

OUTREACH PROJECTS

VISIT TO OMAN



Michael Meadowcroft former Liberal Democrat MP for Leeds West 1983 -1987 writes:

The Inter-Parliamentary Union mission to the Sultanate of Oman was a model of the sort of project the Association is well placed to assist. Since the last election in October 2011 the parliament of Oman - in local parlance, the Majlis - has had increased powers to exercise oversight of the Executive. To gain further insight into the ways and means of undertaking such oversight, the Chair of the Majlis invited the IPU to send a delegation to undertake workshops with its members.

Josef Winkler, a former German Green MP, Franck Boulin, a senior French fonctionnaire with considerable overseas experience, myself and Laurence Marzal from IPU, were in Oman for two full working days in February. The whole mission was well organised by Laurence Marzal and each of the three consultants led individual sessions, all of which were held in the superb new Majlis building, massively constructed out of local marble in which the eighty-four MPs rattled around somewhat.

Two sessions were held with the whole Majlis, and some fifty per cent of members attended. Attention was first paid to accountability via parliament - including questions to Ministers, determining the order paper and parliamentary scrutiny of legislation. Then the focus was on oversight through select committees, set up both to monitor government departments and to investigate specific topics. The third session brought together leading members of the Majlis, including committee

chairs, with the aim of looking in detail at the parliamentary structures and member support in order to make oversight more effective. The final session brought together senior parliamentary staff to discuss their relationship with members and how best they could make the Majlis more effective. There was clearly a determination from both members and staff to make the most of the increased opportunities.

One inhibiting factor is the lack of political parties which are currently banned in Oman. Whatever increasing public criticism there is in Britain of parties, any system which leaves each MP to his or her - and in Oman the Majlis is almost entirely male - individual resources and initiative largely prevents co-ordination and teamwork and enables the executive to have a much easier time than it would have with party political groupings. Some individual Majlis members recognise this and believe that the country will move towards a party structure but there is no doubt that the country has been scarred by the history of Islamic parties and extremist parties which undermined its stability.

It was certainly a very positive mission with frank and co-operative discussions on a wide range of topics. As is always the case with such missions, the long question and answer sessions were much livelier and comprehensive than the formal speeches and responses.

