The Centre for Democratic Institutions’ inaugural Political Party Development (PPD) course was held from 9 to 20 October 2006 in Canberra, with 14 participants in attendance. The two-week course was based at the Crawford School of Economics and Government at the Australian National University, and was presented by Norm Kelly.

The PPD course has been designed to provide senior political party officials from the Southeast Asia – South Pacific region with the skills and capacity to strengthen their parties and party systems, with the objectives being improved governance and more stable democracies. The intention of the course was to provide participants with:

- Information on the Australian political system, with insights into how Australian political parties administer and organise themselves;
- An understanding of party theory and the factors that influence the development of party systems;
- A better understanding of parties and party systems in their region;
- Opportunities to develop contacts and networks with other parties in their own countries and throughout the region; and
- Development of links with Australian organisations and institutions.

The course was well supported by Australia’s main political parties, with requests for site visits and guest presenters positively received.

Course Participants

The course was attended by 14 officials from five countries – Indonesia (three participants), East Timor (two), Papua New Guinea (seven), Vanuatu (one) and Fiji (one). The weighting towards Papua New Guinea was to maximise impact ahead of that country’s general election in June 2007. The group included one Cabinet Minister, one other member of parliament, and an ambassador. All participants held senior positions in their respective parties, normally as General Secretary or an equivalent level.

In promoting the PPD course throughout the region, CDI received more than 30 nominations from six countries. Despite the efforts of CDI, only two women nominated
to be involved in the course, both of whom were successful in being selected. The low rate of women’s involvement is unfortunately indicative of the political environment in the participating countries.

While 18 officials originally accepted invitations to attend the course, four officials did not arrive or cancelled at the last minute. Fortunately this did not diminish the number of countries represented on the course, and the resultant size of the group proved to be ideal for interaction and site visits. Participants were required to be fluent in written and spoken English, and this was generally the case, with only one or two participants having occasional difficulties in understanding presenters or in making themselves understood.

As part of the course, the participants were required to give two presentations – a short introductory talk on their party and its place in their country’s political system; and, in groups of two or three, a longer talk on one of six topics. These topics were – Internal Party Democracy; Party Membership; Party Law; Pre-selection Processes; A Voice for Women; and Controlling your MPs. The standard of these presentations was high, and was valuable in the group gaining a better understanding of regional differences in these topic areas.

Structure

The PPD course was composed of lectures and guest speakers, visits to Australian political institutions, and participant presentations. In addition two social events were held – a welcoming event where participants met Australian government and party officials and their countries’ embassy and high commission staff; and a course dinner, with presentations to each of the participants.

The course covered 16 topics:

- Functions of Political Parties
- Membership
- Party Systems & Democratic Development
- Policy
- Australian Political Parties
- Campaigns
- Electoral Systems
- Pre-selections
- Parliamentary Wing
- Finances
- Women in Politics
- Media
- Regulation of Parties
- Parties in Action
- Parties in Opposition
- Coalitions

These topics were covered by a mix of lectures and institutional visits. Sessions with guest presenters included time for discussion/Q&A.

Site Visits

Site visits were made to the following institutions:

*Australian national party secretariats* – Labor Party, Liberal Party, Nationals, Greens. In addition, the group observed a session of the Nationals’ Federal Conference, which was held in Canberra on 14-15 October.
Australian Parliament House – three visits were made, meeting with Members and Senators (covered below) and parliamentary officials: the Clerks of the House of Representatives (Ian Harris) and the Senate (Harry Evans); Committee Office (Robyn Webber); Parliamentary Library (Richard Ryan); and Press Gallery (Karen Middleton, Jack Waterford).

ACT Legislative Assembly – including meetings with the Clerk of the Assembly (Tom Duncan) and the Committee office (Robina Jaffray).

Australian Electoral Commission - a presentation from the Director of Funding and Disclosure, Kevin Bodel.

Australian Party Involvement

The success of the course relied on the active involvement and support of the main Australian political parties, and this was always forthcoming when requested, both from the administrative and parliamentary wings of the parties. At the administrative level, the visits to the parties’ secretariats included presentations on the general structure of the party administration, as well as coverage of particular topics such as policy formulation, pre-selection processes, and branch structures. Special acknowledgement and thanks are given to the respective Secretaries/Directors of the parties – Brian Loughnane (Liberal), Tim Gartrell (Labor), Andrew Hall (Nationals) and Stewart Jackson (Greens) to willingly provide this level of access and involvement, and to party officers, particularly Michael Morgan and Bruce Edwards, but also Linda Reynolds, Melissa Fairhall, Penny Reader Harris, Matthew Cossey, and Pam Stallman.

The opportunity to attend the Nationals’ Federal Conference was a highlight for the course participants, with the feedback from many of the participants being that the sessions debating motions were particularly useful and applicable for their own parties. We can expect more tightly-run conferences, with sensible notice of motions and limits on speakers’ times, to be occurring in the region in the future! The group also welcomed observing the interaction and accessibility between party members and their parliamentary representatives. A special thanks goes to Andrew Hall for organising this opportunity.

At the parliamentary level, the willingness of parliamentarians to meet with the group during sitting weeks was very much appreciated. The group met with the following Members and Senators:

Labor: Roger Price MP, Bob Sercombe MP, Karin MacDonald MLA, Mary Porter MLA, Wayne Berry MLA, and Tanya Plibersek MP.

Liberal: Teresa Gambaro MP, Kerry Bartlett MP, Bill Stefaniak MLA, Jacqui Burke MLA.

Greens: Senator Rachel Siewert.

The sessions with these representatives were very useful for understanding the relationships between the parliamentary and lay wings of parties. The inclusion of party
whips in the program (e.g. Price, Bartlett and Siewert) also provided a sound insight into the organisation and discipline of party representatives in the parliamentary context.

The experience and expertise of former parliamentarians and party officials was also called upon to add to the value of the course. Of particular importance were the presentations from Tony Eggleton (former Federal Director of the Liberal Party and current Chair of CDI’s Consultative Committee); Vicki Bourne (former Democrats’ Senator and Whip); and Stephen Swift (former Democrats’ Campaign Director).

Conclusion

As this was the first time that the PPD course has been held, the content and structure of the programme was closely assessed. Overall, the current course design worked well, providing a good mix of presentation and participation. For future courses, changes to content, materials and format can be expected to be relatively minor. Support from CDI staff was excellent, and minor administrative issues, in particular room set-up and IT facilities, should be easily improved for future courses.

CDI had earlier considered whether the course should run for two or three weeks, and decided on a two-week model. This created some difficulties in fitting all of the essential elements into the course, especially in the first week where there were some quite long days. However, this can be alleviated with some changes in future programmes. More importantly, by containing the course to two weeks, helped to ensure participation by sufficiently senior party officials. It is doubtful whether a longer course would attract nominations from such senior figures.

While a thorough nomination process ensured a high standard of experienced participants, late withdrawals resulted in only one participant each from Vanuatu and Fiji. Ideally there would be at least two participants from any participating country.

Most participants also used the opportunity of visiting Canberra to further their links with Australian parties and organisations, as well as interacting with their diplomatic and expatriate communities. The Australian Government’s Office for Women provided opportunities for the two women participants to meet with Australian women political representatives outside the course.

All participants exhibited a genuine desire to not only learn from the course, but to put that learning into practice on their return to their respective countries. The participants were generally of an age, seniority and experience to benefit greatly from the course, and it is expected that many of them will use the knowledge gained from the course to further train and educate others in their parties. It is expected that the links CDI has now made with numerous political parties in the region, through the nomination process and the course itself, as well as other CDI activities in the target countries, will assist in identifying further suitable applicants for future PPD courses.

The enthusiastic support and involvement of the Australian political parties and their parliamentarians was critical to the success of the course, and CDI acknowledges the willingness of the parties to support and actively participate in the various sessions. The PPD sessions have also helped Australian parties to gain a better understanding of some of the issues and challenges that confront parties from the region.