

## ***Report of Commonwealth Day 2001 in Branches***

### ***CPA Commonwealth Day Programme***

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The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association held a full-day event in London on March 12, 2001, for young people from around the Commonwealth. The nearly 40 young people came from almost as many State and National Branches of the CPA, from the Falkland Islands to Zambia, the Caribbean to Gibraltar. The day was essentially one for learning: Parliamentary affairs, Democracy and Human Rights being the main focus. The CPA Secretariat provided a wealth of useful information in booklet form prior to and during the Programme, and hosted a variety of speakers to address participants during the day.

#### **Tour of UK Houses of Parliament**

Guided tours through the Palace of Westminster were an excellent start to the day. Not only did our guides provide us with fascinating, entertaining and sometimes gruesome (!) information about the history of Parliamentary Democracy in Britain, they brought to life the contrast between the present grandeur of the Palace and its destruction in times past through fire and war. It was easy and interesting to draw parallels between the workings of the House of Commons and Australia's Federal and State Houses of Parliament, and particularly good to see Australia's contribution of the Speaker's Chair to the post-War reconstruction of the site. Other participants could equally reflect on their own Parliamentary customs, and see their contributions to the new House of Commons. In this sense, the tour brought the group together, highlighting the common links between member branches of the CPA.

#### **Panel Discussion at CPA Headquarters**

Mr Raja Gomez, Director of Development and Planning, welcomed us to CPA Headquarters in Westminster and introduced us to the CPA, its international role and the structure of the organisation. He was joined by Mrs Cheryl Gillan, currently Shadow Minister for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs in Britain and the British Isles and Mediterranean Regional representative to the Executive Committee. Cheryl provided a fascinating introduction to life as a British MP, the challenges faced by women entering British Parliament, and the controversies of current refugee policy around the world. We were also addressed by CPA Secretary-General Mr Arthur Donahoe, QC and the Hon. Pius Msekwa (MP, Tanzania), current Chairman of the Executive Committee. During lunch we were able to talk further with the speakers, and learn more about their role in the CPA and the role of the CPA in the Commonwealth. It was an excellent opportunity to engage with people of such wide experience and expertise.

## **Participant Debates**

Several debates were then held between the young people attending the Programme, covering a number of topical issues in domestic and international politics within the Commonwealth. Participants supported the proposition that Commonwealth countries should be suspended for suspected violations of Human Rights, opposed quotas for women in Parliament and opposed State funding for political parties. The debates were strongly contested, successfully discussed sensitive case material and had their entertaining moments, in what proved to be a great way of involving all the young people and promoting our interaction.

## **Commonwealth Day Observance in Westminster Abbey**

The CPA had secured tickets for each of us to attend, with the Queen, Prime Minister of Britain and many other dignitaries from Britain and the Commonwealth, the multi-faith Observance in Westminster Abbey. The beauty of the Abbey and splendour of the voices of the Abbey's choristers would have made the event special in itself, but the Observance was also very well planned to incorporate the people, customs and beliefs of all Commonwealth countries and the generations therein. The theme of the Queen's address - A New Generation - was well reflected by the content of the programme. Children asked questions about the importance of individuals, the environment, world peace, friendships and the role of the new generation, which were answered by representatives of Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Islamic and Jewish faiths. Commonwealth Secretary-General, the Right Hon. Donald McKinnon, in reading the Queen's Message, emphasised that the strength of the Commonwealth lies in its diversity.

## **Celebration at the Royal Commonwealth Society**

Whilst some participants chose to attend debates in the Houses of Commons and Lords following the Observance in Westminster Abbey, I went with a second group to the Royal Commonwealth Society in Westminster, to attend their Commonwealth Day celebrations. It was a further opportunity to get to know the other young participants of the Programme, and also to meet other people connected with the many associations of the Commonwealth.

We hope to follow up the Commonwealth Day event with a more in-depth study of the Commonwealth later in the year. I think we all felt that we learned a tremendous amount during the day, and are eager to participate in further events hosted by the CPA. Apart from the opportunities to visit the Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey, it was also a chance to meet and form friendships with new people, from around the World. I express my sincere appreciation to the Tasmanian Branch of the CPA for nominating and supporting me to attend the Commonwealth Day Programme. Ms Susan Dando, who attended the event last year, and I seem to have enjoyed this opportunity so much that we hope others will have the same experience in the future, representing Tasmania at the CPA events to come.