TRAINING REPORT

ASPG ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2007 & WORK ATTACHMENTS TO THE AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL PARLIAMENT, PARLIAMENT OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA, AND THE ACT LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

20 – 31 August 2007

Report prepared by:

Jude Devesi
Research and Committee Secretary
National Parliament of Solomon Islands
CONTENTS........................................................................................................................................................................... 2

INTRODUCTION........................................................................................................................................................................ 3

BACKGROUND ........................................................................................................................................................................ 3

OBJECTIVES ............................................................................................................................................................................. 4

PROGRAM OF EVENTS.................................................................................................................................................. 4
  ASPG Conference .......................................................................................................................................................... 4
  Work Attachment ......................................................................................................................................................... 4

LESSONS LEARNT ........................................................................................................................................................... 5

RECOMMENDATIONS..................................................................................................................................................... 7
INTRODUCTION

In the provision of support to build effective Parliaments within the Pacific Region, the Center for Democratic Institutions (CDI) with the support of the National Parliament Office and the UNDP Solomon Islands Parliamentary Strengthening Project sponsored my participation at the Australasian Study of Parliaments Group (ASPG) 2007 Annual Conference. The conference was hosted by the Parliament of South Australia and was held at Parliament House in Adelaide. In addition to this, CDI arranged for me to attend a nine-day work attachment with the Parliament of South Australia, the Australian Federal Parliament, and the ACT Legislative Assembly.

This report outlines the background, objectives, program of events, outcomes, lessons learnt and recommendations of the program to comply with the reporting requirements and to assist in reviewing and improving future training programs for Parliamentary staff of the Solomon Islands Parliament and the Pacific Region.

BACKGROUND

CDI is an organization that responds to the needs of countries of the Asia-Pacific region in building good governance and strengthening democratic institutions. It is based at the Crawford School of Economics and Government at the Australian National University (ANU) and it receives its core funding from the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID). Its programs are categorized into the two main areas of Political Party Development and Parliamentary Strengthening.1

The ASPG is a politically non-partisan body which was established in 1978 to encourage and stimulate research, writing, teaching and discussion about parliamentary institutions, particularly those in Australasia and the South Pacific. The ASPG has ‘Chapters’ in all States and Territories of Australia and in New Zealand. Its membership consists of parliamentarians, parliamentary officers, academics, teachers, journalists, students and other interested individuals.2

The ASPG is exclusive to Australian (both State and Federal) and New Zealand Parliaments and its main goal is to facilitate the exchange of information on the study of parliament for research and teaching purposes to the mutual advantage of the region.

1 www.cdi.anu.edu.au
2 www.aspg.org.au
Recently, the ASPG with the assistance of CDI and other development partners has decided to actively pursue a process of engagement with the Parliaments of the Pacific in order to assist these countries to develop effective legislatures. As a result, the 2006 ASPG Annual Conference in Wellington was attended by Members and staff from the Parliament of Fiji and Solomon Islands.

The 2007 ASPG Annual Conference held in Adelaide was attended by participants from Bougainville, Cook Islands, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. The Conference was preceded by a four-day work attachment with the Parliament of South Australia and a further five-day attachment with the Australian Federal Parliament and the ACT Legislative Assembly.

The work attachment is the first of its kind and is an effort to strengthen the skills and knowledge base of Parliamentary staff in the work of Parliaments through the observation and participation in activities of more developed and advanced Parliaments around the region.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the work attachment were:

1. To experience and observe first-hand the operations of a more developed Parliament in terms of their administration, services, procedure, and Committee work.

2. To acquire new knowledge and expertise that could be applied in the Solomon Islands context.

3. To contribute to the overall professional development of the staff of the National Parliament of Solomon Islands.

4. To foster new working and professional relationships with staff of regional Parliaments.

PROGRAM OF EVENTS

ASPG Conference

The topics presented at the Conference were informative and academically oriented. This year’s theme was “Parliament’s Accountability to the People”. They covered a range of topics including Role of Parliamentary Committee in Public Accountability, Government Advertising, Role of Independent Members, Parliamentary Education and Professional Development, Public Redress and Right of Reply, Conscience Voting, Media Reporting Standards and Public Perception.

Work Attachment
The work attachment program was attended by the Clerk to the Bougainville Parliament and myself.

At the South Australian Parliament, the attachment program included a visit to the Playford Electorate Office\(^3\), briefings with the Parliamentary Library, Education Office, House of Assembly Procedure Office and the Committee Office. We also sat in one of the meetings of the Natural Resources Committee as they conducted a public hearing.

At the Australian Federal Parliament, a very full program was arranged by the Parliamentary Relations Office in conjunction with the Senate Procedure Office. Two days were spent with the House of Representatives and another two with the Senate. The program include meetings with the Clerk and Deputy Clerk of the Senate, Deputy Clerk of the House of Representatives, Committees Secretaries of a number of Committees in both Houses, Director of Hansard, Clerk Assistant Table and Clerk Assistant Committees in both Houses, Serjeant-at-Arms and Usher of the Black Rod, Security Operations Director, Education office and official of the Parliamentary relation office.

The last day of the program was with the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Legislative Assembly which included briefings by the Clerk and Deputy Clerk, Clerk Assistant, Committee Office, Finance and Administration Office, Hansard, and Security Officers.

The following table summarizes the major activities undertaken as part of the program:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Place</th>
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<tr>
<td>20 – 23 August 2007</td>
<td>Attachment to the Parliament of South Australia</td>
<td>Parliament House, Adelaide</td>
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<tr>
<td>24 -25 August 2007</td>
<td>ASPG Annual Conference</td>
<td>Parliament House, Adelaide</td>
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<tr>
<td>27 – 30 August 2007</td>
<td>Attachment to the Australian Federal Parliament</td>
<td>Parliament House, Canberra</td>
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<tr>
<td>31 August 2007</td>
<td>Attachment to the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Legislative Assembly</td>
<td>Legislative Assembly, Canberra</td>
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LESSONS LEARNT

Overall, the conference and work attachments were an eye opener for me. In other words, the entire program was an opportunity to experience and see first hand how Parliaments operate in a more developed country. The range and quality of topics presented during the program was not only interesting but also educational. It also was a standard setter and we returned to our respective Parliaments with new ideas and skills that would be

\(^3\) This electorate is represented by the Speaker of the House of Assembly, Parliament of South Australia.
applied and adapted to improve how our Parliaments operate. For example, during the program, we were provided with documents that related to the preparation for a sitting period including the preparation of house papers, procedural digests and analysis, chamber research papers and guide to committee practice and procedure. We were also provided with copies of the House of Representatives Practice and the Odger’s Senate Procedure and Practice which will serve a useful reference material that could be drawn upon when needed.

Another thing that clearly stood out from the work attachment was that more developed Parliaments tend to have clear and distinct lines of specialization. Throughout the attachment, I was fortunate to be able visit the different offices that make up the Parliament including the Clerk’s office, Procedure office, Committee office, Table office and Chamber research, Hansard, Parliamentary Education office, Serjeant-at-arms and Usher of the Black Rod, and the Corporate services office including Parliamentary security. This contrasts with the situation at the Solomon Islands Parliament where until recently resources did not permit the development of secretariat services and staff remain required to perform tasks and duties that cut across these different offices. The program was extremely useful in that it provided tips and ideas to assist the current organizational restructure of the National Parliament of Solomon Islands. Furthermore, it was an opportunity to see how the proposed new structures work in larger and older Parliaments.

An important observation of the attachment was that more developed Parliaments tend to have built up their parliamentary procedures and administrative processes to a much higher level than one would find in a less developed Parliament such as in the Solomon Islands. The presence of precedent systems has resulted in more effective provision of parliamentary services and management of Parliamentary affairs including procedural advice and research services to Members. It also meant that Members are fully aware of the services and support that they have and therefore make good use of these services. The key lesson learnt was that there is an urgent need for the strengthening of the procedural and precedent systems in the Solomon Islands Parliament to provide accurate and timely procedural advice to the Speaker, Clerk and Members of Parliament. The Solomon Islands Parliament have now began to establish procedural and precedent systems including a system for the proper recording of tabled papers and documents, the compilation of Speakers rulings, and the recording of procedural highlights and issues using annotated Standing Orders.

In terms of Parliamentary Committees, the major observation made was that Members were well-supported by their secretariat in terms of briefings and research papers regarding the issue(s) under consideration. Given this, it was noted that the support provided to Committee members has resulted in effective questioning of the witnesses at public hearings and that their MPs were well-versed with the issues at hand. In the one Committee that was observed conducting a public hearing, the Members displayed great skills and confidence in questioning witnesses appearing before the Committee. This provided a lesson for the Solomon Islands Parliament and highlighted the need to educate and train Members on the roles and functions of Parliamentary Committees and the work that it can do in scrutinize the Executive Government. It also provided useful ideas to
establish set procedures and guidelines for the efficient operation of Parliamentary Committees, for instance, guides to committee procedure and practice for both members and staff.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are suggestions for future training programs:

1. I noted that although the attachment was broad and involved briefings with a lot of the different offices within Parliament, I felt that each of these briefings were too short and would be more beneficial if more time had been allocated for each of the sessions.

2. In relation to the point made in No. 1 above, a further suggestion would be to request participants of future attachment programs to specify their areas of interest within Parliament and they could spend more time focusing and on their areas of interest. This would effectively mean prioritizing certain areas over others.

3. Contingency to availability of staff (and funding of course), the attachment program could possibly involve hands-on training or practical sessions where the trainee actually gets to experience the real situation from their counterpart staff. This would also help build up an effective system of mentoring and guidance to the trainee and ensure that skills are transferred in the process.

4. It would also help if the timing of the attachment be modified to coincide with a sitting of Parliament, so that trainees get a feel of what it is like on a sitting day. Again this will depends on the availability of counterpart staff on a sitting day.

5. Another consideration is that Parliaments selected for future attachment program be of a similar size and staff make-up. Although not entirely necessary, it would help to have the trainees work in similar environments as their own Parliaments. For example, from the recent program, I felt that the Parliament of South Australia and ACT Legislative Assembly were more manageable and relevant for the attachment. On the other hand, the visit to Australian Federal Parliament, although extremely beneficial and interesting, was overwhelming in terms of the resources and capacity that it has available. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association concept of ‘twining’ similar sized Parliaments is an option to explore for these types of attachment programs so as to ensure that participants from a particular Pacific Parliament get similar and consistent training instead of multiple and mixed messages.

6. Members of Parliament from the region should also be included in attachment programs such as these, especially in observing Committee meetings and hearings. This would help them to appreciate and develop appropriate skills.
for effective committee inquiries and to utilize the support that is provided for
them through the committee secretariat.

7. The ASPG is a useful avenue for the sharing and exchange of ideas on
Parliamentary work and would be beneficial for most Pacific Islands
Parliaments to be engaged regularly in such forums. An option that could be
explored is the creation of a similar body for the Pacific region that could be
affiliated to the ASPG or operate as a sub-organization of the ASPG. This will
enable most of the Pacific Parliament to be able to participate and exchange
ideas for further improving the work of Parliament.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To sum up, the ASPG conference and the work attachment program was extremely useful
and the I would like thank the organizers and sponsors, namely Quinton Clements who is
the Deputy Director of CDI and Kevin Rizolli, President of ASPG. Also special thanks to
Malcolm Lehman and his team for organizing the South Australian component of the
program, Harry Evans and Bernard Wright for the once-in-a-life-time opportunity to
meet, Paul Jeanroy of the Parliamentary Relations Office and Amanda Hill of the Senate
Procedure Office for organizing the program and chaperoning the participants during the
attachment to the Australian Federal Parliament, and Tom Duncan and Max Kiermaier of
the ACT Legislative Assembly. The kind and generous assistance of all of the above
mentioned persons towards developing the program and accommodating our needs is
greatly appreciated and acknowledged.