



Remarks

Conference for Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities

31 August 2017: 0900 Hours

Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
Executive Committee Member - Canada Region

Hon Jackson Lafferty, MLA, Speaker, Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly

[1413 words]

- Honourable Kevin Murphy, MLA, Speaker, Nova Scotia Legislative Assembly
- Mayor Michael Savage of the Halifax Regional Municipality
- Honourable Ministers
- Honourable Members of Parliament
- Mr Neil Fergusson, Clerk, Nova Scotia House of Assembly
- Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great pleasure to be here in Halifax, Nova Scotia, at the inaugural Conference for Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities, as a representative of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

I would like to join Honourable Speaker and Mayor Savage in welcoming you to Halifax and to the first Conference of this kind to be delivered by the CPA in collaboration with the CPA Nova Scotia Branch.

May I, on behalf of the Association, express my personal appreciation to Speaker Murphy and his staff for their steadfast commitment in hosting this CPA programme here in Halifax this week.

The CPA Secretary-General, Mr Akbar Khan, asked me to also express his appreciation to the CPA Nova Scotia Branch for its willingness to host this Conference. This demonstrates the commitment of the CPA Nova Scotia Branch to the advancement of the work of the Association in promoting the democratic principles and values to which we all subscribe.

Unfortunately, prior commitments prevent the Secretary-General from being here today, however, he sends his best wishes for very successful deliberations and hopes that this meeting will be of great value to you all and to work of the Association.

Honourable Members,

During the next two days, you will share the challenges you face in your daily lives as well as the triumphs, with colleagues from other Regions of the CPA. This will deepen our understanding of your various experiences, in getting elected and in fulfilling your duties as elected representatives.

Honourable Members,

The World Health Organisation reports that around 15% of the world's population, or an estimated 1 billion people live with some form of disability or different ability.

The United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) highlights disability as a human rights issue. The United Nations also reports that people with disabilities experience inequalities which deprive them of equal access to health care, employment, education and/or political participation because of their disability.

Every person has a right to equal access to political participation. Persons with disabilities have a great deal to contribute to our society and democracies, given equal opportunities and the right support. However, despite constituting 15% of the world's population, Parliamentarians with disabilities are in the minority or non-existent in most Commonwealth Parliaments, and disproportionately represented in governance and other levels of decision-making.

The Commonwealth Secretariat, the government arm of the Commonwealth, and partners met in London on 3 May 2012 in London for the fourth anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CPRD), to raise awareness of the key principles of the CRPD and the challenges hindering persons with disabilities from full and equal participation in society. As at that date 28 of the 54 Commonwealth Countries had ratified the Convention which prohibits all forms of discrimination based on disability. The meeting called for Commonwealth member states to hasten efforts towards ratification and improved implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

It is clear therefore that Parliamentarians and Parliament have roles to play in ensuring that governments ratify such conventions that protect the rights of persons with disabilities.

This inaugural Conference of Commonwealth Parliamentarians with disabilities is therefore important and timely and the discussions over the next two days are essential to our collective and shared understanding of how Parliamentarians with disabilities carry out their duties across the Commonwealth and how Parliaments as institutions have become more accessible and inclusive.

I believe that there is a role for Parliament as well as international organisations such as the CPA to play in ensuring that Parliamentarians with disabilities transition from exclusion to inclusion in political and public life.

Recognising the importance of inclusion and the value that diversity brings to the development of our democracies and societies, the CPA International Executive Committee in 2016, approved the proposal for this inaugural meeting where Parliamentarians with disabilities could share experiences and network, and explore the feasibility of forming a formal network to support Commonwealth Parliamentarians with disabilities.

Such an initiative would serve as a support network for Parliamentarians with Disabilities and work out strategies to increase the representation of persons with disabilities in our Parliaments.

The under-representation or marginalisation of special groups such as this one, undermines the legitimacy of our democratic institutions and jeopardises the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

Disability is referenced in various parts of the SDGs including education, growth and employment, inequality, accessibility of human settlements, as well as data collection and monitoring of the SDGs.

Closely linked to disability, Goal 10 strives to reduce inequality within and among countries by empowering and promoting social, economic and political inclusion for all, including persons with disabilities.

Parliaments have a critical role to play in ensuring that the SDGs are met by 2030.

Governments ALSO have a crucial role to play in ensuring that persons with disabilities participate in all decision-making processes at every level of government and society. The role of the Executive is critical to ensuring a disability perspective in all aspects of policy and legislation, effective implementation and enforcement of existing disability laws and policies and providing for equal employment opportunities and training.

Parliaments can also legislate to eliminate all forms of discrimination and other barriers faced by persons with disabilities and to ensure Parliaments become more representative of our societies.

Honourable Members,

The CPA has traditionally supported special interest groups including the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) and Small Branches.

The special interest groups such as Small Branches and Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) have unique challenges. Supportive of the diversity of its membership and the unique and nuanced needs of CPA's special interest groups, the CPA offers tailored programmes and conferences to help meet the needs of its membership. Small Branches delegates meet as a group in the side-lines of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference to discuss issues that affect them and have a Workshop Topic designed for Small Branches.

The CWP was developed from an informal meeting of women Parliamentarians in 1989 to tackle existing imbalances of female representation in decision-making. The CWP has made strides in its efforts to increase the representation of women in Parliament, although there remains some work to be done. Members will hear more about the formation of the CWP and its work from Honourable Linda Reid, MLA, British Columbia who is the current CWP Steering Committee Member for Canada Region.

Honourable Members,

Speaker Murphy, the architect of this initiative, will present a proposal to you this morning. As you discuss the proposal and your recommendations, I would encourage you to lend your expertise and support to this pioneering initiative over the next two days through active engagement and recommending to the following:

1. What you can do as individual Members of Parliament to advance the understanding and involvement of people with disabilities in democratic institutions?
2. What Parliament should be doing to encourage people with disabilities to take part in parliamentary democracy?
3. What international organisations such as the CPA can do to encourage Parliaments to be more inclusive of people with disabilities.

Honourable Members,

The main outcomes of this conference are expected to be:

- a Proposal to the CPA International Executive Committee for the establishment of a network for Commonwealth Parliamentarians with disabilities; and,
- a Report of the recommendations and discussions that can be shared with the wider CPA Membership to ensure information sharing on good practice is disseminated across all 180 Commonwealth Parliaments and Legislatures.

I urge all of you to ensure that this is shared with colleagues in your respective CPA Branches and Regions.

I hope that you will all take away from this Conference invaluable information through sharing of experiences and good practice from your own Parliaments and Legislatures.

Finally, may I thank all the carers and Parliamentary staff for the invaluable support you give to the Members present here today. Your support undoubtedly contributes to a better quality of life and assists the Members to effectively fulfil their obligations as elected representatives.

I wish you well in your deliberations and look forward to the forming of lasting relationships.

Thank you.