ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE

The Fifth Commonwealth Youth Parliament held by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association brought to the United Kingdom a diverse group of politically aware and articulate young people who demonstrated that political apathy is not a characteristic of everyone under age 30.

Rt Hon. Baroness D’Souza of Wychwood, in London.
Baroness D’Souza has been the Lord Speaker, the Presiding Officer of the House of Lords at Westminster, since 2011. She is a Joint President of the CPA United Kingdom Branch. A Peer since 2004, she was the Convenor of the Crossbench Peers from 2007 until she was elected as the Lord Speaker.

From 4 to 7 December 2012, the United Kingdom Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and the CPA Secretariat hosted the 5th Commonwealth Youth Parliament, which saw some 60 young people come to Westminster from the furthest reaches of the Commonwealth.

The four-day programme explored the principles of governance at a local, national and international level, exposing the delegates to the ancient system of the Westminster Parliament. Experiencing plenary addresses, model parliamentary business sessions such as a Committee of the Whole House and several more interactive workshops, the Commonwealth Youth Parliamentarians (CYPs) were given an introduction to the intricacies of parliamentary democracy.

The programme culminated in a final parliamentary-style debate on access to education in the House of Lords Robing Room – once used as the Chamber of the Upper House after the Commons Chamber was bombed during the “Blitz” of the Second World War – discussing whether there should be free schooling for all.

Having formed party caucuses over the course of the week, the CYPs had the opportunity to develop party structures, to elect party leaders and front bench teams, and to formulate policies to present to the House.

I was delighted to preside at this debate, the second one in which I have played a part during my tenure as Lord Speaker thus far. Once again, I was struck by the proficiency of the arguments, the coherence of each party’s policies, and the impressive degree of political agility displayed by all participants. On a personal level, I have found both experiences highly rewarding, and I am very pleased that the U.K. was once again able to host.

The Commonwealth includes one third of the world’s population, and 50 per cent of its population is aged 25 or under.

The Commonwealth Youth Parliament therefore represents a remarkable opportunity to engage with this key demographic, a group representative of the future leaders, legislators and activists of the Commonwealth. In a year that has seen us celebrate the 60th anniversary of the succession of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, the Head of the Commonwealth, it seems a particularly fitting moment to turn our eyes forward, and to seek to engage this next generation in the political process.

A key priority in planning the 5th CYP has been the use of social media to ensure a legacy of ongoing relationships between the Commonwealth Youth Parliamentarians is established, by creating alumni communities.
for Commonwealth Youth Parliamentarians to continuing sharing challenges and successes.

Engaging young people both within the UK, and internationally is one of my major aims. I have continued my predecessor’s Peers in Schools programme which has now sent peers to speak in around 1000 schools, reaching around 50,000 students. There is also a well-resourced Education Unit within the Houses of Parliament, which runs visits both to and from schools in order to teach young people about Parliament and provides extensive teaching materials for schools. Parliamentary Outreach and the House of Lords Outreach team undertake similar activities with community and youth groups, working outside the traditional educational system to reach young people.

This work complements the recent addition of citizenship to the national curriculum in Britain, which is now taught up to the age of 16. Citizenship was introduced as a compulsory component of education in 2002 in a move to improve political literacy and participation in the UK. It is now one of the fastest-growing subjects at GCSE, the general exams taken by all British students at the age of sixteen.

The curriculum is designed to encourage young people to involve themselves in their communities and give them an understanding of how to influence the democratic process, lessons that unlike so many school subjects will have a direct impact on all citizens for the rest of their lives.


5TH CYP

Mason Nkabinde, MYP, of Mpumalanga
Mr Nkabinde was a Member of the Youth Parliament representing Mpumalanga and was the Government Chief Whip in the 5th Commonwealth Youth Parliament. Currently employed as a security and protocol co-ordinator in a South African company, he holds a National Higher Certificate in information technology and software development from Tshwane University of Technology in Nelspruit.

It was a great pleasure that I took part in the 5th Commonwealth Youth Parliament (CYP) held in London in 2012. I can confirm that it was a valuable experience for all the young people present.

I assure the CPA that the young people will continue to prosper, as the purpose of the CYP was among other things to share experiences among ourselves as youth from completely diverse backgrounds and I think this purpose was met to its fullest.

As I was attending the CYP, I received an update which read: “This December the rich and wealthy will be on holiday, the aspiring to be rich and powerful will be in Mangaung (the South African city where the ruling African National Congress was formed and which hosted the party’s 53rd conference in December), workers will be in the store shop maximizing profit for the rich while the youth will be on the streets idling.”

I shared this update with some members of the CYP, particularly those in the government Commonwealth Democratic Alliance (CDA), of which I was part. The last part of the update got us thinking on how best as a ruling party we could change the status of youth in our societies. It was at this point where many different schools of thought emerged. The debates formed the foundation on which our destiny would be built and the future cemented.

The 5th CYP was designed in a format that gave us an opportunity to be in a functioning Legislature for four days. We had a government party (CDA), an opposition party (the Determination for the Future Party) and independents.

This exercise exposed us, as young leaders, to the reality of what the role of Parliament is in ensuring accountability of the executive and oversight by Parliament of the decision-making process in government. With the presentations from the different speakers that generously imparted their knowledge and answered our questions without reservations, it was by far the most informative programme I have ever attended – and I’m sure here that I speak for all MYPs.

Having been introduced to the Westminster Parliament, I take home the experiences and wisdom of the Honourable Members who took time to brief us. What is undisputed is the fact that, as young people, we have so much to contribute to the direction of development. National leaders must take heed from the CYP programme that there is a leadership role that young people can and must play. We can no longer wait for the future to take up this position, as so many issues facing the modern world – poverty, underdevelopment, HIV and many other forms of societal challenges – impact disproportionately on young people.

Looking ahead
The CYP presented a platform for us to make a pact that we are no longer simply going to be the future, but we will take charge today to protect and determine our destiny as nations. The message is crystal clear for all that we must be involved in decision-making and implementation, and we do all of this because we don’t wish for the youth to continue to suffer.

Our debates during the week focused on youth unemployment, which evidently is a large issue for all Commonwealth countries. Deliberations indicated that as the youth, we do not ask for free rides, hand-outs and pity; but we need more opportunities through education, entrepreneurial space and a voice audible enough for our leaders to heed.

We further appreciate the role we can play in achieving the Millennium Development Goals, both at the conceptual and practical level. We think we are strategically placed to contribute as direct beneficiaries of these programmes.

I wish to take this opportunity to congratulate all the participants on a smooth-running CYP.

This in itself is an indication that the 5th CYP was a meeting of visionary and disciplined future leaders with an awareness of their role as representatives of the young people of their countries charged with finding solutions to contemporary challenges confronting them.

I hope the CYP is merely the first in a series of platforms for young people to learn and make our input in how best Commonwealth countries can develop and how the life of their people can be changed for the better.

The disheartening picture of disengaged youth in Commonwealth countries must be eliminated; a culture of activism, creativity and participation must be encouraged by all Parliaments in the Commonwealth by developing programmes that speak to youth participation in the governance of their countries. The message that governments don’t exist for themselves but for the people must be disseminated, heard and understood.

I hope the next CYP has more time to reflect extensively on a number of issues which were not covered in the 5th Youth Parliament, including the effects of HIV/AIDS, sustainable development and strengthening democracies.

I think the Commonwealth has a bright future, especially if it continues to look to its youth. This is an open invitation to all governments to utilize the resource we present; together we can achieve more.

If I may paraphrase the words of the Deputy Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, Mrs Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba: “It is through experience that we learn that democracy is what we do, not what we have”. Let’s do democracy and encourage (and hear) young people to be actively involved in the affairs of their countries’ development.

See you at the 6th CYP!
Ms Claire Coulton, MYP, New South Wales

Ms Coulton was a Member of the Youth Parliament representing New South Wales and was the Leader of the Opposition in the 5th Commonwealth Youth Parliament. Currently completing a Master’s degree in politics and international studies at the University of New England in New South Wales, she is also a research assistant to a Member of the Australian state’s Legislative Council and worked previously as a teacher.

As the oldest Commonwealth Youth Parliamentarian of 2012, I was unsure of what to expect when I travelled to London in December to meet my colleagues. From the outset, the mood was exuberant and contagious. The foyer of Lambeth’s Tune Hotel has surely never before seen such a raucous gathering, as delegates excitedly met their fellow party and opposition members. Many of us had endured a 30 degree drop in temperature during our travels from all corners of the Commonwealth, and we were all rugged up and excited for four days of seminars, debates on motions, caucusing and committee meetings.

Apart from the more obvious cultural differences, we were also quite a disparate group in terms of political view points. Interestingly, a number of countries’ delegates were split between the two major parties. As the leader of the conservative-leaning Opposition, the Determination of the Future Party, I was pleased to discover overwhelming bipartisan support for a number of motions that are quite contentious in my home state of New South Wales, such as marriage equality and the reduction of the voting age to 16.

While both parties and the Independents agreed on the need to address youth unemployment, the significance of agriculture to the Commonwealth and the importance of education, there was very enthusiastic debate about how schemes to tackle these issues should look and how they could realistically be funded.

The week also included a number of lighter moments, such as late-night caucus meetings in the coffee shops and pubs of South London, unexpected party defections (a big win for the Opposition!) and the most multicultural dance party I have ever attended.

A particular highlight was the invitation to Marlborough House for a question and answer session with the Commonwealth Deputy Secretary-General, Ms Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba, where the hot topic was the relevance of the Commonwealth. In Australian schools and in the media, the Commonwealth is rarely mentioned outside of the Commonwealth Games. Biannually we see the images of the CHOGM summit on the television and only differentiate it from the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum due to the smaller number of colourful shirts worn by the leaders. Through CYP, however, I had the chance to really examine the Harare declaration, as well as the core principles of the declaration, and to begin to understand the importance of the Commonwealth as an essential advisor in particular for developing nations.

Myth of youth disengagement

One of the more controversial topics of the week was the disengagement of young people in the political process at all levels. As a former teacher and member of the youth wing of a political party, I think that youth disengagement in politics is a myth – political apathy and ignorance exists across all spectrums and age groups, and some of the most switched-on political minds I have ever met are under the age of 30. This belief was reinforced at the CYP, where each and every delegate was passionate about politics.

If communities as a whole were more connected to the political process, this would lead to increasing engagement amongst the younger generation. Disengagement is a serious problem, but one that political leaders need to address across their entire communities, and not solely in classrooms. In NSW, politics is part of the curriculum, and the majority of students have the chance to travel to Canberra, visit Parliament, the Electoral Commission and other relevant institutions, and perhaps participate in a mock election for their school. In London, however, without context these experiences can be meaningless, and very CYP representative agreed that political education comes best from doing, rather than from chalk and talk.

Personally, my most beneficial political experiences have come from involvement in my school’s Student Representative Council, participation in student leadership forums, and membership of the NSW Young Nationals. These experiences are all immensely more valuable than a lesson in a classroom, and teachers and Parliamentaries alike should be facilitating experiences like this for young people.

This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be teaching politics in schools; but any activities need to be relevant, student-driven and to lead to real outcomes. Events such as the CYP are the perfect incubator for encouraging politically minded young people to become involved in politics. No guest speaker was more engaging than CYP’s own Emily Shaw, from the Shetlands, who explained the incredible participation rates in the Scottish Youth Parliament, which is run entirely by young people.

The most valuable element of the CYP was the opportunity to network with enthusiastic and passionate young people from across the Commonwealth, a number of whom I am sure will go on to achieve great things. We recognise the importance of being accountable for the opportunity we were given, and have formed a group on social media where we will continue regularly to interact. Collectively, we have made a commitment to blog about both our experiences at the CYP and any issues of significance for the group. I am particularly interested to learn more about the smaller states that attended, including the Cayman Islands, Bermuda, the Falklands and Swaziland. Through this blog, we hope to continue the learning experience that began in London.

On behalf of all participants, I would like to express our gratitude to our home CPA Branches for their nomination and support, to the many guest speakers, including the House of Commons Speaker, Lord Speaker and several prominent MPs, and most particularly to the Commonwealth Youth Parliament team, under the leadership of CPA Secretary-General Dr William F. Shija and United Kingdom Branch Secretary Mr Andrew Tuggey, for organizing the programme so well at the same time as letting us take the lead and set the agenda for debate.

It was an honour and a thrill to debate in Westminster. The experience that will stay with me for a lifetime, and I am certain that it has encouraged several emerging political careers.