



The Centre for Democratic Institutions

STUDY VISIT BY REPRESENTATIVES OF THE SENATE OF THAILAND CANBERRA 2-6 DECEMBER 2002

Introduction

CDI enjoys a close working relationship with the King Prajadhipok Institute in Thailand and over the past two years the two democracy promotion centres have worked closely together to help strengthen the Senate of Thailand.

In 2001 and 2002 Australian Senators visited Thailand under a CDI/KPI program to hold discussions with their Thai counterparts on various parliamentary issues. The Senate of Thailand has a critical role to play under the 1997 Constitution as the body that oversees the accountability institutions established under the Constitution. Its legislative powers are, however, restricted. The Australian Senate has functioned continuously for over one hundred years and because the proportional representation system under which it is elected virtually guarantees that no government will have a majority in the Senate, it has become an important house of review. Accordingly there was a broad range of issues under discussion.

The King Prajadhipok Institute is the only officially funded democracy promotion body in Southeast Asia. It is therefore a natural partner for CDI in the region. The two organisations concluded an MOU in 2000 and have cooperated closely ever since. It was particularly pleasing that the Director-General of KPI, Prof Dr Borwornsak Uwanno, and Ms Visnee Iamsa-ad, from the International Relations Office, were able to join the delegation. The delegation members were:

Prof Dr Bowornsak Uwanno
Prof Dr Boonton Dockthaisong
Dr. (Mrs) Malinee Sukavejworakit
Mrs. Maleerat Keawka
Mr. Niwes Phancharoenworakul
Khunying (Mrs) Chodchoy Sophonpanich
Mr Nipon Wisityuthasart
Ms Visnee Iamsa-ad

The program for the delegation (attached) was based on two days of discussions and observation at the Federal Parliament. This was followed by visits to the Legislative

Assembly of the Australian Capital Territory, the Australian Electoral Commission Education Centre at old Parliament House and the National Museum of Australia.

Given the interests of the delegation, the program concentrated on three broad areas; accountability processes, enhancing the status of women and best practice in civics education.

Accountability Processes

One of the key processes in the Federal Parliament is Question Time where questions without notice are put to Ministers. The questions are allocated to both government and opposition members and the delegation was able to distinguish the very different character of those questions. Whereas questions from government members are designed to elicit a response highlighting positive aspects of government policy, opposition questions are searching for a chink in the government's armour. On this occasion the target for the opposition in both houses was the financial and tax arrangements of Senator Coonan and her spouse, the distinguished former justice of the Supreme Court of NSW, Andrew Rogers. While the episode was seen by the Thai visitors as quite brutal, it did point to the high standards of probity required of Australian parliamentarians and the degree of scrutiny under which their private financial arrangements are examined in public.

The delegation held discussions with the Speaker of the House, the Hon Neil Andrew, and the President of the Senate, the Hon Paul Calvert. The discussion dealt with the proceedings in Question Time and the tools available to the presiding officers to keep proceedings under control. The Speaker made the point that there was really no use trying to evade a question through recourse to points of order and arguments based on tenuous interpretations of the rules of proceedings. Ultimately, the question would have to be answered. This was simply how Australian politics worked.

In the course of the meeting with the Presiding Officers, the delegation expressed its great sorrow for the tragedy that had occurred in Bali in October and spoke about the common battle against terrorism in the region.

Dr Andrew Southcott, a Liberal Party Member of Parliament from South Australia and a member of the CDI Consultative Council, also met with the delegation and spoke of current issues before the parliament. One of the interesting points concerned the way some decisions in parliament were being taken not through disciplined party bloc voting but through a conscience vote. This resembled the work method of the Thai Senate, an apolitical chamber where Senators took decisions according to their personal views. In Australian parliaments conscience votes tended to take place on issues of moral uncertainty such as abortion and genetic engineering. On such issues Members of Parliament tended to come under severe lobbying and these were always difficult and testing issues for them to deal with.

The delegation also had the benefit of receiving a briefing from the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), Mr Bob Charles and the Committee Secretary Dr Margaret Kerley. Mr Charles explained how the PAC was established 89 years ago by Act of Parliament and how it had a close relationship with the Auditor-General whose independence the committee helped safeguard. It has not been Australian practice to have an Opposition member as chair of the PAC. The aim of the PAC was

to work collegially by consensus, as this would strengthen its influence. The PAC has tabled 392 reports to date and its recommendations carry considerable weight. It had for the first time recently conducted an inquiry looking at corporate governance in the private sector in the wake of the Enron fiasco.

The delegation agreed that Thailand did not have a comparable body and that the committee reviewing the budget looked at a different set of issues. There was great interest in pursuing the work of the PAC. Another point drawn by the delegation was the relationship between the PAC and the Audit office. This was an example of a coalition between parliament and an accountability institution that enhanced the work of both bodies. There were many new institutions of accountability established under the 1997 Constitution and the Senate could benefit by finding ways of working closely with these bodies.

Mr Bob Bessell from the secretariat provided the delegation with a detailed briefing on the budget process and the Senate Estimates Committees. These committees had developed into powerful organs of accountability. They could ask about any issue concerning the public sector. A particular focus of the Senators' questions concerned public hearings held by Senate Committees. Australian practice was to encourage written submissions and then to invite authors to address the committee if necessary. This tended to discourage the disruptive 'town hall' type meetings that had plagued Thai processes.

The Speaker of the ACT Legislative Assembly, Mr Wayne Berry, was very generous with the time he devoted to the delegation. A detailed discussion about electoral systems demonstrated what a complicated system the ACT had. The Hare-Clark proportional representation system with Robson rotation conducted in three multi-member electorates was difficult to administer and to count but ACT electors had come to understand it. The Thai delegation was of the view that Thailand needed to retain a much more simple first-past-the-post system, as voters could easily understand how it worked.

Status of Women

The delegation was evenly divided between men and women and the women were interested in looking at various gender and health issues. The call on Mrs Chris Gallus, the Parliamentary Secretary in charge of AusAID focused on the issue of attracting women to parliament. One way was to establish quotas and some systems and parties had resorted to this but Mrs Gallus, though seeing the value of such initiatives, did not personally favour any qualifications on the merit system. Once the problem of establishing a critical mass of women in a chamber was solved then things would be easier for future women members. The Australian Senate probably had such a critical mass. The Thai visitors noted that neither Thai chamber had more than ten percent women members. Politics was often seen as an unwelcoming arena for women.

Senator Maleerat explained the work she was engaged in to train women candidates to run for office, called the Women in Politics program. This is non-partisan training in aspects of public speaking, advocacy and organisational management. Thai political parties value this training and often recruit from graduates of the program.

At the ACT Legislative Assembly the delegation met two women members, Helen Cross and Karin MacDonald. Mrs Cross had recently completed work on a report on The Status of Women in the ACT, copies of which she provided to the visitors (on CDI website).

The women members of the delegation also called on Mrs Kelly Hoare, a Federal MP. Mrs Hoare and Senator Malinee work together in the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (AFPPD) which is a coordinating body working to generate support and perpetuate cooperation among Asian parliamentarians in the area of population and development. The AFPPD was formed in 1981 as a product of the Asian Conference of Parliamentarians on Population and Development held in Beijing. Since 1982, the AFPPD membership has grown to nineteen national committees, with full-time offices in six countries. In 1991, the AFPPD moved its operations to Bangkok and there established its permanent secretariat. The AFPPD conducts regional seminars, conferences, and study visits as a means to help parliamentarians increase their level of research, information, involvement and motivation in the issues surrounding population and development. Senator Malinee has recently been elected as the new Secretary-General and Mrs Hoare is the Australian representative.

The women members also called on the Chancellor of the University of Canberra, Prof Wendy McCarthy. Prof McCarthy and Senator Malinee have worked together previously in the WHO Kobe Centre (WKC). The Philosophy of the WKC is based upon the concept of leadership and a spirit of partnership for global health development. Its mission is that of international and interdisciplinary investigations of issues relating to global health and welfare systems development. WKC seeks to improve the health of individuals and societies, worldwide, by bringing together the best knowledge and experience available.

The delegation also met Prof Ann Harding who is engaged in a research project under WKC. The mission of WKC Women and Health program is to strengthen women's capacities and leadership for sustainable health development globally. The goal of Women and Health is to support Health and Welfare System Development globally, which is designed to be WKC's overall mission and a priority programme. Women and Health also complements the related activities of WHO Headquarters and regional offices. The delegation discussed ways of coordinating their research work with the work being undertaken under the direction of Prof Harding.

Civics Education

Given Thailand's commitment to democracy and improving the quality of its democracy, the delegation was very interested in civics education. In Australia the target group of civics education is older primary school children. Studies have found that at the age of 10-12, children tend to take in and retain information on elections and democracy if it is presented to them in an accessible and enjoyable form.

At Parliament House, the delegation was able to see the many groups of school children who visit during sitting days and attend Question Time. The Public Education Office arranges tours of the parliament. The delegation also visited Old Parliament House where the Canberra Electoral Education Centre run by the Australian Electoral Commission conducts a 90-minute course for school children.

The course includes an interesting video where camera reflections are made to look like holograms and keep the kids entertained. Children then undertake research activities by means of interactive devices. Finally, the children conduct a vote by preferential voting and count the results thus observing how informal votes are eliminated, how low primary vote winners are progressively eliminated and how preferences are progressively distributed to other candidates until such time as one candidate wins the required number of votes to constitute a majority.

The delegation also visited the National Museum of Australia. Australians get a unique chance to explore what it means to be Australian at the new National Museum of Australia in Canberra. Opened in March 2001, the National Museum is the first in the country devoted to the stories of Australia and Australians, exploring the key issues, events and people that have shaped and influenced Australia. Rare objects which illustrate the complex origins of the Australian continent and nation have been collected for the past 20 years and — complemented by objects lent from museums across the country — are the focus for the Museum's wide range of stories and exhibitions. The collection has everything from the carcass of the extinct Tasmanian Tiger to the black baby garments worn by dingo victim Azaria Chamberlain. Other objects include Australia's largest collection of bark paintings, convict clothing, material from ceremonies marking Federation, the ABC Outside Broadcast Van from the 1956 Olympics. State-of-the-art technology and exhibition design present the stories of the collection in an exciting and inventive manner, including the use of multi-media, live performances and hands-on activities, to appeal to a wide range of audiences.

These visits will help shape the thinking of the delegation and influence the direction of civics education in Thailand. The civics education provided at Parliament House, Old Parliament House and the National Museum of Australia complement the much-acclaimed program run by the Department of Education, Science and Training called *Discovering Democracy*. *Discovering Democracy* has helped to revitalise what had become a neglected part of the school curriculum. Civics and citizenship education is now winning increased recognition throughout Australia, both in State/Territory curriculum documents and in school practices. All education authorities agree that effective civics and citizenship education is central to contemporary schooling.

On 5 December the delegation attended the K R Narayan Oration delivered by Lord Meghnad Desai on the subject "Development and Democracy: India 1947-2002". In his erudite lecture Lord Desai concluded with the ironic dilemma facing India - "it can have a secular but anti reform coalition or a non secular but economic liberal coalition."

The full text is at <http://rspas.anu.edu.au/papers/narayanan/2002oration.pdf>

Program

Monday December	2	1000	Meet in conference room at the Bentley Hotel Dr Andrew Southcott - MP
		1100	Mr Roland Rich - Introduction to Australian Politics
		1215	Arrive at Senate Entrance, Parliament House <i>Met by Parliamentary Relations Officer</i>
		1230	BBQ Luncheon hosted by the Thailand Parliamentary Friendship Group <i>House of Representatives Alcove</i>
		1400	Observe Question Time in the Senate <i>President's Gallery</i>
		1530	Short Break
		1600	Call on the Presiding Officers <i>President's Suite</i>
		1630	Depart Parliament House
Tuesday December	3	1020	Assemble at Senate Entrance, Parliament House <i>Met by Parliamentary Relations Officer</i>
		1030	Meeting - Mr Bob Bessell, Senior Clerk of Committees, Senate Committee Room 2S2
		1130	Meeting – Mr Bob Charles MP Chair, Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit Committee Room IR5
		1230	Informal luncheon and brief tour of Parliament and visit to gift shop
		1350	Assemble outside gift shop
		1400	Observe Question Time in the House of Representatives <i>Speaker's Gallery</i>
		1545	1. Meeting with the Hon. Chris Gallus Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Foreign Affairs Committee Room
		1545	2. Meeting – Senator Jan McLucas, [Chair] and Mr David Creed, (Secretary) - Senate Standing Committee on Scrutiny of Bills; and Senator Tsebin Tchen (Chair) and Mr James Warmenhoven (Secretary) - Senate Standing Committee on Regulations and Ordinances <i>Committee Room 1S6</i>
		1630	Depart Parliament House
Wednesday December	4	1400 1440 1500 1530	Meeting with Tom Duncan, Deputy Clerk, ACT Legislative Assembly (go to Member's Entrance - southern entrance) Short Tour Afternoon tea with members Depart
		1900	Dinner for Senators Hosted by John Milne Head, Australia Thailand Association
Thursday December	5	1000	Visit to AEC Senate Entrance, Southwest Wing Old Parliament House
		1130	75th Birthday Anniversary of His Majesty the King Royal Thai Embassy, 111 Empire Circuit
		1500	Guided Tour of Museum of Australia