

## Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

I attended the CPA seminar in Edinburgh on Wednesday 31 October.

The four sessions that day were held in the Scottish Parliament and there were about 25 delegates present from across the Commonwealth, including Canada, Australia, Pakistan and some of the very small island countries.

The first session covered **The MP and the Political Party** and the delegates from the various countries talked of their own experiences. These varied greatly because of the very different situations. In one case a delegate from Pakistan had a constituency that was much larger than anything in the UK but on the other hand there were small island countries with a population of just a few hundred and no political parties as we understand them.

**Scotland's Futures Forum** ([www.scotlandfutureforum.org](http://www.scotlandfutureforum.org)) was created by the Scottish Parliament to help its members, along with policy makers, businesses, academics, and the wider community of Scotland, look beyond immediate horizons, to some of the challenges and opportunities we will face in the future. Looking beyond the four year electoral cycle and away from party politics, the forum seeks to stimulate public debate in Scotland, bringing fresh perspectives, ideas and creativity on how we might prepare for the future now. Robert Rae, director of the Futures Forum, explained the work of the organisation and then the delegates spent some time in small groups considering their long term vision for their political system and structures.

The speaker on **Standing Orders** was from the Department of the Official Record (Hansard) in Westminster. She explained the history of standing orders and the way in which *Erskine May* is updated. The situation varied greatly from country to country and delegates raised a wide range of questions, including whether members should be able to read speeches in parliament!

The session on the **Right to Information** was extremely interesting and the Scottish Information Commissioner Kevin Dunion was one of the three panellists. He spoke very much from his own experience in Scotland but pointed out that the commissioners from the various parts of the UK do meet up from time to time to discuss their work. There are some slight variations in the legislation in the different countries but much that is common.

Only a few of the countries have a Freedom of Information Act. Some of the smaller countries said it would be too expensive and that they felt there was no need for it – everyone knows everything anyway!

In the evening the **dinner** was hosted by the Scottish First Minister and was held in the Royal College of Surgeons, which is one of Edinburgh's hidden gems. After the meal we had a tour of their library and saw some of the rarest items.