Report\(^1\) on the Professional Skills Development Course for Parliamentary Research Staff

15 - 22 March 2010

Centre for Democratic Institutions in conjunction with Institute for Peace and Democracy

Convened by Mr Ian Harris AO, Dr Ketut Erawan & Mr Quinton Clements

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\(^1\) Drafted by Mr Ian Harris, immediate past Secretary-General of the Australian House of Representatives
Overview

The Professional Skills Development Course held in March 2010 was specifically developed with research and technical staff from the Indonesian legislature (known as "Staff Ahli") in mind. During the planning and development phase, the target group was widened to include staff undertaking similar tasks with the National Assembly of Timor Leste. Two staff from the Bali Institute of Peace and Democracy accompanying Dr Erawan actively supported discussions and deliberations until their return to Indonesia. Indonesian staff were drawn from the Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat and the Dewan Perwakilan Daerah.

The course focussed on:

- Comparisons of the development of parliamentary governance in Australia, Indonesia and Timor Leste.
- Relations between the two Chambers in Australia and Indonesia.
- Parliamentary ethics and parliamentary service
- Assisting legislators with research, speech-writing, and legislative drafting.
- Interacting with legislators, the public and others.
Planning
Initially the content of the course was planned by Mr Quinton Clements, Acting Director of the Centre for Democratic Institutions, based at the Australian National University, Canberra, and Dr Ketut Erawan, Executive Director of the Institute for Peace and Democracy based in Bali.

Subsequent planning, consultation and implementation was undertaken by Mr Ian Harris AO, immediate past Secretary-General of the Australian House of Representatives and Mrs Erika Harris. The Parliamentary Relations Office of the Australian National Parliament and the Australian Parliamentary Library were closely involved with planning and implementation of the course.

The Centre for Democratic Institutions and the Institute for Peace and Democracy
The Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI) was established by the Australian Government in 1998 to support the efforts of emerging democracies in the Asia Pacific region to strengthen their political systems. Projects are aimed at improving political governance and political practice in partner countries and concentrate on parliamentary practice and leadership, the operation of political parties, democratic
institutional designs, constituency representation and similar themes and issues relating to the improving the effectiveness and quality of the work of national legislatures, parliaments and parliamentarians.

The Institute for Peace and Democracy is the learning community established to provide substantive, academic and technical support for the dialogue conducted by the Bali Democracy Forum. It regularly organises discussions on democratic elections, a multiparty system in a pluralistic society, effective legislatures, judicial independence, law enforcement in the context of human rights, anticorruption measures, media freedom, the market economy and social justice, strengthening civil society and the way in which a professional military establishment can help promote democracy. The Institute also engages in activities to promote peace and cooperation amongst nations.

One of the great strengths of the course was the way in which the understanding of the Indonesian and Timor Leste background provided by Dr Erawan and staff from the Institute for Peace and Democracy encouraged frank and productive discussion, as well as inspirational leadership on basic governance issues. This provided a perfect context in the ANU discussions for the practical experience of the immediate past Secretary-General of the Australian House of
Representatives and of Mr Clements, the then Acting Director of CDI, who has hands-on experience in the parliaments of Australia and Papua New Guinea, as well as extensive experience in other legislatures in the South Pacific.

**Implementation**
The course was conducted at the Australian National University and Parliament House, Canberra. The first two days of the course were conducted at the ANU Conference facilities and were extremely important for the development of group confidence and cohesion. The final day of the course also took place in a conference room at CDI's location within the Crawford School at the ANU and provided an ideal location for the final preparation and presentation of action plans, a task approached with a great degree of diligence by participants, and which provided an extremely rewarding experience to those who observed the presentations. The ANU presentations included a practical segment on research and analysis techniques, which was greatly appreciated by participants.

The sessions held at Parliament House were extremely beneficial. Staff from the Parliamentary Library, procedural research areas, the office of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition shared
experiences, provided practical advice and participated in meaningful discussion with course participants.

Highlights of the course within Parliament House were:

- observation of Question time in both Houses,
- a practical exchange of experiences in dealing with the Media,
- a reception by the Presiding Officers which included the opportunity for close dialogue with the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, senior parliamentary staff and the participants,
- formal recognition of, and welcome to the participants in the second Chamber of the House of Representatives, the Main Committee, and
- informal recognition and welcome in the corridors by the Prime Minister, the Hon Kevin Rudd MP.

**Outcomes and Evaluation**

The convenors placed great emphasis on providing the opportunity for a learning environment that developed themes in an Australian, Indonesian and Timor Leste context of:

- Understanding parliamentary governance and the role of the legislature in accountability of the Executive and in the legislative process,
• Interacting with the public, the Media and other stakeholders in order to improve the quality of legislation and parliamentary debate,
• Staff/legislator relations, and
• Practical advice and an exchange of experiences in undertaking effective research.

Convenor perceptions were that the group was extremely diligent and participative. All members of the group were keen to learn, to join in discussions and presentations, and to work towards the course objectives, as well as seeking elements and contacts that would assist the discharge of their current and future duties.

Participant evaluation, obtained and analysed independently, was, on the whole, extremely positive. Principal evaluation conclusions on course content were:

• 70% of participants felt that the right amount of information was provided.
• 85% of participants assessed the overall course as being excellent or good.
• 75% of participants believed that there was sufficient opportunity to discuss issues of common interest and concern with other participants, and
• 80% felt that there was a sufficient balance between presentation and discussion groups.
• 75% of participants assessed the total course contents or most of it as extremely relevant and useful to their work, and
• Most participants found all aspects of the course to be useful to them and identified no aspects as being the least useful.

The evaluation comments did point to room for improvement in facilitation and delivery of the contents. A knowledge of the English language was a prerequisite for participation in the course. The principal convenors, being aware of the challenges presented to participants by a course being delivered in a language other than their working language, delivered their sessions accordingly, but this awareness was not reflected by all presenters. This aspect could be stressed to Australian participants in any future formulations of similar courses.

Acknowledgments and Thanks
Many elements of a course of this kind enrich the experience of participants if the sessions are timed to coincide with parliamentary sittings. However, this places additional pressures on presenters who have parliamentary responsibilities. Special thanks are due to the Parliamentary Library of the Parliament of the
Commonwealth of Australia, to the staff of the Senate and the House of Representatives, the Parliamentary Relations Office and the Office of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition for being so generous with their time.

The staff from the Bali Institute for Peace and Democracy were also subject to a number of pressures, not the least of which was an impending visit to the Institute by the President of the United States of America. Due to American domestic circumstances, the presidential visit did not take place, but this was not known until the course was proceeding, and the Bali staff were required to balance competing priorities.

CDI itself was undergoing a challenging period during the time of the course, following the resignation of the Director and the move of the Acting Director (and course co-convenor) to the position of Senior Adviser to the President of the Australian Senate. This placed additional demands on Mr Luke Hambly, Ms Suzanne Francis, Ms Emily Blizzard, Ms Evi Fitriani and Miss Diah Esfandari (all of whom were involved in other programs including one based in Honiara, VIP visits such as that from Ministers from South Pacific countries etc). Successful delivery of the course would not have been possible without their dedicated support, which is greatly appreciated.