

Feedback on 61st Westminster Seminar on Parliamentary Practice and Procedure - 5th to 9th March, 2012 organized in London.

I attended the 61st Westminster's Seminar on Parliamentary Practice and Procedure organized by the UK branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in the premises of the House of Commons during 5th and 9th March, 2012. Sixty five delegates from Commonwealth legislatures participated in it. I was the only delegate from India representing our Parliament.

The aim of the seminar was to enhance the capacity of delegates to work more effectively in their legislatures. Its objectives were to use the Westminster model as the focus of discussion, to explore through briefings, discussion sessions and practical observation:

- The role of Parliament in holding the Executive to account, including scrutiny of legislation, committee work, questions and debates
- The role of opposition parties and cross-party relations
- Party discipline and transparency
- The role of a second chamber and bicameralism
- Representation and the role of the MP in the constituency
- The management and administration of Parliament including the work of the Speaker/Presiding Officer and Members' Services
- Providing procedural advice to Members

It discussed the functioning of Parliament with special focus on the historical evolution of legislatures and parliamentary democracy and the way they have evolved facing challenges and opportunities. It also enabled the participants to focus on variations in the functioning of Parliaments in Commonwealth countries and the current methods of working and the potential areas of improvement which would fine tune the way in which such legislatures perform their duties. On each of the above topics eminent speakers who were Members of the House of Commons and House of Lords addressed the participants. There were also distinguished speakers who came from academia and administration delivered lectures on themes connected with functioning of Parliament. Apart from lectures, the programme involved a visit to the Parliamentary constituency of a Member of the House of Commons and understanding the way in which the

concerned Member represented his or her constituents and took up their issues in the Parliament.

During lecture sessions on each theme mentioned above I actively participated and asked many questions and made observations. Besides, I used to flag the rules, practice, procedure and conventions of Indian Parliament which have evolved in the context of the evolution of our parliamentary democracy. For instance, I referred to the civil society activism in India which remained at the root of the demand for a comprehensive legislation on *Jan Lokpal*. I drove home the point that the civil society groups exert pressure on the Parliament to remain responsive to the demands of the people and accordingly frame legislations to address the contemporary challenges and problems. This point was taken up by me in the context of the discussion on scrutiny of legislation. It was supplemented by my remark that in India the Department-related Parliamentary Standing Committees were established in 1993 to examine, *inter alia*, the Bills referred to them by the Presiding Officers of both the Houses of Parliament. I also stated that on most of the occasions, the recommendations of the Committee on Bill examined by it are largely accepted by the Government, and thereby ensuring effective parliamentary scrutiny on legislations.

When the discussion took place on the role of Opposition Parties on cross-party relations, I referred to the Indian example of a parliamentary Act which came into effect in 1977 and by which the Leader of the Opposition has been accorded the statutory status. I always attempted to place before the participants of the Commonwealth countries the specific Indian examples which evolved through the growth and development of parliamentary democracy in our country. Such references from India fascinated many of the participants.

When the role of Second Chamber and bicameralism was discussed I made a reference to the point that in India the Rajya Sabha as a Second Chamber which is not subject to dissolution has often been used by successive governments to introduce some of the socially and economically significant Bills so that such Bills would not lapse with the dissolution of the Lower House. Normally, when a Bill is introduced in the Lower House, it remains alive till the completion of the term of the House and lapses with the dissolution of the House. In this context, I referred to most of the legislations on women's rights in India which were first introduced in the Rajya Sabha. Apart from referring to such legislations from 1950s, I

referred to the Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, 2010 which was introduced in the Rajya Sabha and passed by the House and which provided for reservation of women in the Lower House of Indian Parliament and State Assemblies. While doing so, I also showed to the participants my article on Rajya Sabha and Women's Empowerment which was published in the Parliamentarian (Issue Four 2011). The officials of the UK Branch of Commonwealth Parliamentary Associations showed interest on my article and wanted to use it in their website. I e-mailed it to them and they immediately put it on their website. The article can be seen at [http://www.cpahq.org/cpahq/Mem/Publications/The Parliamentarian/Parliamentarian_2_2011/Rajya%20Sabha%20and%20Women's%20Empowerment-by%20SN%20Sahu.aspx](http://www.cpahq.org/cpahq/Mem/Publications/The_Parliamentarian/Parliamentarian_2_2011/Rajya%20Sabha%20and%20Women's%20Empowerment-by%20SN%20Sahu.aspx).

In the seminar there was a discussion on Parliament and Media. While participating in the discussion I referred to the Media Cell in the Rajya Sabha which was established after I submitted a proposal in 2003. I also referred to the establishment of a separate channel called Rajya Sabha TV which drew the attention of all the participants. During the discussion, I also referred to the BBC Report on Beyond Sound Bites which talked about the role of electronic media and its relevance in contemporary society. The eminent speaker who was delivering the lecture showed keen interest on the BBC Report and wanted to have a copy of it.

It was revealing to note that the Select Committees of the House of Commons which examine the policies of the Government do not submit their reports to the Parliament. They prepare the report and just put it on the Parliament website. It was also educative to note that the Chairman of the Select Committees are elected by the House and not nominated as is the case in India. The Office of the Chairman of the Select Committees have assumed enormous importance and those who become the Chairman command respect from society at large. Many Members of the British Parliament prefer to build a career as Chairman of the Select Committee because of the prestige and dignity associated with it.

On 8th March, 2012, that is, on International Women's Day the Lord Speaker Rt Hon. Baroness D'Souza hosted breakfast and gave opportunities to participants to discuss gender issue and empowerment of women. It was a very exciting meeting. When my turn came, I referred to the observation of the President of the UN Hunger Project who stated that election of more than half a million women to the grass roots representative bodies in India

constituted the greatest experiment of our age. I then stated that based on the success of the reservation of 33% of seats for women in grass root democratic bodies that Indian Government has decided to extend such reservation facilities to women in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. The point was well taken by the participants.

The Speaker of the House of Commons addressed the participants and referred to the initiative taken by him to reach out to the younger generation for the purpose of explaining to them the relevance of Parliament for society and nation. He regretted that there is a disconnect between parliament and people and, therefore, he wanted to bridge the gulf by the parliamentary outreach programme.

One of the agendas in the Seminar was to visit the constituency of an MP. As part of a group I visited Streatham constituency in London which elected Labour Party Leader, Mr. Chuka Umunna to the House of Commons in May, 2010. It was a very educative visit. Mr. Umunna is a British citizen of African origin and is hailed as the Barack Obama of Britain. A very charismatic leader, he is the Shadow Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills. He took us around some parts of his constituency and explained that he represented hundred thousand people. I explained to him that in India, an MP of the Lower House of Parliament normally represents more than a million people. He took us to a village market and explained to us the kind of work he was doing for the people of the area who profess diverse faiths.

The Seminar was very educative. While participating in the Seminar, I showed some of the publications brought out by Rajya Sabha Secretariat. One of them was the Occasional Paper on Electronic Waste. Seeing that Occasional Paper Mr. Andrew Tuggey, Director, Commonwealth and International Relations expressed his admiration and wondered as to how the officials of the Rajya Sabha Secretariat had time to bring out such quality publication.

In participating in the Seminar I learnt a lot and also shared the experiences of running Indian Parliament. The wide variety of thoughts articulated in the Seminar enriched me and in fact more and more officers from the Secretariat, particularly from the LARRDIS should be given opportunity to participate in such a Seminar. It is recommended that while participating in such a Seminar the participants must take publications, their

own articles and lot of literature from the debates of Rajya Sabha to enlighten the international participants and project the image of Indian Parliament in proper perspective. I shared these points with Secretary-General Dr. V.K. Agnihotri who appreciated the feedback I gave and expressed happiness that I participated in the Seminar and meaningfully contributed when each topic was discussed.

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