

AUSTRALIA TO THE UNITED KINGDOM
8 – 18 June 2003

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Introduction

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Our visit to the United Kingdom between 8 and 18 June 2003, courtesy of the Australian Political Exchange Council ("APEC") and hosted by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was an extraordinary experience for each member of the delegation.

At the outset of this report it is appropriate to record the thanks of the delegation to Nora Doogan and others of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office for the program they arranged for us in the United Kingdom. We had the opportunity to meet with Members of the House of Commons, Members of the European and Scottish Parliaments including Ministers and Shadow Ministers. We met civil servants, political advisors, officers of the Parliament – the House of Lords, the Scottish Parliament, and representatives of the major political parties, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Trade Union Congress and the European Commission.

We were provided with a comprehensive overview of the country's system of governance and recent political reforms as well as an insight into the current issues and political debates in the UK. It allowed a frank and open discussion among political party activists (us included) about party democracy, campaigning, community apathy, alternate voting systems, fund raising/ public funding and policy development in all our parties in a modern context.

Special effort was made to accommodate the particular wishes of individual delegates with diverse policy interests such as policing, community safety, transport, employment services, welfare reform, and urban/regional renewal. The knowledge gained from this first hand contact and information exchange was invaluable and much appreciated.

The delegation was also able to visit some significant sites and places in London, Edinburgh and Newcastle, which enhanced the richness of the experience of this visit. The officers who were our guides, Mr Nigel Harland in London and Mr Bob Calderwood in Edinburgh were delightful hosts and looked after us well.

Current Issues in the UK Political System

The lasting impression from our visit to the UK will be that we were there at a time of significant political and social change. One delegate commented that this was remarkable because they had always thought of Britain as being "established" with a very old system resistant to change.

The timing of our visit to the UK coincided with a number of events – the release of the draft European Union (“EU”) Constitution, the long awaited statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer concerning the adoption of the Euro, a substantial cabinet reshuffle was implemented by the Prime Minister, further reform of the House of Lords was announced by removing the Law Lords and establishing a Supreme Court.

The Blair Government was also coming under increasing scrutiny regarding their decision to join the United States in its invasion of Iraq. A Parliamentary Inquiry into the intelligence considered by the Government in making its decision was initiated and there were allegations in the media that the Prime Minister’s office had been involved in “sexing up” the intelligence dossier concerning Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction.

There were changes announced to civil service departments to compliment devolution in Scotland and Wales, in particular, the abolition of the Welsh and Scottish Offices. The Government also announced a referendum in Northern England on the establishment of a regional assembly.

Westminster – “Same, same only different...”

So much of the UK political system is familiar to an Australian political delegation. This is clearly demonstrated by the similarity of our institutions – similar but certainly not the same! The monarchy, the Westminster system of parliament, local government, the civil service, unions and political parties are all familiar institutions.

Each institution was dealing with the complexity of change it confronted, usually with a willingness to experiment, occasionally with reluctance and resistance.

The creation of regional parliaments with devolved powers from Westminster and the ongoing debate about the need for an English regional assembly are part of a reform process for the House of Commons. The proposed changes to the number of Scottish electorates and hence the level of representation in the House of Commons is one example of how devolution may drive further reform. There are strongly held views that House of Commons MPs from Scotland should not be allowed to vote on legislation that does not apply to Scotland because of devolution and the concordats with Westminster. There are equally strongly held views that the way forward is to create regional assemblies for the English. This issue was referred to by many people we visited as the “Midlothian question”.

The House of Lords has been subject to scrutiny and some reforms. In 1999 the Blair Government legislated to effectively remove the right of most hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House. A Royal Commission was established to consider the role, function and composition of the “second chamber”. The Royal Commission Report was published in 2000 including a number of options for the House including both elected and appointed representatives. It is fair to say that completing the reform of the House of Lords is still ‘a work in progress’.

The delegation received an informative briefing from David Beamish, the Clerk of Journals in the House of Lords.

During the five days in London we had the opportunity to meet with representatives of each of the three main political parties in the UK, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and the Tory Party.

The delegation quizzed each party on their attitude to devolution, the adoption of the Euro and the future of Europe. This discussion extended into many areas that enabled the group to compare and contrast the Australian experience with that of the UK.

The British are interested in our system of compulsory voting and proportional representation. The UK has a non-compulsory 'first past the post' voting system in Westminster. All political parties expressed concern at the trend of low voter turn out at general elections (60% of eligible voters voted at the last election). Much of the parties campaigning is directed at turning supporters out to vote. Matt Clarke, the Assistant General Secretary of the Labour Party pointed out that in Australia the trend of increasing informal votes in elections reflected a similar problem of voter apathy in the Australian context.

Electoral system reforms including alternative voting systems are still being considered (and trialed) in the UK. The voting system adopted for the Scottish Parliament has a component of PR. This system has seen the election of a coalition government of the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats. While we visited the UK there was a debate underway concerning applying PR in local council elections. The outcome of this matter will be interesting to observe, particularly as the representation of women improved where PR was used.

It was invaluable to learn how each party was structured, how they developed policy and prepared their election manifesto.

For example, the Labour Party focuses very much on the approach of "Partnerships in Power" and strives to engage both party members and the public in policy development. The partnership is one between the party, the government and the people.

Matt Clarke described the process of policy development within the Labour Party, and the members of our delegation found this consultative approach very interesting. Whilst the Annual Conference is the sovereign body in the party, it is the National Policy Forum ("NPF") that drives and manages the policy development process. The NPF is currently developing the Labour Party's manifesto for its third term; even while the government is implementing the manifesto it took to the last election. The election manifesto is different from party policy per se – it is the specific commitments and proposals the party intends to implement during its term in office. In contrast to widely held perceptions in Australia, where election promises are viewed cynically by the public, in the UK the Blair Government is going to great lengths to stick to its election manifesto, as this is expected by the voters. It is also interesting to note that, under recent electoral law changes, public funding is available to political parties for manifesto development.

The delegation asked questions about the Labour Party's relationship with trade unions, as there has been criticism that the Blair government had abandoned some traditional "socialist" values to be more "populist". It is also true that much of the Thatcher Anti-Union legislation is still on the Statute. Matt spoke about New Labour's focus on "traditional values in a modern setting" stressing that change was necessary because of globalisation and change in the world at large. Tony Blair's more moderate approach, his philosophy of "fairness, not favours" is demonstrating to the electorate that the Labour Party is governing in the interests of all not some.

We had an interesting discussion with Matt, as we did with MPs from the Liberal Democrats, New Labour and the Tories, about the role of political parties, the role of the media, in light of growing disillusionment and frustration amongst the people with political processes.

In particular, Mr Hugh Rickard, the Chief Executive Officer of the Liberal Democrat Party ("LDP") provided the delegation with a detailed overview of the structure and policy development processes within the LDP. Liz Oss-Emer explained that there were great similarities in this process within the LDP and the Australian Democrats.

The party's fortunes appear to be flourishing and they saw themselves as becoming the real opposition to Labour as the Tory Party continues to poll less support. Mr Lembit Opik, the LDP Spokesperson on Wales and Northern Ireland, gave the delegation a "third party" view of the political scene in Britain.

The LDP is the third largest party represented in the British Parliament, with 53 seats in the House of Commons (659 seats in total). There are ten (10) parties represented in the House. The LDP also won 30% of the seats in this year's local government elections.

From Mr Opik's point of view third party position is often a frustrating one, but it's a position where it's possible to maintain a strong values focus. The Liberal Democrats tend to be outcome focused, agreeing with the government and letting them take credit if necessary.

Lembit spoke about the challenge to the party to maintain its vision if it becomes the main opposition or wins government, when pressure to compromise will be greater. He believes that by recruiting idealists into the party it will be partly protected from this happening. Lembit also raised the idea of limiting the life of any government to 10 years.

Part of the Liberal Democrats approach is a focus on grass roots issues – all MPs are expected to engage with the electorate - or constituency, on even the most mundane issue.

We discussed the low voter turn out in the election of the Welsh Assembly. The election saw a 38% voter turnout. Lembit expressed the view that the Assembly needs to market itself better to the people as it has only been in existence for four years. He also said the Welsh MPs need to be more active in the community. In the UK parliament, as party spokesperson for Wales, Lembit raises issues relevant to that region. He is also responsible for policy issues for Wales & Northern Ireland within his party.

We were fortunate to have the opportunity to meet with Bernard Jenkin MP who is the Shadow Secretary of State for Defence. He spoke of his role in Opposition and of the issues in his portfolio. The Tory Party supported the Prime Minister's decision to join the war in Iraq.

He spoke of the visits he had made to British Troops in Iraq. He was concerned that despite significant government expenditure on defence acquisitions, the British Troops used technology inferior to the United States. There was some conjecture that this had caused difficulties in the joint operations.

Our discussion with Bernard confirmed the view that the role of the Opposition in the UK is similar to Australia. It was noted that Shadow Ministers in the UK do not receive additional remuneration for their role unlike in Australia.

The delegation also met with Richard Normington (Secretary of the IDU) and Michael Harbour, an MEP and the Conservative Leader in the European Parliament to discuss the Tory Party's structures and methods of operation nationally, in the EU and internationally.

The opportunity to meet with Government Ministers was appreciated. It was particularly topical to meet with Rt Hon Adam Ingram MP, who is one of the Ministers of State working under the Secretary of Defence. The Iraq war, the search for weapons of mass destruction and serious questions about the intelligence provided to the government was the main item on the electronic and print media through out our visit.

The Rt Hon John Spellar, MP is the Minister for State for Transport. He explained the breadth of his portfolio responsibilities encompassing all forms of transport and associated issues in the UK. London is the major transport gateway to Europe, an important position to maintain. Millions and millions of people travel to and through the capital every year. The government is keen to continue to hold and build upon this pivotal transport position. The issue of Public Private Partnerships was discussed as was the impact of past contracting out and privatisation including the insight of experience when dealing with specifying the service required of private sector operators with substantial public service contracts.

Mr Bill Rammell MP is one of three Under Secretaries, working under two Ministers for State who in turn work under the Foreign Secretary. Mr Rammell holds the portfolio responsibilities for Latin America, North-East Asia, Africa, the Solomon Islands, Australia, the United Nations and Human Rights.

Unfortunately our discussions with Mr Rammell were cut short because he had to return to Westminster for a Division. We did touch on the subjects of North Korea, the Iraq war, Britain's relationship with China since "handing back" Hong Kong and African debt. On the latter, Mr Rammell pointed out that the UK had forgiven debts owed by seven African countries and is looking at doing so in several more. It has also increased foreign aid to Africa by 50% over the last 3 years.

The issue of returning to Westminster for Divisions caused some interest amongst delegation members, particularly the parliamentarians. Many MPs are housed in new offices across the road from Westminster, connected by an under road walkway – a few minutes brisk walk to the chamber. The bells in the House of Commons ring for seven minutes. The offices of Ministers and Secretaries etc. are in their department buildings, which are spread around Whitechapel. The Foreign Office, where we met Mr Rammell, is a good ten minute walk from Westminster, quicker by car (assuming the lights and traffic are with you). A car with driver is on standby, and leaps into action when the bells are rung.

Highlights of our visit to Westminster were observing Questions to the Prime Minister in the House of Commons and also enjoying lunch hosted by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

Europe, the Euro and Enlargement

The UK is an important member of the European Union. There are however, varying views in the UK about the level of involvement and what powers are appropriate for the EU. These differing views were represented in discussions with people and organisations the delegation met, as well as in media reports during our visit.

The publication of the Draft Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe has re-ignited debate in the British community concerning the future of Europe and their role in it. Commentators and politicians refer to the discussion as the 'Future of Europe' debate. The final document (which has a very long process to consider changes and must be determined by unanimity of the Heads of Government of Member States) is intended to clarify what should be decided by national governments and on what issues countries can work together at a European level. A European Council of Ministers' meeting was

scheduled for 20 June where the draft EU Constitutional Treaty was to be formerly presented.

The context of the 'Future of Europe' debate in the UK includes the controversial issues concerning adoption of the European single currency, the Euro and the enlargement of the EU.

The EU, which is made up of fifteen member states, is preparing itself for the greatest expansion in membership since its formation. There are currently thirteen candidate countries; ten of these become official members of the EU in May 2004.

Eleven member states adopted the Euro when it was launched but three countries – Denmark, Sweden and the UK – decided to defer a decision. The delegation arrived in London the day before the Hon. Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was scheduled to make a statement in the House of Commons concerning the question of monetary union and the Government's attitude to the adoption of the Euro. The Blair government decided to delay a referendum concerning monetary union because of domestic economic issues like home mortgage interest rates and to allow further consultation with the community.

The delegation met with Mr Ian Barber, Deputy Head of the Representative Office of the European Commission in the UK. Mr Barber's presentation provided details about the history of the EU and the European Commission's priorities including enlargement and economic prosperity. We discussed the role of the EU office in Canberra and the opportunities for Australia. An informative question and answer session addressed issues including impact of EC decision on Scottish fishing industry, wage rates, EU in Australia and opportunities for trade, French territories in Pacific, Ireland using Euro and changes to CAP payments.

Devolution

At the same time as the debate about "evolving power upwards" to the EU continues so does the consideration of the success of "devolving power downwards" to differing models of regional government. The Blair Government has introduced regional government in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It also re-established the Greater London Council abolished by the Thatcher Government many years before.

The Northern Ireland Assembly ("NIA") was established following the 1998 Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement. The NIA has been suspended as a result of breakdowns in the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. Elections were due in June 2003 but were delayed indefinitely.

The National Assembly for Wales was opened in 1999. It does not have full legislative powers but it does have responsibility for the development and implementation of policies for Wales within its secondary devolved powers. Shortly before our arrival in the UK the Welsh Assembly received some acclaim for achieving 50% representation of women in their parliament.

The Scottish Parliament is by far the most powerful of the devolved regional governments. Despite the fact that Scotland is part of the UK, the Scots have always retained control over their legal and education systems as well as other areas. The people of Scotland were (and still are) passionate about having their own parliament with full legislative power and authority. It is also the parliament the delegation visited and became familiar with its legislative powers and operations.

The Scottish Parliament

The delegation was given a comprehensive overview of the Scottish Parliament. We met with civil servants, parliamentary presiding officers, academics, Members of the Scottish Parliament ("MSPs") from various political parties and the political advisors to the Labour/LDP Coalition Government.

Tim Simons, External Relations and Strategy Co-ordinator in the Scottish Parliament briefed us regarding devolution, the concordats with Westminster and spoke of Scotland's political links to Europe.

There are 129 members in the Parliament – 73 are directly elected from constituencies and 56 are elected by proportional representation on a regional list based on the regions used in the European parliamentary elections.

The evolution of the Scottish Parliament was discussed and the political composition of the first Parliament. It was explained that there is a Coalition Agreement between the Labour Party and the LDP combining elements of both parties' election manifestos. The Agreement emphasises consensus, transparency and openness in government. It has been seen to be very successful particularly concerning the timely passage of legislation (more so than Westminster) and has ensured policy changes are effectively implemented.

The acceptance of change by MSPs was remarkable to observe. All parties appeared to share a common vision that the Scottish Parliament will deliver long-term gains on important issues for the Scottish people.

The Memorandum of Understanding on Concordats with Westminster that prescribes the devolution of powers from Westminster was discussed. Initially the Scottish Office (a public sector department) assisted both the Scottish Parliament as well as Westminster identify and deal with overlaps or oversights in the Memorandum concerning the reserved versus devolved powers.

Scotland has eight Members of the European Parliament ("MEPs"). The EU has provided tremendous opportunities for Scotland to develop closer links with Europe and promote Scotland's tourism and lifestyle.

The delegation was treated to a lively and informative presentation by Eberhard Bort, the Co-ordinator of the newly established Institute of Governance at the University of Edinburgh. He provided us with an excellent opportunity to discuss the levels of government in the United Kingdom and Scotland in particular. The question and answer session covered the "joint constituency" relationships for MSPs and List MSPs, overlapping constituency boundaries for each level of government, voter turnout, election campaigning and the use of "think tanks" by political parties.

We were proud to be the first Australian delegation to visit the Institute and understand that we will feature on their website for a while!

The delegation spoke with parliamentarians from the major political parties in Scotland. A common theme from all these discussions was the desire to see the devolution of power to the Scottish Parliament succeed. There was also a demonstrated willingness to be innovative in dealing with all matters which come before the Parliament.

We were able to meet briefly with a member of the Scottish Cabinet. Patricia Ferguson MSP is the Minister for Parliamentary Business. This role, among other things, combines the role of Chief Whip and Leader of Government Business in the House (In an

Australian context). Unfortunately our meeting with Patricia regarding her role was brief as she was required back in the Chamber. The innovation of a daily "decision time" where all voting occurs was very interesting as was the procedure for Question Time which we were fortunate to see.

It is evident that because of the goodwill of most MSPs and their positive attitude to devolution has ensured the Scottish Parliament is effective. They did not adopt the cumbersome rules of Westminster in determining their procedures or standing orders. Examples used by Patricia to illustrate this goodwill were the success of the Procedures Committee on the electronic voting system used in the chamber and the timely passing of legislation resulting from the innovative use of committee structures by the Parliament.

The committee system has been taken to new heights – legislation is developed and discussed by parliamentary committees with all parties represented and participating before legislation. Committees can also initiate legislation.

Regional & Local Government – North East England

The last two days of the trip saw the delegation in North East England visiting the area of Newcastle.

At a luncheon hosted by Mr Bryan Rees, Head of Regional and Local Governance we were treated to traditional fare and later to a detailed presentation about governance in the English regions. This presentation included a summary of major reforms from 1997 - devolution to Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland; formation of the Greater London Authority & House of Lords reform; changes to regional policy since 1997 - formation of Regional Development Agencies (which is where the impetus for urban renewal/revitalisation of Gateshead was first generated); the Government Offices work; the creation of regional chambers and regional development agencies in some areas. Regional governance is seen as critical for economic growth.

A Regional Government White Paper was circulated by the Blair Government in May 2002, setting out how the government intended to decentralise and devolve power. The powers identified to be devolved included housing, culture, environment and biodiversity, transport, employment, land use and regional planning, public health. One aim of regional government has been to decrease overlap, repetition and duplication of government services.

It was intended that the new regional assemblies would be based on existing boundaries (i.e. fairly small with 25-35 members). There would be an Assembly Leader and Cabinet chosen by the whole Assembly. The White Paper establishes a PR voting system. This could mean radical change in some regions that have been dominated as either Labour Party or Tory areas for many years. The Assemblies would be funded by Commonwealth grant plus local taxes plus "independent" sources.

The implementation of further reform including the creation of regional assemblies is dependant upon both legislative reform and local referenda. The delegation was delighted that on the day of our visit Westminster announced that referendums would be held (Autumn 2004) in three key regional areas, one of them being Newcastle-Gateshead (the North East) on regional government. The officials from the city council and the Government Office of the North East (which represents eight different government departments) with whom we were meeting were required to do many media interviews concerning this announcement and so the delegation became involved in that as well.

A reception with members of the Association of North East Councils provided us with the opportunity to discuss local issues and understand more how all the tiers of government interact.

North East England suffered significant economic decline as a result of the loss of manufacturing industries and mining concerns in the 1980s and 1990s. Local communities were experiencing high levels of unemployment, welfare dependency and declining standards of living.

There has been significant investment in urban renewal (redevelopment/ revitalisation) in some of these areas to turn these communities around. Some members of the delegation had earlier met with representatives of the government agency dealing with the Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. The new deal for communities developed from this strategy has great prospects for improving the liveability of many deprived areas in the UK.

The delegation met with representatives from the Gateshead Quays development project – one such urban renewal project. The project involved a major redevelopment of “run down” urban areas. One focus of the redevelopment was to bring art into the area. A disused flour mill has been transformed into the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Arts. We walked across the “winking eye” Millennium Bridge and saw the construction of the new performing arts centre, which looks a little bit like the Sydney Opera House.

While in the North East of England the delegation was able to visit significant sites including the massive iron structure called The Angel of the North near Durham. We also visited Durham Cathedral, a world heritage site. Our tour was conducted by Anne Hayward, Chapter Steward and somewhat of an historian, she was very impressive and we wish to record our sincere thanks to her.

Australian Connections

There exists a special relationship and connection between Australia and the UK. One in eight Australians have a UK born parent or grandparent. The UK is our second largest investor and fourth largest trading partner (NB. Europe is our largest trading partner). Our political institutions are similar. The building and commissioning of an Australian War Memorial at Hyde Park Corner in London is but one example of that close and historic relationship.

While in the UK we were able to meet with Australian representatives including a meeting with Mr Bill Tweddell and a number of officers from the Australian High Commission. This was an excellent opportunity to gain some insights into the function of the high commission, as well as an opportunity to discuss with them issues in the UK from an Aussie’s perspective such as the future of our relationship with the UK as well as immigration, refugees, intelligence gathering and trade, among others.

In a report such as this it is impossible to refer to everyone we met and every place we visited. However, I hope I have been able to provide an overview of the activities of the delegation’s trip. As Leader I had to return to Australia early and unfortunately missed the visit to North East England.

I thank the other members of the delegation for their comradeship and good will. One of the great strengths of the APEC Political Exchange program is not only the ability to establish international relationships across parties and ideologies but also the opportunity to build bridges across parties among the Australian representatives that attend. I wish my fellow delegates all the best and look forward to working with them again in the future.

Finally, on behalf of the delegation we record our thanks to the officers of the APEC in Australia.

Sharryn Jackson.