The fourth Responsible Parliamentary Government (RPG) Course was conducted in late August/early September by the Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI) in conjunction with the ANU’s Asia Pacific School of Economics and Government (APSEG). The three-week course was designed primarily for mid-level parliamentary officials and examined the fundamental principles and practices of responsible parliamentary government. Using the Australian Commonwealth Parliament as the principal example, the course covered issues including constitutional foundations, the main activities of parliament, and related structures for accountability and scrutiny of administration. The curriculum included class-based learning including course work and guest lectures, and field trips to local councils, and state and federal legislatures.

13 officials from the parliaments of Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and Papua New Guinea participated in 2005 and 10 of this number were women. All had a reasonable proficiency in English and the entire program was conducted without interpreters. Sadly, proposed students from Timor Leste and Fiji were unable to attend this year’s course.

Taught and coordinated by CDI’s Indonesia/Legislative specialist, Dr Stephen Sherlock in 2005, the RPG remains the only course of its kind in the world, with 52 people having undertaken the course since its inception and development by CDI in 2002. During this period, the RPG has developed into the 2nd of our CDI flagship projects which, by engaging with parliamentary officials, works to complement our 1st flagship project, the Pacific Parliamentary Forum (PPF), engaging as it does regional MPs, also toward the overarching goal of improved governance, both at the institutional and individual level.

The RPG structure in 2005 was broadly similar to those in previous years. Participant assignments were based upon readings from a mixture of texts from the classic writings about parliament and democracy and from contemporary Australian documents.
The program has several objectives. These include:

- Providing participants with an informed understanding of the constitutional and parliamentary framework for representative government;
- Assisting participants to understand the workings of representative and responsible government under modern conditions;
- Promoting their understanding of the practical contributions which parliamentary staff make to the effective operations of a democratically elected parliament; and
- Enhancing their knowledge of a parliament’s relationship with other institutions essential to a fully democratic polity, including the courts, civil society and the media.

Key components of the program were:

- Australia’s constitutional and parliamentary arrangements, including the federal character of the nation’s government;
- The Parliament, including the roles of the presiding officers; the clerks; the Library/Research Service; Hansard and the place of the Opposition;
- Media coverage of parliament;
- The review of legislation and the making of regulations,
- Scrutiny and management of public expenditure;
- Roles, activities and servicing of parliamentary committees;
- Parliamentary activities relating to human rights and the fight against corruption; including the role of independent statutory oversight bodies such as the Auditor-General and the Ombudsman;
- Relations with courts and tribunals; administrative review;
- Parliamentary administration, including the Parliamentary Service Act; and
- Conduct and ethics.

Special features of the program were visits to Parliament House to visit key locations and view Question Time and other proceedings in the Senate and the House of Representatives. The participants also had the opportunity of meeting His Excellency the Governor-General and Mrs Jeffery at Government House. Visits to the council of the NSW regional town of Cooma, and the ACT Legislative Assembly demonstrated that basic principles of representative and responsible government can be found at local and territory levels as well as the national level.

During the three weeks, the Program was addressed by a wide range of guest speakers, particularly parliamentary staff or ex-staff, MPs and academics from ANU and other institutions. In addition, there were presentations from senior staff of institutions such as the Ombudsman, National Audit Office, the High Court and the Australian Electoral Commission. During visits to Cooma Council and the ACT Legislative Assembly, the participants were addressed by both
elected Members of the chambers and by staff. See the RPG program on the CDI website\(^1\) for details of all RPG activities and speakers.

**Assessment & Review**

The participants were not formally assessed, but their written assignments were used as the basis for extensive feedback and discussion sessions in class. Participants were also given personal feedback on their assignments and on individual questions. At the end of each week, a session for review and feedback provided a good opportunity for participants to seek clarification and further information and to provide comments on the conduct of the program. An overall review session of the program at the end of the course led to a lively and informative discussion. A useful suggestion by participants was that the course could benefit from having a greater emphasis on basic background material presented by professional teachers and academics during the first week of the course.

**Conclusion**

The syllabus and conduct of the Program, as in previous years, owed a great deal to the Clerk of the House of Representatives, Mr Ian Harris. His knowledge of the qualities of a good parliamentary officer and his counsel about session presenters were invaluable in design and construction of the program. The subsequent practical and personal support at Parliament House provided by Mr Harris and his staff gave the program a cachet it could not otherwise have had, and greatly helped to activate the interest of participants.

The enthusiastic support of the Presiding Officers, parliamentarians and former parliamentarians, and senior staff from all parliamentary departments was a major contribution to the conduct of the program and was expressly appreciated by all participants.

The program participants were generally of the standard required to benefit from the course, although some participants with a lower standard of English found some guest speakers rather challenging to understand. Some of the more junior level participants were less able to take a prominent part in open discussion in class than those with more extensive professional experience. These observations underscore the importance of liaising closely with the counterpart parliaments to ensure that the most suitably qualified candidates are selected.

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\(^1\) http://www.cdi.anu.edu.au/asia_pacific_region/asia_pacific_region_downloads/RPG_Program_AugSept05.pdf