



Report of the
COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION
66th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference
2-5 October 2023
Accra, **Ghana**



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Background, Summary and Highlights.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference (CPC) is the annual meeting of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA). It is one of the largest Commonwealth meetings, bringing together some 500 Parliamentarians representing over 180 parliamentary Branches, from across the Association's nine Regions.

The 66th CPC took place between 2-5 October 2023 in Accra, Ghana. The Conference theme was "***The Commonwealth Charter 10 years on: Values and Principles for Parliaments to Uphold***"; with 2023 marking the 10th anniversary of the Commonwealth Charter which outlines the principles and values of the Commonwealth.

The CPA Wales (Senedd) Branch, as part of its fee structure, was invited to send one delegate with the option of being represented by additional conference "Observer" participants.

Once again, the opportunity to participate in this year's CPC was opened up to all Branch Members and the selected delegation was made up of Members not on the Branch Executive Committee and who had not previously been active in the work of CPA at the Senedd.

The conference provided excellent networking opportunities as well as a platform to raise the profile of the Senedd and Wales.

The Senedd took advantage of the opportunities, beyond the immediate conference, including to participate in meetings with Speaker-led delegations from the [Western Cape Provincial Parliament](#) (South Africa) and the [National Assembly of Quebec](#); as well as LGBTQ+ community engagement, led by Adam Price MS, in partnership with the British High Commission in Ghana.

Report by Adam Price MS

Background

The 66th CPC in Accra was held under the theme of “The Commonwealth Charter 10 years on: Values and Principles for Parliaments to Uphold”. The Commonwealth Charter expressly prohibits all forms of discrimination on any ground and yet many in the LGBTQ+ community continue to face severe discrimination, including the criminalisation of same-sex love in the majority of Commonwealth countries.

The fact that the Conference was to be held in Ghana gave added power to the sense of anger and frustration at the failure to live up to the Commonwealth’s stated principles. On the 6th July 2023 the Ghanaian Parliament voted unanimously in favour of the Second Reading of anti-LGBTQ bill which would make the mere expression of an LGBTQ+ identity a criminal offence. Many LGBTQ+ parliamentarians, together with our allies, agonised on whether to boycott this year’s CPC.

I decided to attend to try and use the platform deliberately to engage with the local LGBTQ+ community and to engage with parliamentarians across the Commonwealth on the question of global LGBTQ+ equality.

LGBTQ+ community engagement

Before the Conference I engaged directly with local LGBTQ+ activists, to hear their experiences and ask them how the CPC could be best used to raise their concerns. I organised two virtual meetings with the LGBTQ+ community in the run-up to the conference and the consensus view was that the best way to assist was through a private briefing of interested UK parliamentarians who could then draw upon this knowledge in their wider participation in the CPC. I worked together with the UK High Commission in arranging for a diverse group of around twenty LGBTQ+ community, civil society and human rights groups to brief the UK delegation from the Senedd, the UK Parliament and the Scottish Parliament. I’ve remained in contact with a number of these activists since the Conference and am continuing to have discussions with other key stakeholders as to how the local LGBT community can be supported.

Plenary Programme of Conference



Photo: Adam Price MS representing the Senedd at the CPC General Assembly.

The main plenary sessions of the formal programme of the General Assembly this year were relatively uncontentious. A motion on the importance of food security and sustainability was passed with no dissenting voices. A second term was agreed for the CPA's Secretary General Stephen Twigg (himself a former LGBTQ+ parliamentarian). Contingency plans for moving the headquarters of the CPA outside of the UK if the necessary legislation to reconstitute the CPA as an international inter-parliamentary organisation, if not passed by the UK Parliament, were agreed.

Possibly one of the most significant addresses to the Conference was by President Akufo-Addo in opening the Conference. He gave a characteristically erudite address in which he stressed the "need to uphold the democratic and human rights that are the background for common ground in the Commonwealth". He repeatedly stressed the protection of fundamental human rights and freedoms and the ideal of a "just and inclusive society for all" as shared values and principles. He cited the preamble of the 1992 Ghanaian Constitution with its reference to "equality of opportunity". His

speech presented Ghana as a stalwart defender of liberal democracy in a region beset by threats to democratic stability, both internal and external. He did this, while recognising Ghana's own failure to make progress e.g. in the area of women's representation with only 40 women parliamentarians currently. He made a passionate defence of democracy, including the importance of solidarity with the people of Ukraine, a standpoint not universally shared among nations of the Global South. In recalling the historic contribution of one of Ghana's most famous citizens, former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, he called for the reform of global institutions, a recognition of the failure to live in harmony with nature and the need for former European powers, in particular, to meet their responsibilities in making reparations for slavery.

Conference Workshops

Carolyn Thomas MS and I attended three of the workshops that were held in parallel during the course of the Conference. A roundtable on youth held in the Ghanaian Parliament was most notable for having no young people on the panel. There was a palpable sense of frustration among the young people present at the sidelining of young people in decision-making – in a country whose median age is 20 - and at soaring youth unemployment, which had been the main focus of a major protest which blocked traffic in the city during the week of the conference.

The Workshop on Gender Quotas in Parliaments across the Commonwealth heard from speakers from Sierra Leone and Bangladesh about the impact of legislative gender quotas there, and from a UN Women representative about global efforts for equal representation. Carolyn Thomas spoke about the proposals for gender quotas in Wales, and also the wider barriers for women's participation in politics. I made the point that gender-equal parliaments should be seen as a stepping stone to inclusive and representative parliaments in the widest sense, including increased participation from other traditionally under-represented groups including people with disabilities, ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ communities. The speaker from Sierra Leone said that their reforms had increased women's representation to 30% and closed list PR had been an important contributory factor in achieving this progress. The UN Women representative pointed to the work being conducted by [CEDAW](#) (the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women) to develop a draft recommendation in favour of gender quotas which is likely to be adopted next year.



Photo: Adam Price MS addressing delegates at the Workshop on “The Commonwealth Charter: A Charter for all Human Rights, or just some?”

The workshop on human rights had speakers from both Global North and South covering the full range of human rights issues covered by the Commonwealth Charter. But it was the discussion of LGBT rights that became the most animated. [Steve Letsike](#), an out lesbian member of the ANC National Executive from South Africa, and chair of the [Commonwealth Equality Network](#) (TCEN) that brings together LGBT+ community and civil society organisations internationally, made a powerful case for universal LGBT+ rights as part of a process of yet-to-be completed decolonisation of British anti-sodomy laws. Some Ghanaian and Ugandan MPs and civil society representatives in the audience disagreed, citing the need to respect local cultural values. Indian and South African delegates – particularly women from the provincial legislatures in the case of the latter - countered by speaking strongly in favour of respect for LGBT+ equality. In my own remarks I referred to the Ghanaian President’s emphasis on human rights for all in his opening remarks, and spoke about the effect on my own mental wellbeing of growing up as at a time when as an

18 year old same-sex love was criminalised and vilified. The chair of the statutory Ghanaian Human Rights and Justice Commission concluded by saying that he did not want international visitors to get the impression that Ghanaian culture was homophobic.

The workshop participants ended by passing, by a majority, a recommendation that ***"The Commonwealth Charter should apply to all Commonwealth citizens irrespective of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, age or political views and Parliaments should be actively working to promote the human rights of all."***

This was a non-binding resolution but, as a motion passed by a parliamentary forum organised in conjunction with the Ghanaian Parliament, its symbolic significance should not be under-estimated.

Report by Carolyn Thomas MS

It was a privilege to attend the 66th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference hosted by the Ghanaian Parliament in Accra, along with Adam Price MS (with the excellent support of Al Davies)

When I was Chair of Flintshire County Council, 10 years ago, I raised the Commonwealth Flag on World Commonwealth Day, talking to school children about celebrating the shared values of the Commonwealth, but had never been outside of Europe so this was a fantastic opportunity to meet and have discussions with other Commonwealth Parliamentarian from across the world, have a snapshot of life in Ghana (which I knew would be so different to my own culture) and promote Wales. It also tied in with work we have been doing on diversity in local government with the Local Government and Housing Committee and international relations post Brexit with the Culture, Communications, Sports, Welsh Language and International Relations committee.

I attended several workshops on equality and diversity, one being "**Gender Quotas – a means to an end**". I spoke how under Senedd reform, there will be a separate piece of legislation for gender quotas, there will also be a requirement for political parties to collect and publish diversity information about candidates standing at Senedd general elections. I also raised that in many countries, women are still the main carer, and some do not have financial independence so that needs to be addressed.

At the workshop "**The Commonwealth Charter: A Charter for all Human Rights, or just some?**" I was proud and moved to hear my colleague Adam Price speak of his experience growing up and coming out as a gay young person. It was brave as not all present in the room, including those sitting near him, were supporters of equality and diversity. At the end of the workshop, I moved to stand in solidarity by him and other Parliamentarians also did the same.



It made me proud that in Wales, the Government and the Senedd are committed to advancing gender equality towards a Wales with an equal sharing of power for all women, men and non-binary people. There is also a continued commitment to develop a country where all LGBTQ+ people in Wales are safe to live and love authentically, openly and freely as themselves – but this is not the same everywhere, and some countries appear to be moving in the opposite direction.

Another Workshop I attended and spoke at was **“E-Parliaments, an effective mechanism for intersectional diversity and equitable public engagement?”**

A panel speaker from New South Wales, talked about how their country had introduced e-petitions. I spoke about how Wales has e-petitions in place and she responded to say that Wales, was a country they looked at and researched before implementing in their country, again it made me proud that Wales is leading. I also spoke how the Senedd, following the outbreak of COVID-19, has continued with the option of hybrid and remote meetings, including in the Chamber, at Committees and Cross party groups. I noted that whilst many Members prefer to attend in person for debates, it has provided equality of opportunity and participation for those with caring responsibilities, physical or mental health disabilities, distance of travel and time management. Again, a fellow parliamentarian came up to me afterwards and commented how Wales is being progressive.

As the Senedd delegation, we met with other parliamentary delegates including the speaker from the Western Cape Parliament and the National Assembly of Quebec. We also took advantage of the opportunity to hold meetings with LGBTQ+ activists in Ghana at the British High Commission and heard first hand their experiences.

I enjoyed the opening ceremony which included African drumming and dancing, and at the end there was singing of the Women’s Anthem. Adam and I thought it would be good to sing this in the Senedd when we pass the gender quota legislation!



I also spent a lot of time with delegates from Scotland who were my travelling companions on the culture excursion to Cape Castle and Kakum National park.

We had an early start, leaving the hotel at 5.30 am but as was consistent with what I called 'Ghana time', we departed on the assembled coaches two hours later. The journey through Ghana to Cape Castle on the coast took another 3 hours, however, it was a good opportunity to see the towns and villages and have a small snapshot of how people are living, often very basically, in the country.

There are many forts built along what was known as the Gold Coast by Europeans in the 1600s, as they mined the minerals. Originally built by Sweden in the 1650s, Cape Coast Castle shifted into Danish, Dutch, and then English possession by the 1660s. Trade revolved around gold, wood, and textiles before English merchants began to seek captive Africans in large numbers. The rooms became dungeons and we heard and saw harrowing



depictions of what captives faced as part of the transatlantic slave trade. After Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807, the castle became an educational and administrative centre. At Kakum National Park, we did not see or hear many natives species of flora and fauna, or animals, it had been raining again, and the middle of the day is not a good time to see wildlife, but I did enjoy walking along the 7 tree top wood and rope bridges, taking us along the tree canopies.

The gala dinner was another good opportunity to chat with fellow parliamentarians and I joined in with the African dancing.



The African food consisted of spicy curries, rice and yams and it was sometimes a surprise when I started eating it and not what I expected!

After having my photograph taken with the Welsh flag on the stage at the conference on Monday I was disappointed to see on Wednesday it had been moved to a side area with other devolved nations.

However, I made the point of carrying it back on stage on three different occasions for further photographs!

Overall, it was an interesting experience to learn about and build international relations, meeting people from other Commonwealth countries, sharing what we are each doing, see first-hand an African country and promote Wales to other nations.

Conference Concluding Statement

The **Conference Concluding Statement** for the **66th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference (CPC)** is available [here](#)

This concluding statement contains:

- the main outcomes of the conference,
- a summary of the workshop discussions, and
- the recommendations that were either endorsed or noted by the Members in attendance.

For access to further news and resources from the 66th CPC – please visit the CPC website hub [here](#).

Images from the events of the 66th are also available at the CPA's Flickr page [here](#)



Photo: Carolyn Thomas MS and Adam Price MS outside the Ghana Parliament, Accra.

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