Building Parliamentary Staff Capacity:

A Global Network of Parliamentary Training Institutes

At the 2016 Montreal Symposium of Parliamentary Training Institutes, a Global Network is Formed

It is now commonly accepted that parliaments have an important impact on good governance and development. In the mind of many, however, that impact comes only as a result of MPs’ actions undertaken while fulfilling their lawmaking and oversight functions. The role of parliamentary staff has often been overlooked. With high MPs turnover rates observed in recent elections, several analysts have come to realize that the influence of parliaments on countries’ political and economic life cannot be materialized effectively without a stable, well-trained and professional parliamentary staff acting as the “corporate memory of parliamentary institutions”.

The burgeoning of parliamentary staff capacity development programs that we are witnessing now is a response to the need of a well-trained parliamentary staff. However, we can regret the little chaos that exists in the world of parliamentary staff training programs: unnecessary duplication of curricula, little collaboration or worst, competition among existing programs. It seems like every time a parliamentary staff training program is to be set up, developers, deliverers and sponsors want to reinvent the wheel, thus ignoring the accumulated knowledge and experience of already existing programs.

The earliest parliamentary staff capacity-building programs were often funded and designed by bilateral aid agencies and delivered essentially through their home-country non-governmental organizations, such as Canada’s The Parliamentary Centre and the United States’ National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. Lately, we have seen many developing countries establish their own parliamentary institutes and many others are in the process of creating theirs. For the newly established institutes or the institutes in the making, the challenges ahead will be pretty much the same. Firstly, challenges related to the suitable institutional design model for those training institutes: how should parliamentary training institutes be funded to insure their autonomy and their effectiveness? Should training institutes be part of parliamentary institutions or academic institutions? What type of relations should training institutes have with the Parliament as an institution? With its members? With the staff serving those members? With institutions related to the Executive?
Secondly, issues related to identification of needs and desired outcomes: what are the relevant training needs for parliamentary staff? Do courses have to be created from scratch? Furthermore, how to ensure that recently trained staff actually apply the acquired skills and knowledge?

Thirdly, challenges related to the delivery of capacity-building programs: are shorter programs/certificates more suitable for parliamentary staff than longer programs? What format of courses keeps learners engaged and motivated? Should programs be delivered online, in-class or both? Should coaching and/or mentoring be part of such programs?

To help answer the abovementioned questions and to facilitate the exchange of knowledge among developers and deliverers of parliamentary staff capacity-building programs, McGill University in partnership with the World Bank, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), and with the generous (or financial?) support of the Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) convened the 1st global symposium of Parliamentary Training Institutes. The symposium was held in Montreal (Canada) on May 13-14, 2016 and brought together a group of scholars, practitioners and executives of parliamentary institutes across the globe (Ghana, UK, Canada, Kenya, and Cambodia). Presentations and discussions, held in a convivial but studious atmosphere, were articulated into three distinct but connected blocks.

The first block was themed “parliamentary staff - a critical component of good governance” and extended throughout the morning session of the first day of the symposium. The block was designed to draw a framework within which the upcoming core discussions were to take place. Presenters were tasked to identify some of the channels whereby parliamentary staff could impact good governance. Following the welcome and introductory remarks from Dr. Carmen Sicilia, Associate Dean of the School of Continuing Studies at McGill University, Dr. Rick Stapenhurst, Professor of Practice at the McGill Desautels Faculty of Management, set out to answer the thought-provoking question, “Does parliament matter?”— a question inspired by Lord Philip Norton, a former member of the UK Parliament, who warned twenty years ago that the ability of parliaments to influence the direction and values of political and economic life is never guaranteed.

Using a set of recent data, Dr. Stapenhurst made the point that Parliament does matter. He showed that parliamentary oversight is strongly correlated to several key political, social and economic indicators. For example, he found that high parliamentary oversight is usually
associated with high democracy scores. In the same vein, countries with high parliamentary oversight were often found to also have higher GDP per capita and lower perceived corruption. Dr. Stapenhurst went further and showed that in countries where parliament’s Public Accounts Committee (PAC) had been more productive (productivity being measured here by the number of reports produced), corruption tended to be better controlled and the Gross National Income per capita tended to be higher on average. According to Dr. Stapenhurst, the ability of Parliament to impact the indicators just mentioned is determined equally by members of parliament themselves on one side and on the other side, by parliamentary staff: their number and their training.

Mr. Dirk Toornstra, former Director of the Office of the Program for Parliamentary Democracy at the European Union Parliament, took the stage right after Dr. Stapenhurst. Speaking from his long experience at the European Union Parliament, Mr. Toornstra explained that the role of parliamentary staff is even more important today than before. In this new era of “instant politics” characterized by the omnipresence of social media, politicians tend to favor actions with “instant returns”. As a result, battle for attention, development of public image and debates on the hottest topical issues are favored at the expense of long-term and more impactful actions. This context coupled with the high turnover of MPs has created parliaments where MPs have weaker knowledge and experience of parliamentary processes.

Parliamentary staff, when provided with decent working conditions, is essential not only for the proper functioning of Parliament but for the whole democracy as well. Mr. Toornstra explained that there is more to staff work than just the corporate management of parliaments and the handling of back room operations. In fact, the role of parliamentary staff is critical to the good functioning of our democracy because parliamentary staff assists MPs in the accomplishment of their main duties: representation, lawmaking and oversight. For example, staff with its fact-based research services and its contacts with other institutions and state agencies (ministerial departments, state auditors, statistical offices, etc.) provides MPs with indispensable sources of information to improve the quality of lawmaking and oversight activities.

The last presenter of the morning session was Ms. Arlene Bussette, Assistant Director of Programmes at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA). Like her predecessors, she made the audience realize the vital role of parliamentary staff in a democracy. The CPA, the organization she works for, has published in 2006 a set of “Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures”. These benchmarks are “a framework that sets out what constitutes effective democratic practice in contemporary parliaments [...] aimed at making parliaments more
effective and democratic institutions.” Ten of these benchmarks stressed the importance of a professional and well-trained staff.

While there are virtually no prescribed academic programs preparing people to assume a parliamentary staff role, parliamentary staff are expected to perform at the highest level right after hiring. This situation makes parliamentary training programs even more relevant because they offer opportunities for continuing education and professional development. Ms. Bussette ended her presentation with an overview of tools, initiatives and programmes developed by the CPA to enhance the capacity of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff in the Commonwealth. For example, the CPA offers:

- Professional development seminars and workshops, including Regional workshops.
- Regional Staff Development workshops for the Africa, Asia, South-East Asia, Pacific and the Caribbean, Americas and Atlantic regions.
- Support for participation of parliamentary staff to the McGill/World Bank International Professional Development Program for Parliamentary Staff.

During a well-deserved break, participants seized the occasion to continue the interesting discussions started earlier during the morning presentations. We could also witness participants exchanging ideas, experiences, anecdotes and, perhaps the most important, business cards: proof, if any was still needed, that this type of event provides great networking opportunities to participants.

The topic of the afternoon session was: “What does contemporary research tell us about parliamentary staff development?” It featured the following presenters: Mr. Paul Belisle, former Clerk of the Canadian Senate, Dr. Louis Imbeau, Director of the Centre for the Analysis of Public Policy (CAPP) at Laval University in Quebec, Mr. Mitchel O’Brien, Governance Program Leader at the World Bank and Dr. Rasheed Draman, Executive Director of the African Centre for Parliamentary Affairs (ACEPA) based in Ghana.

Mr. Belisle’s presentation offered a good overview of contemporary research on parliamentary staff development. A particular attention was given to a seminal study conducted by the World Bank Institute in conjunction with the CPA and La Francophonie. The study used survey questionnaires and interviews to assess and specifically identify the training needs to be addressed by the parliamentary capacity-building programs in the making.

The analysis of the answers collected during those surveys yielded a series of principles that could guide those developing their own parliamentary training programs. Some of these principles
are as follows: the primary audience of parliamentary training programs should be parliamentary staff from all sectors of the Secretariat and similar program should also be developed for Members in the future. Furthermore, the programs should strike a good balance between theory and practice; the programs should be unique and should not compete with existing efforts; the course content should be designed to concentrate on “how” parliaments work with a focus on the students’ local parliaments. E-learning emerged as a good alternative to residency programs because of the travel cost they entail; however, clerks surveyed have expressed concerns related to e-learning availability in some countries and its effectiveness. Finally, the surveys indicated that parliamentary program should have clear learning objectives and practical exercises.

Dr. Imbeau then took the floor to present a typical parliamentary staff training program at Laval University. His presentation did not narrate the details of the making of the program, but focused instead on how the program is offered as of today. The Laval University partners with the Quebec National Assembly and the International Organization of Francophonie and targets essentially parliamentary staff from the French-speaking countries. The program curriculum consists of 5 online courses and a 10-day Residency in Quebec City. Although mostly practically oriented, the program also has a considerable theoretical component and participants are encouraged to think of their work situations where the theoretical elements learned might apply. Dr. Imbeau, however, regrettably noted that many of the registered participants are often unable to travel to Canada for the residency part of the program essentially because of administrative and visa encumbrances.

The break for leg-stretching following Dr. Imbeau’s presentation did not dampen participants’ studious mood and they came back eager to listen to the next speaker: Mr. Mitchel O’Brien. He made a presentation on how his organization (the World Bank) views parliamentary development. According to Mr. O’Brien, a parliamentary capacity support project should be designed in order to be: a) scalable, b) sustainable, c) results-focused, d) integrated and e) capacity building focused. Mr. O’Brien presented three broad capacity building approaches:

- Individual approach where the training program would seek to enhance the capacity of individual MP and parliamentary staff.
- The institutional approach where the program seeks to strengthen the Parliament as an institution or a selected institution under the umbrella of Parliaments like oversight committees.
- The practitioner exchange approach where like-minded professionals or MPs are brought together to learn from each other’s experiences.
Mr. O'Brien’s presentation was followed by the last block of the symposium themed: “The Practitioner’s Perspective”, which was led by Dr. Rasheed Draman. Dr. Draman presented to the audience his perspectives on parliamentary staff training. Dr. Draman has been working with African parliaments for more than 10 years. Today he runs ACEPA – a not-for-profit organization in Ghana with the vision to install more effective parliaments. His presentation first highlighted the main issues faced by parliamentary administrations in Africa and reinforced the idea that a strong, dynamic and effective parliament cannot exist without a parliamentary administration of equal quality. Parliamentary staff training can be, according to him, a way to strengthen African parliaments.

Drawing on his extensive experience working in the field of parliamentary staff training in Africa, Dr. Draman presented some ideas he believes could enhance the quality of such programs. Firstly, he argued that parliamentary training programs be demand-driven instead of being supply-driven: this will ensure that they provide services that are considered a priority by the targeted recipients. He further explained that training needs should be aligned to more strategic needs. Also, he stressed the importance of communication and coordination, which he believes would help achieve some synergies. Lastly, he pointed out the need for training programs to be sustainable and ensure knowledge transfer in the long run. Dr. Draman concluded with a very eye-opening case studies of the set up process of the Ghanaian and Kenyan parliamentary training Institutes. In all, the first day of the symposium was quite uplifting and all the participants left looking forward to meet again the next day.

On its second and last day, the symposium started off with a presentation from Mr. Dararith Kim Yeat, Executive Director of the Parliamentary Institute of Cambodia (PIC). Despite being quite recently established (2011), the PIC has many attributes of a model parliamentary institute. It is demand-driven: created at the request of the members of Cambodian Parliament and parliamentary Secretary-General. Mr. Yeat explained that the PIC follows a systemic approach to capacity building: it assists in capacity building at all the stages of the activities related to parliamentary functions (representation, lawmaking and oversight). Besides its more traditional services, the PIC also offers general professional and skills development classes like English language classes. Mr. Yeat also presented some of the research work conducted within the PIC’s research department. Topics and subjects treated by PIC’s research department were varied and ranged from “the impacts of dam construction” to a “comparison of electoral processes in other countries”.
When asked how he saw the development of the PIC, Mr. Yeat stated his vision which includes extensive “South-South” cooperation. The PIC intends to increase knowledge sharing and capacity building with the parliaments of neighbouring countries: Laos, Myanmar and Thailand. This is an initiative that all the participants thought should be encouraged and even emulated by other parliamentary training institutes in other regions of the world.

The last presentation of the Symposium was given by Dr. Nyokabi Kamau, Director of the Center for Parliamentary Studies and Training (CPST) of Kenya. Her exposé detailed the functioning and challenges of one the earliest and avant-garde parliamentary training institutes in sub-Saharan Africa. The CPST was created by the Kenyan Parliament to serve a broad base of clients including not only the Kenyan MPs and staff, but also the members and staff of county legislatures, as well as other stakeholders and individuals interested in parliamentary administration. Many participants to the symposium found the CPST’s initiative to train and serve members and staff of the parliaments in the region to be innovative. For example, in June of last year the CPST offered training to staff of the National Assembly of Zambia. Three months prior to that, it had offered training for fiscal analysts and budget officers from Zambia, Seychelles and Uganda. In 2015 and 2016, the CPST has provided this type of regional training to a total of 208 non-Kenyan participants. This kind of knowledge and experience sharing is without doubt in accordance with the desire of symposium participants to encourage more collaboration and synergies among parliamentary training institutes.

Also very interesting is the eclectic and ever evolving nature of curricula at the CPST. In addition to traditional trainings in legislative and procedural matters, in public finance, in human resources and parliamentary administration, etc., the CPST has also made sure to address issues like gender inequalities and marginalization. Furthermore, a countrywide capacity needs assessment is underway to inform the CPST’s work after the 2017 general elections. Part of the success of the CPST can be attributed to its outreach activities and its strong social media presence.

Its successes notwithstanding, the CPST deals with some challenges that Dr. Kamau shared with the audience. One of these challenges is related to the financial autonomy of the Centre as many trainings provided are still donor-funded. Also, even four year after its establishment, the Centre is still searching for the best model for its structure and its staffing.

The afternoon session that followed was dedicated to discussions on questions sparkled by the presentations held since the beginning of the symposium. Delegates from countries in the process
of setting up their own parliamentary training institutes found that Q&A period very useful. While it would be naïve to believe that the Montreal symposium provided answers to every single question related to parliamentary capacity building, it definitely met one of the needs expressed by participants, namely the need to have a forum to share experiences best practices and to learn from each other. Participants agreed to establish a “community of practice” to allow the discussions that started in Montreal to continue and deepen. The Global Network of Parliamentary Training Institutes (GNPTI) was thus born, with McGill University offering to host a web platform for such exchanges. Dr. Kamau offered to host the next symposium of the GNPTI in Nairobi, in 2017.

For further details on the Symposium, please visit:

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