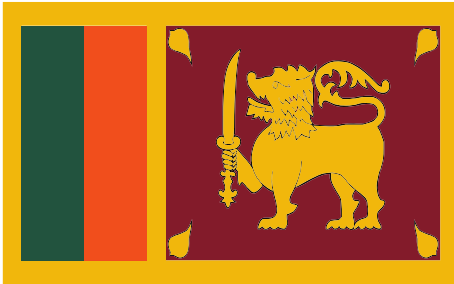


Sri Lanka - UK New Members & Officials Programme

Report

July 2025



PARLIAMENT OF SRI LANKA

UK DELEGATION:

- Yasmin Qureshi MP, Chair of WFD Board of Governors
- Paulette Hamilton MP, Acting Chair of the Health and Social Care Select Committee
- Jamie Stone MP, Chair of the Petitions Select Committee
- Andrew Snowden MP, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Sri Lanka
- Jonathan Hingston, Committee Specialist, International Development Select Committee
- Annika Weerasinghe, Director of Select Committee Communications and Engagement

PROGRAMME OVERVIEW

A UK Parliamentary Delegation visited Sri Lanka from 21 to 25 July 2025 to participate in a programme for new Members and Parliamentary Officials. The visit, jointly organised by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK (CPA UK) and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), brought together the UK and Sri Lanka Parliaments to exchange insights and experiences and renew the historically strong ties between these legislatures. The UK delegation comprised four UK MPs and two UK Parliamentary officials. Alongside the programme, the delegation also held a series of diplomatic meetings facilitated by the British High Commission in Colombo.

2024 was a year of change in both UK and Sri Lankan politics. In the UK, the Labour Party returned to government after 14 years in opposition. Meanwhile, Sri Lanka saw the National People's Power (NPP) alliance surge from just three MPs to win the presidency and a majority in parliament in quick succession.

These elections ushered in a wave of new members, who now constitute a majority in both the UK House of Commons and the Sri Lankan Parliament, creating an ideal opportunity for members from both countries to learn from each other's common experiences.



Delegation Leader Yasmin Qureshi MP participated in the programme's opening, alongside the Hon Dr. Jagath Wickramaratne MP, Speaker of the Parliament of Sri Lanka .

The programme provided a valuable platform for CPA UK and WFD to identify opportunities for continued collaboration with the Parliament of Sri Lanka during its new term. Planned future activities include:

- **WFD Study Visit to the UK Parliament:** WFD will host a delegation of Sri Lankan MPs, led by Speaker Hon. Jagath Wickramaratne, from 26-29 October 2025. The delegation will also have the chance to meet with CPA UK to explore areas for future cooperation.
- **Engagement with Key Parliamentary Stakeholders:** CPA UK and WFD will continue working with groups such as the Parliamentary Women's Caucus, the Open Parliament Initiative Caucus, and Sectoral Oversight Committees to support inclusive and transparent governance.
- **Dialogue for Clerks & Officials:** CPA UK will work to facilitate knowledge sharing activities between clerks & officials from both parliament, particularly through the organisations of virtual meetings focused on priority areas.



The delegation had the opportunity to meet with Sri Lanka's Prime Minister, Hon. Dr Harini Amarasuriya MP.

ABOUT CPA UK

CPA UK supports and strengthens parliamentary democracy throughout the Commonwealth. It focuses on key priority themes including women in parliament, modern slavery, financial oversight, security and trade.

Peer-to-peer learning is central to the way CPA UK works. CPA UK brings together UK and Commonwealth parliamentarians and officials to share knowledge and learn from each other. It aims to improve parliamentary oversight, scrutiny and representation and is located in and funded by the UK Parliament.

It delivers tailored programmes that include activities with individual countries and legislatures, and large scale projects and activities that bring together Commonwealth parliamentarians and clerks.

ABOUT WFD

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) is the UK public body dedicated to strengthening democracy around the world. WFD works with parliaments, political parties, and civil society groups as well as on elections to help make political systems fairer and more inclusive, accountable and transparent.

For more than 30 years, it has actively helped democracies to grow stronger so that freedom and prosperity can flourish.

WFD also produces research and generates policy that contributes new tools for and approaches to democracy support.

WFD works on themes of:

- Accountability and Transparency
- Elections
- Environmental democracy
- Inclusion
- Openness and participation
- Women's political leadership.



The Hon Shanakiyan Rasamanickan MP, Chair of the Caucus for Open Parliament Initiative, addresses a meeting with the UK Delegation.

REBUILDING TRUST IN POLITICS

Low public trust and engagement have shaped the current political landscape in both the UK and Sri Lanka, as reflected in declining voter turnout at both countries' elections. In Sri Lanka, public frustration was especially visible during the 2022 Aragalaya protests, which led to the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

Sri Lankan members and officials identified rebuilding this trust as a top priority for their parliament. The Caucus for the Open Parliament Initiative is a group that is especially active in this area. As part of the global Open Government Partnership (OGP), the initiative promotes transparency and public participation in governance. However, Sri Lanka's OGP membership is currently inactive due to the previous government's failure to submit an action plan to realise its commitments under this partnership. The Caucus hopes to work with the new government and civil society partners to reactivate Sri Lanka's membership. WFD has secured some funding to start working on the OGP process with Sri Lankan counterparts.

The Caucus is also planning its own outreach activities to strengthen public engagement. They shared examples of the Sri Lankan Parliament's existing work to involve young people in Parliament by delivering 'School Parliaments' where children can discuss political topics, by hosting visits from schools in the Parliament building.

There has been a notable increase in these visits in recent years, with the Parliament now hosting up to 30 groups a day, although long travel times and limited funding still restrict access for many schools.

UK delegates noted similar challenges in their own Parliament's school outreach programme, and noted the introduction of travel subsidies for disadvantaged schools, and the appointment of regional staff to deliver lessons locally as two measures that had been introduced to address this.

The UK delegation also highlighted the success of Parliamentary petitions in strengthening public engagement with Parliament. This scheme allows citizens to submit petitions to Parliament, with any reaching over 100,000 signatures being subsequently debated by MPs. 15,000 petitions have been received since the creation of this system 10 years ago. Some of these have achieved a high public profile, such as the 2019 petition for the UK to remain in the EU (6.1 million signatures) and others have led to legislative changes, such as Finn's Law, which criminalises attacks on police dogs.

Both Parliaments stream their proceedings online. In the UK, debates are broadcast on the BBC Parliament TV channel. Sri Lanka's website streams debates in Sinhalese, Tamil, and English, but committee hearings are not shown live and are only published as clips afterwards.



Sri Lanka's Women Parliamentarian Caucus spoke with the UK Delegation about their priorities for the new parliament.

ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

The 2024 Elections in the UK and Sri Lanka also set new records in women's political representation. 263 women were elected to the House of Commons, while women now hold 21 out of 225 seats in the Sri Lankan Parliament, with 19 of these being from the NPP. Notably, many of these Sri Lankan MPs entered parliament without family ties to previous politicians, in a break from historical trends.

The elections also resulted in the appointment of Hon. Harini Amarasuriya as Prime Minister, becoming the third woman to hold this office, and following in the footsteps of Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who became the world's first female Prime Minister in 1960. During their visit, the UK delegation met with Sri Lanka's Women Parliamentarians' Caucus, who outlined their priorities for the new term. Chief among these was introducing gender quotas to boost women's representation, a measure already in place in some South Asian countries such as India and Pakistan, though not in the UK.

The Caucus also highlighted broader gender equality goals, including:

- Recognising unpaid care work and closing the gender pay gap
- Supporting caregivers and increasing women's labour force participation (with a particular focus on promoting greater ethnic diversity)
- Raising the marital age for Muslim girls to 18
- Promoting gender-responsive budgeting
- Tackling sexual and gender-based violence
- Creating safer, gender-sensitive public transport

The group also discussed the newly enacted Women's Empowerment Act, establishing a National Commission on Women, which was formally launched on the week of the programme. The commission has been vested with a variety of powers to protect and strengthen women's rights, including by:

- setting national policy (with Parliamentary approval)
- conducting inquiries
- initiating legal action
- running awareness programmes
- assessing legislation and recommending reforms

There is a strong potential for future collaboration between CPA UK, WFD, and the Women Parliamentarians' Caucus, all of whom expressed interest in partnering on future activities. This collaboration could also bring valuable opportunities for mutual learning with the UK Parliament, which recently established its first ever women's caucus.

SCRUTINY THROUGH COMMITTEES

Participants explored shared approaches to scrutiny through Parliamentary Committees. Sri Lanka's Parliament recently reduced its number of Sectoral Oversight Committees to eliminate overlapping mandates.

Sri Lankan MPs noted that this reform made it easier to meet with ministers, who now spend less time in committee hearings. However, these changes also brought challenges. Each committee now oversees up to five ministries, significantly expanding their remits.

This contrasts with the UK House of Commons, where each government department is shadowed by a dedicated Select Committee. Sri Lankan committees now face heavier workloads and tight deadlines, often being asked to produce reports on legislation within a day. As a multilingual Parliament, the need to translate these reports into Sinhalese, Tamil, and English which adds further complexity.

Budget scrutiny through committees was a particular focus of the programme. Participants discussed the role of external experts and institutions in supporting this work. The UK's Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), established in 2010, provides independent economic and fiscal forecasts that inform government decisions. UK Parliamentarians use OBR data to support scrutiny of the budget.

Specific committees will also work closely with outside institutions to support their financial scrutiny, such as the Public Accounts Committee which works closely with the National Audit Office to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of government.

Committees also draw on short-term technical support from economists, think tanks, and NGOs, although the UK delegation did emphasise the importance of ensuring this support was drawn from a diverse range of perspectives to give members a balanced picture.

Sri Lankan committees currently rely less on external expertise but are working to strengthen internal capacity. The Parliament is establishing a budget office to improve access to financial data and support scrutiny. One of its proposed roles is to cost party policies during election campaigns. No equivalent body exists in the UK Parliament to perform this function, although manifesto costs are still projected by respected independent research organisations, most notably the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

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TRANSNATIONAL EDUCATION TIES

The close ties between the UK and Sri Lanka are especially evident in the sphere of education. Both Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya and Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa are graduates of British universities and spoke positively about their time in the UK during meetings with the delegation.

The British Council plays a key role in supporting Sri Lanka's transnational education (TNE) sector, especially through English language instruction, with 33 English support centres across the country.



The delegation met with the Sri Lanka's Leader of the Opposition, Hon. Sajith Premadasa MP.

It also promotes digital and language literacy among girls, having established 99 after-school clubs that have reached over 2,000 girls in rural areas. The delegation had the chance to learn more about the transnational education (TNE) sector through a site visit to the British Council in Colombo, where they had the chance to meet with local education partners, and speak with students currently enrolled in English language courses.

Sri Lanka is the UK's second-largest TNE market, with 60,000 students currently pursuing UK degrees. Since 2018, enrolments have grown by 113%. Stakeholders highlighted the mutual benefits of this relationship, noting that Sri Lankan graduates are highly valued in the UK due to the strength of their education system.

Despite this success, challenges remain. While Sri Lankan Parliamentarians praised the British Council's work, the NPP's commitment to free education contrasts with the Council's fee-based model, potentially limiting future collaboration. Additionally, recent UK government funding cuts have forced the British Council to close 40 overseas operations. Although the Sri Lankan branch is 85% self-sufficient, reduced funding still constrains its ability to expand.

