Report of the Professional Skills Development Course for Parliamentarians -
Parliament, Policy, the Press & the Public:
Preparing for the Challenges of being a Minister
21-30 October 2009
Centre for Democratic Institutions - Australian National University | Canberra

Developed by Hon Dr. Kay Patterson & Mr Quinton Clements assisted by
Hon. Moses Maladina MP

The concept of the course came from a suggestion made to Mr Quinton Clements, Deputy Director of the Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI), by the Hon. Dr Derek Sikua MP, Prime Minister of Solomon Islands, during a CDI training workshop for Members of the National Parliament in Honiara in April 2008. Mr Clements then invited the Hon. Dr. Kay Patterson, a former Senator for Victoria and Cabinet Minister to work with him in designing and developing a course which would target new and/or potential ministers from the Pacific Islands Region. The aim of the course would be to encourage through discussion, presentations and activities the development of an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of a minister in a parliamentary democracy.

Planning

The planning commenced in February 2009 with Dr Patterson and Mr Clements initially meeting for a full day to outline the objectives and structure of the course.

Consideration was given in the planning to try and maximize the participants' exposure to current Australian MPs so the dates were set to coincide with the sitting of Federal Parliament in Canberra. It was also thought important that as all of the participants were coming from unicameral systems that they spent time visiting the ACT Legislative Assembly. It was not possible to coordinate a date when both parliaments were sitting but with the assistance of the Clerk of the ACT Legislative Assembly, Mr Tom Duncan, we were able to visit the chamber and have an ACT Government Minister, Mr Simon Corbell MLA, and an ACT Opposition back bencher, Mr Steve Doszpot MLA, participate in a session. Throughout the course the facilitators compared and contrasted the bicameral system the participants were observing at the Federal level in Australia and the unicameral systems they represented.

In the planning the program Mr Clements and Dr Patterson were careful to ensure a proper balance in terms of political parties, gender, current and past members of parliament and to address the issues of ministerial responsibility from a number of points of view – Ministers
and former ministers, clerks and staff of the Federal and ACT parliaments, Chairs and Secretaries of parliamentary committees, ministerial staff, senior departmental staff, departmental liaison officers, presiding officers, and the media. They also included a focus on committees which monitor ministerial responsibility – e.g. Estimates, Scrutiny of Bills and Regulations and Ordinances. Other topics covered included Parliamentary Business – questions, the legislative process, parliamentary committees and enquiries, budget estimates (from the government, public service and opposition perspective), the parliamentary vs government roles, developing job descriptions and guidelines for MPs, parliamentary office-holders and ministers, cabinet and the concept of collective responsibility, working with fellow ministers, cabinet solidarity, the role of Hansard, accountability and the role of the Ombudsman and the Audit Office, Ministerial Conduct – principles of good leadership and good governance, ethics and codes for conduct of ministers, dealing with stakeholders, dealing with the party and implementing party platforms. Opportunities were provided for the participants to compare and contrast their parliamentary processes and those they were observing or being told about.

During the planning of the course Mr Clements and Dr Patterson believed it was important to ensure that it did not focus too heavily on “what we do in Australia” without the appropriate balance of an experienced former minister/member of parliament from the Pacific Region. Accordingly Mr Clements invited the Hon. Moses Maladina, Member for Esa'ala Open and former Deputy Prime Minister of Papua New Guinea to join the team of facilitators in order to provide this balance and perspective from the region to the program.

A day was also devoted to the relationship between the media and a minister, media releases and dealing with and using the media. The Presiding Officers of the Parliament of Australia kindly allowed the use of the broadcasting studio in Parliament House on the final day of the program for a series of mock media interviews. This enabled the participants to have realistic interviews – with two experienced journalists who gave their time freely (Alex Kirk of the ABC and Andrew Probyn of the WA Newspaper) interviewing each participant live to camera.


**Participants**

Invitations were extended to the parliaments of Papua New Guinea, Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Tonga, Samoa, Cook Islands and Timor-Leste. Nineteen applicants were accepted into the course. With the exception of the participant of Timor-Leste, all were parliamentarians in their respective countries and a number were currently or had been ministers in their governments. The participant from Timor-Leste, Mr Mariano Carmo, is a senior adviser to the National Parliament and the Office of the President with the United Nations Mission in Timor-Leste. His participation in the course was funded by and came at the request of the UN Mission.
Several participants from Papua New Guinea who had been accepted into the course and agreed to participate withdrew prior to the course commencing because of the vagaries of politics in PNG.

**Implementation**

Great emphasis was placed on the need for the participants to attend all sessions and the attendance of those who participated in the whole course was near to 100% except for one or two absenting themselves for a day due to sickness. One Papua New Guinean participant who was self funded together with two of the CDI sponsored participants from Papua New Guinea returned home early due to concerns about an impending vote of no confidence in the Prime Minister.

Tragically one of the participants from Vanuatu, Hon. Ture Kailo MP, passed away in the early hours of Friday 23rd October 2009 in Canberra.

Following this, the convenors asked the participants to decide if they wished to continue with the course or return home. It was obvious when they were told at what would have been the first session at 9 am on the Friday morning that they wanted to be together for the day but not to proceed with the program for that day. This was respected. During the day, with the wise counsel of one of the Samoan participants, the group decided that after having the weekend off that they should continue with the course - a decision supported by the convenors and which proved to be a sound one.

Considerable time was devoted over the months between the original planning day and the final draft of the program to refining the topics to ensure the participants were exposed to presenters who worked with or had worked with ministers enabling them to understand the range of people they would work with as a minister. The most time consuming part of the course was identifying, inviting, coordinating, and following up the wide range of presenters – Mr Clements and Dr Patterson used their networks to provide the participants with a wide variety of first rate presenters and this was greatly appreciated by those attending.

The level of interaction and engagement with the program by the participants was very impressive. From day one they were asking questions, making comments and generally involving themselves in the program in a very positive and encouraging way. None of the shyness or hesitancy that may have been expected for the first day or two was evident. The quality of the presenters (all selected for their known interest in sharing their knowledge and experience) made a major contribution to ensuring the interest of the participants was maintained at a very high level throughout what was a very long course. The convenors believe it would have been very difficult to conduct a course of this nature for anything less than 8 days – some of the units were truncated or morphed into other sessions when a day was lost due to tragic circumstances but the ideal would have been to use the whole 8 days. In the planning it was decided not to have evening sessions as the day were very full and the level of participation and interest justified this decision.
Lessons Learnt

The length of the course seemed appropriate – having 3 days and then a weekend seemed a good way to structure an 8 day course. Having access to a Parliament proved invaluable although running this course in an election year would not be advised.

The Senate Estimates Committees were sitting (which was not just fortuitous but taken into account in the planning) – meeting with the Senators on the Estimates Committee was a highlight for the participants especially when it was arranged for them to sit in the public gallery at the Estimates hearings and questions were being asked about accountability and Australian aid to PNG.

The contribution of the Hon. Moses Maladina during the program was crucial – it maintained a focus on the differences in our systems. For example, he is expected as an MP and therefore leader in his electorate to provide gifts for weddings and funerals – behavior that would be considered corrupt or bribery in Australia. There was considerable discussion about how this could be handled to accommodate tradition as well as to promote transparency and accountability. He also ensured that the sessions did not stray and were brought back to local examples which the participants could comprehend. The session were sufficiently informal that the convenors would ask a presenter to give an example, rephrase something or ask a question to elucidate a point and encourage the participants to do the same. The presenters were flexible and these interventions helped to ensure that the participants could apply what they were learning to their respective local situations.

If the course were to be conducted again changes could be made to the sessions involving the minister and his or her relationship with the media. All of this was handled on the last day. Mr Ian Hanke facilitated three very positive sessions on dealing with the media and then in the afternoon a role playing exercise was undertaken as mentioned above in the parliamentary broadcasting studio. It became obvious during the session two days before that none of the participants had ever been involved in drafting or approving a media release. They had been asked to prepare media releases on issues relevant to their constituents several days before – for example, legislation regarding which side of the road Samoans are to drive on. The participants required a great deal of assistance to draft anything which resembled a media release and need some examples of why they needed to be able to do this. An example they were given was needing to be able to send out a media release (which was of an acceptable standard) if they were Minister for the Environment and they wanted to make a point to the international media about the effect of global warming and rising sea levels on their island country.

More emphasis should be placed participants preparing for the course prior to it commencing – for example, asking participants to think about issues on which they may have to comment in the media, giving them some examples of media releases, explaining the importance of being able to communicate their position/views to the media and then allocating some time at the beginning of the course to working in small groups to develop media releases. Then the media sessions could be run on the day before they do the face to face interviews. The pre-course preparation and the spacing of this session would enhance its value. Although the participants all seemed to enjoy, value and learn from the media
training sessions the outcomes could have been improved had the lack of experience been anticipated.

Acknowledgements

Although CDI has thanked those who put so much time and effort into making the course the success it was we cannot allow this opportunity to pass without adding our personal thanks to the participants, presenters and those behind the scenes. In particular we would like to thank the Clerk of the House of Representatives, Mr Ian Harris, and the Clerk of the ACT Legislative Assembly, Mr Tom Duncan, and their respective staff for their unqualified support. We wish to also thank the Hon. Moses Maladina MP for participating in this most worthwhile project and providing outstanding leadership, advice, support and encouragement. The enormous contribution to the workshop of the staff of CDI - Suzanne Francis and Luke Hambly - was crucial in the successful outcome of the workshop. Their workload was intensified by the extent of the arrangements made necessary by the death, and return to his country, of one of the participants. Their contribution and professionalism was very much appreciated by all.

The Hon. Dr Kay Patterson Mr Quinton Clements