Welcome to the Seventh CDI Annual Address. Each year CDI invites a person of high standing and achievement to come to this Parliament House and speak to us about the task of building democracy. We issue this invitation because of our belief that the work of the Centre for Democratic Institutions can best be accomplished by establishing a dialogue about constructing democratic systems, not delivering monologues on how Australia is building its democracy.

We have had a cast of most distinguished speakers over the past seven years. In recent years we have had the benefit of the wisdom of two of the Pacific’s great statesmen, the late Tony Siaguru of Papua New Guinea and Paul Tovua of the Solomon Islands. Today we complete the Melanesian spearhead with a distinguished speaker from Vanuatu.

CDI is based in the Coombs building of the Australian National University. One of the great benefits of being among the leading thinkers of the two great research schools located in Coombs is that we feed off the intellectual and networking capital of these two great schools. Another advantage is that, because the job of academics is to criticise, CDI comes in for plenty of criticism. Part of my job is to listen to it. One criticism concerns the Annual Addresses and, unfortunately Donald, your presence has compounded the problem rather than resolved it. All our speakers have been men. Hopefully in the next year or two we can begin the process of evening the gender ledger.

We are very pleased to have with us the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Honourable Bruce Billson, Member for Dunkley in Victoria. Mr Billson also chairs the Consultative Council that advises CDI on the direction of its work. One of the directions the Council wishes to see developed, is work on strengthening political parties in the region and Donald Kalpokas’ address today is part of that process.

I think it would be fair to describe Mr Billson as part of the generation of John Howard’s Prime Ministership because he entered parliament in 1996 and has been re-elected at the three subsequent elections. He became Parliamentary Secretary in mid 2004. I hope he will excuse my comment that the role of a Parliamentary Secretary can be quite difficult. The Parliamentary Secretary necessarily lives in the shade cast by the Minister and tends to be put in charge in those periods of political calm like over Christmas. Tsunamis don’t understand this basic political fact and so it was Mr Billson that led Australia’s initial response to the Tsunami disaster and did so, if I may say, admirably and effectively. We are delighted that he has found the time to join us today.
First I will call on Mr Billson to welcome our distinguished speaker. After Donald’s Address, there will be an opportunity for questions. After questions, please join us for an informal sandwich lunch at the back of the hall. Thank you all for joining us today.