



FALKLAND ISLANDS GOVERNMENT

PRESS RELEASE

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Westminster Seminar 'Interesting and Informative'

The Hon Dick Sawle, Member of Legislative Assembly, is due to return to the Falkland Islands today after attending the Westminster Seminar on Parliamentary Practices and Procedures, which he has described as 'interesting and informative'. The two-week Seminar is held annually by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to allow newly-elected politicians to study the operation of a Parliament and the work of its key office holders, and to examine ways to better represent and engage with the communities they serve.

The Seminar started with a tour of the Houses of Parliament, and a session on the empowerment of women in politics. "My feeling is that the Falkland Islands stand head and shoulders above the rest in that three out of eight of our elected members are women", commented Mr Sawle. The delegates then went to Westminster Abbey where the Queen presided over the Service of Observance for Commonwealth Day.

Mr Sawle went on, "Part of the Queen's address concerned a matter dear to all our hearts in the Falkland Islands, the role of the internet in developing countries, when she said that advances in modern telecommunications are also having a marked economic effect on people from developing nations in the Commonwealth, helping to transform small to medium sized businesses. The internet is playing an important part in helping to nurture those fledgling markets but, as yet, it still remains an unaffordable option for too many Commonwealth citizens. I would imagine that most of the 1,000 plus people in Westminster Abbey would assume that these remarks were directed at the poorer Commonwealth nations. They would be surprised to learn that they could be directed quite correctly at one of the countries with the highest income per capita of the Commonwealth."

The focus of Day 2 was a debate on the Westminster parliamentary system. "It is interesting to note that in the UK," said Mr Sawle, "given the low turnout in elections,

no MP is ever voted in by a majority of their constituents. Public confidence in MPs has declined and as a consequence there is little faith in government. The democratic process is therefore called into question but, as Churchill said, democracy is far from perfect but it is the best of all the alternatives. However, in the Falkland Islands we have over 80% turnout in the elections and our democratic process has been seen to be real and effective.”

“To restore confidence, British MPs suggested that people should be educated into wanting to vote and to become engaged in the political system of the UK. The point was also made that if there is no opposition, then there is no effective democracy. In the absence of opposition, then the media become the effective voice of that opposition.”

Day 3 was a series of seminars on topics such as the cost and effectiveness of oral and written questions, public expenditure and the role of Parliament, scrutiny of the Prime Minister, legislative procedures, and the committee system.

“The highlight of the day was a reception at No 10 Downing Street for all delegates hosted by Harriet Harman, the deputy leader of the Labour Party. It is certainly an honour to visit No 10 and also a great opportunity to meet with a variety of MPs and Lords and reinforce the Falklands message of right to self-determination and also of course to discuss recent events concerning oil and Argentina’s aggressive attitude.”

Towards the end of the first week, Mr Sawle took the opportunity to meet Sir Nicholas Winterton, the outgoing chair of the Falkland Islands All Party Parliamentary Group, and to accompany Andy Love MP for Edmonton in London on a constituency visit. “The visit was interesting – it struck me that whilst Westminster was heavily resourced, the constituency was the complete opposite with very few staff and very few resources and heavily relied on committed helpers and supporters.”

Week 2 began with sessions with Serjeant at Arms Mrs Jill Pay on the security aspects of Westminster, and Speaker of the House of Commons Mr John Bercow MP. “Once again,” said Mr Sawle, “the history and procedure, pomp and ceremony, splendour and magnificence of Westminster were amazing. It makes the Falkland Islands system look simple, clear, democratic and very transparent.”

At a session on MPs expenses, it was suggested that the best way to avoid similar problems in future is to pay MPs a fair salary appropriate to the job that they do. Mr Sawle noted that nearly half of the current Westminster MPs will be resigning at the General Election, “which gives us a difficulty in ensuring that new MPs are aware of our political situation and will continue to support us as has always been the case in the past. There is a lot of work going on in the background on this, via FIGO and Sukey Cameron. In my view, this type of lobbying and presence is vital if we are going to maintain the support that we currently have.”

While in London, Mr Sawle took the opportunity to meet with Adam Dunlop of Cable and Wireless. “I discussed with him the current situation and people’s dissatisfaction

with the current service. I also emphasised that I was aware that there was a lot of work being carried out to get the Campo system especially working and reliable, but there is still a long way to go before it is acceptable.”

Day 7 concentrated on the issues involved in broadcasting parliamentary proceedings, and how parliaments can be funded. In the evening Mr Sawle attended a presentation by Dr Lindsay Parson (Head of the Sea Law Group at the National Oceanography Centre in Southampton) to the All Party Parliamentary Group on the strategic value of the world’s oceans.

“This is especially important to the Falklands as we have submitted our bid under the law of the seas to extend our ownership of the seabed to include our continental shelf,” commented Mr Sawle. “At present, we own the seabed within our EEZ, which measures some 750 km² of seabed. If our claim is successful, this would extend to the end of the continental shelf – an additional 1.2 million km² of seabed with potentially valuable resources. All of the Overseas Territories stand to potentially benefit a great deal with this. There are many valuable resources on and below the seabed.”

Day 8 included a session on research and information facilities. It was chaired by Elizabeth Hallam Smith who is the Chief Librarian for the House of Lords, and trained the Falkland Islands Government’s Archivist, the late Jane Cameron. “We talked about the management of information within FIG,” reported Mr Sawle. “One of the problems that I see is that information is scattered around various government departments. There is a lack of corporate knowledge as senior civil servants come and go and we are constantly in danger of re-inventing the wheel as we do not have a simple and effective system for the storage and retrieval of information. It is relatively simple to provide a solution, but whether or not the cost of doing so would be justified is, of course, another matter, but it is something that is worth looking at.”

Andy Richardson, the editor of Hansard (the official record of Parliamentary proceedings), encouraged the delegates to consider greater use of the internet to communicate with their constituents. “I decided in fact to set up an account on Facebook and will see how it goes, but it will be an interesting experiment,” said Mr Sawle.

Later the same day Mr Sawle attended a meeting of the UK Overseas Territories Association with the Falkland Islands Government’s Representative in London, Sukey Cameron. The agenda covered a number of issues, including a motion by the Falkland Islands that Overseas Territories should be able to lay a wreath at the Cenotaph rather than have one laid on their behalf. Mr Sawle said that everyone present was also keen to explore ways in which Overseas Territories can work together to share information. The day finished with a concert at Westminster Hall, where the Parliamentary Choir performed Mozart’s requiem, which Mr Sawle described as, “an amazing venue for an amazing piece of music.”

The seminar finished with two lively debates, the first about parliamentary democracy, procedures and the effectiveness of the Westminster system, and the second on

climate change. Mr Sawle commented that, “I was pleased to point out that the Falklands led the way in the use of renewable energy but that, unlike other countries, it was not difficult to sell the idea to the people, as it had a direct financial benefit to the consumer.”

Mr Sawle ended by saying that overall he found the Westminster Seminar interesting and informative. Although some sessions were not relevant to the Falkland Islands, it had been a valuable learning experience and he looked forward to putting what he had learned into practice.

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Note for Editors

- More Falkland Islands information is available at www.falklands.gov.fk.