Australasian Study of Parliament Group
New Zealand Chapter
2006 Annual Conference

PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS
WELLINGTON
NEW ZEALAND

28TH – 30TH SEPTEMBER 2006
This report provides a summary of the 2006 Annual Conference of the Australasian Study of Parliament Group (ASPG) that was held at Parliament House, Wellington, New Zealand from 28th – 30th September, 2006. The following 7 new graduate staff members from the Parliament of Fiji, along with their supervisor Mr Alifereti Bulivou and CDI executive officer Luke Hambly attended the conference with funding provided by CDI.

1. Mr Iresh Lal
2. Ms Anaseini Boila
3. Ms Millen Chan
4. Ms Shabina Khan
5. Ms Fenella Fonmoa
6. Ms Portia Domonatani
7. Ms Agnes Nisha

The Clerk of the New Zealand Parliament, Mr David McGee arranged for a 1 day attachment for the above Fijian parliament staff members with the Research, Committee and Procedural Office on the day immediately preceding the conference to give the new graduates an overview of how things are carried out in the NZ Parliament. This provided the group with an invaluable introduction to the workings of another national parliament in the region, providing the spark for comparative analysis and consideration by the graduates of their roles in the Fijian parliament. This process was further enhanced with their participation in the ASPG annual conference.

This year’s conference theme continued to develop the 2005 theme of “Parliament and Accountability”, which focused primarily on parliamentary oversight of agencies’ roles and the development of oversight committees. Various speakers this year addressed the issues of financial accountability and the effectiveness of parliamentary processes in holding Ministers, Governments and public servants to account.

Sessions and group discussions were held around sub-themes that included:

- Historical and comparative overviews of the accountability of Executives to Parliaments
- Controlling the purse strings: parliament’s historical role; public accounts committees; parliamentary scrutiny of government expenditure; parliament and the regulation of governmental advertising
- Telling the full story? Parliament, the release of information, the role of the media, and the role of parliamentary enquiries
- Holding individuals to account: recent developments in ministerial accountability; minister, public servants and parliamentary committees
- The role of the opposition in holding government to account, including the adequacy of information sources available to non-governmental parties and MPs; and issues relating to institutional design, such as bi-cameralism, uni-cameralism, and the implications of parliamentary size (the number of MPs)
Many interesting issues and challenges were raised throughout the conference sessions. In the opening address, the Hon Margaret Wilson, Speaker of the NZ House of Representatives made the point that parliaments and their mechanisms of accountability and scrutiny of the executive need their advocates more than ever and the ASPG plays an important role in this area. She also stated that in a unicameral parliament such as NZ, well run and resourced committees, as the primary oversight mechanism, were clearly of central importance. So too, the speaker made the point that developing and maintaining opportunities for scrutiny and accountability of the executive by parliament is one thing, but whether, and how such opportunities are taken up is another.

In the key note address that followed on the first day, ASPG president the Hon Kevin Rozzoli picked up on some of the Speaker’s points, noting that parliaments are centrally about accountability, and its very important that they serve to raise the bar of accountability to get the best out of the people and processes of government, he spoke of the trend of increasing executive domination of government in ASPG member parliaments as concerning.

Further sessions reiterated the idea that over and above providing the opportunities, the quality of scrutiny is crucial, and that an independent parliament should be resourced accordingly to play its central role in helping this to be realized through committee work, library resources and the like. Some sessions were more conceptual in scope and others offered more technical assessments of various accountability mechanisms in the context of particular parliaments and what might be done to improve them.

For example, one session on public servants and committees in the NZ context shone light on the delicate balance and possible ethical issues concerning the role of public servants who can be called on to brief and advise both committee members, and MPs and ministers who may be appearing before them.

In sessions on Public Accounts Committees (PACs) in the region, the point was made that accounting practices and processes need to be the servant of greater accountability, not a substitute for it as was some times the case. Kerry Jacobs of Latrobe University presented a session on his comparative PAC research project across Australasia towards a best-practice analysis. While at an early stage in the project, a clear outcome was that PACs differ vastly across these parliaments - they are differently established, composed, chaired, funded, and exercise very different types and ranges of powers.

At the conclusion of the conference special mention was made of the participation by the Fijian and Solomon islands delegates, and the ASPG president was hopeful that such connection with pacific island states would become a regular feature of future ASPGs conferences. Certainly, all participants took the opportunity to make new connections to help facilitate the better accountability of parliaments. In particular for CDI, the opportunity to network extensively with MPs and staff from Australia’s state parliaments opened many new channels to enhance our work in the region.
By way of background, The Australasian Study Group (ASPG) was formed in 1978 to encourage and stimulate research, writing and teaching about parliamentary institutions in Australia and the South pacific. The ASPG comprises chapters based in the Commonwealth Parliament, each State and Territory Parliament of Australia, and in the New Zealand Parliament. Individual chapters run seminars and other functions on issues relating to Parliament. Current membership of the ASPG includes Members of Parliament, parliamentary staff, academics, students of political science, law and public policy, and research and policy officers. The ASPG holds an annual conference in Australia or New Zealand.

The ASPG produces a journal, *Australasian Parliamentary Review* twice a year and is currently edited by Professor Elaine Thompson.

**Acknowledgements**

The eight staff members of the Parliament of Fiji would like to express their sincere gratitude to CDI, in particular Mr Luke Hambly, for fully funding their attendance at the conference thus giving them the opportunity to network with their counterparts very early in the parliamentary career.

The lessons learnt from the conference and through the informal discussions with other parliamentary staff and members of parliament who shared their experiences willingly will put the new graduates in good stead in years to come.

A special thank you also goes to the staff of the New Zealand Parliament for facilitating the 1 day attachment and the warm hospitality accorded to us during our stay in Wellington.

Last but not the least, the assistance provided by the Fiji High Commission in Wellington is also acknowledged as without their assistance, the trip would have been less enjoyable, particularly for the staff members that were traveling for the first time out of country.