



Belfast, 20 - 23 September 2021

50th British Islands and Mediterranean Region (BIMR) Conference

Conference Report



SUMMARY

From 20 – 23 September 2021, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) Northern Ireland Assembly Branch was delighted to host the 50th annual British Islands and Mediterranean Region (BIMR) Conference, where parliamentarians representing 11 of the 13 regional branches were given the opportunity to share ideas and exchange good practice. The theme of the conference was 'Post-Pandemic Parliaments' and looked at the impact the pandemic has had on parliaments and how they function.

The programme was designed to allow delegates to hear about each other's experiences during the pandemic and how their individual legislatures changed and adapted to facilitate legislating in a time of national crisis. It also gave delegates the opportunity, during six workshops, to hear from and engage with high level speakers including Dr Hannah White, Institute for Government, Dr Rebecca Gordon, University of West Scotland, Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira, University of Leeds, Patricia Donnelly, Head of the Vaccine Programme, Department of Health, Northern Ireland, Joanne Stewart, Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance and Robin Newton MLA, from the Northern Ireland Assembly (Assembly).

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KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- The conference was officially opened by the Speaker and President of the CPA Northern Ireland Assembly Branch, Mr Alex Maskey MLA. He gave a welcome address to delegates before the plenary was opened by Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA, Chair of the CPA Northern Ireland Assembly Branch.
- The theme of the plenary was 'Parliaments and the Pandemic' and was hosted by Dr Hannah White from the Institute for Government.
- Six workshops took place during the conference on the themes of emergency legislation and scrutiny, the future of hybrid parliaments, public engagement and representation, post pandemic planning, the impact of COVID on tourism, travel and hospitality and the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on young people's learning and mental health.
- The region's AGM was held on the first day of the conference and was chaired by Ms Leona Roberts MLA, from the Falkland Islands. The Secretary-General of the CPA, Mr Stephen Twigg, addressed BMR delegates for the first time during his tenure as Secretary-General.
- On the second day the regional Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) Steering Committee held a productive meeting chaired by Ms Samantha Sacramento MP from Malta.
- Delegates attended the Balmoral Show, Northern Ireland's largest agri-food event, and found out how the pandemic impacted this sector.
- The Speaker and President of the CPA Northern Ireland Assembly Branch, Mr Alex Maskey MLA hosted an official dinner in Parliament Buildings, Stormont Estate, where delegates were met by the amazing Campbell College Pipes and Drums. The Gala Dinner was held in Hillsborough Castle, where delegates were joined by two very special guests, HRH The Earl of Wessex and HRH The Countess of Wessex.
- An optional tour day for delegates took place on the final day. The tour took delegates to Derry/Londonderry and the Giant's Causeway.



The Earl of Wessex with conference delegates (Left); The Earl and Countess of Wessex with Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger MP, Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA and Ms Michelle McIlveen MLA (Right)



DAY ONE - TUESDAY 21 SEPTEMBER

Plenary One - Parliaments and the Pandemic

The theme of the first Plenary session was 'Parliaments and the Pandemic' and was hosted by Dr Hannah White from the Institute for Government. A panel of four speakers from the BIMR discussed their experience of the pandemic within their own parliaments.

The panel was:

- Speaker Alex Maskey MLA, Northern Ireland Assembly
- Rhianon Passmore MS, Welsh Parliament
- Maria Miller MP, Parliament of the United Kingdom
- Leona Roberts MLA, Legislative Assembly of the Falkland Islands

Workshop A - Emergency Legislation & Scrutiny

Facilitator: Dr Rebecca Gordon, University of West Scotland

Rapporteur: Deputy David Johnson, The States Assembly, Jersey

Dr Rebecca Gordon gave Workshop members a presentation entitled "Emergency Legislation and Scrutiny: Parliamentary oversight during COVID-19", before opening up for discussion.

Conclusions

Safeguarding democracy and improving government responses to health emergencies requires strengthening legislatures, particularly in the following areas:

- Technology
 - Regulations
 - Committee System
 - Crisis Committees
 - Funding
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Workshop B - The Future of Hybrid Parliaments

Facilitator: Dr Hannah White OBE, Institute for Government

Rapporteur: Rhun Ap Iorwerth MS, Welsh Parliament

The workshop considered the following challenges:

- Practicality / logistical
- Procedural
- Inclusivity
- Legitimacy
- Engagement.

Summary.

- It was likely most parliaments would be open to keeping at least some of the best practices learned and developed during the pandemic through hybrid working.
- The option of having hybrid working was important as was improving IT infrastructure to facilitate this.
- The CPA should have a role in supporting this work.
- We need to consider the impact on how future hybrid working will impact on media and our social media.
- Cost vs Benefit consideration.
- Differing opinion from Economic Vs Sociological perspectives.

Workshop C: Public Engagement & Representation

Facilitator: Professor Cristina Leston-Bandeira, University of Leeds

Rapporteur: Steve Aiken MLA, Northern Ireland Assembly

The session was designed to explore the benefits and challenges of public engagement. Public engagement was particularly challenging during COVID-19 as Parliaments needed to focus on core function and public engagement just stopped. There was a paradox of response, with some



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parliaments just halting all public engagement, while others innovated coming up with some interesting ideas and practices. In a time of crisis, you need to engage with the public, to find out the impacts of regulations – particularly the ‘unforeseen’, secondary effects.

Five key elements to take away and consider:

1. **Proactively seek out underrepresented groups.**
2. **Listen** – not broadcast. Be seen to listen.
3. **Be responsive to specific needs of different audiences.** Use different methods and platforms. Think about how welcoming places are and whether engagement would be better out in the community.
4. **Plan public engagement early.** Make it part of the process - not an add on.
5. **Link public engagement with parliamentary business** - not as a separate entity. This will help people better understand the institution.

BIMR Annual General Meeting

Senior British Islands and Mediterranean Regional Representative Leona Roberts MLA (Falkland Islands) took the Chair supported by Regional Secretary Jon Davies. The Chair welcomed those present and noted that the meeting was hybrid with colleagues from CPA Scotland joining remotely through an online platform.

CPA Secretary General Stephen Twigg addressed the meeting. He explained that his early priority following his appointment was to map out a strategic plan for CPA. He set out the key priority themes of mutual learning, CPA's legal status, the separation of powers, diversity and inclusion and CPA's place in the broader world.

The Regional Secretary reported back on the region's priority theme for 2020/21 which was how different jurisdictions has responded to the Covid-19 pandemic. A series of workshops were held during the year in which 11 out of 13 branches in the region had participated. These discussions were led by parliamentarians from across the region and a final report had been published and distributed.

The meeting agreed the region's focus theme for the year ahead would be the climate emergency.

Regional Representative Stuart McMillan MSP (Scotland) reported back on the March CPA international Executive Committee meeting. He had attended alongside Leona Roberts MLA and Ian Liddell-Grainger. There had been dialogue on constitutional amendments. Subsequently a Working Group was established. There was no defined timeframe.

The Chair welcomed newly appointed Regional Representative Julie Elliott MP (UK) who would replace Ian Liddell-Grainger on the international Executive Committee.

Hon. Samantha Sacramento MP (Gibraltar) Regional Representative on the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) Steering Committee reported back on the Conference and meetings held online during the year, which had been productive despite the inability to meet in person.

The Regional Secretary read out a short report from Regional Representative on the CPA Small Branches Steering Committee Juan Watterson MHK (Isle of Man) who was unable to attend the The Regional Secretary read out a statement from Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities (CPwD) Regional Champion Paul Maynard MP (UK). He noted that all parliaments take a different approach to supporting candidates, representatives and visitors with disabilities and the regional network's initial focus would be on doing an audit of parliaments in the region to see what provision was in place.

The Regional Secretary gave an update on cross-regional activity. He noted that branches in the region continue to work a lot together, particularly on delivering Post Election Seminars and Election observation in Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies. Mr Davies thanked regional branch secretaries who were the machinery of the network. He paid tribute to Roger Philips (Isle of Man) and Paul Martinez (Gibraltar) on their retirements. Both had been stalwarts of the organisation whose support of CPA and its work went much wider than their respective jurisdictions. Mr Davies thanked the CPA Northern Ireland Assembly team responsible for organising the 50th BIMR Conference who had been working all hours for months to make sure the conference happened.

Roger Philips (Isle of Man) announced that the newly elected President of Tynwald was keen to host the following year's Conference and a final decision would be reached after the Election once the relevant decision-making bodies were re-constituted.

Full minutes are available from the British Islands and Mediterranean Region Secretariat: cpabimr@parliament.uk.

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DAY TWO - WEDNESDAY 22 SEPTEMBER

Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Steering Committee Breakfast Meeting

Chaired by Hon. Samantha Sacramento MP (Gibraltar) the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Steering Committee met, including committee members joining remotely online.

The meeting included an online presentation from CPA Secretariat's Bénite Dibateza on CPA's work on Gender Sensitive Parliaments and a progress update on the field guide for Gender Sensitive Parliament Audits.

The Committee agreed to allocate 2021's Regional Strengthening Funds to a piece of work to support Gender Sensitive Parliament work in the region.

Full minutes are available from the British Islands and Mediterranean Region Secretariat: cpabimr@parliament.uk.

Workshop D: Post Pandemic Planning: Vaccine Response

Facilitator: Patricia Donnelly, Head of the Vaccine Programme, Department of Health
Rapporteur: Hon. Steve Linares, Gibraltar Parliament

Patricia Donnelly gave attendees an overview of the vaccine response in Northern Ireland and about positive examples and lessons learned.

Delegates then discussed what worked for other countries.

All delegates agreed that the threat of the pandemic in developing countries remained a concern.



Workshop E: The Impact of COVID on Tourism, Travel & Hospitality: How these industries can evolve to cope with future pandemics

Facilitator: Joanne Stewart, NI Tourism Alliance

Rapporteur: Steve Falla, States of Guernsey

The workshop began with a case study from Dr Joanne Stuart, CEO of the Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance (NITA), the representative body for the Northern Ireland Tourism and Travel Industry. She explained tourism turnover had dropped by £800m since the pandemic struck. International travel had reduced by 90 per cent and measures to deal with Covid had contributed to further cost for the industry. This experience resonated with other regions. Delegates identified, among numerous challenges, a skills shortage, employees having left the industry; with the hospitality sector was described as “at breaking point”. The sector faced an enormous debt burden exacerbated by venue capacity being undermined by social distancing; the slow return of international travel and changing needs, with tourists now more drawn towards outdoor, rural, environmental and coastal attractions.

While the challenges were daunting, delegates agreed that new opportunities were also presented, and this was the time to be intentional about harnessing them.

Workshop F: Life & Learning in Lockdown: The impact of COVID-19 restrictions on young people's learning and mental health

Facilitators: Robin Newton MLA & Louise Close, NI Assembly Engagement Manager

Rapporteur: Colin McGrath MLA, Northern Ireland Assembly

Robin Newton MLA and Louise Close gave attendees a presentation on the Northern Ireland experience which was followed by discussion in small groups about attendees' own experiences.

Conclusion:

The delegates agreed that learning in lockdown is a fine balancing act and schools/colleges must be prepared to provide bespoke solutions on an ad hoc basis depending on the specific needs of each group as defined by socio-economic, geographic and other criteria.

Plenary Two - The Agri-Food Industry Post-COVID

Speakers: Billy Martin, President, Royal Ulster Agricultural Society; Alan Crowe, Chief Executive, Royal Ulster Agricultural Society; Michele Shirlow, CX Food Northern Ireland

Representatives from the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society and the CX Food NI gave delegates a presentation on the agriculture and food industry post-COVID and on the hosting of the Balmoral Show. Delegates were then given a tour of the show, allowing them to visit a selection of show exhibitions and to speak to exhibitors.

Reports from Workshops

The conference concluded with rapporteurs reporting back on workshop presentations and discussions, and with closing remarks from the conference hosts and key contributors.

DELEGATES



Northern Ireland Assembly

William Humphrey MLA
Colin McGrath MLA
Steve Aiken MLA
Stewart Dickson MLA
Mervyn Storey MLA
Jonathan Buckley MLA (Observer)
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Robin Newton MLA
Louise Close, Engagement Staff
Nicola Crawford, Engagement Staff
Micky McCoy, Engagement Staff
Emma Steele, Engagement Staff



CYPRUS

Aristos Damianou MP
Marios Mavrides MP
Christos Orphanides MP
Christiana Solomonidou (Secretary)
Loukia Mouyi (International Relations Officer)



GUERNSEY

Deputy Sue Aldwell
Deputy Chris Blin
Deputy Steve Falla
Simon Ross (Secretary)



Isle of Man

Peter Greenhill MLC
Roger Phillips (Secretary)



SCOTLAND

Sarah Boyack MSP (online)
Stuart McMillan MSP (online)



UK

Julie Elliott MP
Maria Miller MP
Chris Elmore MP
David Mundell MP
Jon Davies (CPA UK)
Helen Haywood (CPA UK)



GIBRALTAR

Elliot Phillips MP
Steven Linares MP
Roy Clinton MP
Samantha Sacramento MP
Paul Martinez (Secretary)



JERSEY

Deputy David Johnson
Deputy Inna Gardiner
Connétable Mike Jackson
Vanessa Page (Secretary)



MALTA

Speaker Angelo Farrugia MP
Clyde Puli MP
Karl Gouder MP
Raymond Scicluna (Secretary)



FALKLAND ISLANDS

Barry Elsby MLA
Leona Roberts MLA



WALES

Rhun ap Iorwerth MS
David Rees MS
Sam Rowlands MS
Rhianon Passmore MS
Al Davies (Secretary)

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