



CPA Activities: The Canadian Scene



Will Stos

Delegates to the CPA - Canadian Regional conference, held in Fredericton from July 20-26, listen to Nova Scotia Speaker Kevin Murphy's presentation about democratic engagement of people with disabilities.

More than 120 delegates and accompanying persons enjoyed some balmy New Brunswick weather and legendary East Coast hospitality as the 52nd Commonwealth Parliamentary Association – Canadian Region Conference was held in Fredericton from July 20-26.

Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians' (CWP) Meeting

Prior to the beginning of the Regional Conference, CWP steering committee members and delegates gathered for two days of business meetings

and guest presentations in the New Brunswick Legislative Assembly's Legislative Council Chamber on July 20 and 21. CWP-Canadian Region Chair **Myrna Driedger** opened the business meeting by noting that she would be presiding over the meeting with a mixture of joy and sadness – joy for witnessing and/or taking part in the CWP's many accomplishments as it has grown and sadness as this conference would be the last she would attend before completing her term as chair. **Linda Reid**, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia,

will replace Driedger as Chair, while Saskatchewan MLA **Laura Ross** was elected as Deputy Chair.

The meeting then welcomed CPA Chair **Alan Haselhurst** and CWP International Chair **Rebecca Kadaga** to offer introductory remarks. Haselhurst, who is also completing his own term as chair this year, said that when he was elected three years earlier he hoped the CWP would be stronger as an organization by the time he left, which it is. He also noted the particularly strength of CWP networks in Africa and Canada and suggested



CWP delegates met in the Legislative Council Chamber of New Brunswick's Legislative Assembly to discuss plans for the coming year.

that they can serve as models of what active CPA organizations and chapters can accomplish. Kadaga detailed the busy travel schedule she has maintained as she has attempted to attend as many CWP regional meetings as possible. While highlighting some success stories of countries where women parliamentarians are making great strides towards equality and full participation, she reminded delegates that much work remains to be done by active chapters such as Canada's.

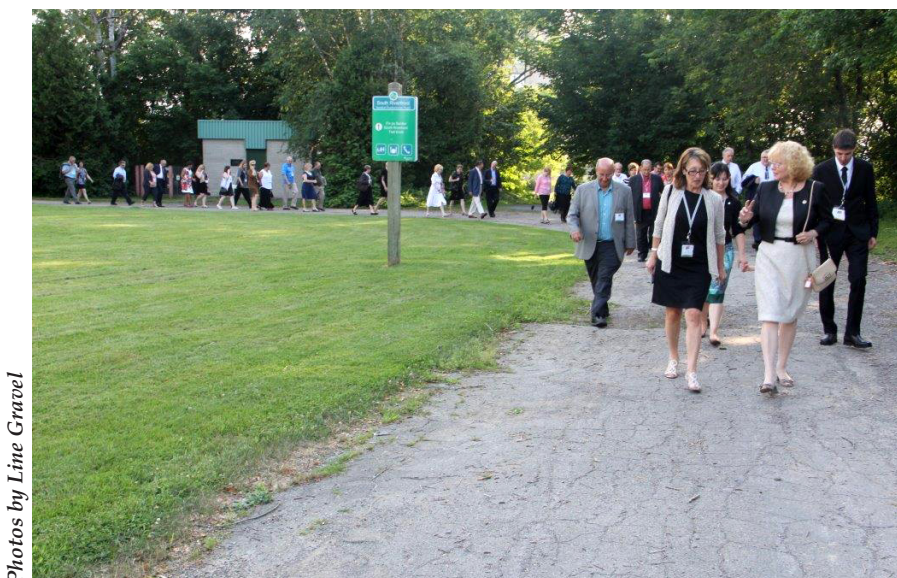
The CWP steering committee agreed that it would strive for less email communication and more in-person communication and outreach, steering committee meetings in every province, and additional distribution of promotional items. The steering committee also developed terms of reference and discussed future nominees for its Women of Inspiration speaker series.

Elizabeth Weir, a former New Brunswick MLA and provincial NDP leader, addressed the gathering as this year's Woman of

Inspiration. Weir, who has served as CEO of the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Agency of New Brunswick and become an internationally renowned consultant on parliamentary strengthening since leaving the New Brunswick Assembly, spoke of the many challenges women politicians face in an increasingly toxic media environment. This

negativity, combined with the intense personal demands of parliamentarians (such as being tethered to a Blackberry), make it difficult to convince women to become involved in public life.

Anne Bertrand, New Brunswick's Access to Information and Privacy Commissioner, spoke of her pride at being appointed to her position based on merit and not gender, noting that when she was thrown into the commissioner role she had "no time to be a woman." Nevertheless, in introducing six young women who worked with her, she said she was proud to stand in front of the audience as a woman and stressed the benefits of the collaborative approach her office has strived to use for dispute resolutions. During a question and answer period Bertrand noted that after 30 years in public service, some of the issues women face have not entirely changed and today's problems are often couched in safety words. She said that politically correct language often hides the insidiousness still present.



Photos by Line Gravel

Attendees walk along the grounds of the Lieutenant Governor's residence.

CWP delegates then departed for a tour of the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research and a subsequent speech from [Acting Director] **Nancy Nason-Clark**. In her scholarly work, she has explored how religious faith influences the journey towards healing for survivors, the challenges facing religious leaders who are called upon to respond to families dealing with domestic violence, and how secular society and religious groups cooperate in the fight to end intimate partner abuse and other forms of family violence.

Upon returning to the Chamber, **Susanne Alexander**, Publisher of Goose Lane Editions, discussed how in her post-government career she has helped to transform a tiny local poetry press, operated largely by volunteers, into a publishing company of regional and national significance.

CPA-CR Business Sessions

Conference organizers presented a diverse line-up of



Photos by Lime Gravel

British Columbia MP Russ Hiebert speaks with Alan Haselhurst, Chair of the CPA International Executive Committee at the Lieutenant Governor's residence.

eight sessions which covered a variety of issues before Canadian parliaments as well as situations which parliamentarians may encounter in their roles as public representatives.

Newfoundland MHA and Deputy Speaker **Wade Verge** shared a personal story about the challenges of being a

government backbencher who must decide whether to defend a government decision that is unpopular among constituents or publicly break with his colleagues. In the discussion which followed, participants spoke of the power of party leadership in the Canadian system and contemporary reform initiatives which seek to reassert parliamentarians' independence.

National Assembly President **Jacques Chagnon** detailed Quebec's debate over end-of-life legislation as part of an argument for the need to debate social issues in parliament. Chagnon contended that parliaments create an exceptional forum in which to conduct the in-depth examination of social issues in a calm manner. Furthermore, he suggested they enhance the image of Parliament, which is too often seen as an arena for partisan debate. One option to facilitate these types of discussions would be to form a committee, similar to ones in France and Finland, which concentrate specifically on major social issues.



From left: Myrna Driedger, Manitoba MLA and CWP-Canadian Region Chair; Brigadier-General Greg Loos, Commander of the Joint Task Force (North), Elaine Taylor, Deputy Premier of Yukon.

Leonard Lee-White, Assistant Deputy Minister in New Brunswick's Department of Finance, shared lessons learned from the host province's public sector pension plan reforms. Noting New Brunswick had both an aging and declining population which put stress on the system, Lee-White detailed how the province opted for a shared-risk pension plan which offered an alternative to the more traditional defined benefit and defined contribution funds.

Elaine Taylor, Yukon's Deputy Premier, and Brigadier-General **Greg Loos**, Commander of the Joint Task Force (North), co-presented a session on Department of National Defence Aid to Civil Authorities. Outlining the success of the annual Operation NANOOK in the three northern territories, Taylor recounted her government's experience with the 2013 operation where a mock-wildfire threatened Whitehorse's city limits. In addition to promoting citizen-interest in disaster preparedness, the operation's scale provided a boost to the territories' economies.

Speaker Reid reported on her legislature's successful Speaker in the Schools Program and revealed some key findings about which grades and ages were most receptive to the series. In post-presentation discussion, other delegates shared anecdotes about children who, though previously quiet and reserved in the classroom, would come out of their shells when selected for key roles in mock parliamentary activities.

Speaker of the Senate **Noël Kinsella's** presentation on what the recent Supreme Court of Canada reference means for

possible Senate reform prompted much debate from delegates across the political and regional spectrum. The Senate Speaker noted the provincial and territorial interest in a strong, functioning Senate. He suggested that the provincial and territorial speakers could facilitate a dialogue amongst Senators and their respective provincial legislators concerning reforms that would best serve the given provinces and territories.

Nova Scotia Speaker **Kevin Murphy** delivered his very personal story about how he suffered a debilitating injury while playing hockey as a youth. Recalling the accessibility issues he faced in school and later in business and political life, Murphy stressed that he realized early on that self-advocacy was going to be an important life skill for him to learn. Nevertheless, he was adamant that "the world

is available to people with disabilities. And they are just that – people first."

The conference concluded with a roundtable discussion with Saskatchewan Speaker **Dan D'Autremont**, and Manitoba MLAs **Cliff Cullen** and **Melanie Wight** on the recent flooding in the Prairie provinces. The parliamentarians noted the tremendous difficulties that arise when decisions are made to divert water that will damage some communities in order to spare others. The presenters also lauded the improvements to infrastructure various governments have made over the years to better protect communities, while cautioning that supposedly once-in-100-year-floods are occurring with greater frequency and more pre-emptive work needs to be done.



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As host for the CPA-CR meeting, New Brunswick offered many interesting attractions and destinations to explore. The bridge leading to Le Pays de la Sagouine.