

Address to AIIA-CDI political party assistance roundtable

Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs Bob McMullan, Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs Senator Marise Payne, Chair of the CDI Consultative Council Tony Eggleton, forum organisers, hosts, colleagues, honoured guests ...

Today I want to argue that democracy promotion like politics generally is about the future, not the past.

It is about structuring the future of Australian approaches to democracy promotion in such ways as to maximise their effectiveness, effecting positive change in our region's political parties, while simultaneously sparing precious tax dollars.

The premise of this public forum is to "examine Australia's current approaches and policies to democracy promotion..."

For a variety of reasons, this discussion is both timely and apt.

The election of a Rudd Labor Government on 24 November 2007, the forthcoming budget and the two year anniversary of the Australian Political Parties for Democracy Program (the APPDP) all underline the importance of this present discussion.

Today, it is appropriate only that I discuss Labor's commitments to this latter initiative and the effects that this has had on the promotion of democracy in our region - that is, Asia and the Pacific.

There is little question that the injection of funds into the major parties under the APPDP to undertake a range of democracy promotion activities fundamentally changed the topography of democracy assistance in this country.

For the first time, political parties in Asia and the Pacific are involved in Australian based capacity building programs delivered both here on Australian soil and on the ground in our target countries.

The program has provided new and unprecedented opportunities for training, exchange and dialogue.

The APPDP tipped the balance in Australia in favour of a practitioner approach to democracy building with respect to party assistance and focused the considerable technical expertise of the parties on the complex political governance challenges in our rapidly evolving region.

Political parties are unique repositories of skills, beliefs and ideas.

Detailed knowledge about democracy in action - that is campaigning and party building - can only be found in past and present members, officials and elected representatives of political parties.

Having straddled the worlds of academia, development assistance and politics, my belief is the emergence of the parties as major development agencies in their own right has streamlined democracy assistance processes in this country and given a much needed edge to our efforts in the region.

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With a small amount of finessing, our Australian approach to democracy assistance will be the envy of the global democracy industry.

It has also begun to redress a prominent lacuna in the Australian industry: a voice and vehicle for practitioners to engage in direct assistance to political parties in our region.

This framework is not without its obstacles and bottlenecks, but so long as it is managed well and transparently and so long as the politics of regional engagement are understood, the APPDP is a productive strategy with the potential and actual ability to deliver democracy and diplomacy dividends for Australia and our neighbours.

In only a short space of time, both parties have adapted to their new roles and now provide innovative, on-the-ground practical training programs to political parties in our region.

Gauging the reactions of the Australian public (measured in raw terms by a peak of 400,000 monthly hits on our modest website) and of our partner parties abroad (measured by interest in our programs, candidates lining up for our initiatives and subscriptions to our newsletter), we have generated considerable interest in our programs.

In two of our recent initiatives – an intensive course for women political campaigners and a political advisers' course – we received many more applications than we could satisfy. Indeed, with a minimum of advertising we received over 100 applicants from all around the world for the 15 scholarship positions for the advisers' course.

Nonetheless, Labor's commitment to seeing these funds expended appropriately and to maximum effect is reflected in the fact that our international work is overseen by a high level committee, including the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the International Secretary and the National Secretary. As International Director, I am the secretary of that committee in addition to being the steward of our international activity, both in relation to the APPDP scheme but including a number of our other international activities, including our contributions to the Australian Political Exchange Council – the *other* APEC.

Our ability to meet the challenges of promoting and consolidating democracy under the APPDP is founded on the fact that while the new scheme represented a set of *prima facie* changes, it tapped into long standing beliefs in internationalism and histories of party-to-party assistance around the world.

The point is that we have been able to do this work because for decades both parties have engaged in precisely the sorts of activities that the APPDP was designed to support.

Before the APPDP scheme existed, both parties were involved in more than one ongoing multilateral forum for political parties based on region and/or ideology.

We have also undertaken important bilateral programs. For example, the late former Assistant National Secretary Ian Henderson was a world leader in providing "democracy assistance" to Nelson Mandela in South Africa as that country struggled to shake off the mantle of Apartheid in the early 1990s.

What the APPDP has done is allow us to focus and professionalise our activities, develop a corpus of skilled, experienced and well trained international officers able to deliver public diplomacy and world class capacity development initiatives in our region.

My major lament is that given the strengths and foresight of the program, the APPDP was not a Labor party initiative.

To illustrate these points, I want to focus on the key challenges that Australian Labor has taken up in the pursuit of our democracy promotion agenda.

From the outset our programs were designed to respond to local demands. Our first set of major initiatives was the deployment of evaluation teams to all our major target countries: Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Timor Leste, Philippines and Solomon Islands. The process is ongoing and developing continually – we have just launched a collaborative and participatory research and evaluation project in Vanuatu in preparation for their elections later in the year – but it indicates how seriously we take the understanding of local context.

Not so long ago, a common refrain among development assistance workers, administrators and policy makers was that we must avoid enmeshment in local politics. While I would certainly caution anyone against meddling in local politics or backing particular horses in particular races in any material sense, I would also state that democracy assistance is inherently political.

Democratisation is a process that seeks to change the distribution of power between social groups. By empowering one set of institutions and actors over others, donors can shape internal power dynamics, especially in poor ... societies.ⁱ

While we should never overestimate our ability to influence local circumstances, great care should always be taken to ensure that programs are delivered in appropriate and productive ways. We cannot simply blunder in and claim an important mandate for reform without ever coming to grips with local contexts. While I am sceptical of the claim that local institutions and organisations must necessarily determine our strategies, we must encourage a higher degree of local involvement in planning and evaluation. Agencies like ours must work on trust and partnership with host governments and partner parties. This has obvious implications for the nature of our work.

For external agencies like ours, reminding politicians in Asia and the Pacific of their failings or berating them for the particular configurations of their legal frameworks, funding arrangements or whatever, is unlikely to build the kinds of relationships needed to effect sustainable development in the political systems *and* political cultures in our region.

There *is* a role for this kind of public critique – primarily it should come from other local politicians or local stakeholders. In this country, these differences are the foundation of the national debate.

Arguably, external actors should also be able to raise these kinds of issues in the public interest in a globalised world. But we need to be very wary of depicting ourselves as the voice of authority in democracy to be listened to by

regional political parties. The body-language of engagement is crucial to our enterprise and its ultimate success.

An eye for local circumstances goes some of the way to redressing the undue attention paid to symptoms of bad political governance, rather than the causes. Understanding what factors contributed to these arrangements is the first step towards building effective and sustainable responses to them. We must place emphasis on understanding local contexts, while still looking for meaningful ways forward. Hence, we have avoided didacticism in favour of building dialogue and partnership.

By identifying a series of shared challenges of globalisation, climate change, terrorism, corruption, gender, trade and democracy - political campaigns, party building and lawmaking, for example - Labor has been able to build rapid, sustainable (we hope) partnerships with parties in each of our target countries. This was so even before we won office last November.

The fact is that many of the challenges we face in Australia will be shared with our counterparts in Asia and the Pacific. Finding common ground in responding to these challenges is the only way to build long-term sustainable support. Moreover, we political parties share fundamentally a belief that our role is to find solutions to the problems faced by everyday people. Our ability to dialogue with our regional counterparts, even at times of political stress, is premised on this recognition.

Labor have placed great stock in coordination and harmonisation. Not just in our ongoing involvement with allied agencies operating in our region, but in ensuring that we play to our unique strengths. We have both contributed productively to and benefited from our partnerships with civil society organisations and elements of the tertiary sector.

We have endeavoured to build strong strategic partnerships with organisations like the National Democratic Institute (NDI) for International Affairs and tertiary institutions such as the CDI and Graduate School of Government (GSG) at Sydney University. We have had dialogue with the National Endowment for Democracy (the NED) in the United States and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA). Each agency brings particular skills and experience to these activities in the region – our difference adds a new and valid voice to the mix.

While the way that our democracy promotion organisations interrelate may vary from international practice, there is no question that the flexibility built into our structures allows us to respond to the varied challenges of this kind of work in our region.

It has allowed for the elements of innovation in our programming by which we have sidestepped the problems associated with governments directly engaging with, for example, political parties to effect democracy assistance programs.

Moreover, our status as an operational unit within a party framework instantly brands our programs and trainers as “hot off the press” of political practice. Indeed, it is this fact that underpins our utility – we, like our partner parties, are practitioners.

That our programs offer to our regional counterparts the same intensity of training and capacity development that we offer to our own people – with some variations - is also highly appealing.

Providing frameworks for dialogue with political parties on campaigns is central to this process –from a democratic practitioner’s perspective this is what parties are about: campaigning for office. This is democracy in action.

The campaign necessarily draws everyday people into the process of constituting government.

It is the campaign which energises party structures and forces us to distil our often complex policies into comprehensible messages about policy and value for public consumption. In our courses as in our political communication, we avoid alienating language and focus on practical approaches to these issues.

The next major challenge is the pervasive belief that political parties involved in international work will necessarily be looking only for sister or brother parties of the same or similar ideological bent. In choosing recipient political parties for APPDP schemes, we take into consideration elements of ideology but it is not the only consideration. Where like-minded parties exist, we will engage them as partners in development. Where political parties are differentiated by other criteria, we will seek to strengthen democratic institutions and promote stable and effective governance across the board. A particular issue here is that we will not engage with parties that openly promote the use of violence as a means to prosecute their political goals. This is a matter of ideology. *Done right, politics is the enemy of violence.*

Although we represent particular beliefs and values, we do not force these upon the participants in our programs – we do not proselytize or recruit. As I mentioned earlier, there are inherent dangers domestically and for the potential recipient in blindly supporting the parties we assume to be our ideological counterparts or try to recruit political parties to our international associations.

There are few prominent political parties in Asia and the Pacific with ideologies that overlap clearly with Labor or Liberal.

Moreover, engagement with external actors like other parties without a commensurate set of safeguards presents unnecessary opportunities for parties to wedge domestic opponents who engage with organisations like ours. We have avoided any accusation of bias by carefully balancing the delivery of multi-party training programs with individual party-to-party consultations. We will always approach the major players in a given jurisdiction to be involved in our programs. The decision to be involved then rests with them. Some take it up, some do not. The point is that they have the choice.

The simple fact is – and this is common to all practitioners in our political arena – the value and recognition of our brands ebb and flow. But our specialist knowledge about political governance practices – in particular, campaigns, party-building and democracy, are rare and valued.

The point of all of this is that democracy promotion is all about the future not the past.

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The future of the people of Asia and the Pacific will be determined above all by the choices made by their leaders, institutions and citizens.

These will determine the degree to which the commitments made now in our region will translate into sustainable outcomes for the citizens of the region's countries.

By and large, external actors will continue to be adjuncts to the broader processes of domestically generated democracy promotion. As democracy promoters, we are not the whole story, but we can make a difference.

We need to engage our counterparts and encourage dialogue on key issues, to chart new directions in partnership.

The need for effective action on our part requires understanding of the political contexts in which we are operating, to ensure we work with the right people, in the right ways to help make progress. This is self evident.

Our activities must support active domestic constituents to be effective and we must be realistic and humble about what we can achieve.

Getting the politics about democracy promotion right will be central to the extent to which we can promote a stable, diverse, well-governed region.

In introducing this presentation, I mentioned that this forum was premised on evaluating our approaches to democracy assistance. The forum organisers were also explicit in their statement that the forum should be used to improve democracy assistance programs in the region.

If we are serious about reforming and streamlining the complex arrangements for democracy assistance currently in operation in Australia, the various organisations represented here need to understand and embrace the new topography. In the interests of harmonisation and coordination, each agency must be utterly clear about what they bring to these debates and what it is that they can contribute to international practices of democracy promotion. It is the natural jumping off point for this discussion.

Chair, thank you.

ⁱ Lise Rakner, Alina Rocha Menocal and Verena Fritz, 'Working Paper 1: Democratisation's Third Wave and the Challenges of Democratic Deepening: Assessing International Democracy Assistance and Lessons Learned', p.48. Cited online at http://www.odi.org.uk/pppg/politics_and_governance/publications/GAPWP1.pdf.