I am pleased to present this report to the House on behalf of the President of the Senate, Hon. Senator Taito Waqavakatoga, and myself, following our attendance at the 6th Pacific Parliamentary Retreat in Wellington, New Zealand, between 15-19 November this year.

1. Overview of programme

This was the 6th retreat organized and run by the Canberra-based Centre for Democratic Institutions for regional parliamentarians under the chair of its Director, Mr. Roland Rich. This year’s theme was tradition and modern parliamentary democracy.

The week-long meeting was held in the Legislative Council Chamber of the New Zealand Parliament in Wellington, with support and sponsorship from both NZAid and AusAID. It was attended by 14 Pacific Island parliamentarians drawn from Samoa, Cook Islands, Vanuatu, Niue, and Fiji. It was also attended by the Former Speaker of the Solomon Islands and current Chairman of the National Peace Council, Paul Tovua, and Sir Julius Chan, former Prime Minister of PNG, both of whom made interesting presentations on aspects of traditional and parliamentary governance and leadership in their respective countries.

Apart from a few outings, including a visit to the fascinating Te Papa National Museum, we spent most of the week in formal sessions involving presentations and discussions. We were privileged to hear from a range of experts from the New Zealand Electoral Commission, Victoria University, and the New Zealand Parliament. They presented illuminating accounts of New Zealand parliamentary practice and the impact of electoral reforms, in particular proportional representation.
In spite of the heavy schedules of NZ parliamentarians during the week of our meeting, a number of senior MPs representing different political parties found the time to address our meeting, to share their experiences, and to offer their personal insights into the NZ parliamentary system, particularly the significant impact that the Mixed Member Proportional electoral system (MMP) has had on the composition and functioning of both Parliament and the Government. This greatly enriched the discussions as the presentations were highly informative, and engaging, as well as refreshingly frank and open.


It was our good fortune that the New Zealand Parliament was sitting during the retreat, and this provided a number of excellent opportunities to sit in on and listen to the very lively debate on the Government’s controversial foreshore and seabed Bill and the equally lively question time, a highlight of the daily parliamentary agenda which attracts considerable public and media interest. Because of the urgency of the foreshore and seabed Bill, the House hours of sitting were extended to midnight.

2. Observations

The general view amongst the participants was that we have a lot to learn from NZ parliamentary practices and rules and the role these have played in strengthening its democracy. As parliamentarians, we can and should be constantly looking for ways to strengthen our own democratic institutions and values. This includes being open to more equitable systems of political representation; to greater public participation; and to a higher level of government accountability to both parliament and the people.

The following are a few of the highlights of the retreat. It is hoped that they may provide useful reference points when we embark on our own electoral and constitutional reform in the future. They also raise some interesting possibilities for reforming our own parliamentary Standing Orders. A number of papers received during the course of the retreat have already been circulated to Senators.
Electoral system reform

There was a general consensus amongst NZ political parties, both government and opposition, that the MMP system which replaced the First Past the Post system in 1996 has changed the face of NZ politics for the better and generally strengthened its democracy. As a system of proportional representation, that combines MPs elected either from single-member constituencies or from political party lists, the MMP system basically ensures that political parties are represented in Parliament in proportion to their share of the nationwide vote. Overall, it plays a pivotal role in sustaining a framework of institutions, procedures and rules that promote a more robust democracy based on political equality, fairer representation, and greater popular control.

Specifically, MMP has created a stronger and more diversified Parliament that is more representative of New Zealand society. It has increased public participation (and in turn interest) in parliamentary processes and boosted the representation of minority or marginalized communities like Maori, Pacific Islanders, ethnic minorities and women who are now present in much larger numbers. MMP, in particular the Party List system, has brought a substantial increase in the proportion of women members of parliament, now tipping the scales at 29%, with 35 women in a 120-member Parliament. Interestingly, New Zealand now ranks as number 16 in the world in terms of women’s representation in Parliament.

MMP has also had a positive impact on the representation of Maori. Indeed, it has more than doubled their seats from 7 in 1993 (representing 7% of the Parliament) to 19 seats in 2002, representing 16% of the Parliament.

The new electoral system has also encouraged a multi-party system (there are 8 parties) accompanied by a wider range of political views (rather than a single party that dominates the parliamentary policy process on its own). It has significantly increased the representation of parties that were un or under-represented under First Past the Post, strengthened the role of smaller parties, and displaced traditional adversarial by more consensual politics based on compromise and power sharing. This gives all parties some role in decision-making and as a general rule requires government to build parliamentary support for its legislation.
Committee system

Another interesting outcome of New Zealand’s electoral reform relates to the parliamentary committee system. MMP has enhanced the importance and power of committees and New Zealand has definitely developed an exemplary system. Aside from ad hoc committees appointed for a specific purpose, 13 subject committees (broadly aligned to ministerial portfolios) form the backbone of an independent, inclusive and effective mechanism for examining and amending government legislation, scrutinizing the financial and operational performance of government departments and public organizations, and holding the government to account for its expenditure of public funds.

Committees are now acknowledged as playing a significant role in influencing policy. They have also been responsible for bringing about some important changes in the administration of some government departments. It is noteworthy that (contrary to our practice here in Fiji) all Bills as a general rule are sent to committees and in turn subject to public scrutiny and submission. This includes the Government’s annual Budget. In addition, and once again contrary to Fiji practice, the government generally accepts committee recommendations, and government bills have often been substantially amended as a result of public input.

A commendable aspect of the committee system is that proceedings are open to the public as of right. Public hearings generate a lot of community interest and participation (sometimes thousands of submissions – the seabed and foreshore Bill being a good example with around 4,500 public submissions received). The committees enable government to test out its proposed policies and hear the views of ordinary citizens. They also offer a way of assessing how thorough the government’s consultation with stakeholders has been.

Another positive feature of the committees is that chairing is shared amongst the different political parties represented in Parliament, and the Labour Government does not necessarily have a majority of members. In fact, only one out of 19 committees has a Government majority. This power sharing arrangement has helped to enhance the independence of the committees and even empowered them to initiate enquiries in the public interest even if these are opposed by the government of the day. Examples of such enquiries
include investigation into two cases of state corruption: one case involving the Inland Revenue Department and the other, the Fisheries Department.

It was interesting to note that the productivity of New Zealand’s parliamentary committees is said to have improved dramatically since the MMP electoral system was introduced. This is in spite of the fact that MPs do not get paid for meeting attendance. MPs do not receive any sitting allowances because this is deemed to be part of their service as MPs or legislators. Of course NZ MPs enjoy a higher salary than here in Fiji, but it is nevertheless salutary to note that so much important work is being undertaken, and with such enthusiasm and commitment, without any expectation of additional allowances.

In fact, we were told that the Pacific is the only region in the world where Members of Parliament are paid for committee work. There would seem to be some merit in reviewing our practice here. Removing payment for committee work would represent a budgetary saving to taxpayers. It would also ensure that MPs and Senators signing up for committee work do so for the right reasons - because of their interest in the issues rather than as a means of boosting their salaries.

Overall, parliamentary committees in New Zealand are marked by their openness, transparency and accountability. There is much that we can learn from.

**Question time**

Question time in Parliament is also a feature of New Zealand’s robust democracy, and it is recognised as an important part of parliamentary business. As such, the rules are designed to encourage and facilitate questions. Question time takes place at 2.p.m. every day and typically lasts up to one hour and a half. In contrast to our system here which requires 4 full days notice, questions are delivered on the same morning they are to be heard. Following a brief administrative check by the parliamentary secretariat, they are passed on to the relevant departments. Ministers are given less than three hours to prepare their responses before the House sits at 2.p.m. A total of 12 questions a day are tabled, and 60 supplementary questions shared proportionately among the parties. This means 72 answers have to be given by government each day.
Voting Procedures

In respect of registration and voting procedures, there are other useful lessons to be learned from New Zealand. On the whole, the system is designed to make voting as easy as possible. Voters can, for example, enroll right up until the day before polling starts. On election day, they can vote at any polling station around the country. Voters also have the option of voting early, up to a fortnight before election day.

Conclusion

On behalf of the President of the Senate and myself, I would like to thank most sincerely the retreat sponsors NZAid and AusAid, along with the Centre for Democratic Institutions and its Director, Mr. Roland Rich for the kind invitation to participate in this very worthwhile meeting; the Members of the New Zealand Parliament, and the hardworking parliamentary staff, including library staff. We also take this opportunity to express our heartfelt appreciation to the Stockholm-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance which co-sponsored with CDI a very generous gift of books to our parliamentary library.

Lastly, on a more personal note, may I add a word of thanks to the Hon. Speaker and FLP Leader, Hon. Mahendra Chaudhry, for sending me to this meeting. This was the first time I have been nominated to attend a conference on behalf of our Parliament since my appointment to the Senate in 1999, and I was most fortunate to have such a memorable initiation.

May I conclude by saying that a personal highlight for me was the opportunity to meet a number of inspiring Maori and Pacific Island women parliamentarians who are playing an active and indeed visionary role in New Zealand politics. They are not only representing the interests of their own Pacific Island and Maori communities. They are also passionately committed to building a more inclusive democracy and a more just society that will be a proud legacy for future generations; a society that embraces New Zealand’s ethnic and cultural diversity, in all its forms, and that respects the rights of ALL its people to belong; and to participate as equals in the governing of their country.

May God grant us the grace and the wisdom to do the same thing here in Fiji.