



The Hon. Sarmite Bulte at the CAFP AGM.

## Teaching women to govern in the emerging world

by Jenny Ford

"Somalia, struggling to come into its own and dealing with divisions created by the transitional federal government, has left its women looking for a place in parliament . . ."

It was too dangerous to travel to Somalia, so they met in Uganda instead. Amidst the political turmoil in the country, the Hon. Sarmite Bulte went to educate Somali women, teaching them about leadership, each other and the transition to democracy.

"Knowledge is empowerment," says the former Liberal MP for Parkdale-High Park. "Their thirst for knowledge, their desire to learn, share stories, share experiences was incredible."

Sarmite travelled to the Ugandan capital of Kampala with a team from the National Democratic Institute, an organization promoting democratic structures and practices around the world. Together, with funding from the United States Agency for International Development, they held a four-day training session for 17 Somali women parliamentarians and female representatives from non-governmental organizations.

"The focus was to educate these women," Sarmite says. "Their country is war torn. There are factions between the Islamic and the non-Islamic groups. There are huge issues."

Somalia, struggling to come into its own and dealing with divisions created by the transitional federal government,

has left its women looking for a place in parliament, Sarmite says. Educating these women and, most importantly, creating a Somali women's caucus was the next step.

"These are the very basics of democracy. There is no tradition there," Sarmite says. "They don't have the structures in place."

Only a select few came to Kampala for the session, which meant they couldn't form a women's caucus there, but Sarmite says they gained enough knowledge to take back to their colleagues.

"They couldn't get over how much they learned, and it was so focused on going back home and letting the other women know," she says.

Regardless of Sarmite's expertise, the Somali women, she says, brought their own stories and issues to the table. They told about female genital mutilation, child soldiers and child brides. She says they were concerned, above all, about the security of persons and were trying to pass legislation in Somalia to make marriage under the age of 13 illegal.

"They were able to enunciate their values, a vision and a mission for their caucus, and it was incredible we were able to get so far. It wasn't me talking to

them, it was them coming up with their own values, their own vision and their own mission," Sarmite says.

This was not Sarmite's first trip with NDI. In 2007, she travelled to Kosovo three times, teaching about caucus, committees and women's committees. However, Somalia was a very different story, she says, where they had to work "from the bottom."

"It's a brand new democracy. It's wonderful to teach them the very basics, a lot of things we take for granted," she says.

Sarmite saw from her personal experience as an MP from 1997-2005 the power of women's caucus, uniting against the war in Iraq and anti-ballistic missiles, for example.

"We were a united voice," she says. "We were strength in numbers."

The 17 women went back to Somalia with a vision for their people, one which they said included peace, equality, accountability, commitment, courage, compassion and social justice.

Because above all, Sarmite says, the caucus is not only for women but also for families, which form the basis of any country and therefore lead to the basis of democracy in Somalia.