

Commonwealth Parliamentarians With Disabilities Conference

A founding organizational conference for a proposed Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities was held in Halifax from August 30 to September 2, 2017. Following this successful gathering of 24 delegates, a proposal to establish this group under the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association was accepted by the CPA's executive committee for further review and discussion at the association's upcoming meeting in Mauritius.

Hon. Kevin S. Murphy, MLA

For a democracy to adequately represent and serve its people, it stands to reason that the elected officials within that democracy would need to be as diverse in background as the people they serve. When done correctly, this allows for the wide range of experiences and expertise found within a community to have a place at the table where policy is made, leading to the development of policy that better reflects the needs of the community. Through my experiences as a person with a disability, both as a private citizen and as an elected official, I have witnessed firsthand how a diverse government can have a significant impact not only on what policy is put forward, but on the procedures and practises of government itself, leading it to become more inclusive.

The path forward for improving the representation and services for persons with disabilities is through their greater participation in our parliaments. It was with this goal in mind that I sought to organize the first conference for Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities (CPwD).

Held in Halifax, Nova Scotia from August 30 to September 2, 2017, the conference served as an opportunity for persons with disabilities to share our experiences from across the different parliaments of the Commonwealth, establishing our common challenges and sharing what practises our members have found to be successful. Additionally, we



Hon. Kevin Murphy

Kevin Murphy is the Speaker of the Nova Scotia Assembly and MLA for Eastern Shore.



Delegates at the organizational conference for the proposed Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities group join host Speaker Kevin Murphy (front centre).

discussed a proposal submitted by the Nova Scotia Branch to the Commonwealth Parliamentarians Associations (CPA) governing bodies to establish a network of parliamentarians with disabilities within the CPA organization. The goal is to create a framework through which the kinds of discussions that took place at this conference could continue, furthering the goal of greater participation of persons with disabilities.

As a member of the CPA International Executive Committee, Jackson Lafferty, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of the Northwest Territories, asked the delegates three questions to contemplate over the course of the conference.

- What can you do as an individual Member of Parliament to advance the understanding and involvement of persons with disabilities in democratic institutions?

- What should Parliaments be doing to encourage persons with disabilities to take part in parliamentary democracy?
- What can international organizations such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association do to encourage Parliaments to be more inclusive of persons with disabilities?

The most valuable asset we have to offer as individuals is our own experience in becoming elected or appointed to positions within public office. Through the course of the conference, there were many different perspectives expressed as to what the challenges were for getting persons with disabilities to run for elected office.

Though not a uniform experience, a common issue shared amongst delegates was whether political parties were willing to run them as candidates. Every

country's political parties have their own traditions and culture when it comes to finding and supporting candidates to seeking office, but in many cases, there is an expectation of grunt work that is required by the party brass. In my own experience, being a person who uses a wheelchair, I spent many years volunteering my time to propose and help draft policy resolutions through my riding association, as opposed to the more traditional task of canvassing and door-knocking. In this way I was both able to demonstrate my strengths as an individual and meet those sometimes-unspoken requirements that might have been held by the party brass. However, such opportunities do not always exist within the structure of a party and it falls to us members who have succeeded to seek out, mentor and support the young, capable, driven persons with disabilities living in our communities. It also falls on us to do our part to change the thinking of "party elders" who may still hold outdated views, depriving our political organizations of talented individuals without even necessarily realizing it.

The second point raised speaks to the need for our institutions, and the very buildings that they occupy to be made inclusive and accommodating for persons with disabilities. From our discussions, it would be fair to say that this is a challenge across the board for the member branches of the CPA. Many of our parliamentary buildings are old – in some cases hundreds of years old – filled with history and traditions that began at a time when accessibility was not in the forefront of the architect's mind.

As I can attest, my own jurisdiction's legislature is nearly 200 years old and in no way, was there any form of accessible entrance ways or lifts included in its original design. It was the election of a former member of our house, Jerry Lawrence, in 1978, that led to the installation of an elevator in our building. It was an important first step to making the legislature inclusive.

Upon my own election in 2013, and my subsequent election as the Speaker of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly, renovations were made within the chamber to allow me to serve just as ably as anyone else in my position. Despite some initial concerns, these changes were made in a way that was respectful to the design of the legislature floor. Though it may initially seem costly, such renovations demonstrate leadership to the public when it comes to enabling persons with disabilities. This leadership not only

creates more inclusive public facilities, but further highlights the significant contributions that persons with disabilities make in our society when given an equal opportunity to participate.

The final question for our consideration was perhaps the most important question of the conference. What can organizations, such as the CPA, do to encourage parliaments to be more inclusive of persons with disabilities? The answer would appear to lie in the great work that has previously been undertaken by the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP).

Since 1989, the CWP has been a force for positive change in improving the representation of women in parliaments across the commonwealth. With the support of the governing CPA bodies, the CWP's organizational framework could serve as a template for the proposed Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities (CPwD). It could operate in a similar fashion, providing better outreach, promotion and research for increasing the representation of persons with disabilities in our parliaments.

To conclude the conference, our delegation put forward a formal list of recommendations for the CPA Branch membership to consider at the 63rd annual Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Dhaka, Bangladesh. I was pleased to learn that upon review of these recommendations, the Executive Committee agreed that the CPA should move forward in establishing the proposed CPwD. The recommendations will be circulated to the CPA membership, and a report will be completed by the CPA's Secretariat on the associated costs required to implement the proposals. The report and further discussion are expected to be presented at the CPA's mid-year meeting being held in Mauritius in 2018.

As one delegate, Stephanie Cadieux, of British Columbia stated: "When we're in public service and when we're in positions of leadership, I think we have an obligation to do better. If we're going to insist that employers make their workplaces accessible and follow inclusive hiring practices then we need to be leading by example."

I would like to thank all those who took part in developing and bringing forward this proposal thus far, and for their ongoing support and contributions as we develop this vision for a more inclusive Commonwealth.