RESPONSIBLE PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNANCE COURSE 2008

The Responsible Parliamentary Governance (RPG) course is the major activity supported by the Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI) in the area of legislative strengthening. It is an intensive two-work program designed for middle-level parliamentary staff from CDI target countries in Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

The seventh annual RPG course took place at the Australian National University (ANU) from 8 to 19 September 2008. For the fourth year in a row, the course was designed and coordinated by Dr Stephen Sherlock, an Associate of CDI.

The twenty participants in the course came from Cambodia, East Timor, Fiji, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Thailand and Vanuatu. A new development in 2008 was the inclusion of a member of staff from a regional parliament, namely the Autonomous Region of Bougainville in PNG. As in 2008, the course was supported by the World Bank Institute (WBI), including funding for the participation of a number of the course members.

In its seven years of existence, the RPG course has now been undertaken by 122 senior and middle-level parliamentary officials. The program continues to attract keen interest from parliaments in the region.

The program has several objectives. These include:

- Providing participants with an understanding of the constitutional and parliamentary framework for representative government.
- Exploring the theoretical and practical elements of the parliament as an institution for the scrutiny and accountability of executive government and of the public accountability of the parliament itself.
- Enhancing knowledge of a parliament’s relationship with other institutions essential to a fully democratic polity, including the courts, audit and ombudsman’s institutions, civil society, political parties and the media.
- Promoting appreciation of the role of parliamentary staff, their functions and professional obligations and the issues and problems which face staff in the execution of their duties in an accountable, democratically elected parliament;
- Encouraging sharing of knowledge, experience and ideas for reform and strengthening of their respective parliaments amongst the participants in the course.
Key subjects for study during the program were:

- Australia’s constitutional and parliamentary arrangements, including the federal character of the country’s government.
- The Parliament, including the roles of the presiding officers; the clerks; the Library and research services; Hansard and public information and education.
- Parliamentary administration and the evolution of staff-Member relations in Australia and overseas.
- The review of legislation and the making of regulations.
- Roles, activities and servicing of parliamentary committees.
- Scrutiny and management of public expenditure.
- Extra-parliamentary institutions that are accountable to parliament or that support the oversight roles of parliament such the Auditor-General, Ombudsman and anti-corruption bodies.
- Relations with courts and tribunals.
- Media coverage of parliament.
- The system of election and the role of the Australian Electoral Commission.
- The operation of political parties in parliament and in the general political arena.
- The involvement of non-government organisations, lobby groups and active private citizens in the work of the parliament.
- Conduct and ethics issues for both Members of Parliament and parliamentary staff.

Structure of the course

The methodology of the course was to provide the participants with background concepts and learning materials from the course convenor and academics from ANU departments and to expose them to input and interaction with their peers and counterparts in the Federal, ACT and NSW parliaments, as well as extra-parliamentary institutions. This then formed the basis for discussion sessions amongst the course members, bringing to bear the participants’ own experience as parliamentary staff in their respective parliaments. The role of the convenor was to facilitate the interchange between the guest presenters and the course members, explaining concepts that arise during sessions and ensuring that the main points were covered. As well designing the course and selecting guest presenters, the convenor provided intellectual guidance, encouragement and feedback for the participants.

As in previous years, the structure of the 2008 program was broadly based on three components. The three weeks of previous courses had been reduced to two, so it was necessary to try to fit as much as possible from earlier years into the shorter program. The first component concentrated on providing a solid introduction to the basics of Australian constitutional and political arrangements and to the political and official structures and workings of the Commonwealth Parliament. Two days of the first week were spent in Parliament House itself, with an intensive program of presentations and discussions with parliamentary staff. These interchanges provided an insight into the systems and operation of the Australian parliament and the staff’s role in supporting the work of both
chambers and the institution as a whole. The course members were also introduced to the group assignment exercise on which they were expected to work during the program.

The second component provided a deeper analysis of the role of the legislature in a system of parliamentary government, with a special focus on the critical place of committees in contemporary parliamentary practice. The program expanded into an examination of issues related to control of executive government expenditure, anti-corruption activities and parliamentary conduct and ethics. Particular attention was also given to providing international perspectives on parliamentary practice and the administration of parliament. Participants again returned to Parliament House to observe the operation of the institution during a sitting day.

The third component widened the focus of attention beyond the Commonwealth Parliament itself. Participants were introduced to the state/territory and local government tiers of Australian government, including a visit to the ACT Legislative Assembly. Representatives from extra-parliamentary institutions of accountability such as the Ombudsman and Auditor-General made presentations to the course. Further elements involved an examination of the parliament’s interaction with non-government actors and the media, and the complexities of the place of political parties as the central players in the politics of parliament and as competitors in the electoral process.

An important part of the course was presentations made by course members themselves. On the first day the participants were given a small historical issue to research and present back to the group the following day. This both introduced issues in the historical evolution of parliamentary democracy and encouraged course members to actively participate in course sessions. There was also short group exercise on parliamentary ethics and codes of conduct during the first week.

The major exercise was a group presentations made by the participants on the central issues of the course on the second last day of the program. Course members had been provided with a series of readings from parliamentary, government, academic and media sources. The readings, together with material and views gathered during the various presentations and discussions with academics, parliamentary staff and others, provided the basis for examining the role of parliament as an instrument of accountability and the issues confronting parliamentary officials in supporting this process. The members of the course took this work very seriously and each of the four groups produced well considered presentations to the rest of the course.

During the two weeks, the course was addressed by a wide range of speakers, including academics from ANU and other institutions and parliamentary staff or ex-staff from both the Commonwealth and NSW parliaments. During the visit to the ACT Legislative Assembly, the participants were addressed by both elected Members and staff. The course was also able to benefit from presentations from senior staff of the Ombudsman, Australian National Audit Office and the Australian Electoral Commission.
Assessment and review

The participants were not formally assessed, but the requirement to carry out research and present findings acted as a measure of participation and comprehension. The presentations were used as the basis for extensive feedback and discussion in class and course members 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.

Conclusion

Once again the course was made possible by the enthusiastic support of the Presiding Officers and senior staff from all parliamentary departments. The program, as in previous years, owed a great deal to the support of the Clerk of the House of Representatives, Mr Ian Harris. Senior officers of both the Department of the House and the Department of the Senate made available significant amounts of staff time in providing presenters and logistical support. The Department of Parliamentary Services, particularly the Parliamentary Library, provided an intellectual input and logistical support which greatly enriched the content of the course. The staff of the Parliamentary Relations Office coordinated the program inside Parliament House, a fact which contributed to the smooth running of this component of the course.

The program participants were generally of the standard required to benefit from the course, although some participants with a more basic standard of English found some guest speakers rather challenging to understand. Finding the most appropriate participants within the various parliaments continues to be the most demanding issue for course organisers and underlines the need for the maintenance of close relations between CDI and the parliaments involved. The involvement of the World Bank Institute has helped in broadening the range of countries feeding into the program and increase the comparative international element of course content.

The wide range of countries involved in the 2008 RPG course stimulated a lively interchange and sharing of ideas. The principal challenge remains maximising the level of active participation by course members and promoting opportunities for them to bring their own experience as parliamentary officials into the general discussion, especially given the less time available in the two week program. This must be balanced against the need for the participants to be exposed to the information and ideas provided by the speakers, a process which inevitably involves more passive learning. Participants were enthusiastic about the experience of the course and expressed determination, together with some trepidation, about their plans to try to apply lessons from the course in their own parliamentary environments.