

8th Commonwealth Youth Parliament

Laura Elliott

The 8th Commonwealth Youth Parliament was hosted by the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia in Victoria, Canada. I was fortunate to be selected by the National Assembly for Wales' Branch of the CPA to represent them at this auspicious event in November 2016.

The Commonwealth Youth Parliament provides a development opportunity for young people between the ages of 18 – 29 who have ambitions to make a career in public office, or just a keen interest in legislative democracy. The added dimension which makes this opportunity so special is the fact that, as a participant, you are working alongside young people from across the Commonwealth.

On Monday 7 November I was joined in the Legislative Chamber of British Columbia by 60 participants representing Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Branches from eight of the nine CPA Regions – Africa; Asia; Australia; British Islands and Mediterranean; Caribbean, Americas and Atlantic; Canada and India and Pacific.



The Opening Ceremony was an opportunity to understand the programme and receive an introduction as to what was expected from us throughout the week. We were welcomed with introductions from Kate Ryan Lloyd, Deputy Clerk; Mr Akbar Khan, Secretary General of the CPA; Honourable Linda Reid, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia and Craig James, Clerk. The ceremony also included a moving Blessing from Elder Mary Ann Thomas and a poetry reading from one of our fellow Youth Parliamentarians,



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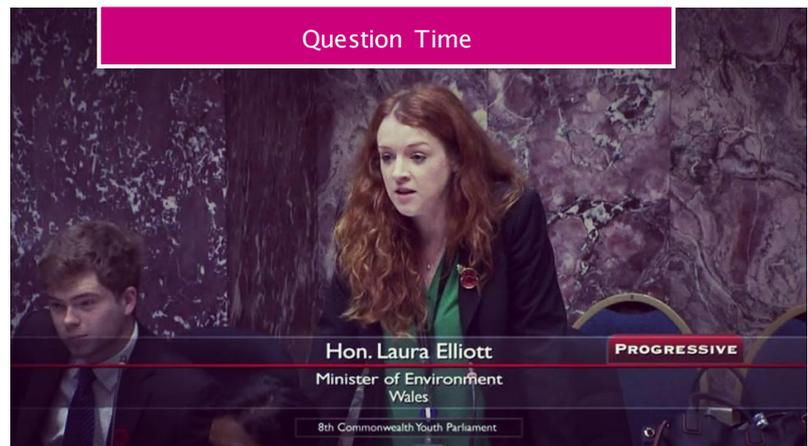
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Zoe Duhaime.

Following the conclusion of the Opening Ceremony, Kate Ryan Lloyd presented an introduction to key procedures of the Commonwealth Youth Parliament. Although the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia follows the Westminster Parliamentary model, it was a very useful session to prepare us for our week ahead.

We had been given packs with information pertaining to 'Commonwealthland', the fictional country which we belonged to and party profiles for the Government and Opposition. Prior to arriving, delegates should have received the party profiles and indicated which one they would like to join, unfortunately due to some technical gremlins not all of us received this information and so were allocated to a Party. I was placed in Government and, following the educational session, we held our first Caucus meeting in the Douglas Fir Committee Room. The main business of the meeting was to select our Premier, Deputy Premier and Whip as well as take expressions of interest for Cabinet positions.

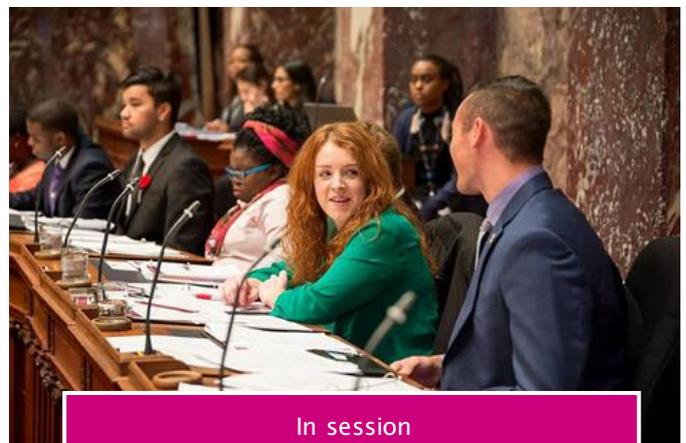
We named ourselves the Progressive Party and elected a female Premier and Deputy. I expressed an interest in the Environment portfolio and was selected by the party leaders to take up office as the Minister of Environment; I had been keen to take on the role given my background – from a farming family and being now employed on a renewable technologies project.



We also started to prepare addresses in reply to the Speech from the Throne which was given later in the afternoon by The Honourable Rick Hansen, Lieutenant Governor. Each party had mentors (actual MPs/MLAs, aged under 35, from Commonwealth Legislatures) and ours advised us that our responses should be a nod to our participation at the event and greetings from our home nations. After the session began it was clear to see that the Opposition had been advised otherwise and our Party Policies were ridiculed and questions were thrown at us during their responses to the Speech from the Throne. Any trepidation about how confrontational the sessions would be ended there!



For the rest of the day we held another Caucus session, had the official photograph of CYP8, prepared for and took part in Question Time (an experience I found to be highly nerve wracking as a Cabinet Minister) and heard mentors discuss the role of a Member of Parliament and Introduced our first Bills to the House. Our Party Whip was excellent and we were frequently protected with 'Points of Order' and notes being passed down the Chamber as to which way we should be voting. Concessions were agreed between parties outside of the Chamber and then we were instructed as to what the party line would be when these discussions arose.



On Day Two of the programme, the main business of the day was the second reading of the Youth Apprenticeship and Internship Act which was the Bill introduced on Day One. Youth Parliamentarians on both sides of the House spoke to the Bill and I took the opportunity to speak about my experience of youth education and employment in Wales, and how important I feel informal education and soft skills are in creating well-rounded and employable individuals outside of the



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classroom. It was fascinating to hear other Youth Parliamentarians speak about their experiences, although predominantly the addresses tended to be given from a perspective which was inside the sphere of our “Commonwealthland”.

During lunch on the second day we were addressed by David Spence, President of the Vancouver Island Branch of the Royal Commonwealth Society. It was a very interesting talk and added to the value which we attributed to having this experience, something which became clearer as the week went on. Tuesday afternoon was spent continuing the second reading of the Youth Apprenticeships and Internship Act and in Caucus preparing for the Committee of the Whole and Amendments.

During the evening, we spent dinner together watching the results of the US Presidential Election come in – a surreal experience and the atmosphere was quite subdued as the result became clearer. Youth Parliamentarian statements the following day were heavily referenced towards the need to continue to fight for freedom of speech and equality; whilst condemning racism, homophobia, sexism and discrimination. During the morning session it felt like there was more than a matter of miles between us and the USA.



On Wednesday we had an educational session from MLAs and representatives from local press who discussed the importance of the media in politics and how the relationship typically worked. This was in advance of each party holding a mock press conference. Aside from our Minister for

Indigenous Affairs announcing a whole new policy, we all dealt with the occasion well and found some humour in some of our answers, the phrase ‘playing the game’ was used quite a lot in preparation with our mentors. The most complicated procedural session of the week was the Committee of the Whole. Youth Parliamentarians lead the session and we were fortunate in Government to have a



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delegate who had taken part in one of these sessions before to guide us through it. It dealt with the step by step acceptance or amendment of the Bill with suggestions made from both sides of the Chamber, all delegates were present and could contribute to the session freely. It was an excellent insight into the stages of progressing an Act of Law, however, we would have benefitted from more time to be able to thrash out all the details as a lot of compromises were made on the wording of the Bill given the limited time available.



With the Lieutenant Governor, Judith Guichon

On Wednesday evening we were transported to Government House for the Closing Dinner of CYP8, hosted by the Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia. Judith Guichon was appointed in 2012 and is the vice regal representative of Queen Elizabeth II of Canada in the Province of British Columbia. It was a very great honour to

be hosted by the Lieutenant Governor and shortly after our arrival we learnt that some of her most recent visitors had been The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge.

I was delighted when, after being introduced as the delegate from Wales, the Lieutenant Governor's eyes lit up as she said I was the only delegate who had mentioned an interest in Agriculture in my biography, and prior to her appointment she owned and operated a large cattle ranch. During the evening the Premier and Leader of the Opposition, Speaker of the House and Lieutenant Governor addressed us. Jabari Lynch from Trinidad and Tobago, treated us to a poem and it was a really moving moment and captured the spirit of the week perfectly, likening the delegation to the ingredients in a bowl of soup – all different, but combining to create something special.



Govt. House meeting Judith Guichon

Our final day was very short and contained a question period, by this time a little more jovial and, as Government, we employed the “filibuster” tactic of talking for as long as possible in answering, to



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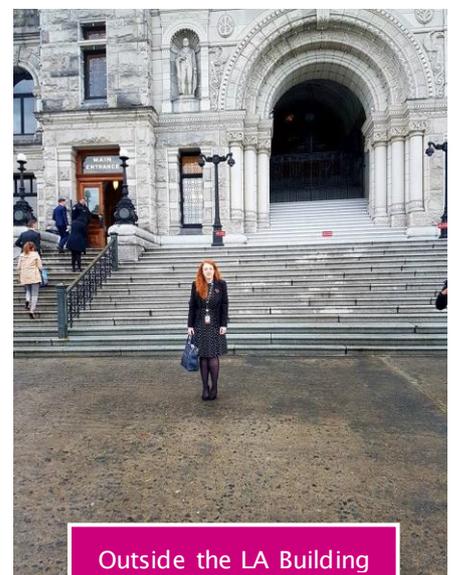
prevent any more questions being asked. I would have laughed if you'd told me at the start of the week that I would be playing for time, waffling on about Carbon Tax in the Chamber! The closing speeches included an address from Hon. Ingrid Moses-Scatliffe, Speaker of the House of Assembly in the British Virgin Islands who will be hosting the 9th Commonwealth Youth Parliament next year. It was at this point a sense of disappointment dawned, a feeling of sadness that our Parliament was coming to a close, and that a new cohort of delegates would be benefitting from this wonderful event and experience next year.



I was fully prepared that the enormity of the experience would not fully sink in until I returned home. Having been able to reflect on the CYP, it has become clear to me that it was a once in a lifetime opportunity and one I will treasure forever. Being able to gain practical experience of the parliamentary system whilst working with like-minded young people who have a range of different backgrounds and life experiences would be very difficult to replicate elsewhere. The future of the Commonwealth is in very safe hands given the calibre of the people in attendance at CYP8 and I hope that the Assembly will be encouraging of an open dialogue whilst we establish our own Youth Parliament.

The programme of the CYP is very structured and it was quite difficult to assess the structure in respective countries during the week as you take on the persona of your party and your party profile. The Falkland Islands, who sit within our BIM Region, are in a similar place to Wales, committed to establishing a Youth Parliament and there were other countries who will be exploring this off the back of the CYP.

In terms of ambitions for the Youth Parliament in Wales the first decision would, I believe, need to be deciding upon the age range. In my opinion, this should be



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younger than 18 in order to truly reflect the views of young people unable to participate under our current voting system. Then an upper age limit – for example the CYP runs to the age of 29, at the Scottish Youth Parliament it is 25, whereas in the Youth Parliament of British Columbia, it is 1.

Then, the question of how we would appoint members to our Youth Assembly – actual elections mirroring constituencies or applications for a limited amount of positions – which could perhaps be nominations from existing youth organisations. The main question will be what work would the Youth Assembly be tasked with: would it be able to contribute to actual legislation in Wales or would the body be more of an experience for young people in a hope to engage more young people in politics? I expect that the reach of the Youth Assembly will be determined by the budget and resources available to it. I look forward to discussing these questions in more detail with the Llywydd and Rhun ap Iorwerth AM, Chair of the CPA Wales Branch. I would like to note that I, as the representative of the National Assembly for Wales, received offers during the CYP, of help from Members of the Youth Parliaments of British Columbia and Scotland to provide us with case studies of their experiences and best practise, which may be useful in aiding and informing how our Youth Parliament develops in Wales.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the National Assembly for Wales and its Branch of the CPA in recognising how important this event is and for sending a delegate from Wales. I feel extremely fortunate to have been selected and would wholeheartedly promote this opportunity to others in the years to come.



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