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GCRP Newsletter

Researching South African Parliament - Personal Insights by Dr. Surya Munro

My first impressions of South African Parliament were of the warmth with which Mlu, (Parliamentary Monitoring Group Officer) showed me past the guards, the crowds of parliamentarians spilling out of the National Assembly doors, and through the maze of corridors leading to the Parliamentary Relations Office. Red tape was invisibly dismembered as Mlu introduced me to officials whom I had, as a faceless foreigner, previously only contacted via telephone and email. We were *in* – fortuitously South African

Parliament is an easy Parliament to access, still keen to display post-transition democratic wares, whilst we learnt, later, that much conversation takes place in corridors away from the stated openness of the committees. These committees, and the parliamentary plenaries, proved a fertile territory for learning about the rituals and norms, overt and more hidden, which shape the parliamentary process. And, whilst the formal ceremonies and symbolic trappings are seen as ‘not a core part of parliamentary business’, they have been transformed in order to reflect the new South Africa. A new South



Africa visible in Keiskamma tapestry, which girds the ‘seat of apartheid’ Old Assembly in healing embrace, in the large and stylish portraits of women that line the passage between Old and New Assemblies, and the floor tiling, which charts the

Table of Contents

South African Parliament—a Personal Perspective by Dr. Surya Munro pg 1

A Brief summary of my Field Trip to South Africa by Victoria Hasson pg 2

Field Work Picture Gallery pg 3

Programme Contacts pg 4

“The apartheid era portraits are safely locked in an underground vault”

passage of South Africa from black and white to geometric coloured shapes, with reference still to a colonial legacy. The buildings could not be dismantled, so they have been re-decorated; indigenous textiles covering layered colonial exploits, with contestations still about what exactly should be changed, and what is ‘part of the fabric’. The apartheid era portraits are safely locked in an underground vault, next to the VIP car park, air conditioned and ‘properly done’,

whilst the rural African ladies whose art works hang on the walls above quite possibly remain without easy access to basic amenities. It was a genuine privilege to carry out research in South African Parliament, seat of a fledgling democracy, underpinned by one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. My gratitude goes out to those who helped us – the front line staff, the senior officials who pulled strings

“My gratitude goes out to those who helped us...”

for us, the unknown library assistants who copied dusty documents about maces and emblems, the representatives of monitoring organisations, the University of Cape Town Department of Public Law which so generously hosted us, and last but not least those officials who sat with us for hours, charting ceremonial developments through the complex territory of the different eras of this fascinating and beautiful country.



The National Council of Provinces Chamber

A Brief Summary of my Field Trip to South Africa by Victoria Hasson

“Yet above all there was a strong sense that it was the theme of ceremony and ritual itself, that allowed us to insert ourselves into the inner workings of South Africa’s parliament.”



The new emblem of South African Parliament launched on the 27th of March 2007.

Writing a brief summary of our recent fieldtrip to South Africa will be hard for all the right reasons. There was not one day in which we weren’t absorbing or gathering interesting and usable material, to the extent that I now feel positively overwhelmed. The success of the trip began from day one, as I was invited to monitor committees alongside committee monitors from an NGO called ‘The Parliamentary Monitoring Group’. I was then thrown immediately into a routine of spending my mornings observing various different committees, and carrying out interviews or doing some archival research in the afternoons. This routine was only broken on the first Friday of the trip, as Surya and I had the fortune of getting tickets for the opening ceremony of parliament. The event was spectacular in its capacity to make real the entire purpose of the programme, and of my study in particular. The range of ideas and issues of significance was overwhelming, as we witnessed both the sincere engagement of some, as well as the potential disengagement of others. With interviews ranging from the Sergeant at Arms, to the Secretary of the National Assembly, parliamentary officials, informants and academ-

ics; the more interviews we carried out, the more I felt this process of realisation continue. On top of this, the kindness and efficiency of the parliamentary library, made even this material both vast and interesting. Paramount to the success of this fieldtrip was undoubtedly the openness of parliament and the kindness of those who we encountered in and around it. Yet above all there was a strong sense that it was the theme of ceremony and ritual itself, that allowed us to insert ourselves into the inner workings of South Africa’s parliament

Field Work Picture Gallery



The National Assembly Chamber (left)

Tiling and Keiskamma Tapestry (right)



Part of the Apartheid Era Art Collection (below Left)

Portrait of a Woman Parliamentarian on display (below right)



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