

Report to the WA Branch of the
Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
on the
2017 CPA Westminster Workshop
For Public Accounts Committees
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1. Introduction

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, United Kingdom (CPA UK) hosted a three day workshop for Parliamentary Public Accounts Committees (PACs) in London on 4-6 December 2017.

As one of three WA CPA Branch representatives and as Chair of the Legislative Council Standing Committee on Estimates and Financial Operations and the Joint Standing Committee on Audit I participated in the Workshop.



Participants in the CPA UK 2017 Westminster Workshop for Public Accounts Committees

The Workshop brought together Chairs, Members and Clerks of public accounts committees (or equivalents) of CPA members. It was particularly targeted at MPs and Clerks of small legislatures.

There were 60 participants. Most (45) were Members of Parliament from the various CPA member branches. Fifteen participants were Clerks or research officers to (mostly national) Parliaments. A low 16.7% of all participants were women.

The aim of the Workshop was to develop the skills and capacity of participants in order to better scrutinise public spending and ensure government accountability for the delivery of public services.

This report provides discussion on the Workshop content and learnings.

I sincerely thank my parliamentary colleagues, the WA Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the staff and members of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK and other Workshop participants for a unique and extremely rewarding opportunity. Thank you also to my fellow WA participants, Tim Hughes and Dean Nalder MLA and to Anne Day, Executive Officer to the Hon Secretary of the WA Branch of CPA. I trust my learnings can be shared to support and strengthen our parliament.

2. Role, Remit and Effectiveness

The Workshop commenced with an informal networking lunch. This was useful to meet participants prior to the formal sessions and to discuss our expectations of the Workshop. The formal sessions commenced with a welcome and introduction from Mr Jon Davies, Chief Executive and Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods MP, Treasurer, CPA UK.

The focus of the first sessions of the Workshop was on the various roles of parliamentary audit or public accounts committees and ways in which committees could improve effectiveness in scrutiny of public accounts.

Rt Hon Dame Margaret Hodge, Member for Barking, provided the Keynote Address. Dame Margaret was the first female Chair of the UK Parliament's Public Accounts Committee (2010-2015). She spoke of the importance of public accounts committees (PACs) in ensuring government accountability of public monies. She provided an outline of some of the inquiries she chaired and the way in which committee operations could use experience of previous inquiries to strengthen their roles.

What makes an effective PAC?

A panel of speakers addressed ways in which effectiveness of public accounts committees could be achieved. This included Dr Helen Foster, Ulster University. Dr Foster is currently researching effectiveness of PACs across three jurisdictions. She reinforced the importance of PACs as critical to ensuring accountability because it is the primary (and often the only) mechanism by which the expenditure of public money can be scrutinised and accounted for. Other effectiveness markers of PACs were discussed by panel members including:

- ensuring a good relationship with Auditor Generals
- ensuring non-partisan approaches to inquiries
- making sure the scope of inquiry is clear to both the PAC and the witnesses (public sector officers)
- educating ministerial, departmental and other stakeholders on the role of PACs
- having clear processes and procedures for the proper conduct of inquiries.¹



Hon Wavel Famkalawan MP, Leader of the Opposition and Chair, Finance and Public Accounts Committee, Seychelles identified how the Auditor General is the main partner in his Committee's work. He spoke of how this is structurally achieved (via the Constitution and capacity to freeze government budgets) and procedures (scrutiny of particular programs, contracts and budgets). He also emphasized the importance of working in a bi-partisan manner.

Committee governance and structure

A panel of speakers addressed commonalities and differences in structures and processes of PACs across the Commonwealth by way of example of how each operate. This included the establishment of an Integrity Commission and rigorous procurement procedures as well as an appropriations committee and expenditure committee (Turks and Cacos). One panel member (McGuinness, UK) discussed the differences of focus of inquiries including whether

¹ For further information on these issues see Foster, Helen (2015) The effectiveness of the Public Accounts Committee in Northern Ireland, *Public Money & Management*, 35:6, 401-408. And <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/3466.pdf>

to consider value for money, waste of expenditure or following expenditure. He highlighted the importance of following through particular programs and expenditure throughout the cycle of the project.

Good practice and innovation in PAC work

A panel of speakers discussed examples of good practice of PAC committees they had participated in. Issues included²:

- ensuring committee members and staff were trained in inquiry methods as well as briefed thoroughly on the issues for examination, prior to examination by external trainers
- ensuring committees understand the terms of reference of the inquiry including the purpose of the inquiry (eg is it to examine expenditure or budget)
- publicise and televise inquiries to enhance transparency, not only of the issues but of the committee processes
- develop good working relationships with other audit bodies (eg Auditor General)
- audit committee staff and audit office staff gaining experience in each workplace to ensure understanding of the role of each of the agencies
- ensuring procurement procedures and practices are also considered in inquiries
- focus on value for money as well as expenditure
- develop a rigorous follow up system post inquiries
- importance of committee members acting in an impartial and bipartisan manner to ensure successful inquiry and outcomes
- very important that the members asking the questions understand why the question asked and the answers that might be anticipated in order to pursue the issue further with the witnesses
- it is important to ensure community engagement, particularly on issue based inquiries
- ensure that there is a clear plan for what evidence is needed and how it will be collected (and what constitutes evidence).

The supreme audit institution

Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs) are organisations independent of the government whose purpose is established by the parliament or consistitution. Roles vary, but primarily exist to

² See Better Financial Scrutiny: A Guide for Select Committees, Scrutiny Unit, House of Commons, January 2015.

enhance accountability in public expenditure. This session discussed the various roles of SAIs in public financial accountability. It also explored the role of Parliament in ensuring and guaranteeing independence of SAIs. Examples of good practice in SAIs and audit committees working together were discussed.

Summary

A wide range of information that may enhance the operation and effectiveness of PACs (or equivalents) in their jurisdictions was provided. Relevant learnings included:

- being clear about the purpose, theme or focus of the inquiry
- develop lines of inquiry that relates to the theme – being clear about what is being inquired into:
 - budget (what is being proposed) or expenditure (how money was spent)
 - waste
 - policy or program outcomes
 - procurement practices and procedures
- training and experiential learning is critical to successful committee operations
- transparency in committee’s own work is important to ensure public accountability and engagement
- ensure bipartisan approaches to committee work

In general, these sessions were invaluable in identifying actions across a range of parliamentary committees that constitute best practice and which ensure accountability and transparency of governments.



With Hon Sebastien Pillay MP, Seychelles

3. Inquiries, Independence and Transparency

The second part of the Workshop focussed on ways of working to ensure successful inquiries. Three sessions were provided and participants were able to chose most relevant to their needs.

Working Cross-Party

This session focussed on elements that are required to ensure successful working together of committees given that all are cross-party in nature. Some of the issues raised included:

- all members are concerned that public funds are expended wisely – use this as the basis for ensuring collaborative inquiries
- be clear about first principles – what are you trying to do
- have ‘lead’ members on key issues to share the workload
- enquiring into large projects – seek milestone reports

While this session was useful, there was not enough time or opportunity for participants to discuss the real barriers to working cross-party effectively.

Effective questioning

A practical based training session was provided on how to ask effective questions. Issues included³:

- have a plan to ask questions
- review plan following hearings
- non-aggressive questioning elicits more detailed information
- acknowledge positives in inquiries as well as problems
- ensure training for all committee members
- try to put a ‘human’ face on issues/impact of expenditure
- make sure understand the question
- be aware of different types of questions (information, testing, clarifying, headline)
- asking open questions often yield more information

³ See White, Hannah, Select Committees under Scrutiny: The impact of parliamentary committee inquiries on government. <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk>

- there's no such thing as a brilliant question – only productive and unproductive questions

Tax transparency workshop

The afternoon workshop was sponsored by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Corporation of London. It considered international tax systems including tax avoidance and evasion.

4. Outcomes, Outreach and Engagement

This session focussed on ways committees can enhance community engagement in order to ensure effective inquiries as well as accountability and transparency. This was provided in skills-based training and panel sessions. It also included observation of a House of Commons PAC hearing in session.

Media and social media training

Two sessions provided practical advice on using traditional and social media. Information provided included:

- Understand why use media
 - amplify issues
 - increase power and influence
 - increase awareness of accountability
- Build relationships with media
- Prepare for interviews (get clear agreement on nature and scope of interview)
- Get briefing on key messages
- Tips on participating in the interview
- Social media can help engagement and assist in getting message out
- Use various platforms
- Digital democracy commission has been established in UK
- Committees use blogs by Chairs
- Use #askgov to send in inquiry questions
- Skype the Speaker – used in UK.

5. Conclusion

The three-day Workshop and associated events were very valuable in building skills and understanding in my role of chair of two parliamentary committees associated with audit-type functions. In addition, the Workshop has aided in strengthening my confidence in these roles. I have available a number of documents which members may wish to read relating to many of the sessions described above.

The sessions were well organised and each met the stated objectives. The informal components were important in sharing information and experiences which also aided learning.



The WA Branch of CPA may wish to consider hosting similar workshops in regional meetings given the obvious value in ensuring well functioning and effective audit and related parliamentary committees contributing to good governance.

Thank you to the WA and UK branches for the support given to me to participate in this invaluable Workshop.