

Report into the 56th Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Conference

Introduction

The 56th Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Conference was held in Nairobi, Kenya from 10th - 19th September 2010. The conference was hosted by the Parliament of the Republic of Kenya with the Kenyan Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

Official Opening Ceremony 14 September 2010

I attended the official opening of the 56th Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Conference on 14 September 2010. The conference was officially opened by His Excellency the Hon Mwai Kibaki, President of the Republic of Kenya.

President Kibaki during his opening speech discussed a wide variety of issues including the new Kenyan constitution and what it means to his country moving forward. He also spoke of the critical issues facing all Commonwealth nations such as climate change, sustainable development, the representation of women and migrant workers.

Australian Region Branch Meeting 14 September 2010

During the afternoon there was an opportunity for the regional groups to hold meetings. September 2010. Delegates from the Australian Region focused considerable energy on the prospects of the forthcoming report from the CPA Working Party and the discussion paper presented by the Hon Senator John Hogg.

Whilst the group was not in a position to make any formal resolutions, it was agreed that every effort possible should be made to ensure that the democratic structures and principles within the CPA be maintained and that we express our opposition to moves to have the CPA recognized as a Diplomatic institution.

Address by Secretary General Commonwealth Parliamentary Association 14 September 2010

The conference was addressed by the CPA's Secretary General, Dr William Shija.

During his address, Dr Shija raised various topics including:

The central role of the CPA in assisting member nations implement parliamentary reform agenda's and delivery of professional development for parliamentarians.

The critical threat that climate change poses to every nation across the planet. He spoke of the emerging view in developing countries in Africa, Asia and the Pacific that there needed to be a recognition that advanced economies had benefited from being able to develop without significant environmental constraints and that now was the time to pay something back and assist developing nations in the implementation of low carbon emission economies by funding the necessary investment and technology.

Expressed sincere sympathy on behalf of the CPA to the people of Pakistan suffering through the widespread flooding in that country.

Indicating that the work of the CPA Working Party was underway and would be completed in time for delegates to consider its report and recommendations at the next CPA conference in London in 2011.

Official Conference Excursion 15 -16 September 2010

As part of the 2010 CPA conference, delegates attended a two day excursion to a location at one of four locations outside of Nairobi. I was allocated to the group which travelled to the Masai Mara with a number of other Australian delegates. Located about 270 kilometers from Nairobi, the reserve is about 1510 sq kms. Spectacular game viewing activities occur during the day and at night in this diverse ecosystem. Visitors are able to venture into the bush with the guidance of knowledgeable guides and to spend the day out in the savanna.

Visitors can also visit local Masai villages where the Masai communities live within the dispersal area with their stock. Centuries of close association with the wildlife has resulted in an almost symbiotic relationship between the Masai people and the wildlife that live in peace with one another.

Guests can observe a prolific number of birds. Including migrants, well over 450 species of birds have been recorded, among them, 57 species of birds of prey. The climate is gentle, rarely too hot, with well-spread rainfall year round. Between July and October, wildebeest migrate through the Masai Mara National Reserve.

The Masai Mara is one of the best plains' game reserves where you can encounter a congregation of all sorts of animals, including lions, cheetahs, ostriches, gazelles, elephants, hippos, rhinos, crocodiles, giraffes, wart hogs, hyenas and water buffalos. Kenya has a very advanced eco-tourism industry that has a willingness to allow full access by visitors to conservation areas and to permit the development of substantial infrastructure to support and facilitate these visits provides substantial employment for Kenyans in regional and rural areas.

It is clear the people of Kenya take considerable pride in the Masai Mara conservation reserve as national asset. In particular, it is clear that the Masai people have a deep cultural connection to the land. Further, it is also clear that the Maasai and the people of Kenya are of the opinion that the best way to protect the conservation values of the Masai Mara is to give as many visitors as possible a positive experience during their visit to engender support for its ongoing conservation and increase awareness about its international environmental significance.

CPA Conference Workshops 17 September 2010

I had the opportunity to attend two Conference Workshops.

Parliament, Accountability & the Role of Internet Governance in Strengthening Oversight

Members at this workshop emphasized the importance of public access to the proceedings and processes of Parliament and Government. The internet is a useful vehicle to enable the delivery of open government. It was discussed that there is a need for government

budgets to cater for the necessary I.C.T. infrastructure to ensure the widest possible access by the public (and media) to government and parliament as well as ensuring MPs have adequate resources to provide information to constituents, media etc.

As a corollary, the fact remains that certain constituents may need assistance to access proceedings or information due to a lack of IT literacy or physical/financial incapacity and this needs to be addressed.

One consequence of greater access is greater scrutiny and necessarily MPs must be prepared to "take the heat" resulting from greater information access. Social media in this context can be as much a hindrance or distraction from true debate as well as a positive tool to engage the community.

Related to this was the tension of the one hand of attaining freedom of speech but on the other, of protection of privacy and reputation. There was a lengthy discussion as to how to deal with "scandalous stories" or untruths that are propagated through the internet.

Members also raised the merits of "right to information" legislation. Putting such information in the public domain saves time and money in the long run. In the 21st century the emphasis is rightly on accountability as opposed to secrecy or at best obscurity that characterized previous eras. In all of this, internet governance is critical. Any internet disruption would seriously impact on availability of information and accountability. Members expressed the view that making technology universally available is a necessity.

The Global Water & Food Crisis

The global water and food crisis is affecting the lives of almost half of the global population. Increased human activity has placed greater demands on water resources as a result of increased population growth. Food production consumes the vast majority of fresh water resources, while other activities include urban and industrial use.

The water scarcity is the major cause of poverty as it especially stifles agricultural development thus depriving a large portion of the population access to food. Scarcity of water has also become a major cause of international conflict through tensions in sharing the resource. The severity of the food crisis is amply illustrated by increasing prices of essential commodities across the globe. It is imperative that concerned governments take substantial steps to control food prices and make low cost food grains accessible to the needy and poor.

Stress on water resources can be attributed to population growth which in turn leads to pressure to provide water for domestic purposes as well as to provide food either through irrigated agriculture, raising of livestock and industrial growth. Food security is determined by the capacity people have to secure access to agricultural production. These opportunities are influenced by access to water.

There is growing concern that 50% of the world's population in 2025 will be facing water scarcity. This is a factor of population growth as well as climate change. The World Health Organization has indicated there are currently approximately 1.1 billion people globally who don't have access to safe drinking water of which 40% live in Africa and Asia. The consequence of this has been that 80% of health problems are linked to inadequate water and sanitation, claiming the lives of 5 million people per year, 1.8 million of whom are children.

In Africa alone, an estimated 5% of CDP is lost annually due to illness and death caused by dirty water and poor sanitation. There was therefore a general consensus that the supply of is central to any program that has the objective of reducing poverty.

General Assembly 18 September 2010

During the general assembly a wide and free ranging debate occurred relating to certain procedures relating the the electoral processes observed during the conference. There was also a discussion surrounding the extension of the General Secretary's term.

The Parliament of Rwanda was formally accepted into the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

A touching video presentation relating to the floods in Pakistan was presented and the Secretary General committed to visit Pakistan in the near future to offer the support of the CPA.

Plenary Session: Commonwealth Initiatives in Handling Migration Issues 18 September 2010

Arguments for and against free migration, both legal and illegal, were voiced by lead speakers as some focused on the protection of the rights of migrant workers while others expressed concerns about the effects of migrants on small communities and on each society's culture and values. There was agreement, however, on the need for international co-operation and collaboration to ensure that migration is managed properly in a globalized world where the movement of people is posing problems for all nations. Migrant workers are often exploited and their human rights abused because they do not know their rights and domestic legislation and institutions can fail to deal with foreigners.

Parliamentarians should therefore scrutinize governments to ensure foreign workers enjoy the same rights as domestic workers and that they have access to education programs so they know what those rights are.

Official Closing Ceremony 18 September 2010

The conference was officially closed by the Rt. Hon Raila Odinga, Prime Minister of the Republic of Kenya. The Prime Minister addressed the conference delegates and raised a number of issues such the new Kenyan constitution, climate change and the need for investment in renewable power generation and transparency and accountability in national governance structures to protect human rights.

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15th November 2010