History of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
1911 to present

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association traces its origin to a world vastly different from today. When the CPA was founded in 1911 as the Empire Parliamentary Association, the world had scarcely two dozen nations which were parliamentary democracies. The British Empire was composed of one sovereign parliamentary democracy, five dominions, a handful of tiny protectorates and a vast array of colonies. Today, the United Nations has 193 member states, 53 of them in the Commonwealth of Nations. The CPA’s membership of 180 Branches also includes fourteen Overseas Territories, three Crown Dependencies and more than 125 sub-national states, provinces and territories in federal-style countries, all with their own Parliaments or Legislatures. Some of the states and provinces and their Legislatures are far larger and their economies more significant than many independent countries.

A hundred years ago the Parliaments and Legislatures of the British Empire had more appointed Members than elected and, even for most of the elected Members, Parliament was a part-time job jammed in around their business, professional or agricultural commitments.

Two world wars, a prolonged global depression, the end of colonialism and the rise of racial and gender equality, a Cold War, countless regional wars, a string of economic booms and recessions, several travel and communications revolutions and the globalization of information, trade, finance and ideas have all changed the world and its people. They have also reinforced the need for open, democratic, parliamentary government. Global fusion has accentuated the value of pooling knowledge and sharing experiences in different ways of conducting public business that are as relevant today as they were when the Empire Parliamentary Association was founded at a meeting on 18 July 1911 in what was then House of Commons Committee Room 15 in the Palace of Westminster.

As well as Members of the Westminster Parliament, the meeting was attended by representatives of the then dominion Parliaments of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Newfoundland and South Africa. The meeting was organized by Howard D’Egville who was later knighted for his role in founding the Empire Parliamentary Association. For over half a century, he went on to serve the Empire Parliamentary Association and later as the first Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

The founders of this Association had, historians tell us, opposing motives: the British sought to generate dominion support for a centralized imperial federation to advance British interests in an increasingly tense world, while the dominion representatives wanted a voice in what Britain might be dragging them into. They soon realized that they had more in common than the differences that separated them – the practice of democratic government and the language of parliamentary politics.
That first meeting, held to mark the coronation of King George V, paved the way for future meetings of British and dominion Parliamentarians at Westminster and paved the way for dominion leaders to be involved in the imperial war cabinet during the First World War and in them, and India, joining Britain in signing the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. As it moved into the 1920s, a new political role emerged for the Association as a link to keep a changing empire together. Its membership began to expand, taking in first Malta and Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and then India. Soon other Parliaments joined from Europe, Asia and the Caribbean, and Australia’s states and Canada’s provinces began joining the group to extend the Empire Parliamentary Association into the second tier of governance. Heads of Government began using Empire Parliamentary Association conferences and other meetings as a forum to speak to Britain and in 1924 the first conference was held outside London, with representatives spending two months in southern Africa, starting in Maseru in what is now Lesotho before moving across South Africa.

Conferences followed in Australia and Canada, although London remained as the favoured destination. Its meetings set the stage for the Balfour Declaration of 1926, which lay the foundation for the ‘Commonwealth’ as a free association of nations, and for the Statute of Westminster of 1931 which gave the dominions de facto independence. By 1939, the Empire Parliamentary Association was composed of more than 20 Parliaments and Legislatures. It was a force in keeping the parliamentary side of the Allied effort together during the Second World War through the provision of information via conferences, publications and letters. It kept open the channels of communication which were to bring the United States into the conflict on the Allied side. This continued after the war as its conferences and publications were often the only means of reliable communication among the Parliaments as the new internationalist world was taking shape.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association emerged from the Empire Parliamentary Association at a conference in London in October 1948, as Parliamentarians preceded their governments by several months in recognizing the future lay in working together as equals co-operating to build a new world. The Commonwealth was not to be born officially at the government level until 1949 with the London Declaration.

The ‘winds of change’ which then blew throughout Africa and across the entire former Empire brought about the end of colonialism and the birth of a diverse collection of independent states which could have gone their separate ways, leaving their common history of conquest and subjugation as nothing more than a bitter legacy. But, as it had in 1911, the commonalities of the practice of democratic government and the language of parliamentary politics helped to keep the peoples, their new governments and the Parliaments that had grown out of the old empire together in a new dynamic – if often underappreciated – international grouping of peoples, sovereign nations and their Parliaments and Legislatures. As the Commonwealth grew to its current membership of 53 nations, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association grew to become a force for good governance not just in the over 180 jurisdictions where it has Branches today, but throughout the wider world.

As Ghana led the independence movement across Africa to join India, Pakistan and the ‘old’ Commonwealth, the CPA’s growth in numbers and in new Parliamentarians occurred in parallel to a movement which was building across the professional world in the 1960s and 1970s, the implementation of continuing professional development.

The CPA became, and continues to be, the natural school for Members and officials of Parliaments to learn their profession from each other. CPA Conferences, which became annual from 1961 having previously been held every two years, added discussions on parliamentary and electoral processes to the usual agenda of political – especially foreign policy – issues. Seminars, such as the Westminster Seminar on Parliamentary Practice and Procedure which began in the early 1950s, meetings of Presiding Officers and Clerks, study groups on
parliamentary subjects, the conversion of its quarterly journal from a summary of debates in various Parliaments to *The Parliamentarian* as the Journal of Commonwealth Parliaments (first published in 1920) as a record of advances in democratic governance and the creation of a Parliamentary Information and Reference Centre at the CPA Headquarters Secretariat, positioned the Association to take on the professional development role, not just for new Parliamentarians in emerging Assemblies, but for all Parliamentarians throughout the Commonwealth.

Continuing education is necessary for all professions, and none more so than Parliamentarians and parliamentary officials who take office without the formal training and supervised practice of other professions, and who are required to operate, often in the highest positions in a country, immediately in an unforgiving and exceptionally demanding environment. By helping Parliamentarians and parliamentary officials to enhance their knowledge of the many different ways in which their institution operates throughout the Commonwealth, to understand diverse perspectives on political issues and to realize that they are not alone in the practice of their professions, the CPA has contributed to the improvement of governance throughout the Commonwealth.

The methodology is in the best traditions of the Commonwealth: people doing jobs in different countries by giving freely of their time and sharing their experiences and expertise help colleagues in similar positions to perform their duties better. This is not always successful. Many struggling democracies failed to perform and fell into periods of military or other forms of autocratic rule. Some countries left, having become uncomfortable with the best principles of democratic parliamentary government which respect the rule of law, human rights and the “inalienable right to participate by means of free and democratic political processes in framing the society in which they live”, as Commonwealth Heads of Government affirmed in their 1971 Singapore Declaration.

But the CPA has always stood ready to help them back onto the democratic path and it is a testament to the value of the Association and its programmes and services that rejoining the Commonwealth parliamentary community is one of the first things on the agenda of every new Parliament.

The CPA in 1989 created the constitutional posts of Patron and Vice-Patron of the Association. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II as the Head of the Commonwealth consented to become Patron of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. The Vice-Patron of the Association is normally the Head of State or Government of the CPA Branch hosting the coming annual Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference.

The Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) was founded as an informal group in 1989 to increase the number of female elected representatives in Parliaments and legislatures across the Commonwealth and to ensure that women’s issues are brought to the fore in parliamentary debate and legislation. The CWP was formally recognised by the CPA in 1996 and the CWP Chairperson was first elected in 2004.

The CPA has since 1981 held Small Branches Conferences for Members from more than 30 jurisdictions with populations of up to a current ceiling of 500,000 people. Members discuss political problems and the operation of democratic systems in some of the world’s smallest jurisdictions through the CPA Small Branches Network and in 2016, the first CPA Small Branches Chairperson was elected.

The CPA celebrated its centennial in 2011 and has continued to develop the best traditions of the Commonwealth and the CPA to honour the work of the Association in a way which will promote and advance the evolution of the parliamentary system throughout the Commonwealth.

*This text was adapted from the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Centennial Book 1911 to 2011 published in 2011 by the CPA. Copyright © Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, 2019.*

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