



The Centre for Democratic Institutions

VISIT TO ANU BY THAI PARLIAMENTARY DELEGATION

A senior delegation comprising representatives of both houses of the Parliament of the Kingdom of Thailand visited the Australian National University on Tuesday 14 October for discussions with the National Thai Studies Centre and the Centre for Democratic Institutions. The delegation was led by the First Vice-President of the Thai Senate:

Mr Pichet Pattanachote
Leader of the Delegation and First Vice President of the Senate

Mr Karoon Sai-ngam
Member of the Senate

Mrs Aranya Suchanil
Member of the Senate

Mr Somchai Chatphatthanasiri
Member of the House of Representatives

Ms Supamas Isarabhakdi
Member of the House of Representatives

Mr Witthaya Keawparadai
Member of the House of Representatives

Mr Sompol Vanigbandhu
Delegation Secretary

Ms Nakamon Maipardit
Assistant Delegation Secretary

Mr Somsak Patradoon

Dr John Funston, Associate Director, and Ms Chintana Sandilands, Assistant Director of the National Thai Studies Centre, together with Mr Roland Rich, Director of the Centre for Democratic Institutions, held discussions with the visitors. After presentations on the role of the National Thai Studies Centre and the Centre for Democratic Institutions, the discussion turned to the Thai political situation. One visitor pointed out that particular issues arose when the country's Prime Minister was also the country's most wealthy citizen. Mr Rich noted that this was the situation in Italy at present and there were difficult questions being posed by the Italian media

about the use of the government's majority in parliament to amend laws thus having the effect of safeguarding the Prime Minister's personal interests. Certain laws relating to the Italian judiciary had been amended to allow a degree of 'forum shopping' by litigants who had a 'legitimate suspicion' that the court to which a case is assigned is biased against the litigants. This has created a new and unwelcome legal doctrine. Thailand's institutions had to show the strength and integrity to discharge their functions properly regardless of who the individuals affected might be.

This led to a discussion of the working of Thailand's new institutions under the 1997 Constitution. The Thai parliamentarians agreed that there was a need for open debate about the functioning of the Constitution. Concern was expressed over the functioning of the Senate and the requirement that the Senators have no linkage with political parties. This might be true of many of the 200 Senators but was honoured in the breach by a significant number. The Senate's role as a guardian of the institutions of the Constitution might therefore be compromised. There was also considerable concern over the grip corruption continued to have over Thai politics. Corruption scandals were commonplace. The media was keen to report on corruption issues but the legal and political systems were slow and constrained in their handling of the matters. The great danger was that the electorate would lose faith in the system.

From CDI's perspective it was pleasing to host participants from previous CDI activities. Senator Pichet had participated in the seminar held by CDI on 30 January 2002 at the ANU. Senator Karoom had been an active participant at the Thai-Australia Senate talks held in Bangkok in July 2002. And Mr Sompol had participated in the course on parliamentary committee systems held in Perth in 1999.