CDI was represented at a recent World Bank workshop on ‘Parliamentary Standards’, referring to standards of good performance appropriate to effective parliaments. Dr John Uhr of the Political Science Program in the ANU’s Research School of Social Sciences represented CDI at this important invitation-only meeting on 13-14 December 2004 in Washington, held to review international lessons about what works and what does not work in institutional strengthening programs devised for parliaments.

The meeting was formally convened by Frannie Léautier, vice-president of the World Bank Institute, on this occasion working closely with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) based in London. The CPA was represented by Director of Development and Planning Niall Johnston who has considerable field experience in democracy assistance. The aim of the meeting was to invite a small group of internationally-regarded organisations with experience in legislative strengthening programs to take stock of lessons about program effectiveness. It is worth noting that among the invited organizations was the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the Geneva-based body that is the world’s oldest institution representing international parliaments, here represented by its secretary-general, Anders Johnsson along with international affairs director Martin Chungong.

CDI was in good company: the only south-of-the-equator organisation among some very influential promoters of democracy, many with field experience in Asia and the Pacific. Not surprisingly, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) was
prominent (represented by Keith Schultz), as was the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, represented by Canadian Randi Davis). Other North American-based international bodies included the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), represented by Keith Henderson. A number of prominent US bodies were also present, including the National Council of State Legislatures, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI, represented by Scott Hubli).

Three features of the meeting stand out in Australian eyes. First, the prevailing focus on Africa and the troubled history of parliamentary developments in that continent. Second, the remarkable influence of the Canadian Parliamentary Centre based in Ottawa, here represented by its head, Robert Miller who has worked extensively with the World Bank Institute to help devise policy frameworks for effective institutional strengthening around the world, including in Asia. Third, the general agreement that the secret to success was the presence of institutional champions among the elected representatives and professional staff of the legislatures receiving assistance, supported by consistent encouragement and support from the central agencies of the relevant national government: at ministerial as well as bureaucratic levels.

The longer the meeting explored this last point, the more obvious it became that institutional strengthening of most parliaments required support from in-country coalitions of participating political parties (opposition as well as government, wherever possible) and professional parliamentary officials. Neither requirement is easy to arrange, and most democracy-assistance programs have difficulties in finding or forming such delicate coalitions of partisan political activists and impartial bureaucratic proceduralists. Civil society activists can often help, but not always. Lessons on how best to manage such coalition-building come from surprising quarters, often quite some distance from the front line of service delivery: for instance, the meeting was pleased to learn about the new masters in Democratization and Constitutional Design begun recently by the Constitution Unit, University College London (here represented by Bill Proctor).
The meeting concluded with one basic resolution, which was that more could and should be done to share lessons about what works. It appears that there is less of this than should be the case, in part because each aid organization is busy with pressing practical issues of service delivery. The meeting resolved to accept the welcome offer of WBI assistance and to support the WBI in establishing a clearing-house facility for international lessons on program effectiveness. WBI officer Rick Stapenhurst co-chaired the meeting with Niall Johnston, with both concluding that the WBI could add-value by facilitating something of a learning community among the many international organizations committed to institutional strengthening of parliaments and legislatures. The meeting concluded that although there was no ‘off the shelf’ model of institutional strengthening, there was much to be gained from closer sharing of the experience of those promoting more effective parliaments. And CDI will now be part of this new process.

John.Uhr@anu.edu.au
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