From 14–17 February 1999, several hundred democracy advocates met in New Delhi to discuss the ways in which democracy can be advanced around the world. Participants were drawn from all parts of the globe and speakers included the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson, and Nobel Laureate in Economics, Amartya Sen. The participants resolved to work together to build a worldwide movement for democracy. The founding statement pledged to "strengthen democracy where it is weak, reform and invigorate democracy even where it is long-standing and bolster pro-democracy groups in countries that have not yet entered into a process of democratisation."

Political leaders from democracies around the world, including Australian Prime Minister John Howard, sent messages of support. The Conference was attended by CDI Director Roland Rich, who later published an opinion piece on the Conference in Thailand's The Nation.

The Conference was sponsored jointly by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), based in the United States, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), and the Centre for Policy Research, based in India.

Amartya Sen's paper, "Democracy as a Universal Value", which was presented at the Conference and subsequently published in the Journal of Democracy is available on the internet. Professor Sen’s paper can be found at http://jhupress.jhu.edu/demo/jod/10.3sen.html.
IS DEMOCRACY AN EXPORT ITEM?*

Roland Rich
Director, Centre for Democratic Institutions

In February 1999, 300 democrats from 85 nations gathered New Delhi to work together to spread democracy throughout the world and launch a World Movement for Democracy. The conference was held in India, the world’s largest democracy, and organised by the National Endowment for Democracy, the leading democracy promotion foundation from the United States.

Democracy promotion foundations from Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States were supported at the conference by politicians, civil society leaders, academics, activists and political exiles. All were of one mind – democracy is worth the struggle.

A conference of kindred spirits makes for enthusiastic networking and strong team building but there needs to be a touch of provocation to excite the intellect. Perhaps inadvertently, the agent provocateur came in the form of former Prime Minister of India, I. K. Gujral, who in answer to a question made the unequivocal statement "democracy is not for export". Gujral said we must respect each nation’s sovereignty and not interfere in internal affairs.

Whether he realised it or not, Gujral was challenging the very raison d’être of the democracy promotion activists. If democracy is not for export then we need to review our collective mission statement.

The difficulty of the problem posed by Gujral was compounded by the message conveyed in the keynote address by Cambridge Nobel Laureate Professor Amartya Sen.

Sen argued that democracy was the best system for economic development. His rigorous empirical analysis demonstrates that famines occur only in authoritarian regimes. "It is not the lack of food that causes famine, it is lack of democracy". He supports the conclusion through numerous examples particularly in Asia and points to the sad case of the current avoidable famine in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, which, despite its name, is the least democratic country in Asia.

Sen broadened his argument beyond famine situations to deal with development more broadly. According to Sen, authoritarian regimes pursuing the "Lee Kuan Yew hypothesis" favouring disciplinarian non-democratic governance as the means of securing economic development are missing the point.

According to Sen, "the economic policies and circumstances that led to the economic success of east Asian economies are by now reasonably well understood. (They are caused) by ‘helpful policies’ which include openness to competition, the use of international markets, public provision of incentives for investment and export, combined with a high level of literacy and school education, successful land reforms, and other social opportunities that widen participation in the process of economic expansion. There is no reason at all to assume that any of these policies is inconsistent with greater democracy".

Sen also says, "the recent problems of east and south-east Asia bring out the penalty of undemocratic governance". He concludes that democracy is a universal value.
The Sen and Gujral hypotheses appear to be in conflict. If Sen is correct, then those working to bring about economic development should see democracy as an essential prerequisite for achieving their objective. International bodies and foreign governments working in development cooperation should take into account the need for democracy in their plans. This sounds very much like exporting democracy.

I believe both are correct. Sen’s analysis is convincing. Even the most benevolent of dictatorships loses the ability to respond to the people’s needs. There is nothing like an election and the prospect of losing office to focus the minds of the incumbents on the people’s needs. Democracy is a universal value and a universal prerequisite for sustained and sound development.

But Gujral is also right. Indian democracy is not exportable to any other country and neither is British, American or Australian democracy. We are happy to speak of the Westminster system but we cringe at the hereditary basis of membership of the House of Lords. We admire the rigorousness of the application the separation of powers doctrine in the United States but we are appalled at the way it led to the impeachment process. We are proud of the openness of Australia’s political system but Asians are aghast at the insults and invective Australian politicians fling at each other at Question Time in Parliament. Each country must find its own path to democracy based on its own history and culture.

This does not preclude an export role. The products that need to be exported are the skills that make democratic institutions work, the lessons learned from experimentation with electoral systems, the experience gained in ensuring accountability, transparency and popular participation.

This is the role for which the Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI) was established in Australia. It is to harness the best of Australia’s democratic experience in support of developing countries’ needs for good governance. Question Time dramatics may be a prohibited export item but there are many success stories in Australia’s democracy that other countries may wish to study. The Parliamentary Committee system with its public hearings and exhaustive reports, the fearlessness of the Independent Commission against Corruption, the competence of the Australian Electoral Commission, the support of the Ombudsman’s Office for people challenging the bureaucracy and the investigations of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commissions may all be relevant subjects.

Democracy promotion foundations like CDI therefore have an important job to accomplish.

*This article was published in the editorial and opinions section of *The Nation* on March 11 1999, under the title "Democracy is a Personal Thing"