CO-OPERATION BETWEEN SMALL JURISDICTIONS: THE EXPERIENCE OF THE ISLE OF MAN

Hon. Clare Christian MLC was elected President of Tynwald in July 2011 having served as a Member of the House of Keys from 1980 to 1986 and a Member of the Legislative Council from 1993 to 2011. She is a former CPA Isle of Man Branch Executive Committee Chairman, a former CPA Regional Representative and a Trustee of the CPA Working Capital and Conference Assistance funds.

Thirty-two years ago as a new member of the Executive Committee of the Isle of Man Branch of the CPA, I was privileged to have the opportunity to take part in the 30th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference, which was hosted by the Isle of Man in 1984. This was a memorable experience in many ways, not least because it incorporated the fourth Small Branches conference. At that time the event was known as the Conference of Members from Small Countries, with “small” being defined as having a population of 250,000 or fewer. Today the population threshold is 500,000 and the event is known as the Conference of Small Branches. This name is more appropriate because not all Small Branches represent “countries”. Some represent subnational legislatures, a category which has been admitted ever since the inaugural event in Fiji in 1981.

The Isle of Man
The Isle of Man is both a small Branch of the CPA and a small country, with a census population in March 2011 of 85,716. Lying mid-way between Great Britain and Ireland, it is not and never has been part of the United Kingdom.

Since 1765 it has been a dependency of the British Crown and relies on the United Kingdom for foreign affairs and defence. Internally, however, it retains its own unique system of government based on the world’s oldest parliament in continuous operation, known as Tynwald.

Tynwald has 35 members in total and is made up of two Branches: the 24-strong House of Keys, which has been directly elected since 1866; and the 11-strong Legislative Council, most of whose Members are today indirectly elected by the House of Keys.

Readers from other small Branches will be only too aware that political life in a small jurisdiction has many advantages, but also many challenges.

Throughout my political career I have taken great strength from the opportunity to share experiences, both positive and negative, with colleagues from other small Branches. Important frameworks for such discussions have been provided by the annual Small Branches Conference and by the annual regional conference of the British Islands and Mediterranean Region of the CPA.

Political support
What has been particularly pleasing in recent years is the extent to which we have been able to build on contacts made at conferences to develop stronger links between small jurisdictions – links which have gone beyond dialogue and grown into different forms of practical support for one another’s parliamentary systems. Where economic and environmental matters are concerned, it is a fact of life for many small jurisdictions that our relationship with a larger neighbour is a predominant concern. Within the sphere of parliamentary practice and procedure, however, the same is not the case. On paper there may be much to learn about the parliaments of the United Kingdom and other large jurisdictions, but in practice there is a limit to how much of that learning we can successfully apply on a smaller scale. When we look to jurisdictions of our own size, by contrast, we are much more likely to find ideas which will be of direct use back home.

Perhaps the most high profile form of support which we can give or receive, which goes to the heart of the democratic process, is assistance with the process of elections. In June 2015 it was therefore with particular pride that a Marx politician, the Speaker of the House of Keys, Hon. Steve Rodan SHK led an Election Observation Mission (EOM) to
the British Virgin Islands (UK) organised by the British Islands and Mediterranean Region of the CPA. This followed a previous Election Observer Mission to the British Virgin Islands in November 2010 on which another Manx politician, Mr Alex Downie OBE MLC, had served.

After an election, the real work of a Parliamentarian begins, with elected members often receiving precious little support or training. In a small jurisdiction the difficulty of “hitting the ground running” is likely to be exacerbated by a lack of support structures and mechanisms, and a scarcity of resources such as parliamentary or political staff. For that reason I was pleased that the Isle of Man was able to support a post-election seminar run after the July 2013 election in St Helena with the aim of strengthening and promoting good governance through providing a framework from which newly elected members could work. Our representative was Mr Tim Crookall, who was at that time a Member of the House of Keys and who has since become a Member of the Legislative Council.

Another post-election initiative was a visit by Hon. Shirley Osborne, Speaker, and Mrs Judith Baker, Clerk, from the Legislative Assembly of Montserrat, who we welcomed to the Isle of Man in September 2015. They came to us as part of a week-long programme organised by the British Islands and Mediterranean Region which also included time at Westminster. We were glad to be able to work with our regional secretariat and to be able to arrange a balanced and co-ordinated overall programme which included both Westminster and the Isle of Man. This is an approach which I would very much like to see more of in the future. There is no reason why visits from small Commonwealth parliaments to Westminster should not include a visit to the Isle of Man as a matter of course.

**Training and development of officers**

It is not only politicians who have much to learn from one another, but also officers. For example, many small Commonwealth jurisdictions have in recent years and decades sought to develop the financial sector of their economy.

Since 2009 the Isle of Man has led the way in bringing together, under the auspices of the Small Countries Financial Management Programme, officials from finance ministries, central banks, and regulatory bodies in small developing countries for a two-week executive education programme designed to stimulate fresh approaches to the challenges they and their countries face.

The Small Countries Financial Management Programme is primarily aimed at those working within executive government (although the legislature and the judiciary also have an important part to play in financial management). On the parliamentary side too, officers can also learn from international exchange programmes. In recent years we have hosted multilateral conferences for British and Irish clerks, official reporters and researchers and librarians; and we have welcomed bilateral visits of officers from Denmark, the Falkland Islands, Guernsey, Jersey, Northwest Territories, Scotland, Tristan da Cunha, Turks and Caicos and the UK Parliament at Westminster.

Our training programme for parliamentary staff has been particularly successful for parliamentary personnel from small and developing jurisdictions. It can be tailored to meet the needs of the individuals attending and combines both theoretical instruction and practical experience of working in a parliamentary setting. Delegates normally spend between two and five working days with our office. For longer programmes we are usually able to arrange one or more days for cultural activities.

Thanks to the benefits of modern technology small
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jurisdictions today can even provide parliamentary services directly to one another. The foremost example of this is the network of international co-operation which we have built up in the field of parliamentary reporting, also known as Hansard services. The Speaker of the House of Keys, Hon. Steve Rodan SHK wrote in The Parliamentarian in 2008 about the pioneering voice recognition system which is used in the production of official reports of Manx parliamentary proceedings. Since then we have extended our Hansard operation by undertaking work for the legislatures of Alderney, Gibraltar, Guernsey and Sark, with discussions also underway with a number of other jurisdictions. These developments, which have brought tangible benefits to all concerned, would most certainly not have taken place, had it not been for the opportunities afforded by the CPA for the sharing of information between jurisdictions.

Parliamentary Committees

In August 2015, the Isle of Man Branch of the CPA was delighted to have the opportunity to collaborate with the CPA Secretariat in the organisation of a Small Branches Committee Workshop, with participants from Bermuda, the Cayman Islands, the Cook Islands, Guernsey, Jersey, Maldives, Northern Territory, Northwest Territories, Prince Edward Island, the Seychelles and Tasmania as well as from the Isle of Man itself. This workshop built on the Small Branches Conference but also allowed us to focus in more depth on the particular issue of committee work.

The system of parliamentary committees in the Isle of Man has come a long way in recent years and the same will be true of many other Small Branches. Nevertheless there remain considerable challenges in operating an effective Public Accounts Committee and other parliamentary committees. Some of these challenges are universal but others are, and always have been, unique to small jurisdictions.

Indeed, if I may end where I began, at the Fourth Small Branches Conference in the Isle of Man in 1984, the second session on that occasion was entitled ‘The Utilization of Parliamentary Committees as a Mechanism for Improving the Efficiency of Small Parliaments’. This may seem like a case of déjà vu but in reality it illustrates one simple truth: that, as the parliaments of small jurisdictions, we have so much to learn from working together. As the oldest parliament in the world in continuous operation (if not, in today’s world, the smallest) Tynwald recognises this truth and will always be ready to play its part.