Striking a Balance: The Role of Parliament in Managing Development

The 10th Centre for Democratic Institutions
Pacific Parliamentary Dialogue
Port Vila | Vanuatu
9 - 11 December 2008
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Introduction

The Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI) holds an annual Dialogue for Members of Parliament from Pacific Island Countries, Australia and New Zealand. The aim of the Dialogue is to facilitate discussions by Pacific Island region parliamentarians on issues of common interest whilst having the opportunity to look at aspects of parliamentary practice in other parliaments in our region.

The 10th annual CDI Pacific Parliamentary Dialogue (‘the Dialogue’) took place in Port Vila, capital of the Republic of Vanuatu from 9 to 11 December 2008. As in previous years, core funding for the Dialogue came from the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), with additional financial support from New Zealand’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade (MFAT) and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA).

The Dialogue was held at Le Lagon Resort in Port Vila. The National Parliament of Vanuatu supported CDI by providing in kind assistance.

This was the fourth time CDI has held this event in a Pacific Island country.¹ CDI invited participants from Papua New Guinea, the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Kiribati, Vanuatu and Australia. Unfortunately no New Zealand parliamentarians were able to attend because the 49th Parliament was being sworn in during the same week as the Dialogue. In most cases participants were nominated by the Speakers of their respective Parliaments. CDI also extended invitations to a number of key constitutional office holders in Vanuatu, including the Chief Electoral Officer, Mr Martin Tete, and the Ombudsman, Mr Peter K Taurakoto.

As has occurred with previous dialogues, the vagaries of politics and other factors meant several parliamentarians were unable to attend. During the week of the Dialogue the Government of Prime Minister Edward Natapei faced its fourth vote of no confidence since coming to office in September 2008. This meant several Ni-Vanuatu parliamentarians did not attend the Dialogue. One other participant, Hon. Nuku from Tonga, failed to turn up in Port Vila.

Despite this, 29 people from nine countries in the region participated in the Dialogue.² 19 of these were parliamentarians representing ten different parliaments.³ Each delegation had at least one member from the Opposition.

For the third time, Members from a provincial level assembly in the Pacific Island region, the Autonomous Bougainville Government House of Representatives, were

¹ Previous Dialogues have been held in Fiji, 2005; Samoa, 2006; and Papua New Guinea, 2007.
² Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Kiribati, New Zealand, Australia and Vanuatu.
³ Seven national legislatures – Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu - and three state/provincial legislatures – New South Wales, Victoria and the Autonomous Region of Bougainville.
invited and participated in the Dialogue. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association was represented by the Hon John Pandazopoulos MP from the State Parliament of Victoria.

The Dialogue provided a forum for Members of Parliament from Pacific Island countries and Australia to discuss issues relating to the theme of the Dialogue – the role that parliamentarians can play in addressing political, economic, environmental and social development issues. As with previous Dialogues, in addition to the overall theme, there was a focus on the host parliament and country. The program was therefore designed so that on the first day the emphasis was on Vanuatu. This gave parliamentarians from elsewhere in the region the opportunity to learn about Vanuatu. The Dialogue contributed to improving political governance in partner countries by exposing participants to new ideas and enabling them to engage with colleagues on more effective ways of managing governance challenges in the region.

The Dialogue in context

Originally named the Pacific Parliamentary Retreat, the Dialogue was designed to provide a forum for Pacific Island parliamentarians to discuss issues of common interest while showcasing parliamentary practice in Australia, and New Zealand in 2004. The inaugural Retreat was held in November 1999 in Canberra. The 13 participants from Fiji, Solomon Islands, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea and Samoa discussed the ways in which the inherited systems of parliamentary democracy are functioning in the contemporary Pacific and the impact of local tradition and culture on the parliamentary process.

In 2004 the Retreat was held outside of Australia for the first time. The Sixth Pacific Parliamentary Retreat, with the theme of Tradition and Modern Parliamentary Democracy, was held at Parliament House in Wellington, New Zealand with the full support of the New Zealand Parliament and NZAID. In 2005, the Retreat was held in a Pacific Island country, Fiji, for the first time and renamed the Pacific Parliamentary Forum, to reflect the need for ongoing dialogue among elected leaders in the Pacific on issues of common concern. Further reflecting these changes, the 2005 Forum was supported by and planned in collaboration with NZAID, the New Zealand Parliament and parliamentary parties, and the Parliament of the Fiji Islands. The University of the South Pacific’s Pacific Institute of Advanced Studies in Development and Governance (PIAS-DG) and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) also made contributions.

In 2006, at the invitation of the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Samoa, Hon. TOLOFUAI'VALELEI Falemoe Leiataua MP, the Forum was held in Samoa and renamed the Pacific Parliamentary Dialogue. In addition to ongoing funding support from AusAID and NZAID, the CPA also provided financial support in 2006.

In 2007 the Dialogue was held in Goroka, capital of the Eastern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea.
Since the first Retreat in Canberra in 1999, 162 parliamentarians, including 29 women, from 15 countries, representing 20 parliaments, in the region have taken part in these meetings. For further information on each Retreat, including detailed reports, consult the CDI website at: http://www.cdi.anu.edu.au

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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Partners</th>
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Participants: 29 – 18 MPs, 9 presenters, 2 CDI staff

Countries Represented: Australia | Autonomous Region of Bougainville | Fiji | New Zealand | PNG | Samoa | Solomon Is | Kiribati | Tonga | Vanuatu

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Participants: 40 – 23 MPs, 7 presenters, 5 PNG parliamentary staff, 4 CDI staff, 1 CPA staff

Countries Represented: Australia | Bougainville | Fiji | New Zealand | PNG | Samoa | Solomon Is | Timor-Leste |

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<tr>
<td>7th Dec 2005</td>
<td>Yanuca Island, Fiji</td>
<td>Foundations of Public Leadership (focus on Parliament of Fiji)</td>
<td>Parliament of Fiji, NZAID; Parliament of NZ; USP Pacific Institute of Advanced Studies in Development &amp; Governance; Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat</td>
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Participants: 16 – Countries Represented: Australia | Cook Islands | Fiji | Nauru | New Zealand | Niue | PNG | Samoa | Solomon Is | Tuvalu | Vanuatu

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<tr>
<td>5th Nov 2003</td>
<td>Darwin, NT</td>
<td>Parliamentary issues, land management, Australian indigenous society &amp; Pacific society (focus on NT Legislative Assembly)</td>
<td>Legislative Assembly of Northern Territory</td>
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Participants: 8 – 7 MPs + 1 PNG parliamentary officer – Countries Represented: Australia | Fiji | PNG | Samoa | Solomon Is

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<tr>
<td>4th Nov 2002</td>
<td>Brisbane, Qld</td>
<td>Accountability &amp; Integrity (focus on the Queensland Parliament)</td>
<td>Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice &amp; Governance, Griffith University</td>
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Participants: 15 – Countries Represented: Australia | Fiji | New Caledonia | PNG | Samoa | Solomon Is | Vanuatu

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<tr>
<td>3rd Dec 2001</td>
<td>Brisbane, Qld</td>
<td>Accountability &amp; Integrity (focus on the Queensland Parliament)</td>
<td>Key Centre for Ethics, Law, Justice &amp; Governance, Griffith University</td>
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Participants: 15 – Countries Represented: Australia | Fiji | New Caledonia | PNG | Samoa

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<td>2nd Dec 2000</td>
<td>Canberra, ACT</td>
<td>Fragility of Westminster Democracy in the Pacific (focus on Federal Parliament &amp; ACT Legislative Assembly)</td>
<td>Centre for the Contemporary Pacific</td>
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Participants: 14 – Countries Represented: Australia | Fiji | New Caledonia | Samoa | Solomon Is | Vanuatu

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<td>1st Nov 2000</td>
<td>Canberra, ACT</td>
<td>Ways in which systems of parliamentary democracy operate in the post-colonial Pacific</td>
<td>Centre for the Contemporary Pacific</td>
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The Dialogue in 2008

Theme

In 2008 the Dialogue had both an overarching theme - to examine the role played by parliaments in managing the challenges of development – and a specific country focus - political developments in Vanuatu. Through presentations and an exchange of national and local case studies, participants were able to discuss the role that Parliamentarians can have in addressing political, economic and social development issues. Parliamentarians can and ought to have a critical role in scrutinising and contributing to the development agendas, resource allocations, and policy making of their countries. The Dialogue reviewed trends in sustainable development in the region and examined the interaction of Parliamentarians with constituents, local communities, local government, and other stakeholders in effecting a shift towards more sustainable approaches to development. Discussion centred on the following issues:

- The capacity constraints faced by all Pacific Island parliaments;
- The barriers to deepening and consolidating parliamentary democracy in each country;
- The core challenges for sustainable development in each country;
- The role of parliamentarians in addressing issues of underdevelopment.

Participants provided examples of how these challenges are answered in the Pacific Island countries and Australia.

As the Dialogue was held in Vanuatu, a considerable part of the program was devoted to political developments in Vanuatu. In September 2008, Vanuatu held its ninth national elections since independence. Dialogue participants were therefore able to learn about the conduct of the 2008 national elections and the formation of the new government led by Prime Minister Natapeti.

The Conference

CDI Deputy Director Quinton Clements formally welcomed participants on behalf of CDI and explained the role of CDI and the purpose of the Dialogue. He noted that this was the first time the Dialogue has been held in Vanuatu and the fifth time it has been held outside Australia. Mr Clements acknowledged the cooperation of the National Parliament of Vanuatu in organising the Dialogue and the support of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade and AusAid.

Mr Clements outlined the purpose of the gathering: to open a dialogue on some of the key challenges facing democratic governance in the Pacific region in order to
make it stronger and better. The Dialogue also provides an opportunity to look at aspects of parliamentary practice in other parliaments in our region. Whilst we all share a common parliamentary heritage – that of Westminster – parliamentary practice and procedure has been modified and adapted to suit local conditions in each of our countries.

He also noted that CDI had a particularly active involvement with Vanuatu in 2008, including working with the Vanuatu parliament in the post-election induction program for new MPs and would be assisting the Parliament with training on the role of parliamentary committees and in the review of its Standing Orders in 2009.

The Hon. George Andre Wells MP, Speaker of the National Parliament was scheduled to give the keynote address but unfortunately had to withdraw on the first morning due to ill health. His address was delivered instead by his Chief of Staff, Mr Jonas Cullwick. In the speech, Mr Cullwick pointed out that thirty Members out of a total of 52 were re-elected in the recent national elections in Vanuatu. He emphasised the need for Members of Parliament to act as role models for their citizens.

Following the keynote address, the remainder of the first day focused on Vanuatu. A panel comprising Mr Ati George Sokomanu (a former President of the Republic of Vanuatu), Professor Don Paterson (University of the South Pacific), Mr Derek Brien (Pacific Institute of Public Policy) and Mr Godwin Ligo (Radio Station FM 107) gave an overview of the 2008 national elections and the issues affecting Vanuatu. Mr Brien pointed out that there were 341 candidates spread over 29 political parties with 88 independents and that the electorate demonstrated a thirst for information with numerous media forums, talk back radio and policy publications. He noted that following the elections the Parliament is more fractured than ever and has been dominated by motions of no confidence and that there has been renewed debate on the effectiveness of the existing voting and parliamentary systems. Professor Paterson outlined what he sees as some of the disturbing features of the political system in Vanuatu including:

- the frequency of votes of no confidence in the government of the day as allowed for in the Constitution,
- shifting political allegiances;
- Lack of women MPs;
- Inadequate consultation with the public about proposed legislation;
- Inadequate consultation with the National Council of Chiefs;
- Inadequate sittings of parliamentary committees; and
- Inadequate parliamentary management.

The next presenter was Mr Martin Tete, Principal Electoral Officer. Mr Tete outlined the electoral system in Vanuatu – 52 Members of Parliament, 17 constituencies (11 multi-member, 6 single member) and discussed the conduct and outcomes of the 2008 national election in Vanuatu. Some of the main issues in the election were the discrepancies between constituency size, lack of an absolute majority for successful candidates, the number of wasted votes and the prevalence of “parachute
candidates”. Mr Peter K Taurakoto, Ombudsman, spoke next on what is expected of a national leader.

The Hon. Kailo Ture MP, a member of the government and the Hon. Moana Carcasses Lalosil MP, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition, followed with presentations on development issues, policies and trends in Vanuatu.

The second day was devoted to presentations from the participants. Each country delegation was invited to provide a short presentation on the development issues that their respective parliaments have dealt with. Each presentation was followed by a question-and-answer session. Following these presentations the New Zealand High Commissioner to Vanuatu, H.E. Jeff Langley, spoke. He firstly apologised for the absence of New Zealand MPs at the Dialogue because of the clash with the official opening of the Parliament for the first time since New Zealand’s election in November. He also noted that the New Zealand Government was pleased to support the Dialogue by providing funding to enable some of the representatives from New Zealand’s sister nations in the Pacific to attend. Mr Langley discussed recent political developments in New Zealand and then went on to consider why in many countries of the Pacific including Vanuatu debate over national policies is not always at the centre of politics and to ask how that may be changed.

The third and final day became with a panel discussion comprised of the Hon. Francesca Semoso, Deputy Speaker of the Bougainville House of Representatives, Ms Marie-Noelle Ferrieux Patterson, a former Chief Ombudsman of Vanuatu, representing Transparency International Vanuatu and Ms Ruth Lioqula, Permanent Secretary, Prime Minister & Cabinet, Solomon Islands. The theme of the discussion was leadership, corruption and accountability. The panel members spoke in detail of the importance of national integrity provisions and the need for compliance as a measure towards raising the image of Parliament and parliamentarians in the eyes of the public. They emphasized that respect for Parliament is an important aspect of good governance and law and order.

The final sessions of the Dialogue focused on the relationship between parliament and different aspects of development. Participants divided into four groups, each considering a particular thematic area:

- Parliamentarians and capacity development;
- The challenges of political development;
- Promoting sustainable development; and
- Economic development and parliament.

Each group then reported back to the plenary session. Participants then engaged in a robust and wide ranging discussion on the lessons learnt during the Dialogue, the ideas shared, and the challenges facing parliaments in the region.

The Dialogue concluded with a farewell dinner at Le Lagon Resort on Thursday evening. The guest of honour at the dinner was the Hon. Edward Natapei MP, Prime Minister of the Republic of Vanuatu.
Conclusion

On the basis of the feedback received by CDI, the 10th Dialogue was a successful event. This success can be attributed to a number of factors including:

- the background, experience and seniority of the participants;
- the countries invited;
- the high quality of the presentations;
- the level of engagement by participants;
- the substantive nature of the discussions;
- the theme of the Dialogue and the design of the program;
- the location chosen; and
- the logistical arrangements.

The theme of Parliament and development proved to be well chosen. Participants were clearly interested in sharing the experiences of their parliaments and countries and learning about approaches to common issues in other countries. The sub-theme of the Dialogue – introducing Vanuatu to the overseas participants – also proved to be of great interest. They heard about and saw a medium sized Pacific Island country with a rich cultural tradition but facing significant development challenges.

The level of engagement by all participants was impressive. All participants attended every session and all took the opportunity to speak, ask questions and share experiences and observations.

CDI sought feedback on the Dialogue from participants through an evaluation process. All respondents were satisfied with the organisation of the Dialogue. Participants were also satisfied with the content and structure of the Dialogue, noting that the right amount of information was provided and the program content was extremely relevant and useful to their work. Many participants noted that they found the opportunities to learn about other Pacific parliamentary experiences and practices and for “open discussions and networking” to be among the most useful aspects of the Dialogue.

In terms of the Dialogue outcomes and future initiatives, a majority of participants rated the Dialogue as excellent and all would recommend attendance at future Dialogues to their parliamentary colleagues. When asked how their participation in the Dialogue will assist them in their work, participants noted that many of the issues discussed were common across the region and that they derived “enormous benefit from the chance to exchange views openly and honestly about the political reality in their respective countries and the challenges they face”. All agreed that there is an ongoing need for Pacific parliamentarians to share experiences and ideas on best parliamentary practice and on the role of an organisation such as CDI in facilitating this.

CDI expresses its sincerest appreciation to the Speaker of the National Parliament of Vanuatu, Hon. George Wells MP; and the Clerk of the National Parliament, Mr Lino
Bulekuli dit Sacsac, and his staff for their generous assistance. CDI also acknowledges the invaluable assistance and support of AusAID, the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, and Le Lagon Resort in Port Vila. CDI hopes that the Dialogue has better equipped participants and further encouraged them in the long process of building better and stronger systems of democratic government across the region.