INTRODUCTION

Over thirty leading experts from Government and university institutions in Vietnam attended a Train the Trainer workshop held from 6 to 10 August 2004 in Ha Long Bay to discuss parliamentary strengthening including constituent representation in a comparative Australian-Vietnamese context. The workshop, funded by Danish International Development Assistance (DANIDA), was facilitated by Mr Roland Rich from CDI and Dr Nguyen Si Dung from the Office of the National Assembly (ONA). The training course was a staging post for the Vietnamese participants to consider suitable training practices for a newly established Resource Centre within the ONA to equip National Assembly Members with the capacity to perform their representative role in the electorate more effectively.

To generate ideas and to define a suitable training program for Members of the National Assembly, the workshop provided an opportunity for dialogue on useful adult education methods and the tools or skills required for effective constituent representation. The Hon Margaret Reid Senator for the Australian Capital Territory, former President of the Senate and Ms Vicki Bourne, former New South Wales Senator, shared their experiences on constituent representation and how they used the Australian Parliamentary processes to advance the interest of their states and constituents. Mr Ngo Anh Dung, Vice Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Assembly and Mr Tran Quoc Thuan, Vice Chairman of the ONA, exchanged the contrasting Vietnamese experience of constituent representation.

BACKGROUND

Since amendments to the Constitution of Vietnam in 1992, there has been great emphasis on the law-making function of the National Assembly as Vietnam makes its transition to the Rule of Law and a market economy. This is happening within the context of Article 2 of the Vietnamese Constitution which states that Vietnam is a “law-governed socialist
State”. Although the Rule of Law in Vietnam is still very much a work-in-progress, the record number of laws passed by the National Assembly to modernise the country’s economic, civil and government institutions is greatly enhancing the impact and importance of legislation.

The role of elected National Assembly Members has been to approve the legislative agenda set by the Party and to introduce Party Policies into law. However, Members of the National Assembly have in recent times grown much more vocal in questioning Government policies and practices.

For the National Assembly to act effectively as the people’s representative body, the role of the National Assembly Members must be strengthened. Members of the National Assembly are elected by the people for a period of five years and Members either operate in a full time or part time capacity. At the 2002 elections, 500 Members were elected of which about 125 Members served full time.

This Train the Trainer workshop was designed to strengthen the capacity of National Assembly Members by helping the Vietnamese workshop participants to design processes that will provide National Assembly Members with greater skills and knowledge to represent their constituency. CDI developed the design in consultation with ONA and Danida. Roland Rich was assisted in the workshop by former CDI summer scholar, Mr Minh Duong, Research Assistant, Office of Drug & Alcohol Policy, The Cabinet Office, NSW Government.

WORKSHOP PROGRAM

The agenda for the Train the Trainer workshop is annexed as well as the list of participants and the PowerPoint slides of each presenter.

DAY 1
An evening opening ceremony marked the beginning of the Train the Trainer workshop. His Excellency Mikael Winther, Charge d’Affairs, Royal Danish Embassy opened the workshop by emphasising the remarkable achievements of Vietnam over the past ten years beginning with Doi Moi. Mr Winther spoke of the importance of the National Assembly and its Members in achieving the Rule of Law in Vietnam and acknowledged that Members were beginning to perform the necessary role of a legislature in overseeing the Government’s performance. The Workshop and the proposed Resource Centre were intended to boost the National Assembly’s capacity to represent local interests and issues.

DAY 2
The session began with each participant introducing his or her neighbour concentrating on what each participant was hoping to achieve over the next two years. This was followed by a physical exercise where two groups competed against each other to solve a problem that appeared deceptively simple. Mr Roland Rich then gave a presentation on ‘Best Practice in Parliamentary Education’ where he conceptualised the process of adult learning and the specific techniques that would better facilitate learning outcomes for
adults and in particular to facilitate learning needs within the Vietnamese context for
Members of the NA.

Ms Margaret Reid gave a presentation on the Australian Parliamentary System and the
three roles of Members of Parliament, which included being a legislator, being a
constituent representative and being a party Member. Ms Reid reflected on her 22-year
political career as a Senator and how she learnt to become more effective as a Member.
Ms Reid spoke of the need for politicians to specialise in areas of most interest and the
importance of being active and responsive to the electorate.

Ms Vicki Bourne presented twelve principles to being a good Australian politician
collated from her experience of being a Senator for New South Wales. These principles
included the ability to think strategically, have clear and achievable goals, and to be
thoroughly prepared on a particular specialised issue of interest.

In the final session of Day 2, participants entered into groups to discuss the ideal
legislator and the current weaknesses of full time and part time Members of the National
Assembly. This discussion focused on the sort of skills required by members of the
National Assembly to do their jobs effectively.

Workshop Discussions

The participants were most interested in Mr Roland Rich’s presentation and
acknowledged the difficulties of applying adult education and learning processes within
the Vietnamese context. They recognised the usefulness of case studies, role plays and
other innovative techniques in training Vietnamese adults. However, they questioned how
the adult learning methods could apply to Members of the National Assembly given the
issue of title and status of Members in Vietnamese society. Vietnamese society paid
deferece to people of status and this had to be factored into any training program.

During the presentations of both Ms Margaret Reid and Ms Vicki Bourne, participants
were interested to know the development of law and policy within a Westminster System
of Government. Participants also queried and discussed how conflicting interests could be
settled between the national and constituent interests as well as the interests of the
political parties. Participants were also interested in the role of the media and how
Parliamentarians engage with it.

In discussions on the needs of full time and part time Members of the National Assembly,
the participants identified the skills that could be further developed by Members. The
following skills or qualities were found to be important and could be part of a training
program for National Assembly Members:
    a) analytical skills;
    b) time management skills;
    c) confident public speaking, media and lobbying skills;
    d) listening skills;
    e) understanding of institutional processes.
Participants agreed that these were the sorts of skills that could be enhanced through appropriate training programs.

**DAY 3**

Ms Vicki Bourne presented both the formal and informal avenues to obtain views and opinions from constituents about a Bill before the Australian Parliament. Ms Bourne discussed the formal consultations which involved the Senate Committee and Inquiry processes and the informal consultation which included meetings with individuals and groups in the electorate, discussions on radio and television and obtaining the views from concerned interest groups. Ms Bourne also shared what she thought was the necessary skills and qualities required by a Member of Parliament in the consultation process which were good listening and media skills, knowing how to deal with difficult people and being thoroughly prepared on the issues before a formal inquiry.

Mr Tran Quoc Thuan described a consultation process that engaged the public by holding meetings with expert and focus groups, obtaining feedback from local government conferences and associations and presenting legislative proposals in the media and internet for comment. Mr Thuan also described the current constraint in the consultation process as being too formal in which legislation defined the scope of work of elected Members. Mr Thuan added that deficiencies in the consultation process were compounded by a passive public and a consultations process that was often too bureaucratic and expensive.

Mr Roland Rich then led discussions on comparisons between features of the two system and the potential improvements in the Vietnamese consultation process. Mr Rich observed that the informal consultation processes were equally important to understand the electorate. Mr Rich stated that in Australia an effective Member would need to identify the “open market of voices” and interest groups that were influential in the decision making process. He further added that the electorate was mostly interested in the issues that affect them and their community and how those issues can be resolved. They were not necessarily interested in the actual legislation, but rather whether legislation could improve their living and working conditions.

Ms Margaret Reid continued the discussion on constituent representation by presenting her experiences in dealing with the people in the electorate of the Australian Capital Territory. She talked about the role of the representative as being a spokesperson for the electorate who reflected the views of the community. She also commented on the work she had performed to assist the people of her constituency and that her re-election chances were dependent on being an active Member. Ms Reid also presented on the skills and qualities that were needed by an elected Member and shared some thoughts from her colleagues on working with the constituency.

Mr Ngo Anh Dung made a presentation on his experiences in dealing with his constituency in Quang Ninh and Binh Duong provinces. He encapsulated the work of an
active Member of the National Assembly who thoroughly prepares the opinions of the electorate for the National Assembly sessions and provided the constituent with feedback following those sessions. National Assembly members were expected by law to meet on a number of occasions each year with their constituency to discuss issues with organisations and individuals.

Mr Nguyen Si Dung concluded Day 2 sessions by presenting a statistical breakdown of elected representatives in Vietnam and the context in which a training program for National Assembly Members would need to work. What was of interest was the high number of Members who for various reasons do not stand or do not get re-elected for the next term of the National Assembly. It was interesting to note that 70 per cent of Members were thus new to the National Assembly.

**Workshop Discussions**

Participants were quick to point out that the consultation process in Vietnam and Australia were not that different although the Vietnamese consultation process may be more formal at times. Participants said that it was important for National Assembly Members to fit local interests into the national interest so as to show unity in the development of the nation.

Participants stated that usually there was no room for people to discuss the issues that would inform the legislative process as a piece of legislation had already been discussed at a party level, drafted within the Executive branch and then introduced for approval by the National Assembly. The formal consultation process was more to inform people about the new legislative changes rather than to develop laws around issues which people were concerned about.

A participant observed that law and party policy in Vietnam were one of the same and for an individual Member to obtain opinions from the general public before a law was introduced was a new and difficult concept. However, another participant contested this observation by pointing out that Bills and laws which are passed reflect the will of the people and that before the party adopts a particular policy, there is wide discussions where a range of groups are consulted.

Participants were impressed by the depth and detail of constituency work undertaken by Ms Margaret Reid. From attending community functions, to assisting a constituent with their individual problems and the intense lobbying on behalf of a constituent to the Government. This was observed to be quite different to the role of a Member of the National Assembly. Participants noted that the responsibilities of a National Assembly Member in the electorate were defined in law and that there were limits to doing things not prescribed by legislation.

Participants also raised the point that in Vietnam a National Assembly Member does not usually have staff who can assist them in their daily activities in the electorate. This is a
resource issue, which though it can be seen from a quantitative perspective, makes the Vietnamese representative system qualitatively different to that of Australia’s.

**DAY 4**

Mr Nguyen Chi Dung and Dr Pham Duy Nghia gave detailed presentations on the training needs of Members of the National Assembly and made proposals for a training program catering for those training needs. A model training program was presented which was developed in consultation with National Assembly Members. The proposed model included political and legal education as well as training in practical and professional skills. The presenters articulated that the training program was consistent with the adult education methods suitable in the Vietnamese context and applied some of the training techniques that were proposed by Mr Roland Rich.

**Workshop Discussions**

Discussions focused on the proposed training model for Members in which there were diverging views. Mr Roland Rich suggested that the training program may be too intensive for adult Members. An effective training program would be one that was based on voluntary participation rather than being compulsory. Mr Rich suggested that adults learn best independently and by being self-motivated. The training program had to be attractive.

Ms Margaret Reid observed that educating Members in politics and theory may not be appropriate for all Members because it is assumed that National Assembly Members should have already become well acquainted with the political system. Ms Reid proposed a program that provided Members with a choice of subjects that they were interested in. Ms Reid suggested that the training program could provide Members, particularly new Members, with information on how to use the available resources and manage those resources to best respond to issues affecting their constituencies. A seminar for new Members to get them acquainted to the Parliamentary processes is an essential part of a training program.

Suggestions were made that the role of the new Resource Centre in the National Assembly could be to provide briefings on policy issues of importance to National Assembly Members so that Members can gather information on issues of concern to them. Thus, an intensive training program teaching constitutional or legal issues may not be the best use of available time as that information can be obtainable to Members who want it.

However, participants also raised the point that in Vietnam there was a need to motivate Members to perform their role effectively. This is why a program which focuses on their responsibilities and on what they can and cannot do would assist them greatly.
There was discussion that the role of the National Assembly is to pass laws and a training program should therefore focus on having Members skilled in understanding laws and procedural processes. Participants observed that because many National Assembly Members were new Members, there was a need to train Members to better understand the political, legal and constitutional system.

**DAY 5**

The final session of the Workshop involved Mr Roland Rich facilitating a leadership skills session using a case study from the “Climbing for Hope” documentary. Participants needed to resolve a series of problems concerning decisions to be taken in leadership positions. The exercise encouraged discussions on skills relating to strategy, team building, conflict management, time and stress management and decision-making. It pointed to the overriding need to focus on merit.

**CONCLUSION**

The Train the Trainer workshop was successful in allowing participants to think of diverse training initiatives and methods for Members of the National Assembly. Participants were interested to learn about the work of representatives from the Australian Parliament and this exchange was positive in developing and reflecting upon the types of skills training for Members of the National Assembly.

It was accepted that both the Australian and Vietnamese representative systems were different, but it was from this worthwhile workshop engagement that robust discussions could be made to examine whether a particular model or parts of that model could be useful to study.

The success of Vietnam’s National Assembly ultimately rests with its elected Members. It was encouraging to observe that ideas about adult education techniques and skills development generated from the Workshop will be considered in the training to be conducted and developed by the new Resource Centre of the National Assembly. This project is part of a series of mechanisms from international donors and the Vietnamese Government to strengthen the capacity of elected representatives to ensure greater accountability in Government and more effective representation for constituents.