Background
The Vietnamese Central Council for Theoretical Research was established in October 1996 to provide advice to senior levels of Vietnamese Communist Party. In particular, the Council was given responsibility for developing the national social science research programmes for the period 1996-2000. The Council also has a role in monitoring the progress of the research programme and in considering the conclusions reached.

In May 1999 a delegation of ten members of the Council undertook a study tour of Australia, designed to provide an understanding of Australian political and economic systems, to discuss the policy priorities of the two countries and to explore the relevance of Australian systems and experience to Vietnam.

The Centre for Democratic Institutions hosted a workshop for the delegation on Wednesday 26 May at the Australian National University.

Workshop training team
The training team consisted of three members:

Roland Rich, Director, Centre for Democratic Institutions

Sharon Bessell, Executive Officer, Centre for Democratic Institution

Suiwah Leung, Director, Graduate Studies in the Economics of Development, National Centre for Development Studies, Australian National University

The Workshop
The workshop was divided into three broad sections, each dealing with one key aspect of governance:

*Political Institutions in Australia*
The first session, presented by Roland Rich, provided a comprehensive overview of the Australian political system. Mr Rich noted that Australia's political institutions and practices follow the Western liberal democratic tradition, and draw on the British and North American experience. The key features of the Australian system were explained, including federalism, constitutionalism, representative government, executive government, bicameralism, the bipolar party system and judicial review. Mr Rich discussed the operation of the separation of powers in the Australian context and suggested that an independent judiciary, free from corruption and the influence of government, is a precondition for the rule of law. Mr Rich concluded by considering the differences between socialist systems of government and free market, liberal democracies. Mr Rich suggested that Marxism derives from an idealist vision of a future utopia and its structure does not incorporate checks and balances on the use of political power. Liberal democracies, on the other hand, are based on a realistic vision of society and human nature and therefore it has built in checks and balances such as the rule of law.

Gender and Good Governance
The second session was presented by Sharon Bessell and focused on gender and good governance. The proposition was put forward that incorporating gender issues into strategies to promote good governance is central to the governance agenda, it is not a separate agenda. While the inclusion of gender in the governance agenda can be argued for in terms of justice and equity, Dr Bessell suggested that it will also result in more effective policy outcomes. The extent of women's participation in formal decision making processes, particularly in national parliaments, and the use of quotas as a means of increasing women's participation was considered. Dr Bessell discussed the experiences of several countries in using quotas and canvassed the various forms of quota systems. Dr Bessell noted that while quotas are one important instrument in removing the barriers to women's involvement in parliament, they are not sufficient. It is also necessary to look beyond numbers to the range of strategies that will promote gender equity.

Implementing Economic Reform
The third session was presented by Suiwah Leung and explored key issues in economic reform and lessons for Vietnam. It was noted that Vietnam has achieved considerable success in implementing macro-economic reform. Inflation has declined and growth has been strong over a sustained period. Dr Leung noted, however, that Vietnam now faces a number of challenges in implementing micro-economic reform. Experience from other countries, including Australia, indicates that micro-economic reform is far more difficult than macro-economic reform. Gaining a political consensus for micro-economic reform is difficult and because the process is a long one it is difficult to maintain momentum. Dr Leung canvassed the areas in which micro-economic reform is necessary in Vietnam and discussed the options open to policy makers.