



The 12th Commonwealth Youth Parliament,
Wellington, New Zealand
September 2024



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(with Angharad Earles)

Introduction

The 12th Commonwealth Youth Parliament (CYP) took place in Wellington, New Zealand in September 2024, with young people representing 37 territories from the nine regions comprising the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. The programme gave delegates an opportunity to develop their skills and knowledge on Parliamentary democracies and legislative processes, whilst celebrating cultures from across the globe. I was so proud to represent the Senedd and Wales at the Commonwealth Youth Parliament, being able to advocate for young people with disabilities and the LGBTQ+ community. I was also excited to meet other young people passionate about politics and activism and to learn how their governments run. Getting a chance to experience New Zealand's culture was an incredible opportunity. Meeting so many amazing people was definitely my favourite part of the experience.



Over the four days of Parliamentary business in the historic Parliament House and the Executive Wing; colloquially known as the "The Beehive" for its distinctive shape, the nations' representatives were split into parties and committees to debate a piece of mock legislation. I was a member of the smallest opposition party as a member of the Oceanic Progress Party (OPP) with 4 other delegates; including the delegate from the United Kingdom who was leader of the party. Debating the Bill in the Chamber and suggesting amendments to it during Committee meetings provided me with further insight into how Parliamentary processes works and what it takes to create

legislation. In amongst the programme's work and visiting the highlights of Wellington I was also making wonderful memories with life-long friends from all over the world. I am greatly appreciative to The Llywydd, Rhun ap Iorwerth MS, Branch Chair and to all at the Senedd Branch of the CPA for giving me the opportunity to represent Wales at the CYP. I have to give special mention to how accessible the New Zealand Parliament made everything for me. They ensured all the documents I needed were in Braille, and I always knew where I was meant to be and what was going on. I wasn't treated any differently because of my blindness, and I felt included in every part of the process, thanks to the staff, Angharad, from the Welsh Youth Parliament who accompanied me, and my fellow delegates.



Day 1

The first day began with a pōwhiri, which is a Māori welcoming ceremony, involving whaikōrero (formal speech) , waiata (singing) and kai (food), and hongiri, which is the Māori welcome expressed by the rubbing or touching of noses. When the hongiri is performed with you as a visitor, this signifies that you are no longer a mere visitor, you are a *tangata whenua*, which essentially means that you are to be unified with those performing the hongiri with you. We were all invited to share hongiri with the staff and MPs from the New Zealand parliament. The pōwhiri a ceremony to determine who is friend or foe is steeped in tradition and has been contemporarily adapted to offices and other places. These beautiful traditional ceremonies

welcomed all delegates to New Zealand and officially began the programme for the 12th Commonwealth Youth Parliament.



During the programme the delegates would be Members of Parliament for the fictional island of Okifenua, the fifth largest island in the South Pacific. Following pōwhiri and hongi we broke into our party groups to elect our party leaders, chief whips, and government ministers. After lunch was the opening of parliament and swearing in of the delegates. Our speakers of the house for the programme were Teanau Tuiono Green Party List MP and Francisco Hernandez Green Party List MP. To end the first day of our work programme the Climate Change Resettlement and Humanitarian Aid Bill was introduced to the House. Although the Bill was

introduced by the Coalition Government my party supported it's introduction with the need for amendments before it could be passed. We ended the day with a tour of the New Zealand Parliament estate. For me some of the highlights of the tour were the adaptable changes being made to make the building accessible including their tactile map of both the estate and the Chamber. They also provide simultaneous translation in the chamber of Māori to English during sessions, like we do with Welsh at the Senedd.

Before the beginning of the programme I didn't know much about how a bill gets passed through Parliament, so I learned a lot in a short time. Even things I thought I already understood made more sense after experiencing them firsthand. Sitting in a

party and following the rules and etiquette of the chamber gave me a deeper understanding of how Parliament operates. Whenever I felt out of my depth, the staff were always happy to explain things, and my fellow delegates were lovely and supportive too.

Day 2

After our morning tea and coffee during the daily briefing to start the day we split into our political parties with Mentors. Each party had a member of staff from the New Zealand parliament on hand to answer any questions along with an MP who could give guidance to us. I grew my teamwork skills and became much more confident in my political knowledge during the party meetings. During the party meeting we discussed what amendments our party wanted to raise during the afternoon Committee meetings. Between the five of us we had a delegate in each of the Committees to raise points with focus on ambitious climate action. Mid-morning



led to the first Chamber debate on the Bill. At the end of this debate a first vote was held with the majority of us in favour of passing the Bill. Our afternoon committee meetings led to many discussions on what amendments were needed to ensure the passing of the Bill in parliament. I was

part of the Environment Committee which was perfect because I'm really passionate about environmental issues. One of the amendments I suggested for the Bill was approved and supported by members from all parties in the Committee. Each committee could only put forward two amendments for the entire Bill, and mine was chosen as one of the two put forward by the Environment Committee. These amendments would be raised during the next chamber debate and only one amendment per clause would be allowed to pass.



That evening a reception was held for all the delegates by the British High Commissioner for New Zealand; Iona Thomas OBE, at the residence Homewood. The impressive timber building played host to us delegates, our

mentor MPs, CPA and New Zealand parliament staff, and those working for the British High Commissioner for an evening of networking and sharing our experiences. I discussed with many about my time with the Welsh Youth Parliament and the positive changes we were making on behalf of the young people of Wales. It was an enjoyable evening, in which connections were made and I learnt more about the other delegates democracies.

Day 3

The third day was devoted to chamber sessions. In the morning was question time, where the coalition government were scrutinised for the Bill they presented to the House. Our afternoon Chamber session proceeded with the final stage of reading the Bill – amendments. All four committees had tabled two amendments each for the Bill. Each amendment was read out and voted upon. Only one amendment per clause was passed.



Day 4

On the final day of the programme we held the Members's Summary Debate. This was an opportunity for each party to make a few statements on the Climate Change Resettlement and Humanitarian Aid Bill before it would be voted upon that afternoon. During the summary debate I gave one of the two statements on behalf of my party the Oceanic Progress Party, which was an amazing experience. During my

statement I talked about how the party agreed with certain amendments passed for the Bill but how some had not been radical enough. Focusing on how Okifenua should be extending support to those in need, considering the country had been built and expanded by immigrants. My statement was well received by the House on both sides of the political spectrum.



After lunch a number of delegates went on a circular walk of Wellington with Celia Wade-Brown MP, a member of the Green Party. She and her staff took us on a historic trip around the city from the Parliament estate, pointing out historic and cultural areas of interest, walking along the waterfront before ending at the

Wellington Cenotaph. Celia Wade-Brown was the third female mayor of Wellington serving for two terms in the early 2010's. I had a great discussion with her regarding the infrastructure in place in Wellington for the visually impaired.

Our afternoon session began with a Party Leader's Summary Debate, where each party leader gave a closing statement on behalf of their party regarding the Bill, these were incredible and impassioned speeches. This was followed by a vote in the House, where the Speaker put the amended Climate Change Resettlement and Humanitarian Aid Bill to a vote, and it was passed by the coalition government and the Oceanic Progress Party. The vote noted the end of a productive and encouraging four days in which we all worked hard but came together with new ideas and concepts to improve the original Bill. It was such a privilege to work alongside so many inspiring young people who have such bright futures ahead of them. I really hope we can work together again on future projects and continue building friendships between young people across the Commonwealth.



On the final evening the New Zealand Parliament had arranged a closing ceremony and dinner for everyone involved in the programme, hosted by CPA President, Hon. Ben Franklin and Teanau Tuiono MP; one of our Speakers of the House during the programme. A delegate from each of the nine regions represented at the Commonwealth Youth Parliament was invited to give a speech. I was invited to speak on behalf of the British Islands, and Mediterranean Region. During my speech I thanked the staff who had made the event possible and Angharad, along with noting what an incredible experience the opportunity had been, how much I had learnt about different cultures and varying forms of government, and the honour it was to be representing Wales and being an advocate for those with disabilities. The

evening meal was a feast of New Zealand cuisine, although as a vegetarian I didn't try the lamb! We finished with birthday cake for the three delegates who had celebrated their birthdays during the programme.



Conclusion



Looking back at the incredible week I had, it was truly an honour to be able to represent Wales at the Commonwealth Youth Parliament. Before going, I was unsure about the impact I'd be able to have in such a space. However, participating in a mock Parliament strengthened my position in representing the young people of Wales and those within the blind community, through developing my understanding of the passage of legislation. Despite the passed Bill being a mock one, the concept of a Climate Change Resettlement and Humanitarian Aid Bill in the real world is far

from falsehood. Although we debated fiercely along our party lines, we came together to instil new concepts that we could all take with us to impact our lives in the future. I got so much out of this experience – not just learning more about politics in different countries but also experiencing New Zealand's incredible culture. My experience at the Commonwealth Youth Parliament was not only unforgettable but also illuminating – it taught me that I can enact change, and that young people can be the change they wish to see. If this experience has taught me anything, it's to not underestimate myself and throw myself in to any opportunity that comes my way. I'm so proud to have been chosen, and I know these memories will stay with me forever. Thank you so much to the Senedd, the CPA and the New Zealand Parliament for this opportunity and for motivating the next generation of potential Parliamentarians.

