Lao PDR has been transformed since the Lao Government began the transition to the market economy in the late-1980s. These rapid and major social and economic changes have placed increasing pressure on the Lao Government to modernise its political institutions.

The purpose of the study tour was to introduce senior Lao officials to the theory and practice of Australian democracy in order to stimulate discussion and thinking on reform of Lao political institutions, particularly in the wake of the recent Asian economic crisis. The study tour was organised by the Centre for Democratic Institutions (CDI) and co-funded by CDI and UNDP through two governance projects: LAO/96/008 : Capacity-building Assistance to the National Assembly and LAO/97/009 : Governance and Public Administration Reform. The study tour was held over two weeks: the first in Canberra and the second in Darwin. The programme for the first week of the study tour was designed and delivered by CDI and the second by the Australian National University's North Australia Research Unit (NARU).

A delegation of seven senior Lao Government officials participated in the study tour, comprising elected members of the National Assembly (MNAs), staff from the National Assembly and an official from the ruling Lao People's Revolutionary Party.

The Lao delegation arrived in Australia on Sunday 8 August and were welcomed to Canberra by the Ambassador of the Lao PDR to Australia and the Director of CDI, Mr Roland Rich, who was also Australia's former Ambassador to the Lao PDR.

The Lao delegation was taken to the top of one of the ACT's highest mountains, Mt. Ainslie, to provide a panoramic view of Canberra, Australia's national capital. A visit was also organised to the Australian War Memorial and Museum to provide the Lao delegation with an introduction to Australia's history, particularly its involvement in 20th Century conflicts and their impact on Australia's national identity. The Lao delegation could relate this visit to their own national experience of war and revolution in the second half of this century.
Canberra Programme
The Director of CDI, Mr Roland Rich, conducted the opening session on the morning of Monday 9 August where he introduced the Lao delegation to the Australian system of government including federalism, constitutionalism, representative government, separation of powers and multi-party democracy. He discussed the One Nation phenomenon, which has been an issue of particular interest to Australia's Asian neighbours. Mr Rich also distributed copies of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 1999 resolution on Promotion of the Right to Democracy.

'River of No Return'
Mr Rich showed the Lao delegation a video of a number of pilot episodes of a Lao-language soap opera, River of No Return, which had been a Lao National TV production supported by the Australian Broadcasting Commission and AIDAB (now AusAID). These pilot episodes were produced to increase the popularity of Lao TV programmes in the face of foreign competition. The Lao Government has withheld permission to broadcast these pilot episodes or to continue production of the series.

The Lao delegation shared their views on the video screening, which touched on the role of the mass media in social and political development. The Lao delegation agreed to take a copy of these pilot episodes back to their country for further consideration by the authorities.

Australian Electoral Commission
The Lao delegation visited the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) Education Centre on the afternoon of Monday 9 August. The Centre's target audience is primarily school children and the Lao delegation were very interested in how young Australians are educated about their democratic election process.

The visit to the Centre was followed by a meeting with AEC representatives who discussed Australia's electoral system and how the AEC assists developing countries with their election process. The Lao delegation were interested in the independence of the AEC and Australia's commitment to compulsory voting.

In the Lao PDR, both National Assembly Members and Village Chiefs are directly elected by the people. There are no plans to extend direct elections to Provincial Governors, District Leaders or Mayors who are all currently appointed to their positions.

Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Scheme
On Tuesday 10 August, the Lao delegation inspected the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Scheme, Australia's largest hydro electric system. Hydro electric power is very important for the development of the Lao PDR both for domestic use and as an export earner. The 681 megawatt Nam Theun 2 project, which is awaiting World Bank approval, will double Lao PDR's generating capacity.

In the morning the Lao delegation visited the Information Centre and Headquarters of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority in Cooma where it was addressed by Mr Barry Dunn, Manager-Water Resources. The Scheme is both an energy and irrigation project which also needs to be sensitive to the environment. The Lao
The delegation was very interested in the political challenge of balancing the needs of competing interests.

The Delegation at the Information Centre of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority
In the afternoon the Lao delegation visited the picturesque town of Talbingo and its dam on the way to a guided tour of Tumut 3 which is Australia's largest hydro power station. The bus trip through the Snowy Mountains also gave the members of the Lao delegation the opportunity to experience snow, some for the first time, and to see mobs of kangaroos and emus in the wild which are native animals that also appear on Australia's coat of arms.

Anti-Corruption
On the morning of Wednesday 11 August, Dr Peter Larmour, National Centre for Development Studies, Australian National University made a presentation on anti-corruption strategies to the Lao delegation. Dr Larmour explained the different dimensions of corruption which he defined as the use of public office for private gain. The Lao delegation defined the Lao word for corruption as swindling from the Government and hiding from the people. The delegation was shown a short video on the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) in New South Wales, which was modelled on the Hong Kong commission. In the Lao PDR, the Party's Control Committee plays an important role in combatting corruption. Dr Larmour and the Lao delegation discussed a range of anti-corruption strategies for developing countries where economic transition can exacerbate corrupt tendencies. In summary, Dr Larmour presented the corruption equation of 'monopoly + discretion - accountability = corruption'.

Public Administration Reform
On the afternoon of Wednesday 11 August, the delegation visited the Commonwealth Government's Public Sector and Merit Protection Commission where presentations were made on recent public administration reforms in Australia's Federal Government. Mr Peter Kennedy, Deputy Public Service Commissioner, explained the role of the Commission and the Australian Government's public administration response to the current challenges facing the public sector which included managing in volatile times, building the top line, information technology, globalisation, costs and business processes, and managing people. The relationship between the elected politicians and the independent bureaucracy appears to be more dynamic in Australia than in the Lao PDR where the demarcation is less marked. A new set of Australian public service values and code of conduct was shared with the Lao delegation.

Political Parties
On the morning of Thursday, 12 August, Professor John Warhurst, Faculty of Political Science, Australian National University, made a presentation to the Lao delegation on the role of political parties in the Australian system of Government. This session was complemented by a session on the afternoon of Friday, 13 August with representatives of the Australian Labor Party and Liberal Party of Australia. The presentations and discussions addressed issues of membership, organisation, policy development, campaigning, electoral support and funding of the major political parties. The importance of revitalising political parties after long periods in power was also noted.
Gender and Politics
Later in the morning of Thursday 12 August, Dr Sharon Bessell, Centre for Democratic Institutions, Australian National University, made a presentation to the Lao delegation on representation of women in the Australian system of Government. The UN target for female representation in Parliament is 30 percent but the worldwide average is 13 percent with Australia at 25 percent and the Lao PDR at 21 percent. Dr Bessell described mechanisms for increasing female representation in Parliament which included quotas of women for both parliamentary members and candidates. In Nordic countries, there are also quotas for men to ensure gender neutrality. Support mechanisms for women in politics such as "Emily's List" and women's caucuses or networks were also discussed.

Federal Parliament
On the afternoon of Thursday 12 August, the Lao delegation in the company of the Ambassador of the Lao PDR to Australia visited Parliament House where they were the guests of the Speaker of the House of Representatives during Question Time. The Lao delegation observed during Question Time the directness of the questioning and answering, the presence of both the Prime Minister and Ministers, and the respect with which all MPs complied with the Speaker's rulings.

Following Question Time, the Lao delegation met with Mr Geoffrey Barker, Foreign Affairs and Defence journalist for the Australian Financial Review and a senior member of the Parliamentary Press Gallery who discussed the role of the media in reporting on politics and Government in Australia.

The Lao delegation also met with the Joint Standing Committee on Defence, Foreign Affairs and Trade of the Federal Parliament. A number of the Committee's members had visited the Lao PDR in the past.

Governance and Democracy in the Asia-Pacific Region
On the morning of Friday 13 August, Professor Tony Milner, Faculty of Asian Studies, Australian National University, made a presentation to the Lao delegation on governance and democracy in the Asia-Pacific region with respect to both the Australian and Lao experiences. Professor Milner discussed different concepts of democracy although all had the concept of 'the people' in common. Professor Milner explained that democracy is an important development issue.

Review and Possible Future Follow-Up
A review session of the first week of the study tour in Canberra was conducted on Friday 13 August. The members of the Lao delegation commended CDI on the content and format of the programme which it felt addressed the most relevant governance issues in the Lao context and had an appropriate balance of classroom and field activities.

In terms of follow-up, the Lao delegation felt that there may be potential for developing relationships between the National Assembly and the Parliament of Australia (such as staff exchanges) and that Australia might be able to support the development of the Ombudsman function in the Lao PDR.
Three specific follow-up activities were drawn to the attention of the Lao delegation for their consideration. These were working with ANU experts to develop an anti-corruption strategy for the Lao PDR, engaging an Australian constitutional expert to lead a discussion on the theory and practice of international constitutional reform, and working with CDI to organise a seminar to strengthen female representation amongst elected village chiefs.

The first week of the study tour in Canberra concluded on Friday 13 August.

Darwin Programme
On the morning of 16 August, the delegation flew to Darwin where they were hosted by the North Australia Research Unit (NARU).

On arrival, the delegation was met at Darwin Airport by Dr Christine Fletcher (Unit Director), Janet Sincock (Divisional Administrator) and Keith Gardner (Director DFAT). Their first comments were how much the local climate reminded them of home! Members of the delegation were very interested in the vegetation and the NARU gardener to provided information on plants in the area.

Government and Democracy in the Northern Territory
The group spent Tuesday 17 August at Parliament House. Dr Fletcher presented an overview of the evolution of democracy in the Northern Territory, and provided some background to the Territory form of government. The delegation attended Question Time and then lunched as special guests of the Speaker.

The leader of the group, Dr Thongloun Sisoulith, became very interested in Australia's live cattle trade to East Asia, which goes through the Port of Darwin. One of the Members suggested that they should meet with the Minister for Asian Relations and Trade whilst in Darwin, but the Minister was about to leave for Melbourne. However, Darwin being the small place that it is, when the group entered a lift on the 4th floor of Parliament House, the Minister for Asian Relations and Trade was a captive lift passenger. By the time everyone reached the ground floor, they parted on a first name basis!

The Court System
On the afternoon of Tuesday 17 August, the delegation visited the Supreme Court where the Sheriff explained the role and structure of the court and the jury system. The delegation was particularly impressed by the Court of Appeals. The only court sitting on that day was the Federal Court, which is housed in the same building. The group spent a few minutes sitting in on proceedings.

State, Territory and Federal Relations
On Wednesday, Dr Fletcher ran a series of seminars throughout the day. Topics included the Australian federation and the structures and principles of our financial transfer system. The delegation was interested in the different powers of the States and Territories, particularly the differences between the Territories. The Commonwealth Grants Commission attracted most of their attention because several other countries have borrowed Australia's method, especially those in the Asian region.
Lunch that day was a spectacular bush tucker event by the pool. The lunch was organised and hosted by a Larrakia consultant who provided sumptuous food - freshly caught crab, magpie goose and barramundi. The Honourable Warren Snowdon, Federal Member for the Northern Territory, attended the lunch.

Visit to Palmerston
On Thursday 19 August the Department of Asian Relations and Trade provided a tour of the Port of Darwin Authority where live cattle were being prepared for export. After the Port, the delegation visited Palmerston, a large and relatively new housing estate in a satellite city on the edge of Darwin.

Visit to Government House
On the afternoon of Thursday 19 August the delegation visited Government House where the Secretary to the Administrator of the Northern Territory conducted an informative tour of the House. Upon returning to NARU Dr Fletcher reviewed the monarchical aspects of government and the role of governors and administrators in the Australian system.

Local Government
On the morning of Friday 20 August Dr Fletcher presented a seminar prior to the delegation's visit the Darwin City Council. Members of the delegation were especially interested in how the local government systems operate, particularly the municipal system that Australia inherited from Britain. The seminar covered the relations of local government to the globalisation process, local government and regional systems and the relationship of the European Union, and the Euro, to trade in the Asian region. The group also discussed representation of local government through peak organisations both domestically and at the international level. That seminar provided the delegation with a strong grounding for their visit with the Mayor of Darwin.

The delegation spent an hour at the Council Chambers and then went on to Energy House for a presentation on of the Adelaide-Darwin railway by the Northern Territory Government. The visit was organised by the Northern Territory Department of Asian Relations and Trade whose project officer assisted with the group's questions. The Northern Territory Department of Asian Relations and Trade also hosted the delegation's visit to Crocodylus Park, the world's most unique crocodile attraction

The study tour concluded with a dinner on the evening of Friday 20 August, when the delegation were guests of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Ms Jennifer Prince, Deputy Under Treasurer, and Mr Ian Prince, from the Department of Asian Relations and Trade, also attended the dinner

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The Lao delegation was particularly impressed with the way in which Question Time operates in Australia. The requirement that all Ministers attend Question Time and the opportunity to ask questions of senior members were seen to be important components of a democratic parliament.

On returning to the Lao PDR, members of the delegation held discussions with the Standing Committee of the National Assembly which resulted in a Question Time
being introduced into the National Assembly during its sitting in October 1999. All Ministers were requested to attend the session to answer questions from the people's representatives.

Participants

The members of the delegation were:

H.E. Dr. Thongloun Sisoulith, MNA  
Leader of the Delegation and Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Assembly

H.E. Dr. Thongphanh Chanthalanon, MNA  
Vice-Chairman of the Committee on Social and Cultural Affairs of the National Assembly

Mr. Khamphong Soulinphoumy  
Chief of the Vientiane Prefecture Constituency Office of the National Assembly

Mr. Thayaphone Singthong, MNA  
Member of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Assembly and Vice-Governor of Khammouane Province

Dr. Phankham Viraphanh  
Vice-President of the Central Committee of Organisation and Personnel of the LPRP

Mr. Samane Souvannasao  
Deputy Chief of Cabinet of the National Assembly

Mr. Thongda Souphasith  
Deputy Head of the Foreign Relations Department of the National Assembly