Learning and leading for change



In June this year I joined 275 young leaders from Commonwealth countries in Banff, Canada for a life-changing experience.

We were there for the Duke of Edinburgh's Commonwealth Study Conference, a global development program for emerging leaders. It aimed to explore engaging leadership for inclusive change with the goal of making the world a better place.

For me, that means endeavouring to ensure the betterment of public education is at the forefront of everything we do here at the SSTUWA.

The conference spanned over two weeks and following the opening sessions with inspirational keynote speakers such as Bruce Mau and Princess Anne, I joined a study group that discovered more about the Canadian province of British Columbia (BC). The other participants travelled in similar groups touring other regions such as Alberta, Ontario, Saskatchewan and even the Yukon. These study tours provided us the opportunity to learn through our experiences which was a key theme of the conference.

During the conference I met a variety of people, including the first female pilot in the air force in Botswana who is paving the way for women in her country and a 28-year-old British diplomat travelling around the world, who was much braver than me.

In BC, we met with local Indigenous communities and their leaders. One of them was Chief Sophie, a community leader who campaigned for her local residential school not to be demolished, but instead redeveloped. (The Canadian residential schools' model was similar to the Australian missions that existed during the period referred to as the Stolen Generation. There were still some residential schools remaining as late as 1996.)

This campaign to redevelop was complex due to the generational trauma that the site represented for many of the Indigenous community members.

Sophie’s work has led to the site being converted into a hotel/casino, and it is now used to create an income stream for the local Indigenous community, reaping some rewards from the mistakes of the past. Our group likened this to the “phoenix rising out of the ashes”, a truly beautiful and fulfilling experience.

Later in our trip, we met with the Lt Governor of British Columbia, the Honourable Janet Austin, in BC’s capital city, Victoria. She had very strong opinions on women in leadership and how the crown works within the Commonwealth. She was down to earth but driven and focused on championing the Commonwealth and its positives of joining our nations together as one. This view was very supportive of our view as a union that we are stronger together, working collaboratively with all key stakeholders.

From there our group travelled to Vancouver and saw firsthand the severity of the homeless situation. The streets were lined with homeless people, which was a confronting situation for some of us. Drug abuse is an ongoing issue in these communities and is something the government is trying to find workable solutions for.

While in Vancouver, as a team building exercise, we attended Plenty of Plates – a group that provides meals for the homeless. We spent the evening making and serving a three-course meal for those in need. After the confronting day of visiting the homeless communities, it was rewarding to be able to provide some comfort to those most in need and witness their gratitude and share in some of their stories.

To finish the conference, all the study groups reconvened in Montreal to present reports to the delegation about what we saw and learnt.

The trip was thought provoking and made me reflect upon the work that we carry out here at the SSTUWA.

One of the key messages that I bought back with me are people are key – you as our members are the key to a successful and productive union that supports the improvement of our public education system. We need to work on empowering members and having pride in the work we do and its importance to the state of education in WA. This flows onto things like training, building branches and following up constantly with you, our members.

Leadership does not always have to be from the front. Good leaders are humble and happy to share in the journey with others who have strengths to support the collective vision. A good leader is a person who has the vision to make the world a better place, by using their passion to guide their people on a journey of growth and self-discovery.

We need to encourage people to take things on, without being threatened by the strength of others.

As leaders we can often think that our job is to hold others accountable, but the first person we need to hold accountable is ourselves. I hope to be able to assist the SSTUWA to share in developing our leaders in the union space as well as supporting the department to develop good leaders in our public education system.

Passion for what you do and where you want to take people is key to success. Having genuine care and concern for your community is essential to being able to lead change for the betterment of your industry. It is our job to maintain our passion for a successful and sustainable public education system in WA.

Our job as a union is to envision how things can be better, and then work out how to get there, making sure that our decision makers (at State Council Conference and District Councils) are truly representative of our membership. Solidarity needs work every day.

This was a massive experience, with an intense timeline that will shape the way I grow as an active unionist into the future. I want to thank my colleagues, the SSTUWA Executive and the senior officers for their support in facilitating my participation in the conference. I have been encouraged and motivated to apply what I learnt and saw back here in WA. This opportunity has inspired me to trust in myself and those who trust in my abilities to lead others. I look forward to continuing to explore this in my role as the coordinator of the schools organising team as we continue to lead and support the most important aspects of our work, you, our members.

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