Introduction

From 1-3 June 2005, the Solomon Islands Ombudsman’s Office in conjunction with the Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Parliamentary Strengthening Project and the Speaker’s Chambers ran a workshop for parliamentarians and provincial premiers on Political Governance: Leadership and Accountability in the King Solomon Hotel Conference Room.

Designed to complement the wider ‘Machinery of Government’ efforts being implemented by AusAID, RAMSI and UNDP in collaboration with the Government of Solomon Islands, the workshop dealt with issues and processes of leadership, accountability, transparency, and parliamentary oversight within the context of constructive national and provincial government relations. The workshop was designed to contribute to the improvement of political governance and practice in Solomon Islands by focusing on the challenges, opportunities and benefits of quality leadership and accountability in government. It aimed to raise awareness among participating parliamentarians and premiers of the parliamentary oversight roles of key government departments, commissions, offices and committees by explaining their structures, functions, services and obligations in relation to leadership and accountability. Simultaneously, it provided a forum for MPs to discuss democratic governance in an open, progressive and non-partisan environment. By sharing comparative knowledge of the goals and benefits of these structures and processes in
both the Solomon Islands, Australia and key regional neighbours, the workshop organizers hoped to build the capacity and encourage the enthusiasm of MPs and premiers to continue to improve their leadership and accountability practices.

Background

The Workshop grew out of discussions between the Office of the Ombudsman of Solomon Islands and the Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI) about the desire to include National and Provincial politicians in discussions about the roles and functions of government departments, institutions and commissions, with a view to improving the processes of leadership, accountability, transparency and parliamentary oversight. The workshop was designed to provide Parliamentarians and Provincial Premiers with the basis for partnership and interaction on issues of mutual concern, particularly given the perception among local stakeholders that neither level of government communicates with the other effectively, and that provincial government was often beholden to the dictates of national MPs, irrespective of the actual constitutional arrangements in Solomon Islands. Given the technical nature of presentations, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) contributed further funding and organisational support to the workshop in pursuit of its overall mission to build capacity among Solomon Islands parliamentarians.

Resource Personnel:

The Office of the Ombudsman invited both regional and national resource personnel to present a series of topics or subjects to participants.

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mr John Smith Pitabelama</td>
<td>Ombudsman, Solomon Islands</td>
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<td>The Hon. John Hickey</td>
<td>Chairman, Public Accounts Committee, PNG</td>
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<td>Mr. Repe Rambe</td>
<td>Secretary, Public Accounts Committee, PNG</td>
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<td>Mr Mose Saitala</td>
<td>Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat</td>
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<td>Mr. Ila Geno</td>
<td>Ombudsman, PNG</td>
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<td>Dr Michael Morgan</td>
<td>Acting Director, CDI</td>
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<td>Mr. Walter Rigamoto</td>
<td>Ombudsman, Fiji &amp; Chairman, Fiji Human Rights Commission</td>
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<td>Hon. Sir Peter Kenilorea</td>
<td>Speaker of Parliament</td>
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<td>Matthew Wale</td>
<td>Solomon Islands Christian Association</td>
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<td>Robyn Henderson</td>
<td>Adviser, Cabinet Office</td>
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<td>Mr John Wood</td>
<td>Consultant, Ombudsman’s Office</td>
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<td>Ned Rokvic</td>
<td>Accountant General</td>
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<td>Marilyn Kodoleke</td>
<td>Director Budget, Budget Unit</td>
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Topics Covered

The technical sessions of the workshops sought to outline to MPs and Provincial premiers the respective roles of public servants and the transparent benefits of improved accountability mechanisms, including key oversight and accountability institutions such as the Ombudsman, the Auditor General and the Accountant General. All participants were provided with a resource kit to guide them through the workshop and to use in their roles as MPs. The kit included:

- Financial Instructions;
- General Orders;
- Ombudsman Act;
- Leadership Code Act;
- Parliamentary Entitlement Act;
- Hand outs from speakers.
- Certificates of attendance

Richard Woodgate, Deputy Auditor General, provided clear evidence of the waste of millions of dollars, lost through poor management, corruption and fraud within the government financial system. This was brought about by:

- Widespread non-compliance with the Public Finance and Audit Act;
- Serious breakdowns in critical management and accounting system; and,
- Millions of dollars of uncollected arrears in fees and licences.

Most of the presentations outlined the roles and responsibilities of various public service organisations. In short order these were:

- The Role and Functions of the Ombudsman;
- The Role and Functions of the Leadership Code Commission;
- The Role and Functions of the Speaker of Parliament;
- The Role of Executive Government & the the Cabinet Office;
- The Role of the Attorney Generals and the Legal Effects for Non-compliance with the Law of Procedures;
- The Conduct of Leaders and Requirements of the Law, with case studies form Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea;
- Quality Leadership: Expectations of Leaders;
- Role and Functions of the Auditor General;
- The Role and Functions of Committees in government, with in depth analysis of the cases of Solomon Island and Papua New Guinea;
- Role of the Public Service Commission;
• Relations between the Parliament and the Provinces;
• Parliament and the Protection of Human Rights;
• Constituency Relations;
• Procedures and Guidelines – National General Elections
• Procedure and Guidelines of the Republic of China Micro-project Scheme; and,
• Procedure and Guidelines of Rural Community Development Fund.

While the workshop was organised around these presentations it became a vehicle for broader discussions about the nature of public leadership in the Solomon Islands

Two main themes are worthy of note. Firstly, many MPs claimed that their institutions were weakened by a lack of resources. However, the PNG delegation stated that if MPs were serious about encouraging accountable parliamentary governance they were ideally placed to oversee the Executive because of their popular support. The Hon. John Hickey stated that the PNG Public Accounts Committee began operating without significant support from the Executive through budgetary allocations, but eventually demanded funding commensurate with the level of public support it received. Indeed, Hickey stated that his committee received excellent support from the general public, although its work necessarily attracted negative attention too, especially from those who benefit from the skimming of state resources.

Second, MPs were at pains to discuss the status afforded them as public leaders, and what effect their relations with constituents and their performance in office had on their public’s perception of them. Many members noted that they are marginalised by the Executive from decision making. The Legislature, they stated, has diminished in importance as a house of debate and decision-making for several reasons. Members noted that oftentimes MPs were insufficiently motivated to drive policy debates, especially where constituents pressured their representatives for material benefits directly, rather than demanding improvements to the economy or the application of uniform national policies aimed at economic growth, for example. This created an economy in which MPs were constantly torn between the specific demands of electors and the national interest. This tension became a prominent theme in the sessions about constituency relations and the disbursement of the RCDF and ROC micro-projects funds. After intensive discussions, most MPs agreed that accommodating local needs and the national interest were not mutually exclusive intentions, so long as decisions about which projects would be supported were made in the spirit of development rather than the unfair support of one group over another or exacerbation of grievances between communities in the Solomon Islands based on unequal access to state resources. Moreover, participants agreed that these funds should be expended and accounted for transparently by MPs, to avoid further charges of pay-offs and favouritism.
Participation in the workshop was consistent throughout, and the attendance of some 30 out of 50 parliamentarians indicates the interest that Solomon Islands MPs have in improving their performance as national leaders and thereby recuperating public trust in the Legislature, which was seriously shaken after the conflict in 1999 and the string of subsequent scandals which beset it have beset it since them. So too,

Although the workshop addressed several contentious issues, not least the poor performance of MPs in recent years and lingering charges of corruption and maladministration, all discussions were conducted in a professional and productive manner. Indeed, in his closing comments, Opposition Leader, the Hon. Francis Billy Hilly noted that many MPs thought of themselves as the leaders of the country anyway without taking their roles that seriously:

When we look at our past record we can see clearly that many of us have not done our jobs very well. We have simply been deficient in our roles as public leaders.

**General Remarks**

The workshop was both important and timely, especially considering the provincial elections which took place in Choiseul and Western Provinces in mid-June 2005, two weeks after the workshop, and considering the national general elections scheduled for early 2006. Moreover, few had had the chance to access the resources provided by the workshop organisers due to resource constraints.

Having resource personnel drawn from the region emphasised the point that many of the issues currently facing Solomon Islands MPs have been experienced to varying degrees elsewhere in the Pacific. The presentations by the Hon. John Hickey and Repe Rambe from the PNG Public Accounts Committee were particularly well received by Solomons participants, not least because the nature of the challenges besetting the PNG committee and its Solomon Islands counterpart were very similar. Sharing information, experiences and lessons learned with neighbouring countries reaffirmed the importance of regional approaches to strengthening democratic institutions.

The communique issued by MPs can be found on the CDI website.