

Promoting parliamentary democracy

During September, Australia will play host to the 47th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference – a forum to share views and ideas on advancing parliamentary democracy. The Conference will also discuss ways of dealing with significant international issues, such as people smuggling and poverty alleviation. The Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Arthur Donahoe QC, outlines the work that the Association undertakes to promote parliamentary democracy.

Principal among the shared values which link Commonwealth nations is the adherence to the democratic form of government. This tenet was first stated publicly in the 1971 Singapore Declaration when Commonwealth Heads of Government affirmed that all people should be free to participate politically in framing the societies in which they live. Heads of Government rededicated themselves to this ideal in the 1991 Harare Declaration, which specifically invited the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) to continue to play the effective role in advancing the democratic process which it had been performing since its establishment in 1911.

The CPA today exists to “promote knowledge of the constitutional, legislative, economic, social and cultural aspects of parliamentary democracy”. Among the many programmes it runs to promote the evolution of parliamentary institutions is the annual Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference, the oldest political gathering in the Commonwealth and one which Australia hosts this September for the fourth time since the Empire Parliamentary Association became the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in 1948.

This conference and other CPA programmes to bolster the institution of parliament and the professional abilities of the members and officials who work in it are guided by the following precepts:

1. Commonwealth parliamentarians, irrespective of gender, race, religion or culture, share a community of interest based on respect for the positive ideals of parliamentary democracy, the rule of law and individual rights and freedoms;
2. The governance of Commonwealth citizens will benefit by exposing political practitioners to the many different policies, procedures and systems employed by other practitioners on a Commonwealth-wide and regional basis;
3. Although the Westminster system is dominant, all Commonwealth assemblies contribute to the continuing evolution of democratic governance so no single institution or country is seen as pre-eminent and no individual practice is universally applicable without local adaptation; and
4. Political, constitutional and procedural consultations are most effectively conducted by facilitating contacts between members and officials through full and frank discussions unfettered by intergovernmental decision-making.



Arthur Donahoe QC, Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. Photo: CPA

Although its membership, which has grown by 50 per cent in the last decade, is constitutionally confined to practising Commonwealth democracies, the Association maintains relations with some non-Commonwealth parliamentary organisations and countries. Several of these will be represented at the conference in Australia, as they were at last year's conference hosted by the United Kingdom and Jersey Parliaments and opened by the Patron of the CPA, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

“Commonwealth parliamentarians share a community of interest.”

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference now attracts parliamentarians and officials from in excess of 170 parliaments and legislatures in the Commonwealth's 51 democratic nations, states, provinces and territories.

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At present, Fiji, Pakistan and Brunei are outside the parliamentary community. Even without them, the community numbers approximately 15,000 members, far too many for the Association to accomplish its goals with one annual conference. It therefore reaches out to all members in this transitory political world by:

- organising seminars, meetings and special study groups for Commonwealth members and officials;
- conducting professional development workshops and symposia, including a highly successful series of post-election seminars for parliaments which have experienced fundamental changes in their operations, have replaced undemocratic regimes or have experienced a substantial influx of new members;
- publishing a quarterly journal on parliamentary affairs, *The Parliamentarian*, and a collection of newsletters, books, reports, electronic information and specialist studies aimed at, and largely written by, members and officials;
- providing an information service on comparative parliamentary, constitutional and political organisation;
- facilitating the exchange of visits between parliaments; and
- presenting a parliamentary perspective on global issues in the intergovernmental community, including nominating parliamentarians to participate in Commonwealth election observation missions.

Special attention is paid to encouraging the representation of women in the parliamentary process. A meeting of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians is held during the annual conference and gender issues are regularly discussed at other sessions and meetings.

The Association also has a particular interest in the Commonwealth's smallest jurisdictions, about 30 of which participate in the annual Small Countries Conference. This conference meets in Darwin immediately prior to this year's plenary conference.

Supporting the agenda of regular services is a busy programme of projects to meet special needs. This year, for example,

the CPA has arranged workshops in Mozambique, Malawi and the South African province of Gauteng for southern African parliamentarians interested in finding ways to strengthen democratic practices. The CPA has also organised study groups on introducing gender-sensitive practices into the parliamentary process and increasing the effectiveness of Public Accounts Committees.



47TH
COMMONWEALTH
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A video conference on parliament's relations with the media and a virtual conference on democracy were also held, highlighting the Association's use of the latest information and communications technology to bring members together.

Association meetings do not pass resolutions or call for particular actions. The CPA is a solution-seeking, not a decision-making, body. Members attending CPA events are free of party and

governmental constraints and bring all shades of political opinion to the CPA's deliberations.

One of the strengths of the CPA is its ability to call on the resources of members and parliaments to give voluntarily of their time and expertise to enhance CPA programmes. This is particularly true of those who serve on its governing bodies, such as The Hon. Pius Msekwa MP, Speaker of the Tanzanian National Assembly, who chairs the CPA's Executive Committee, and Senator The Hon. Margaret Reid, who takes time out from her duties as President of Australia's Senate to preside over this year's General Assembly. These bodies set CPA policy and direct the activities of the Association's London secretariat of 14 staff, ensuring the CPA remains in touch with the changing demands of democratic representation.

At a time when traditional Commonwealth links are rivalled by regional political groupings and the expansion of non-Commonwealth trade and other ties, the CPA performs a vital function in increasing the awareness of parliamentarians about developments in countries and assemblies which share historical, institutional, political, linguistic and legal traditions. This role is crucial for members of all parliaments, whether they work in new institutions seeking to initiate their procedures or long-established democracies striving to make their operations more representative, responsible and relevant.

For more information on the work of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association visit: www.cpahq.org

The topics for discussion at the 47th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference are:

- Strengthening Parliament's oversight role in the battle against corruption
- Poverty Alleviation
- Gender sensitising Parliaments in the Commonwealth
- Towards being a professional knowledge-based parliamentarian
- Combating international trafficking of people
- Should scientific advances be the subject to legislative and regulatory measures?