Centre for Democratic Institutions

THE HONOURABLE ALEXANDER DOWNER MP
MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS

On the Occasion of the Inaugural CDI Annual Address Delivered by The Honourable Fidel Ramos, President of the Philippines, 1992-1998

Thursday, 26 November 1998

Excellencies, Honourable Members and Senators, Professor Terrell, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I am delighted to be introducing President Fidel Ramos, who is today giving the inaugural annual lecture of the Centre for Democratic Institutions.

The establishment of the CDI this year is an initiative of which I am particularly proud. My vision is that the CDI will give practical effect to the Government's commitment to supporting good governance and human rights. The CDI's role is to harness the best features of Australia's democratic experience and to provide a mechanism to contribute to the improvement of civil society in Asia and the Pacific. In Australia we are blessed with a vigorous working democracy under the rule of law, a free press, energetic civil society organisations, and effective and independent specialist bodies. While the Australian model may not always be directly applicable, I would like to think our neighbours can draw on our experiences and ideas as a basis for their own efforts to strengthen systems of governance.

To assist in this process, the CDI must deal with some of the larger issues at stake in the region, such as consent, transparency and accountability. This Annual Lecture will provide an on-going way of drawing attention to such issues, and I am happy the event is being held in Parliament House. While the CDI is based at ANU, it was always my vision that the CDI would integrate itself in the wider community, including the Parliamentary community.

I can think of no more appropriate choice to launch the CDI annual address series than President Ramos. Australia has had a long and strong relationship with the Philippines, but one which President Ramos then correctly characterised during his 1995 visit to Australia as one where the Philippines and Australia were 'looking past' each other.

Considerable effort has been made recently to ensure that the bilateral relationship is broadened and deepened. I made my first official bilateral visit to the Philippines in October 1997, where I opened the first Philippine-Australia Dialogue and signed, among other things, the Memorandum of Understanding for Joint Action to Combat
Child Sexual Abuse and Other Serious Crime. The second Philippine–Australia Dialogue will be opened in Brisbane tomorrow.

Australia is committed to the successful economic and social development of the Philippines, being the second largest grant aid donor after Japan, and leads in Defence Cooperation assistance. The high priority the Australian Government accords to the bilateral relationship is reflected in the Philippines' position as Australia's fourth largest development cooperation partner.

The 'All the Best - From Australia' promotion, which commenced in early November, represents Australia's official contribution to the Philippines Centenary of Independence celebrations. The promotion encompasses trade, cultural activities, sporting events and exhibitions, and is designed to reflect Australia's unique diversity, rich indigenous history and the extent of Australia's engagement with the Philippines in a range of fields. A growing Filipino community in Australia of over 90,000 people underpins this engagement.

It is a pleasure to welcome President Ramos here today. If there is one phrase that encapsulates Ramos' career, it is 'service to his country'. A graduate of West Point, he has held a range of important posts, including Secretary of National Defence, Chief of Staff of the Philippines Armed Forces and, of course, President. His service to his country has been recognised with an array of awards and honorary degrees, including several for his work in the promotion of peace and democracy in the region.

President Ramos' achievements were substantial during his six-year term. He set the Philippines on a stronger political and economic path, achieving this through astute alliance building and by projecting the image of a responsible, consensus-oriented, hands-on leader. He may be best remembered for his programmes of national political reconciliation with the three main threats to the country's internal stability, the military rebels, the Muslim separatists and the communists.

President Ramos oversaw a free and fair election in 1998. Just as he had won power through the ballot box after the Aquino Presidency, so he passed on the baton to President Estrada after his own Presidency, thereby reinforcing the Philippines' long and proud democratic traditions.

President Ramos can accurately be described as one of Asia's leading statesmen. No one is better qualified to speak to us today about democracy.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you President Fidel Ramos.