Once upon a thousand years ago, a Parliament was born. Marauding Vikings vanquished the Manx people in the tenth century and bequeathed a parliamentary system that still endures today, with some modernizing over recent centuries by its native Celts and later English influences.

Located geographically at the centre of the British Isles but for many years a self-governing Crown Dependency, the Isle of Man boasts autonomy over its law-making and revenue raising that many a new Parliament would envy.

But how well is it functioning as a modern Parliament? That is the crucial question examined by participating in the CPA Fundamentals Programme: how good are we, and how do we compare with others in the Commonwealth?

No matter how thoroughly you may feel you understand the workings of a parliamentary assembly, participating in the study programme through McGill University in Montréal, Canada, fosters greater insight and enables an appreciation of the value of good governance along with the need to balance Executive power with parliamentary scrutiny.

In a recent article (The Parliamentarian 2018/Volume 99/Issue 3), Hon. Tony Smith MP, Speaker of the Australian House of Representatives explained how, 'on appointment to the Speaker's panel, each Member is issued with guidance notes which offer guidance on the history of the role and all aspects of the House practice and procedure for Chairs'.

No such comprehensive guidance notes were available on election for the new Members on the CPA Fundamentals/McGill University class of 2018! Some received informal mentoring following their election or appointment; many studied the formal Standing Orders that govern parliamentary processes, while others reported battling against the establishment, a lack of structure and weak accountability of the Executive or a lack of impartiality by a Presiding Officer. I hope I won’t break any Chatham House rules by reporting the following from the Members’ presentations, analysing the merits and demerits of their assemblies.

Alongside the Isle of Man’s 1,000 years of tradition, the course brought together a panoply of Commonwealth colleagues from such diverse and distant assemblies in CPA Small Branches as Tasmania, the Falkland Islands, the Caribbean Region and even fascinating little Bougainville. Geographically part of Solomon Islands but politically part of Papua New Guinea, Bougainville has a post-conflict Parliament inaugurated on 15 June 2005. Participants hear directly from Members, frequently two per Parliament, usually on opposing sides of political and party divides.

Study on the CPA Fundamentals Programme on Practice and Procedure commenced online in the summer of 2018 with an introduction to the principles of Commonwealth Parliamentary Governance. We progressed through Contemporary Issues in Parliamentary Governance to Advanced Parliamentary Governance at McGill University’s School for Continuing Studies on Sherbrooke Street, Montréal as part of the residential week of the course. We have now commenced the final ‘strategic pillar’ on Parliamentary Communications.

Lecturer Dr John K Johnson leads the various modules enabling Members to better understand factors that influence and impact on parliamentary functions. He provides encouragement to undertake self-assessment and analysis of one’s own Parliament, to determine the strengths and weaknesses in terms of structures and processes plus
comparisons with others.

Online learning is enhanced by four end-of-module tests plus posting essays with online discussions for all students that enable each topic to be explored in more depth. Only time pressure and parliamentary duties prevents this from being as active a forum as it might be.

The residential week at McGill University was a privilege and an eye-opening collision of historic tradition and evolving modernity. Additionally, it enabled for many of us a first visit to Québec's biggest city in an historic week when cannabis was legalized (although none of us, to my knowledge, bothered queuing around the block to sample the newly legal product). Mostly it was an opportunity in an exceptionally mild week in early Fall to enjoy meeting Commonwealth Parliamentarians from across the globe, plus a little sightseeing, with our forays around Montréal brightened by the public art adorning every road and square in the streets adjacent to the McGill University campus.

While most participants were newly elected Members, a few were in a governing party and amongst the cohort was a Madam Speaker, the first woman in one of the participating small jurisdictions. But she reported 'token lip service' was given to women in her experience. Her colleague said the assembly suffered through a lack of resources and no research facilities or meeting spaces – not because of poverty but because 'the Executive controls the Legislature'.

A major theme of our studies was to consider how the balance of power should be maintained, and the level of compliance each jurisdiction has with the CPA's Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures. There was also much discussion over female representation in Parliaments, which threw up some interesting comparisons between small islands and the Australian Capital Territory (represented by Members, Michael Pettersson, MLA and Elizabeth Lee, MLA) boasting now the first female majority Parliament in Australia and the first female head of government there too. Jeff Collins, MLA from Australia's Northern Territory also revealed exceptional diversity with 12 out of 25 women in Parliament, five from indigenous communities.

One Member revealed how the first Prime Minister of their 40 years old Parliament was in office for 30 years. Another from a South Pacific island highlighted issues in a Parliament dominated by 47 out of 50 Members from the ruling party, where three members of the opposition serve on two scrutiny Committees each.

Effective scrutiny was another major area of consideration, study and debate.

One extremely pertinent lecture was delivered by Glenn Wheeler from the Office of the Auditor General (OAG) in Canada's Northwest Territories, an area larger than England, France and Belgium combined, with a population of 43,000 people spread over 33 communities. The role of the OAG of Canada, he explained, was to undertake financial audits and performance audits. Reports are discussed with departments to get agreement on facts and departments' responses to recommendations before tabling the reports directly to the Legislative Assembly. Recent report subjects ranged from Climate Change in 2017, to Correction (prison segregation) in 2015. Sometimes work would commence in response to specific requests from the Legislative Assembly.

Mr Wheeler's concluding comments resonated with me: 'We cannot force departments to make change. To some extent we rely on media and the professionalism of departments to make change, and we rely on goodwill and a robust democratic system.'

Through the residential week, we continued to study all those aspects that make up a robust democratic system, with debates continuing through the evenings and even at breakfast.

One of the highlights was a fascinating lunch with the Canadian MP for Hamilton Centre, Hon. David Christopherson, MP of the New Democratic Party, who left school at 15 and started in politics at age 22 after discovering 'a knack for talking'. Several of my fellow students taped his whole 'off-the-cuff' presentation. So much experience, eloquence and frank advice from someone towards the end of his parliamentary career, who will surely be in demand for speaking engagements in his retirement!

His talk included such pearls of wisdom as: 'Be ethical and honest all the time.' 'Politics is a marathon not a sprint.' 'To thine own self be true.' And the basic tenet to ensure re-election: 'The absence of screw-ups; better a missed opportunity than a screw-up!'

Another highlight was a session by the equally charismatic Kathleen Sears on political leadership. This was one of the most impactful sessions for me – encouraging self-awareness to understand individual strengths and weaknesses and how to improve. Political skills, she advised, means utilising legitimate means to influence a course of action; advancing ideas by saying what's best for the community not the individual. We should search opportunities to create alliances, promote exchanges and make an impact, always remembering that what you do speaks louder than what you say.

The skill of a politician, (reinforced by both speakers separately) is to retain credibility. The best politician should use persuasion, think on your feet but always demonstrate integrity.

We were welcomed and gently supported throughout the week by Dr Rick Stapenhurst, the very experienced Parliamentary Programs Coordinator at McGill University. He facilitated the
Member presentations with Paul Bekle, a former Clerk to the Parliament of Canada, plus the evaluation round-up sessions at the close. Dr Rick (it’s quite informal) also provided information on the Administration and Financing of Parliament and with Dr Johnson led us though the core functions: looking at how to enhance the democracy of our Parliaments and making them better for our citizens, guarding against the common issue of the encroachment of the Executive on parliamentary power. Consideration of core functions progressed later in the week with Oversight (Dr Rick) and Committees and Executive Scrutiny plus the Role of Parties from Kevin Deveaux. There was plenty more including Codes of Conduct and Legislation, the Role of Back Benchers, etc. A participant from the previous year, former Jersey Deputy of St Brelade, Murray Norton, even joined us by video link to comment on the perils and pressures on politicians of social media.

I could go into details of more of our lectures – but perhaps better to recommend signing up for the course for those interested. Participation in the CPA Fundamentals Programme delivers what it promises – it provides a well-supported learning space with excellent study materials, to enable participants to unpick what makes Parliaments tick and stitch our own back together, with the insight to suggest improvements to the design where necessary.

Equipping Members with the time and technical knowledge to be better informed about parliamentary systems is very empowering; it is necessary to understand the systems and the possibilities to be able to work effectively. Democracy needs us to admit shortcomings in the system where they exist and seek to make improvements where necessary.

On the Isle of Man, residents are frequently publicly critical of our Parliament but we don’t suffer outside criticism gladly. The best scrutiny comes from Members from across the political spectrum self-analysing and working collaboratively to improve the structures that in turn will lead to better functioning of the assembly.

Parliamentary performance is improved by fully appreciating internal and external pressures, the role of media, the art of communication and the need for transparency in good governance.

The course provides technical information on all these subjects plus opens up a wealth of academic study and reading for ongoing study. While appreciating the Isle of Man’s unique tri-cameral system of Parliament, I was previously unaware how staunchly plurality-majoritarian our system of election is, how quickly perception can veer from us upholding an arena-type legislature to allegations of a rubber-stamp Parliament. Equally, how delicately power is balanced between Executive government, Parliament and its administration.

The constant striving for greater equality and better representation of women in Parliament is an interesting factor that came up for consideration on numerous occasions. While the Isle of Man has the proud boast of being first in the world to give (some) women the vote in 1881, the number of female representatives remains low, compared with many in the Commonwealth. The current House of Keys has five elected female Members, while five more women have been elected to the eight seats in the upper chamber, making Tynevald overall 31% female, the highest proportion in its long history. Recent appointments to the Legislative Council saw the Island leap from 178th place on the Inter-Parliamentary Union comparison table in 2016 to 44th place now – just below the United Kingdom. But what caused the improvement and how it can be built on in future elections is something for future analysis and report. It is likely the re-drawing of constituency boundaries prior to the 2016 General Election, forming 12 equal constituencies consisting of two seats each, prompted more women to put their name forward. It has been established that the number of women elected (five) was directly in proportion to the number who stood, so the focus in future must be on more credible female candidates coming forward.

The rise of party activity is also something likely to have an impact on the next election in 2021.

And in concluding the CPA Fundamentals Programme, what parliamentary issues remain? The final session of the residential week at McGill University enabled each of us to identify and share the top three things we would take home and recommend to our Parliament. While these centre on the CPA Benchmarks, it also throws into sharp relief the absence of any women in the Isle of Man Council of Ministers, which I feel would be addressed if more experienced women Members are returned next time at the ballot box; but other structural issues have also been highlighted by the course and its various modules.

The Lord Lisvane Review of the Functioning of the Isle of Man Parliament exposed some criticisms that continue to resound with the Manx public as unresolved: for instance, the lack of an appointed Auditor-General, and the number of Members from upper and lower chambers taking a role in the government. These and other management issues will be my focus in the near future, armed with the political science learnings of my year on the CPA Fundamentals Programme with McGill University, which is thoroughly recommended for any Parliamentarians who are interested in living, breathing and improving their own parliamentary structure.

I commented to one of the tutors that I was turning into a parliamentary process nerd. His response: ‘We need more parliamentary process nerds.’

For more information and how to apply for the CPA Fundamentals Programme on Practice and Procedure for Commonwealth Parliamentarians please visit www.cpaahq.org/cpafunds. There are two Programmes available – one for all Commonwealth Parliamentarians (with the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa) and one for Members from CPA Small Branches (with McGill University, Canada).