



centre for democratic institutions

## **First Among Equals: A Professional Development Course for Presiding Officers**

*Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> – Friday 26<sup>th</sup> June 2009  
Parliament House, Brisbane*

### **The Project**

Previous workshops and seminars have identified an interest among members of Pacific Region parliaments for a specific course on the role of the Speaker. In many such countries, with little in the way of human resources to administer and build their parliaments, much of the initiative is seen to lie with the Speaker. They are seen as figures of authority with the potential to influence the growth of democratic capacity. The reality is however much different. Small budgets and lack of knowledge about how to approach their responsibilities create significant obstacles for even the best intentioned. As one Speaker attending the course said, “When I was elected Speaker all they gave me was a copy of the Standing Orders”.

In response to these inquiries CDI has designed a course to provide professional development for Speakers, Deputy Speakers, Clerks and other members interested in learning about leadership roles from a parliamentary, rather than political, perspective.

The project was headed by Quinton Clements, Deputy Director of CDI who approached the Hon. Kevin Rozzoli AM, former Speaker of the NSW Legislative Assembly, to act as course convener and chief facilitator. It has always been my belief that more emphasis should be given to the elements of leadership in the parliamentary sphere and that these elements should be based on an understanding of the concepts upon which good Westminster practice has long been founded. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the World Bank Institute showed considerable interest in the proposed course and offered tangible support to the program through sponsorship of several participants and the attendance of a representative from each organization throughout the course.

The decision was made to hold the course in Australia because of the somewhat easier logistics of bringing delegates from nine countries to a central destination. As well the Parliament of Queensland has been a strong supporter of CDI in previous workshops and seminars. The former Speaker, the Hon. Mike Reynolds and present Speaker, the Hon. John Mickel, as well as the Clerk, Neil Laurie, were enthusiastic about hosting the event, the facilities were excellent and it proved popular with those attending the course.

### **The Team**

As well as Quinton Clements and Mr Rozzoli, CDI were very fortunate to bring to the team the knowledge and experience of Mr. Russell Grove, Clerk of the Legislative

Assembly of New South Wales, Mr. Neil Laurie, Clerk of the Parliament of Queensland, Mr. Alan Thompson, Secretary, Department of Parliamentary Services, Parliament of Australia, and a number of departmental heads from the Queensland Parliament, Mr. Michael Hickey, Director of Corporate and House Services, Ms. Lucinda Osmond, Chief Reporter, Ms. Mary Seefried, Parliamentary Librarian, Leanne Clare, First Clerk Assistant (Procedure), Ms Jo Mathers, Senior Parliamentary Officer- Papers and Research, Mr. Kevin Jones, Sergeant-at-Arms and Manager, Security and Attendant Services. Also participating were Mr. Andrew Imlach, Director Communications and Research, Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and Mitchell O'Brien of the World Bank Institute. Additional support was provided by Mr. Michael Ries, Deputy Clerk and Ms. Sarah McCallan, Protocol Officer, Community Engagement.

## **The Planning**

Prior to the Course, Mr Clements and Mr Rozzoli visited the Queensland Parliament to discuss arrangements and to talk to staff of the Parliament regarding presentations, both their content and the fundamental message we wanted to get across. This was that, while free to choose whatever operating procedures best suited each jurisdiction, we would promote a number of tried and proven elements of good practice which could be useful in guiding the Parliaments to better democratic outcomes. We also wanted to foster the highest standards of integrity and dignity using examples from history to demonstrate that during periods in which the Parliament was held in high regard by the people, the level of good democratic governance was enhanced or expanded. These principles were warmly embraced by all presenters. We were also fortunate in bringing on board the Hon. Jim Fouras, a former Queensland Speaker noted for his fairness and independence. It was decided to divide the course material between the Speaker's role in the Chamber and administration of the parliamentary institution.

Delegates were accommodated in an almost new apartment block within walking distance of the Parliament. This proved highly successful, made it easy to keep close contact with delegates and helped forge a warm collegiate atmosphere. All aspects of the course including social functions were held within the parliamentary complex, special security arrangements were made to facilitate access, and all necessary equipment was provided including the facility to record proceedings. Delegates arrived during the twenty four hours prior to the welcome reception on the Monday night. They assembled at the accommodation before proceeding to the Parliament where registration including the issue of security passes was carried out. This was followed by a reception hosted by Speaker Mickel in the Lucinda Bar, a gracious and historic room within the original parliamentary building. The Bar is named after the S.S. Lucinda which was used to accommodate delegates to the Constitutional Conventions that forged the Australian Constitution.

## **The Course**

After some opening remarks from Mr Clements and Mr Rozzoli, the first day commenced with delegates, facilitators and presenters introducing themselves, each delegate providing an overview of their Parliament. There was an opportunity for questions from around the table. It is a common mistake to put all the Pacific nations into the one group. This is not so and the lively spate of questions revealed a healthy curiosity among the delegates to know more about each other.

This was followed by a talk on the history of the Speakership, featuring mainly on the tenures of British Speakers Lenthall and Onslow. These men did most to forge the principles of parliamentary democracy that today still frame the essential guide for those who aspire to the highest standards of parliamentary chairmanship. The lecture gave rise to many questions on standards of fairness and impartiality expected of the Chair and the knowledge of practice and procedure that is essential to gaining respect in the Chair.

The afternoon session comprised talks by Neil Laurie on the purpose and function of Parliament as a democratic institution and the function of standing orders, conventions and rulings, the propagation of debate, fairness, controlling behaviour of members, framing rulings and the role of Question Time. Almost two hours was given to questions and comments arising from the day's presentations. It was pleasing to see a good level of exchange between delegates and presenters, and between the presenters themselves. It was evident there was a keen interest in the topics discussed and a willingness to discuss issues in their own jurisdictions and to seek advice on possible solutions to problems they were facing.

Having set the broad parameters under which Parliaments based on the Westminster system function the second day concentrated in greater detail on chamber procedure and parliamentary administration. Discussion was led by Russell Grove who explored the key elements of the Speaker's role in the Chamber and in particular the need for a good working relationship between Speaker and Clerk. Michael Hickey then gave two talks, the first on the administration that supports the Parliament, the second on strategic planning and budgeting, keeping the institution 'on target' and accountable. The outline was kept simple, having regard to the vast differences in budgets and physical characteristics from country to country, for example, how to draft a basic strategic plan and draw up a simple budget.

The sessions on Hansard - the importance of keeping records of debates, the Library - its importance as an information and research facility, and record keeping raised keen interest. It was clear that the potential in these areas evinced considerable interest, delegates readily seeing benefits for their members if improvements could be made. The final session on parliamentary security probably had the least impact, the gulf between the physical structure and potential threats too great to raise a lot of interest, despite past attacks on several Pacific Parliaments. A talk on keeping of parliamentary archives the following day also proved interesting. Much of the discussion centred on the celebration of milestones in a nation's history and the value of gathering early records while the actual events are not too distant.

The third day returned to matters more closely associated with the Chamber. A session on Parliamentary Privilege created great interest as the group explored the difference between privilege and matters of law and good conduct. More time could have been given to this topic as it proved to be a good start point for discussion. Each presenter allowed time for questions and it was evident the opportunity was much valued by delegates. Final sessions related to roles that could be pursued by a Speaker beyond chamber and administration. The protocol and pastoral roles were considered as was the concept of members looking to the Speakership as a career opportunity by taking on the positions of Deputy or Assistant Speakers thus gaining experience in the Chair. This area also generated quite a degree of discussion. By now all delegates were completely relaxed and comfortable with one another, a good atmosphere for dialogue. This led into

a general discussion on the way forward for each Parliament covering future professional development programs, inductions, committee workshops, strategic planning and budgeting. It became clear that there is much to be covered and that members are keen to learn.

Delegates were given a tour of the parliamentary complex including the records area where they were shown records going back one hundred and fifty years. Next year will be the sesqui-centenary of the Queensland Parliament so there has been much activity in this area in preparation for the event.

The course finished with a formal dinner in the Strangers Dining Room with the presentation of certificates for completion of the course and an exchange of gifts including a presentation of copies of Mr Rozzoli's book on parliamentary practice, 'Gavel to Gavel – an insider's view of parliament' which contains much material complementary to the course.

On Friday delegates were taken to the suburban electorate office of Mr. Simon Finn, Member for Yeerongpilly, where delegates were able to discuss practical aspects of constitutional work.

## **Evaluation**

An evaluation was conducted at the end of the course and the results analysed by CDI. This was particularly important given that the course broke new ground and there was little basis for comparative assessment. Mostly the response was very positive with ratings of 82% saying the right amount of information was provided, 59% believing the content was extremely relevant and useful to their work, and 41% indicating the content was relevant and useful in their work. Some felt that the course could have been more comprehensive in terms of detail, for example, legislative drafting, media aspects of parliament, and more on committees. Committee work is however dealt with in detail by specific courses run by CDI so this comment may well reflect the views of those who have not as yet been able to access a CDI course.

The facilitation was commended with 59% saying all sessions were clear, comprehensive and easy to understand and 35% saying most of the sessions clear, comprehensive and easy to understand. 76% thought there was enough opportunity to discuss issues of common interest and concern, while 88% thought the balance between presentations and discussions groups was appropriate.

While the focus was on Speakers and Clerks participants generally felt that much of the material would be of benefit to all MPs. They also felt the information could well lead to better planning and operational standards for their parliaments, even with a limited budget, and provided an insight into ways in which the independence of parliament and its functions could be improved.

When asked what types of courses or activities would be most valuable for CDI to undertake in the future the response could be summarised by saying more, more, more. While seeing the value in a specialist course for Clerks and Speakers there was an overwhelming view that a course for members generally on how to be an effective MP would be of great value. Many also felt that some type of civics course to educate voters and course in schools would be of equally great value.

## **Lessons learnt**

1. The present course was highly valued and with some streamlining of the program should be repeated.
2. There is a great opportunity to run a “representational skills” course for all MPs. Such a course could use at least 50% of the content of the Speakers Course with additional sessions such as policy making, working with the electorate, time management, writing press releases, and the role and function of the public service. Such a course would lend itself to break-out sessions to work through scenarios that would illustrate the use of the material in the basic presentation. These courses could be run for individual parliaments although there is also a place for inter-parliament courses as participants in this course highly valued the contact with other Pacific nations and the opportunity to work through problems of common concern.
3. At the facilitation level the venue used, the Undumbi Room in Parliament House, was too big and the layout, dictated by the equipment requirements, too spread out. This tended to break down the close collegiate atmosphere we were trying to foster. A smaller room would be desirable for any future course.
4. Although the quality of the presentations was highly praised more group discussion directed at problem solving would be beneficial. It is essential to provide a Pacific focus, not simply because they are Pacific nations but because of the common links of size, support (or lack of it), electoral structure, and the challenge of balancing local cultural norms with the need to embrace an ever increasing interface with outside practice. How these can come together in a way that will capture the most benefit from each is vital to each parliament.
5. There is a real challenge in encouraging participants to raise specific issues within their parliaments. It was interesting for me to attend the final dinner and to find myself fielding questions and working through issues during the course of the dinner. Many of the matters raised would have enhanced the discussions during the course sessions.

## **Recommendations**

1. The value of involving Clerks as well as Speakers be recognized and that this course be conducted again next year under the banner of “Parliamentary Leadership – A Professional Development Course for Speakers and Clerks”, but open as this course has been to key persons whether members or staff.
2. Course numbers be increased to around twenty and be restructured to allow break out sessions to work through specific topics, and that consideration be given to increasing it to four days.
3. Working examples of a strategic plan and budget be given and built up as a specific exercise.
4. Participants should be encouraged to provide pre-course information on their Parliament, particularly what they see as the major problems they face.
5. CDI consider running a new course titled “Being an Effective MP – A Professional Development Course for Members”. This course would have content along the lines given above, to be delivered as a course for individual Parliaments, say mid term, or as a course for all parliaments with say thirty participants limited to three or four from each Parliament.

6. That every endeavour is made to create a more intimate, collegiate atmosphere and that the introductory session in which participants speak about their parliaments be extended.
7. That, if these recommendations are accepted, planning begin as soon as possible on the new formats as there is quite an amount of work involved in putting the structure and course materials together.

### **Acknowledgements**

Although CDI has thanked those who put so much time and effort into making the course the success it was I cannot allow this opportunity to pass without adding my personal thanks to the participants, presenters and those behind the scenes. In particular I would like to thank the Clerk of the Queensland Parliament, the Hon. John Mickel, the Clerk, Neil Laurie and his Deputy Michael Ries for their unqualified support and their offer to host another course in the future. Special thanks must go to Sarah McCallan who undertook the bulk of the coordination with parliamentary staff and facilities and Lucinda Osmond for organizing the recording and prompt transcript of proceedings.

Once again I wish to thank CDI for the privilege of participating in this most worthwhile project and express my sincere gratitude to my good friend Quinton Clements, whose leadership, advice, support and encouragement as always was quite outstanding.

Kevin Rozzoli  
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