

PARLIAMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF FIJI

REPORT ON THE 5th WESTMINSTER WORKSHOP FOR
PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEES (CO-HOSTED BY THE
PARLIAMENT OF MALTA and CPA UK)

*JUNE 1ST-4TH
2015*

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BACKGROUND

In October 2014, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association ('CPA') reaffirmed the communiqué of the 2013 Commonwealth Head of Government Meeting ('CHOGM') which read:

46. Heads of Government further reaffirmed that strong and independent Parliamentary oversight plays an important role in preserving the trust of citizens in the integrity of government, through Public Accounts Committees that are effective, independent and transparent.

A vision for a Commonwealth Association of Public Accounts Committees ('CAPAC') was thus engendered. CPA was well aware that there were already regional institutions across the Commonwealth such as the Australasian Council of Public Accounts Committees ('ACPAC') which would still play a pivotal role. CAPAC was envisioned to:

- Provide support to existing regional organisations of PACs, and encourage and support the creation of new regional bodies where none currently exist;
- Produce learning resources for dissemination to Parliaments;
- Promote technical cooperation programmes specifically aimed at PACs; and
- Arrange for regular contact between PACs, including 'virtual' contacts such as teleconferences and online discussions.

In June 2014 an informal steering committee of elected members had previously been formed during the 4th Westminster Workshop and began work on a draft Constitution for the proposed CAPAC.

CPA-UK offered to fund and the Maltese Parliament co-host the 5th Westminster Workshop on the role of PACs, in Malta June 2015 where the Constitution could be adopted and the CAPAC officially launched. For this purpose CPA-UK sponsored Accommodation and UNDP the airfares of the Chair and the Deputy Chair, as well as the Secretary of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts to attend the Workshop in Malta from the 1st-5th June 2015.

INTRODUCTION

The 5th Westminster Workshop on PACs apart from providing the platform for the launch of the nascent CAPAC, provides specific capacity building for Members of PACs or equivalent bodies from around the Commonwealth as well as well as split sessions and trainings for the Clerk of those Committees. This year CPA UK, in partnership with CPA Malta, held the 5th Westminster Workshop: Effective, Independent and Transparent Public Accounts Committees for Robust Public Financial Oversight, Monday 1 – Thursday 4 June 2015, which took place in Malta.

Building on previous workshops, the 5th Westminster Workshop continued to provide a forum for exploring the key current challenges faced by PACs across the Commonwealth, enabling the exchange of ideas and expertise on how PACs can increase their efficiency and effectiveness in scrutinising public expenditure; from budgeting and planning to tracking performance.

CPA-UK generally hosts these workshops in the Palace of Westminster but due to the recently concluded General Elections in the United Kingdom, it was known during the 4th Westminster Workshop in June 2014 that the halls of Westminster would not be available. To this end, the co-chair of the CAPAC steering committee offered his home jurisdiction of Malta as an alternative venue in June 2015. Malta had already been identified as the venue of the CHOGM later the same year in November and so this seemed the optimal choice.

The 5th Westminster Workshop seemed the perfect platform for the launch of CAPAC.

In accordance with its Constitution, the aim of CAPAC is to ensure that all Commonwealth Parliaments and the citizens they serve benefit from strong and independent Public Accounts or equivalent committees to sustain and promote the highest principles of public finance.

It goes on to state *“...without restricting the generality of this aim, the Association shall pursue it by:*

- (a) Making the case for the independence of Commonwealth PACs, and for the implementation of all appropriate PAC recommendations as key components of good governance;*
- (b) Defining, publishing and promoting standards of good practice, in line with Commonwealth principles, to assist CAPAC Member Committees in being effective, transparent and independent;*
- (c) Providing training to support CAPAC Member Committees in improving their performance;*
- (d) Acting as a clearing house of valuable information on matters pertaining to PACs; this will include information about current practices in various legislatures;*
- (e) Carrying out peer reviews as a platform for both exchange of information and benchmarking;*
- (f) Engaging in proactive and effective relationships with key stakeholders, including but not limited to, regional PAC organisations and the Conference of Commonwealth Auditors-General;*
- (g) Strengthening the capacity of PACs in Small States; and*
- (h) Encouraging bilateral and multilateral cooperation amongst members on issues of common concern.”*

This kind of exposure was necessary for the Fiji Parliament, as it allowed members of the delegation to see first-hand how their counterparts operated internationally and equally important to compare their systems and processes with those adopted in Fiji. Particular interest was the close similarity of the process in Fiji with that of the Westminster Parliament in particular and it seems that we adopted the majority of our processes directly from the United Kingdom. In addition, it was important for the Fiji Parliament to develop new networks and re-engage as well as strengthen old ties with former Parliamentary partners.

The delegation was led by the Chairperson, the Hon. Prof. Biman Prasad and comprised the Deputy Chair Hon. Balmindar Singh and accompanied by the Director Legislature and Secretary to PAC, Mr. Joeli Ditoka.

The participation of the Fiji delegation was made possible through co-funding by the United Nations Development Programme (“**UNDP**”) Parliament project who funded the airfares and the CPA-UK who arranged for the accommodation.

WORKSHOP VENUE & PARTICIPANTS

The Republic of Malta is a southern European island country comprising an archipelago of islands in the Mediterranean Sea. A member of the EU since 2004, the country covers just over 316 square kilometres with a population of around 450,000. The capital is Valetta and Malta has two official languages, being Maltese and English. The formal welcome to the Workshop this year was a Garden Reception hosted by Her Excellency Mrs Marie Louise Coleiro Preca, the President of the Republic of Malta at the Presidential Palace in Attard, Malta. The Conference proper was held over four days from 1st to 4th June at the Corinthia Palace Hotel in San Anton, a short walk away from the Presidential Palace.

The workshop was attended by Members of PACs as well as Clerks from across the Commonwealth, although the Pacific was represented only by Papua New Guinea as well as Fiji. ACPAC did however send two Members from the Western Australian State Parliament as Observers. [A full list of contributors and participants can be found in the **Annexure**].



Chair and Deputy Chair at the first session of the Workshop

WORKSHOP TOPICS

The speakers spoke on multitude of topics from varying perspectives. This varied from the perspective of Chairpersons, Members of Committee as well as Clerks. Other topics such as community engagement and the media included speakers from Civil Society Organisations as well as the Media.



Panel Discussion L-R Fiji Kenyan Chair, Jamaican MP, Facilitator, Barbadian MP and Fijian PAC Chair (far right)

Fiji was a visible presence in the Workshop and the Chief Executive of CPA-UK especially welcomed Fiji's participation as a move towards rejoining the CPA and further participation in the Commonwealth generally.

The Chair was called upon several times to facilitate and lead group discussions and to participate in panel discussions.



Left: Group Discussion led by Fijian PAC Chair. Right: Fijian Delegation participation from the floor during feedback.

As was the case when the Fijian PAC attended the ACPAC Conference 2015, there were inevitable comparisons made between the PACs represented in terms of composition, scope of work, functions and powers, there were also academics and local government level administrators who shared their experiences as well as clerks and former clerks from Westminster who provided background to their experience of working with PACs.

Another interesting topic was the recurring discussion surrounding how PACs could initiate their line of enquiry and the various legal frameworks in place. It was noted that even if PACs were restricted in scope to the scrutinisation of the reports of the supreme audit institution, there was a wide discretion in how they went about it.

Another theme repeated from ACPAC, in one session was the question of how one would go about measuring the effectiveness or lack thereof of a PAC. The Chair from the Indian PAC repeated impressive statistics in terms of their 173 meetings (mostly of subcommittees). There was general consensus however that the number of meetings alone was a poor way

of attempting to ascertain effectiveness. The number of recommendations adopted by the Government was mooted as one and this also had its disadvantages as Governments reject good recommendations at times for purely political reasons. The question was answered differently by different committees and one of the former clerk's of the Westminster PAC made the point that the effectiveness of any particular PAC would depend on the objectives and focus of the individual committee from the outset. Although the shift in recent times to a more expansive role for PACs was an increasing trend, again the particulars would differ depending on jurisdiction. The World Bank presented a model called Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning ('MEL') as a workable assessment tool. MEL was explained as Measurement of progress against goals set by strategic plans, Evaluating systematically the worth of its processes and Learning by application to the specific operation of each PAC. Focus was also shifted from final impact alone, to a more holistic assessment which also took into account intermediate impact ie changes that were initiated after PAC Hearings.



Final session held in the debating Chamber of the new complex of the Parliament of the Republic of Malta, Valetta, Malta – Hon. Prof. Prasad making some concluding remarks

The Workshop also had specific training for the Clerks which encompassed engagement with various media and civil society organisations as well as effective time management and how best to facilitate the work of Committees with specific challenges in the various jurisdictions including budgetary, staffing and other resource limitations.

The Clerk of the Pakistani PAC explained that the practice in his jurisdiction was that the Clerk (called a Secretary in Pakistan just as in Fiji) was usually a staff member of the National Audit Office who was seconded to the Secretariat to serve the PAC.

Sarah Petit the current Westminster PAC Clerk also stressed that the level of media coverage should not be confused with effectiveness of the Secretariat. As important as media coverage was, from the Secretariat standpoint it would always be secondary to the core duties and even though this would sometimes result in criticism from the members, the core functions must never be neglected.

CAPAC LAUNCH & ELECTIONS

After 3 briefings held from Monday 1st June through to Wednesday 3rd June between the Workshop sessions, CAPAC was officially launched after the endorsement of the Constitution at the General Meeting on Wednesday 3rd June 2015 at 11.00 a.m. Thereafter nominations for positions on the Executive Committee were opened. After some consideration, the Fijian delegation nominated Hon. Sir John Hickey, the Chair of the PNG PAC. Nominations closed at 9.00 a.m. on Thursday 4th June 2015. As the precise number of nominations were received, there was no need for elections and the Executive Committee Members were deemed elected unopposed.

The Executive Committee elected Hon. Tonio Fenech (Maltese PAC Chair) as their Chair and Hon. Alice Alaso Asianut (Ugandan PAC Chair) as Vice-Chair. Representatives from the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Kenya, Tanzania and PNG were the other Members of the Executive Committee.

CONCLUSION

1. The Westminster Workshop is a worthwhile capacity building event for the Fijian Parliament to attend and with the launch of CAPAC, meetings and exchange programmes with other Parliaments for the purposes of peer learning and exposure to best practice in parliamentary procedures are bound to continue increasing;
2. Although the CPA and CAPAC are much larger umbrella bodies and Fiji may be better served by focusing on the regional ACPAC and the nascent Pacific Association of PACs – this does not detract from the knowledge sharing and exposure to be gained from the membership of these international bodies;
3. It is recommended that the Fijian PAC continues to send delegates to the Westminster Workshop as well as CAPAC, ACPAC and other regional meets; and
4. As previously stated it is recommended that the Parliamentary Secretariat continue to develop resources to improve services available to all Parliamentary Committees and where necessary investing in more human resources. It was again noted that effective secretarial support was crucial for quality performance of parliamentary committees.



Hon. Prof. Biman Prasad
Chairperson
Standing Committee on Public Accounts
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Annexure