CDI 2007 Political Party Assistance Roundtable

CDI’s 2007 Political Party Assistance Roundtable was held at Parliament House on 21 May on the subject of “Political Party Assistance in New Democracies”.

The roundtable was an invitation-only event and was attended by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Alexander Downer, the Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Robert McLelland MP, Senator Marise Payne, Dr Andrew Southcott MP, and representatives of the major Australian political parties, the Australian Electoral Commission, and AusAID. The roundtable was chaired by Mr Tony Eggleton AO CVO, chair of the CDI Consultative Council.

The Roundtable began with an introductory speech by Mr Ivan Doherty, Director of Political Party Programs at the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the U.S. democracy promotion organisation headquartered in Washington DC.

Mr Doherty is the NDI’s principal in-house expert on political party development. He currently oversees party development programs in more than 45 countries as well as working with political party international organizations and other democracy foundations. Mr. Doherty also serves as a member of the Steering Committee of the World Movement for Democracy. He was previously general secretary of the Fine Gael Party in Ireland.

Mr. Doherty began his talk by reflecting on the importance of political parties and political party development to the broader challenge of democracy building. Stable democracy requires the development of strong, broadly based and well-organized political parties. If democratic party organizations fail to fulfil their special role in society, citizens may lose faith in the governing process itself. Political parties that effectively debate public policy issues and that are representative and accountable will contribute to democratic society.

Mr Doherty also noted that there had often been resistance to the idea of party assistance because of its overtly ‘political’ nature and also because aid agencies have tended to be more comfortable dealing with civil society than with parties. There had been a considerable shift in international opinion in this field over the past decade, with more and more governments and international organisations choosing to include political party strengthening in their development assistance program.

Mr Doherty then moved on to focus on the role of the National Democratic Institute in assisting political parties. For over 20 years, NDI has worked with democratic
parties from across the political spectrum in more than 60 countries around the world, making it the world’s largest political party assistance program.

The purpose of such programs is to deepen and expand democratic values and practices in transitional societies by enabling political parties to fulfil their responsibilities in a professional, transparent and peaceful manner consistent with international standards and the laws of their respective countries.

Mr Doherty also focussed on how NDI chooses the parties with which it wants to work. Beginning with an inclusive approach, NDI selects its targets based on a set of standards including the party’s prominence in politics; its popular support base; its receptiveness to NDI assistance; commitment to democracy; level of internal democracy; and ability to absorb assistance. This included targeting younger, emerging party leaders as well as established ones.

Ultimately, Mr Doherty explained, the goal of NDI's political party program is to support the development of effective party institutions and processes that contribute to a healthy and vibrant democracy. To do this, NDI focusses on three elements: the role of political parties in elections, the role of political parties in parliament, and the kinds of training fora most appropriate to the particular circumstances which different party systems face.

Election-related political party programs are the most popular form of assistance from the parties themselves. Programs address all of the activities necessary to structure and conduct an effective election campaign, such as developing an effective campaign; building a campaign management team; motivating and mobilizing the party membership; message and platform development; media relations; voter outreach; candidate identification, recruitment and selection; campaign funding; and related activities.

Once elected, attention shifts to the role of parties in parliament. In new and transitional democracies, many parties have little experience in organizing their activities in parliament, which greatly effect the public's perceptions of a party and thus its effectiveness. Key issues therefore include the role of parties in opposition and government; the rights and responsibilities of government and opposition; the structure of a parliamentary group or caucus; the decision making process within a caucus; effective use of parliamentary debating time; and the importance of party discipline and the role of a whip.

These same functional issues are also a prominent part of CDI’s Political Party Development activities. In addition, a key cross-cutting issue for all parties, whether in government or opposition, is their representational duties and relationships with interest groups and civil society. Both NDI and CDI seek to provide a neutral space where parties can come together to consider important issues outside the immediate pressures of partisan competition.

Like CDI, NDI uses a variety of techniques to enhance the capacity and effectiveness of political parties and to affect attitudinal changes among all societal actors. Depending upon the needs identified, these may include:
• Multiparty seminars and single party seminars
• Directed projects and special projects
• Consultations with Party headquarters
• Party working groups
• One to one consultations/advisory sessions
• Informal dialogue
• Training of trainers within parties
• Second country study missions
• Development of training manuals
• Facilitation of internal party discussion
• Assistance with developing international links
• Public forums and information meetings
• Opinion polls and research
• Presentation of comparative studies/examples.

Mr Doherty concluded his talk with an endorsement of Australia’s increased role in the political party development field through the involvement of the Australian parties in international development activities and CDI’s own political party strengthening program.

Following Mr Doherty’s talk, lunch was served and the floor opened for a general discussion on international political party assistance and Australia’s role in this process. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Downer, focussed on the problems of ethnically-exclusive parties and the difficulty in promoting nationally-oriented parties in many new democracies, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. Parties in the west, he noted, have evolved out of historic cleavages that are often weak or absent in new democracies.

Liberal and Labor party representatives both gave statements about their work in this field. Senator Marise Payne discussed the contribution to party development and networking achieved through election observation missions. NDI’s Asia regional director, Peter Manikas, discussed the challenges facing party building in regions such as South Asia, where parties are of long historical standing but remain weakly institutionalised. Other prominent contributors to the discussion included CDI Director Dr Ben Reilly, Robert McLelland MP, and Prof Andrew MacIntyre from the Australian National University.

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Attendees:

Key Speaker
Mr Ivan Doherty - Director of Political Party Programs, National Democratic Institute (NDI) - USA

Chair
Mr Tony Eggleton AO CVO - Chair, CDI Consultative Council

Guests
The Hon Alexander Downer MP - Minister for Foreign Affairs
Dr Ben Reilly - Director CDI
Dr Andrew Southcott MP
Mr Robert McClelland MP
Senator Marise Payne
Mr Peter Manikas - NDI - Regional Director for Asia
Ms Annmarie O'Keeffe AM - DDG, AusAID
Mr Brian Loughnane - Federal Director, Liberal Party of Australia
Prof. Andrew MacIntyre - Director, Crawford School, ANU
Mr Michael Maley - Director International Services, Australian Electoral Commission
Mr Bruce Edwards - International Secretary - Liberal Party of Australia
Dr Michael Morgan – Director, International Projects, Australian Labor Party
Mr Norm Kelly - CDI Associate, ANU
Ms Caitlin Wilson - Director Anti-Corruption and Political Governance Unit, AusAID
Mr Sam Beever - AusAID DLO - Mr Downer's Office
Mr Luke Hambly - Executive Officer CDI