



Centre for Democratic Institutions

**COURSE ON PARLIAMENTARY
COMMITTEE SYSTEMS
FOR THE OFFICERS OF THAI NATIONAL ASSEMBLY**

PERTH

19-30 OCTOBER 1999

From 19-30 October 1999, the Centre for Democratic Institutions sponsored a Course on Parliamentary Committee systems for members of the Thai National Assembly. The Course was managed jointly by the Asia Research Centre, Murdoch University and the Western Australian Parliament, and was held in Perth, Western Australia.

The Programme combined observation of Committees in action, tours of the Western Australian Parliament, and meetings with counterparts with workshops and seminars at Murdoch University. While the programme was both stimulating and intense, participants also had some time to sample the delights of Perth, with a whale watching tour and a dolphin performance taking place on Saturday 23 October.

The first day of the Course, Wednesday 20 October, was spent at Parliament House, allowing the participants to familiarise themselves with the procedures and workings of the Parliament. The Deputy Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, Mr Doug Carpenter, and the Deputy Clerk and Usher of the Black Rod of the Legislative Assembly, Mr Ian Allnutt, welcomed the delegation. Participants then observed a meeting of the Public Accounts Committee, followed by a tour of the Parliamentary Information and Education Office. In the afternoon, the delegation attended Question Time and visited the nearby Constitutional Centre.

The second day commenced with a background briefing on the Australian Political System by Janice Dudley from Murdoch University. The briefing included discussion of the Federal/State division of powers and provided the context necessary to enable the delegation to understand detailed information on how committees operate.

Subsequent sessions over the coming days provided in-depth briefings on the role of Parliamentary committees in the state system and in the federal system, and on the interaction between Committees and the public. Several workshops and roundtables ensured detailed discussion and analysis of Committee Systems, with the Thai participants comparing the Western Australian and Thai systems and sharing their own experiences of committee systems.

On Tuesday 26 October, the Thai participants provided a presentation on the History of the Thai Parliamentary System to members of the Australasian Study of Parliament

Group and others. This session allowed their Australian counterparts to learn something of the Thai system and to compare approaches and experiences.

As a result of the Course, participants identified several ways in which the Thai system could be potentially improved, including:

- Empowering committee staff to hold preliminary investigations before a committee launches an inquiry. Under the Thai system, committee members can initiate an inquiry without first investigating whether the issue has been dealt with elsewhere. This sometimes leads to duplication.
- Providing more information to the public. At present, committee agendas, but nothing else, are made available to the public. Participants wanted to disseminate more information through the media, including through Parliament's own radio station. The Internet is not yet an option, as it is not available to a large section of the public.
- Avoiding duplication when complaints and inquiries are directed to more than one committee as happens at present in Thailand. Participants saw value in establishing a committee on public administration to handle such issues, along the lines of the Western Australian committee.
- Having the system of external experts rationalised. The Western Australian Parliament pays only out-of-pocket expenses unless experts are specifically engaged to provide assistance to a committee, in which case a salary or contractual benefit is paid. At present all Thai experts are paid and personal relationships with committee members may override expertise in the appointment of experts. Committee staff may spend more time advising the external experts than advising the actual committee members.
- Rescheduling committee meetings so as to avoid them being held at the same time as sessions of the National Assembly. With committees and the House sitting at the same time, committee staff are not able to service both effectively. The Western Australian system specifically avoids sitting times coinciding with committee meeting times.

The value of the course was increased by the excellent input of the Thai participants, who were extremely well-prepared and focused. The participants were highly committed to their work and both benefited from and contributed to the success of the course.