CDI 2006 International Political Party Assistance Roundtable

CDI’s inaugural International Political Party Assistance roundtable concluded an intensive meeting in Canberra on 7 September 2006 with a commitment by Australian and international democracy promotion organisations to work closely together on the task of political party strengthening.

Drawing together the major Australian party secretariats with relevant government representatives and international organisations, the roundtable was the first gathering of all key actors working on political party development in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific.

The roundtable focussed on lessons learned from the experience of political party assistance in the Asia-Pacific region, and the sharing of experiences to identify optimum strategies of party assistance in CDI’s target countries of Indonesia, East Timor, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu and in the broader Asia-Pacific region.

To this end, the workshop featured presentations from CDI, international party assistance organisations working in these countries such as the National Democratic Institute, the International Republican Institute, and the Asia Foundation, as well as the Liberal Party of Australia and the Australian Labor Party.

CDI Director Ben Reilly opened the workshop by setting out the essential functions which parties undertake in a working democracy, including linking ordinary citizens with their political representatives, fostering political accountability, enculturating future leaders into the political system, reflecting opinions, forming governments, and conferring legitimacy on the political system. However, in many new democracies, particularly the Asia-Pacific region, parties often struggled to play these roles, making the role of external assistance crucial. Dr Reilly raised some key questions for the roundtable: how to identify optimum strategies of party assistance; whether to assist parties bilaterally or strive for a non-partisan approach, and how to manage the sensitivities that inevitably arise from involvement with what are explicitly ‘political’ organisations. Dr Reilly also set out CDI’s own approach to the task of political party assistance, centred around CDI’s new flagship training course on Political Party Development.

The roundtable also featured presentations from the heads of the Liberal and Labor party secretariats, Brian Loughnane and Tim Gartrell, and their respective international officers, Bruce Edwards and Michael Morgan. With the injection of new
funding for international activities, both parties have plans to increase their international democracy assistance. Brian Loughnane set out how the Liberals are seeking to build on their long-standing connections with the International Democrat Union (chaired by Prime Minister John Howard), and their strong links with organisations like the International Republican Institute and the Westminster Foundation. The ALP has similar links with the National Democratic Institute and the Socialist International.

A feature of the workshop was the detailed discussion of the challenges facing political parties led by experts working on the ground. Paul Rowland of the National Democratic Institute discussed the challenges of party assistance in Indonesia, taking issue with some widely-accepted myths about the Indonesian party system, and the overarching challenges of Indonesia’s scale, size, geography, and reform inertia.

Looking at East Timor, Johanna Kao set out the International Republican Institute’s criteria for political party assistance, and discussed the particular problems facing party assistance in East Timor, including the prevalence of personality politics, elite-dominated parties, and the difficulties of inducting new talent into the political system.

CDI’s new Deputy Director, Quinton Clements, focussed on the enormous challenges inherent in trying to promote more consolidated and disciplined parties in Papua New Guinea, including the country’s unique physical and cultural diversity, poor communications, and weak, fragile parties which are, for the most part, “vehicles of convenience”.

Finally, David Hegarty of the ANU gave a stimulating overview of the political realities of the Pacific Island countries, including the differences between Melanesia and Polynesia, the nature of patronage-based politics, and the need to foster interest aggregation and interest articulation as core strategies of party development.

The workshop concluded with a series of presentations on the broader challenges of political party assistance in the region. Tim Meisburger of the Asia Foundation discussed the Challenges of Political Party Assistance in the Asia-Pacific. Michael Maley of the Australian Electoral Commission set out the some of the core differences between first world and third-world elections, and the risks in attempting to transplant approaches from one to another. Anmara O’Keefe from AusAID looked at the political governance priorities in the aid program.

As well as raising awareness and increasing knowledge of practical party assistance strategies, the meeting laid the foundations for stronger cooperation between CDI, the major parties, and key international organizations working in this field. These outcomes will have immediate effect with a commitment by all organizations to work together closely in the complex and sensitive task of political party assistance.