The Commonwealth Secretariat has a keen interest in the Pacific. Nine of its 54 members are Pacific Island nations (Fiji Islands, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu) and the Cook Islands and Niue are associated states. In view of the difficulties being encountered in parts of the Pacific with representative democracy, the rule of law and accountability processes, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, the Rt. Hon. Don McKinnon, invited Heads of Government of Commonwealth Pacific Island nations to attend a Roundtable to discuss the challenges facing democracy in the region. A preparatory meeting of parliamentarians from the region took place immediately prior to the Roundtable to focus on the key issues. Four resource persons, including CDI Director Roland Rich, were invited to present papers to the preparatory meeting.

The Preparatory Meeting took place at the Mocambo Hotel, Nadi on 15-16 August 2002 to prepare a Report for the consideration of Commonwealth Pacific Island countries Heads of Government at their Roundtable on 19-20 August. The focus of the Preparatory meeting was on the particular challenges facing democratic governance in the Pacific taking into account different national circumstances, cultures and values and how the Commonwealth and Pacific Islands Forum might respond.

Discussion at the Preparatory Meeting and the Roundtable focused on broad issues and their application to the Pacific Island nations. Constitutions were accepted as essential instruments but they tended to have a western character that did not always fit neatly with the small communities of the Pacific. Future constitutional developments were widely seen to require improvements in consultative mechanisms. There was also a need to design governance institutions to meet Pacific needs. An important start had been made in terms of electoral system redesign in some participating countries. The checks and balances systems developed in other countries were not working well in the Pacific and ways had to be found to incorporate traditional forms of resolving conflict alongside the institutional mechanisms.

A recurring theme of the Preparatory Meeting was the role of custom in modern processes of governance. Pacific islanders have accepted many of the universalist concepts in the field of honest government and protection of human rights largely because much of it is based on religious learning and Christianity has become such an
integral part of Pacific life. The competitive and majoritarian concepts inherent in multi-party democracy are more difficult to integrate into customary processes where consensus and continuity are organising themes of life. All societies must accommodate change and the challenge for the Pacific was to find ways of retaining the cohesive strengths of custom while developing systems of governance that can function effectively in a globalised system.

Two of the friction points discussed at the Meeting concerned land and gender roles. Both had deeply imbedded customary practices associated with them and change was sensitive and difficult. Progress in accepting women in leadership positions in the Pacific has been particularly slow as demonstrated by the very small numbers of women in Pacific Island Parliaments. Concepts such as gender quotas and reserved seats for women were discussed but there was little enthusiasm in favour of instituting such structures. Though it was a long term process, the most enduring answer lay in civics education that explained the contribution women can make to leadership.

One of the greatest dangers facing many Pacific countries was the break down in law and order. Pacific participants said that in some cases outside assistance was necessary to restore calm. Alongside this, efforts were needed in strengthening the institutions that assure rule of law including the police.

Participants at the Preparatory Meeting and the Roundtable requested the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Secretariat of the Pacific Islands Forum to remain engaged in the process of improving governance structures.