Purpose of the Retreat
From 22–26 November 1999 the Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI) in conjunction with the Centre for the Contemporary Pacific at The Australian National University hosted the Canberra Retreat on Parliamentary Democracy in the Pacific. The retreat was supported by AusAID. The purpose of the retreat was to discuss the ways in which systems of parliamentary democracy, inherited at independence, are functioning in the post-colonial Pacific. It sought to understand the complex ways in which western parliamentary processes have been incorporated into local social and cultural contexts intersected by gender, ethnicity and social conditions.

The broad themes around which discussion was organised included

- Political Parties and Parliamentary Democracy
- The Individual Parliamentarian and Parliamentary Democracy
- The Role of the Opposition in Parliamentary Democracy
- Ethics and Responsibility in Parliamentary Democracy.
- Managing the Economy and Natural Resources

Participants

Participants at the Retreat came from:

**The Solomon Islands:**
Hon William HAOMAE
Hon. Hilda KARI, Hon. Alfred MAETIA

**Fiji:**
Hon Gopal LAKSHMAN
The invitation to participate in the retreat was also extended to Vanuatu, but budget discussions and other pressing matters prevented the involvement of participants from Vanuatu.

Activity

In addition to formal discussions, the participants availed themselves of the opportunity of visiting Canberra to meet with officials of the Australian Electoral Commission, tour the Australian War Memorial, attend Question Time in the Federal Parliament, meeting with presiding officers, had Afternoon Tea at the ACT Legislative Assembly with Speaker Greg Cornwell, met Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and visit their respective High Commissions. The PNG participants also attended the PNG Update hosted by the National Centre for Development Studies at The Australian National University.

Summary of Discussion

Some participants presented brief written papers. The discussions, after brief introduction by academic facilitators, were free-ranging, open and engaging.

The session on political parties began with an overview of decolonization and the emergence of party-politics in the Pacific Islands. It was noted that the political process in the Pacific, as in many emergent and established democracies, was essentially party-driven, that broad-based political parties were a crucial to the successful operation of democracies. A number of questions were raised, around which discussion followed. The participants generally agree that a number of important problems faced political parties in the Pacific. Internal organisation, cohesion, discipline and loyalty was one of them. It was agreed that in this respect, there was much to be desired. Another problem was the extent to which political parties were dependent on the personality of their leaders rather than a coherent set of principles. Indeed, leaders often treated their parties as their private property. Parties were expected to be resource providers, yet they were themselves often in straitened circumstances. The question of
fragmentation of political parties along regional and ethnic lines was also discussed. At the end, all agreed that there was need for more education and more effort to strengthen political parties in the islands.

The session on parliamentary ethics considered a number of issues. Two provoked good discussion. One was the question of misconduct, which participants agreed, included conflicts of interest, failing to table documents or answer question, misusing parliamentary privilege and entitlements, using parliamentary position for party or personal advantage, seeking employment after parliament, discrediting parliament or otherwise discrediting it. The second issue was the purposes of a Code of Conduct. The Code, it was agreed, was not to be used as a controlling device but to set standards to assess and guide behaviour, provide basis for response, and reassure the community. Most Pacific parliaments have such codes, but they are not always easy to apply. It was agreed that bribery and mismanagement were common throughout the Pacific.

The session on the individual parliamentarian focussed on the moral and intellectual conflicts and tensions inherent in the role. Individual parliamentarians have duty to their conscience, their constituents, to their party and to parliament itself, to defend its honour and integrity. Sometimes, loyalty to the church or faith also intervenes. Parliamentarians had to balance the long term interests of their countries with the short-term interests of their constituents. Much was expected of them. As one participant put it, ‘What is theirs is theirs. What is ours is theirs, too.’ Some participants lamented the fact that they had no previous training in being a parliamentarian, which sometimes led to conflicts of interest and allegations of corruption, especially as membership of parliament opened many doors and windows of opportunity for them.

The animated discussion in the session on the role of the opposition in parliamentary democracies revealed that many Pacific cultures did not comprehend the nature of that aspect of parliaments. The participants recognised that a robust opposition was vital to the success of a healthy democracy, but the ordinary people had great difficulty in understanding this. A large part of the difficulty here lay in the fact that in many Pacific cultures, business is conducted in a consensual manner, and often, especially in Polynesia, leadership was the prerogative of chiefs. Even legitimate criticism of the policies of political leaders of chiefly background was seen as disrespectful not only to the person concerned but also to the region, group, tribe or clan that he or she represented. Some countries, notably Fiji, had recently adopted a formula for governance in their constitution which reduced the adversarial nature of Westminster democracy, but it was too early to tell whether this will in fact work.

The session on the economy and the management of natural resources discussed, among other things, the best method of harvesting natural resources and deciding their sustainability. Participants discussed the enormous financial and political pressures to develop resources, not always in the way that served the national interest. The question of forestry management in the Solomon Islands was raised as a case study in this regard. Many participants talked about the inability of island governments to negotiate effectively with multinational companies. Often they did not have agencies or statutory institutions within the countries to co-ordinate efforts of various branches of government and the private sector dealing with a particular resources such as fisheries or forestry. The inequity in the distribution of income derived from the exploitation of natural resources among the various resource owners was also raised, the case
study cited being the Native Land Trust Board in Fiji.

**Conclusion**
The Canberra Retreat was judged by the participants to be a great success, as indicated in their comments in the assessment sheets. They appreciated the efforts of the organisers and the opportunity to meet with Australian officials and counterparts. Most of all, though, they valued the opportunity to share their experiences with their other Pacific colleagues. What emerged, as the discussions proceeded, was that the Pacific Island States shared many problems in common. They unanimously recommended that similar retreats, on different themes, should be organized on a regular basis.

The organisers of the Retreat, the Centre for Democratic Institutions and the Centre for the Contemporary Pacific at The Australian National University, appreciate the support of AUSAID.