



THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVE FINANCIAL OVERSIGHT IN COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTS

The Commonwealth Association of Public Accounts Committees (CAPAC) Pacific Workshop took place in Suva, Fiji in February 2019.



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It feels very appropriate to be writing about 'A Connected Commonwealth' in the 70th year since the 'modern' Commonwealth was formed, and midway through the United Kingdom's tenure as Chair-in-Office of the Commonwealth. Next year, the UK will hand over this position to Rwanda.

The Commonwealth is connected first and foremost by its shared values and the 2.4 billion people who enjoy friendship, cooperation and family ties with others around the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association extends these interactions to Legislatures around the Commonwealth, providing a platform upon which Parliamentarians and Clerks can network and share skills and knowledge relating to their roles.

In February 2019, I participated in the Commonwealth Association of Public Accounts Committees (CAPAC) Pacific Workshop hosted by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK (CPA UK Branch) in Suva, Fiji, in partnership with the Parliament of Fiji. Public Accounts Committees have very specific remits and unique characteristics, and this was an opportunity for me and my Public Accounts Committee counterparts in the CPA Pacific Region to pool our practical experience and learn from one another.

There are over 20 Commonwealth Public Accounts Committees in the Pacific Region and they vary significantly in terms

of the size of their membership, the size of the government budget they scrutinise and the focus of their inquiries. For example, the Public Accounts Committee of Tuvalu consists of three Members and scrutinises a government budget of \$32.5 million, while the Public Accounts Committee of New Zealand consists of thirteen Members and scrutinises a government budget of \$80 billion.

However, despite these differences, the operational functions of the Public Accounts Committees across the Pacific Region have much in common; they must build constructive relationships with their respective Supreme Audit Institutions and government, they must work collaboratively across political differences, and they must successfully engage key stakeholders in their work.

During the three-day workshop, I gained a deeper understanding of the CPA Pacific Region and of the context in which Pacific Public Accounts Committees operate. I was also able to share, compare and reflect on my own experiences of working within the UK context with my fellow workshop participants.



Importantly, we discussed 'blockers' that inhibit our work, for example the lack of resources and training for Committee Members and staff, the difficulty of reaching a consensus among Members, and time constraints on Committee work. Importantly, we discussed how to ensure that governments deliver on their responses to Committee recommendations, and we were able to share solutions to facilitate better scrutiny of government and the use of mechanisms such as the media to do this.

I was delighted to chair an interactive Committee exercise designed to give workshop participants constructive feedback on their questioning techniques of witnesses. The witnesses invited to participate were members of the COP23 Presidency Trust Fund which is currently chaired by Fiji. COP23 stands for the 23rd annual Conference of the Parties to the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, and this exercise focussed on the auditing of the Trust Fund account and expenditure. During

this exercise, it was interesting to note and learn from the different questioning techniques of Members and the role of the Chair in allocating questions that play to the strengths of Members.

Feedback from participants indicated that the workshop presented a very useful opportunity to learn from our differences and build invaluable networks across the region. The Commonwealth theme for 2019 is 'A Connected Commonwealth', and I am glad to have worked towards this theme and to have experienced it first hand with my counterparts across the Pacific.

This workshop was one in a series of regional Public Accounts Committee workshops delivered by CPA UK.

There will be two further workshops in the CPA Asia Region and the CPA Caribbean, Americas and Atlantic Region, which form part of a wider project delivered by CPA UK as part of the Commonwealth Partnership for Democracy (CP4D).

CP4D is a UK Government fund administered by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy in partnership with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association CPA Headquarters and CPA UK Branch, and the Commonwealth Local Government Forum, and the project aims to build political commitment to democratic values. For further information about the next Public Accounts Committee regional workshops please email burtab@parliament.uk.



Images: CPA UK Branch and Parliament of Fiji.

Focus on financial scrutiny and parliamentary oversight in Commonwealth Parliaments at first CAPAC Pacific Region workshop in Fiji

Commonwealth Parliamentarians from the CPA Pacific Region have gathered for the first regional workshop of the Commonwealth Association of Public Accounts Committees (CAPAC) in Suva, Fiji from 19 to 21 February 2019. The three-day workshop was opened by the newly elected Speaker of the Parliament of the Republic of Fiji, Hon. Ratu Epeli Nailatikau and the workshop was attended by MPs and Clerks from Australia, Kiribati, New Zealand, Niue, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, the United Kingdom, Vanuatu and Fiji.

The regional workshop focused on the work of Commonwealth Public Accounts Committees in promoting good governance and reaffirming that strong and independent Parliamentary oversight plays an important role in preserving the trust of citizens in the integrity of government. This is achieved through Public Accounts Committees that are effective, independent and transparent.

Shabana Mahmood, MP, a Member of the UK Parliament's Public Accounts Committee, gave the keynote address to delegates at the CAPAC Pacific workshop highlighting methods of collaborative working and the importance of effective training for PAC Members.

The CAPAC regional workshops are funded by the Commonwealth Partnership for Democracy (CP4D) and delivered by the CPA UK Branch. Following the Pacific Regional workshop will be workshops in the Asia Region and the Caribbean, Americas and Atlantic Region. A final pan-Commonwealth workshop will take place in London in early 2020 and will be an opportunity for CPA Regions and individual Public Accounts Committees to report on progress made in line with aims and objectives of the preceding regional workshops.

The Commonwealth Association of Public Accounts Committees (CAPAC) was constituted in June 2014 by the

Chairs and Members of Public Accounts and equivalent financial Committees of Commonwealth Parliaments and is designed to support the work of Commonwealth Public Accounts Committees in promoting good governance and financial scrutiny.

