



centre for democratic institutions

2011 Effective Parliamentary Committee Inquiries Course | Sydney | 14-18 February

Rationale

Parliamentary committees can play a critically important role in the work of parliaments. They can examine matters of policy and public administration; they can review legislative and expenditure proposals; and they can provide opportunity for expert and community opinion to influence parliamentary debate and decision making. By examining in detail the operation of government agencies and by carefully assessing policy options and proposed bills, parliamentary committees, when operating effectively, can make a substantial contribution to better government.

Working with parliaments in the region to enhance the effectiveness of committee operations is a core theme in CDI's work and since 2008 CDI has convened an annual Effective Parliamentary Committee Inquiries Course for parliamentary officials who support the investigatory work of parliamentary committees.¹

The 2011 edition of the course, held from 14 to 18 February 2011 at NSW Parliament in Sydney, was the 5th annual event and, as in previous years it was co-convened by staff from the NSW Parliament and supported by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

Activity

The Effective Parliamentary Committee Inquiries Course is a practical, interactive training designed around the process of a conducting a committee inquiry. It covers:

- preparing terms of reference for an inquiry;
- planning and budgeting for an inquiry, collecting evidence in writing and at public hearings;
- analysing evidence and drafting committee reports; and
- tabling reports in parliament.

Officials from parliaments in East Timor, Papua New Guinea, the PNG Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Samoa, Kiribati and Nauru participated in the 2011 course. Officials from the Parliament of Vanuatu were

¹ CDI has also, since 2007, has co-sponsored (first with La Trobe University and in 2010 with Deakin University) an annual Summer Residential Program for Public Accounts Committees. The program is a one-week residential course for members and staff from parliamentary public accounts committees in Africa, Asia and the Pacific which aims to improve participant understanding of the processes of parliamentary scrutiny and the work of Auditors-General.

planning to attend but, because of an unexpected sitting of parliament, had to withdraw. Financial support from the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association supported the participation of officials from Tuvalu, Tonga and the Solomon Islands.

The course was facilitated by Grant Harrison (CDI's Deputy Director), Steven Reynolds (from the NSW Legislative Council) and Les Gonye (from the NSW Legislative Assembly) and involved contributions from:

- Lynne Lovelock (Clerk of the NSW Legislative Council) and Russell Grove (Clerk of the NSW Legislative Assembly), who opened proceedings;
- Hon Amanda Fazio MLC (President of the Legislative Council), Hon Kayee Griffin MLC and Paul McLeay MP, who offered their perspectives on committee operations and on their expectations of committee staff;
- Peter Achterstraat (Auditor-General of NSW), who talked about the roles of the Auditor-General and of parliamentary committees in scrutinizing the administrative performance of government agencies;
- staff of the NSW parliament (including Simon Johnston, Ronda Miller, Helen Minnican, Rachel Callinan, Vicki Bubach, Rachel Simpson, and Beverley Duffy), who shared their experience in supporting the conduct of committee inquiries.

The course was structured in such a way as to allow participants draft terms of reference for a committee inquiry, prepare inquiry plans and budgets, prepare briefing papers, and plan for and participate in a 'mock' public hearing. During the mock hearing participants assumed various roles (as committee members, as witnesses, as secretariat staff and as Hansard reporters) and conducted a role-play hearing, demonstrating the practices which had been discussed in earlier stages of the course.

The final part of the course involved preparation of part of a draft report, based on the 'evidence' gathered during the mock hearing.

Outcome

The aim of EPCIC is threefold - to allow officials from parliaments in the region:

- to be exposed to the principles and practices that underpin the effective operation of parliamentary committees in the NSW Parliament (the oldest legislative body in Australia);
- to learn about the operation of parliaments and parliamentary committee in other Asia-Pacific jurisdictions; and
- to reflect on practices in their own parliaments and consider whether the approaches and processes outlined in the course could be incorporated or adapted for use in their own parliaments.

Feedback from participants during the course, in our post-course evaluation and in subsequent discussions indicates that the course was well-targeted and well-received. Our evaluation showed that:

- 83% of participants found the course content to extremely relevant (the highest rating received since the course began); and
- the most useful sessions were those on drafting terms or reference, planning hearings and report writing.

A strong theme in the comments made by participants was that the course has encouraged them to be more secure in their understanding of committee operations

and more confident in their capacity to provide advice to parliamentarians on the administrative and analytical processes needed to ensure that committee activities are conducted effectively.

Many participants also asked that CDI consider conducting the course in-country, to allow more staff to participate, and consider allowing members of parliament to participate so they too can benefit from the course.

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