aspect of diversity:

- gender
- religious pluralism
- disability
- indigenous minorities.

The sessions incorporated the contributions of relevant experts and allowed for extensive discussion by members of the groups.



# Summary reports from video-conferences

## Gender

Parliamentarians from Malaysia, South Africa and Wales took part in this discussion, which was held on 21 May 2007. Each of the participant countries is taking action on addressing gender equality. However, they have varying experiences in relation to men and women. It was clear there is still a long way to go to achieve 50–50 gender balance and this needs partnership with men as well as the support of government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and society generally.

Constitutional processes and policies can assist greatly in working towards greater representation of women, and adopting international treaties and standards can help achieve this.

## Country experience

In **Malaysia** women's issues are given priority in government policy and they support international treaties such as the Beijing Platform and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Gender equality is in the federal constitution. They have a parliamentary Women and Family Committee and budgets have increased for gender issues. The Committee reviews relevant legislation to ensure it is consistent with the constitution's equality measures.

NGOs, professional bodies and the National Women's Organisation are consulted about new policies, for example the Domestic Violence Act.

In **South Africa** a Women's Coalition, formed from different bodies and areas of society drew up a Charter for Women, which was submitted to the Constitutional Committee. The 30 per cent target for women in parliament has been reached and it has been proposed that a request to raise the target to 50 per cent should be put to the next ANC Policy Conference.

The Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC) on the Improvement of Quality of Life and Status of Women monitors government compliance with international treaties, and assesses whether departmental policies are gender sensitive. The JMC allows space for women to consult other bodies and place gender issues on the policy agenda. Consultations are carried out with communities, NGOs, women's organisations, and through public hearings. Women are invited to contribute to budget debates, and government departments consult the JMC.

The **Welsh** Assembly had a 50–50 gender balance achieved in the last Assembly through positive action. Despite the high number of women there are still barriers that need to be challenged.

It is important to encourage women to play a stronger role in the economy. The Assembly supports and sponsors external organisations addressing women's issues such as work-life balance, access to child care and transport and women into enterprise. The Equalities Minister ensures that there is constant scrutiny of policy and its impact on women.

## Recommendations

- There is a need to address 'hearts and 'minds' as people are not always convinced that gender balance is needed. More commitment for gender balance and gender policies is needed from political parties.
- There is a need for training for women – both before selection and after election.
- Positive action is important to enable women to be elected, including special legislation to address the under-representation of women.
- A legislative framework is needed to underpin equality and to ensure that domestic legislation reflects international agreements.
- It is important for parliaments to think about changing their own culture, e.g. family friendly hours, child care facilities.
- It is clear that when women get into parliament, interests and policies change, leading to specific legislation for domestic violence, positive action, and gender budgeting.
- It is important that parliaments consult widely before introducing any legislation to ensure it is gender sensitive.



## Religious pluralism

Participants from the UK, Nigeria and Jamaica took part in this discussion, which was held on 8 November 2007. Each of the participant countries was experiencing different issues in respect of religious pluralism. However, many of their approaches to addressing the issues had similarities. Religious pluralism is an increasingly important issue across the Commonwealth. Parliamentarians have a critical role to play in ensuring that religious issues and faith representation are incorporated into democratic processes.

## Country experience

The **UK** has become an increasingly diverse society and religion (or faith, the term used in the UK) has become more important. Up until 2000 little time was given to issues of faith or interfaith and references to faith rarely appeared in public life or legislation. There was confusion on the size and diversity of faith communities in the UK, with varying representations in the media and public life. For many the pace of change has not been quick enough. There are, for example, parliamentary committees, and country interest groups in parliament but there is not a great degree of true collaboration across faith groups at the grass-roots level.

There has been a growth of faith and inter-faith networks in the UK for social change and in response to issues of national concern such as the rise of Islamophobia and extremism. Government tries to engage with the UK Muslim community but there is some challenge to this as it can appear to be for the wrong reasons (e.g. anti-terrorism) rather than for the benefit of society overall. There has been a rise in grass-roots groups lobbying parliamentarians and networking.

The British government has established the Inter-Faith Network and the Inner Cities Religious Council to promote dialogue at a national and regional level. There are initiatives that seek to secure the voice of diverse communities on issues relating to education and the provision of health services. Grass-roots dialogue is increasing the pace of change and making government policy-making less reactive. Faith communities are now taken as cohesive bodies with differing views that need to be taken account of in new legislation and provision of services to those communities. The newly formed Commission for Equality and Human Rights considers areas of religion and faith to come under its remit. Parliamentarians in the UK need to take account of all communities within their constituencies and make the effort to understand their needs.

**Nigeria** is a secular state and the Constitution protects freedom of thought and religion. Parties have actively sought to achieve balance between the two main religions in Cabinet and party posts. The Inter-Religious Council is sent to areas where religious issues have arisen and they report back to parliament. It is seen that all issues affect all communities. The setting up of a Haj Committee has been accompanied by the establishment of a Christian Pilgrimage Committee. One proposal suggested that a Commission for Religious Affairs be set up in Nigeria, which could come together from time to time to discuss religious pluralism issues.

At the state level there are different institutions, some under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Parliamentarians advise constituents to live together peacefully and promote diversity. They work to ensure religion is not a part of decision-making.

There are few forums for religious groups to come together in **Jamaica**. Those that do exist (such as the Jamaica Council of Churches) are set up by the churches in what is a predominantly Christian country. Non-Christian communities are very small. When serious national issues arise, parliamentarians hold discussions with communities and churches. The Jamaica Council of Churches is represented on various social issues boards, e.g. the National Council for Drug Abuse and the National Council of Education. There was a recognition of a need to look at the under-representation of other churches and religions.

## Recommendations

- Parliamentarians should look at the sorts of bodies with which they can work to promote religious diversity. An interreligious council at state and local level could help to foster understanding and to solve religious problems before they escalate. The aim of any processes should be to promote a sense of belonging.
- The media can be encouraged to ensure fair coverage of religious matters and groups.
- They can ensure that places of religious worship are not used for promoting religious tension.
- Legislation can be used to help religious harmony.
- There should be proactive encouragement of representation of diverse communities on public appointment bodies such as those providing services (as evidenced in the UK).

## Disability

Parliamentarians from Scotland, Singapore and Uganda took part in this discussion, which was held on 11 December 2007. All participants already had processes in place to ensure the inclusion of disabled people in society. However, there were some country differences in how they approached this. The vital issue is to change attitudes to disabled people and disability generally. Without a change in attitudes, legislation alone cannot help. There is the challenge of how to meet the needs and wishes of all disabled people, whatever their circumstances or impairment, and how these wishes are reflected in policies.

## Country experience

In **Scotland** equality is one of the founding principles of the Scottish Parliament. The Equal Opportunities Committee in parliament and various cross-party groups provide an opportunity for political parties and the public to discuss shared interests. Capability Scotland is working closely with MSPs and government to ensure that disabled people achieve full equality by 2020 at the latest.

Disabled people in Scotland can approach MSPs in their constituencies; write to ministers; or ask MSPs to bring a motion or private member's bill. They can also approach the Equal Opportunities Committee and other committees such as transport, health, or education. There is also the Petitions Committee – any member of the public can put an issue to the Petitions Committee which can then refer it to the relevant Committee or Minister. The parliament also has separate cross-party groups on, for example, Alzheimer's, dyslexia, and epilepsy.

The Equal Opportunities Committee has a statutory responsibility to scrutinise draft legislation, including how it addresses the concerns of disabled people as well as monitoring government action, and checking how government is responding to disability concerns including career service, leisure facilities and employment practice. The Committee, in their investigations, has taken evidence directly from those who are disabled.

Bodies that Scottish parliamentarians can work with include those allied to parliament such as the Human Rights Commission; local government where the delivery mechanism for much of the legislations passed rests; and the voluntary sector, which has open and transparent access to parliamentarians. Much of the knowledge and experience of needs lies in the voluntary sector and, often, the resources to provide delivery. Parliamentarians hold constituency surgeries, visit local organisations, and interact with a variety of groups and individuals.

It was felt in Scotland that the principal issue was education. There has been a notable change of attitude about disabled students from non-disabled students over the years of integration in schools.

As **Singapore** is a small country it is fairly easy to co-ordinate special needs groups with the work of parliament. The Standing Committee on Disability comes under the Ministry of Community, Youth and Sport and looks at broad areas relating to the needs of the disabled. Parliamentarians work with voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) to look at certain issues and take them forward to parliament and bring them to the attention of policy-makers. It is possible to get a quick policy response this way. Parliamentarians are always available for consultation with voluntary groups or through weekly surgeries with their constituents if there is an issue of concern.

There is an Enabling Masterplan, which aims to address issues of disability over the next five years. The Steering Committee for the Masterplan involved the public and private sector as well as members of the general public (including disabled people). The Committee gave 31 recommendations to government and the Ministry of Community, Youth and Sport is responsible for implementation. One area is barrier-free access: by 2011 the majority of urban areas should be barrier free and adapted for disabled access. A Standing Committee on Disability (started in February 2008), will help to co-ordinate policies and implementation across agencies and ministries.

In Singapore they are mindful of developing policies to benefit the disabled; they do not second-guess what the needs are. Engaging directly is very important – taking a comprehensive approach, and consulting not just the disabled but also their carers (who have needs of their own that should be met). The aim is to help the disabled get a functional base to achieve financial independence through employment. There is constant competition for resources but society should be enlightened enough to recognise the importance of equality.

There are estimated to be 2.4 million disabled people in **Uganda** (or ten per cent of the total population). The 1995 Constitution recognises the rights of people with disabilities and ensures their representation in the National Assembly.

There is a clear structure in Uganda for ensuring disabled people can contribute to policy-making. The National Union of Disabled Persons is strong at the national level. When issues arise the union will organise lobbying meetings, consult MPs and ensure issues are forwarded jointly. Lobbying by the National Union had resulted in there being

five parliamentary seats for representatives of people with disabilities. There are also representative bodies at the local, district, parish and village level. There is also representation of disabled people at all levels of local government with places reserved for disabled people.

Legislation plays an important part in ensuring the rights of the disabled are observed. The National Assembly has Standing and Session Committees, some of which address disability-related issues.

Parliamentarians also work with international NGOs and bodies and benefit from their services and experience. They network with stakeholders such as the Ugandan Society for Disabled Children, who can provide useful information and expertise to feed into legislation.

## Recommendations

- Those who live with disabilities and understand their needs often have the solutions, so parliamentarians need to work in partnership with them, and their carers on the provision of services.
- MPs can influence the enactment of laws for the promotion and protection of the rights of people with disability and ensure that laws are not discriminatory. They can press for the adoption and ratification of international agreements by their government.
- They can lobby for relevant services: the provision of services for disabled people should be brought into the mainstream of all sector plans.
- MPs can also lobby for the allocating of resources to address the needs of people with disability and there should be a monitoring and evaluation mechanism to ensure service delivery is appropriate and effective.
- It is incumbent on other bodies to work in partnership so that parliamentarians are not bombarded with differing demands (there are about 45,000 voluntary bodies in the UK).

## Indigenous minorities

Participants from the UK, Canada and Namibia took part in this discussion, which was held on 28 February 2008. In most countries indigenous peoples are in a minority. Over the Commonwealth as a whole there are probably 150 to 180 million indigenous people, many of whom are severely disadvantaged. In democracy-based systems where the majority holds sway, it is important to get legislation relevant to improving the lot of indigenous minorities. Other issues are important for indigenous peoples – their remoteness and linguistic exclusion.

It was clear that both countries had different backgrounds relating to indigenous peoples. Namibia has struggled to escape the apartheid system and is trying to build a unified country. In Canada incremental changes have been introduced through treaties over a long period. What is similar is the way in which parliaments are able to carry out their responsibilities and listen to special constituencies.

## Country experience

**Canada's** Constitution Act recognises three distinct groups of aboriginal peoples in Canada: First Nations, Inuit and Métis – each with their own culture, languages, political and spiritual traditions. In 2006 there were over one million people (almost four per cent of the population) identifying themselves as aboriginal. Section 35 of the Act recognised and affirmed the existing aboriginal and treaty rights of First Nations, Inuit and Métis. Members of the Senate are required to consider minority issues throughout their work. There is a Standing Senate Committee for Aboriginal Peoples, which conducts long-term studies and deals with legislation on issues such as land rights. There is also an Aboriginal Affairs Committee in the House of Commons and aboriginal members sit in parliament. There is also participation of aboriginal groups at other levels of government, including within their own governance systems. A number of issues such as land rights and use of land resources are settled through treaty obligations.

Political parties in Canada are very open to bringing in a diversity of people including aboriginal peoples. Elections Canada, an independent body set up by parliament, has programmes to encourage aboriginal peoples to vote and to interest them in the whole political process. The Assembly of First Nations (AFN), a national organisation representing First Nations citizens in Canada, also has programmes to encourage



political participation. But this is still a work in progress with only four out of 308 members of the House of Commons coming from aboriginal groups.

In Canada there are low numbers of aboriginal doctors, teachers and lawyers, and other professionals. There has been a focus on education as there have been problems among First Nations communities. There is a need to work on a national model of secondary education delivery. At the moment communities can govern their own secondary education system, but there has been a problem of non-achievement of standards that needs to be addressed. At the tertiary level it was important to include education about their own language and culture for students from aboriginal communities. There is a need to balance discussions about diversity with building a united Canada. Aboriginal groups are over-represented in prisons and they are not achieving national education standards for example.

In **Namibia** there are two indigenous groups – the San and the Himba – who together comprise four to five per cent of the population. A former German colony, Namibia had been mandated to South Africa, which then imposed the apartheid system, which divided up the population on tribal lines. At independence in 1990 there was a desire to open up the country to everyone but it was difficult to pinpoint groups and their level of oppression. However, all parties are working to ensure national representation and to bring in all diverse groups. The San are also represented in the National Council, the upper chamber of parliament. Representation is better at the local and regional level. A town in the north of Namibia has a Himba-controlled council.

No formal systems are in place to promote policies that address issues related to indigenous peoples and no specific parliamentary committees. The absence of a formal structure does not mean that the challenges are not addressed in parliament. Political parties have developed the practice where MPs are assigned to particular regions and are required to listen to and articulate the issues raised by residents. These issues are then passed back to caucuses and can then be debated in parliament. Local governance structures can also be used. The Working Group for Indigenous Minorities (WIMSA) is an NGO representing the interests and highlighting the concerns of the San in Namibia, South Africa and Botswana, particularly on social and economic issues.

In Namibia the platform of a political party is the only vehicle for standing for parliament and the parties are committed to addressing the under-representation of indigenous groups. MPs are elected through a system of party-list proportional representation and by Presidential appointment. The President can consider the under-representation of certain groups. Voting levels are low among indigenous communities but political parties can encourage groups to be active in the process by addressing issues of interest to them.

There is also the challenge of bringing indigenous communities into the mainstream of society, socially and economically, for example as teachers or doctors. There have been

several initiatives in Namibia to address socio-economic underdevelopment. The Ministry of Education has a multi-sectoral task force to help bring educationally marginalised children into the mainstream system and to ensure that children complete school. It is believed that providing education will unlock opportunities for indigenous groups to raise themselves economically. Children who complete school act as role models or agents of change. Some colleges of education have set aside teacher training places for indigenous groups. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has investigated the socio-economic challenges in San and Himba communities and has provided assistance such as livestock and agricultural tools, and relief from school fees. However, there are many competing needs in the country and there are not enough resources to address them all.

## Recommendations

- Continuing dialogue and communication between members of parliament as well as communication with the public are very important in ensuring that the concerns of all sections of society are taken into account at all times. Parliamentarians have a responsibility to ensure that the wishes of the people they represent are made a reality.
- International instruments can be used as guidelines but are not always appropriate for all countries.
- It is helpful to have an aim for aboriginal communities to assume responsibility for their own affairs – to have self-government where appropriate and integration when they wish to.
- In some areas there are large enough groups to elect aboriginal MPs, and action to promote better representation should be considered.
- Parliamentarians have a critical role to play in representing indigenous minority groups' issues – for example, there has traditionally been a focus in aboriginal groups on the family system and so there is more interest in issues relating to the family.
- As we become a more international world, there is more and more human rights legislation. This is negotiated by executives with limited input from parliamentarians. There should be more opportunities for parliamentarians to get involved in these issues that affect diverse communities. One good development is that aboriginal women are assuming roles within their own governance process – as Chiefs, or leading NGOs. Parliamentarians could consider appropriate legislative protection for indigenous minorities – for example, in Canada, there is a bill going through parliament to extend the Human Rights Act to aboriginal peoples.
- Improving access to and performance in the education system for indigenous minorities was felt to be critical. Learning from good practice and implementing appropriate positive action was considered essential and parliamentarians could have a major role in lobbying for appropriate changes.

# List of participants

## Gender

### Malaysia

Hon. Senator Heng Seai Kie MP  
Hon. Senator Mumtaz Md. Nawi MP  
Hon. Dr Junaidy Abdul Wahab MP

### South Africa

Hon. S. P. Rwexana MP  
Hon. Janet Semple MP

### Wales

Adele Baumgardt, Director of Policy and Partnership, Equal Opportunity Commission Wales (Facilitator)  
Hon. Christine Chapman AM  
Hon. Joyce Watson AM  
Claire Clancy, Chief Executive and Clerk of the National Assembly

## Religious pluralism

### Jamaica

Hon. Marisa Dalrymple-Philibert MP and Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives  
Hon. Sharon Hay-Webster MP

### Nigeria

Hon. Shuaibu Abdullahi MHR  
Hon. Khadija Abba-Ibrahim MHR  
Hon. Ike Chinwo MHR

### UK

Mike Waldron, Director of Policy and International Affairs, the Faith Regen Foundation (Facilitator)

## Disability

### Scotland

Alan Dickson (Facilitator)  
Hon. Margaret Mitchell MSP  
Hon. Hugh O'Donnell MSP  
Hon. Jamie Stone MSP  
Hon. Johann Lamont MSP

### Singapore

Hon. Ellen Lee Geck Hoon MP  
Hon. Zaqy Mohamad MP  
Hon. Sin Boon Ann MP

### Uganda

Hon. Hood Kiribedda Katuramu MP  
Hon. Wilson William Nokrach MP

## Indigenous minorities

### Canada

Senator the Hon. Raynell Andreychuk  
Rod Bruinooge MP

### Namibia

Hon. Clara Bohitile MP  
Hon. Royal /Ui/o/oo MP  
Hon. McHenry Venaani MP

### UK

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