

Australian Political Exchange Council

Inaugural Delegation

Philippines

July – August 2006

Comment by Delegation Leader

The inaugural Australian Political Exchange Council (APEC) delegation to the Philippines was a wonderful success and proved to be a great opportunity for young Australian leaders to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the Philippine people, their culture, democracy, rich history, challenges and economics.

The delegation was made up of a bipartisan group of representatives from the Australian Labor Party, Liberal Party of Australia, the National Party of Australia and the Australian Political Exchange Council (APEC) and appreciated the access and hospitality provided to the delegation.

This inaugural visit also provided the platform for a continued and strong relationship between our two peoples and nations that share many common aspirations and values. Matters such as democracy, freedom of religion and association, human rights, housing availability, poverty and the many other issues that face our nations at different levels were central to many of the discussions.

My appreciation must also be noted in regard to the Philippine Council of Young Political Leaders (PCYPL) – our hosts in the Philippines – for their wonderful support and assistance during our visit that without them would have made our delegation work more difficult and I am sure less than the wonderful experience we enjoyed.

The Philippines are a proud, strong country made up of intelligent and hard working people at all levels. A nation facing a number of challenges but also many opportunities and natural advantages none of which the least would be its strength in its people.

We visited many beautiful and interesting places from the capital Manila to the outer regions, the picturesque Bohol and Cebu regions and other places of interest such as Loboc. In all the towns, cities and Barangies we visited, new friends were made.

The meetings and discussions afforded to us were all of exceptional quality and helpful in our better understanding of the issues and challenges confronting the Philippines.

The professionalism of the people we encountered demonstrated the renowned reputation of the Philippine people for their hospitality, warmth and genuine sincerity towards our delegation as visitors and the purpose of our presence.

This visit has highlighted the need for Australia to take a greater interest in the democratic process, economic matters and other exchanges that can be shared between our nations.

Australia is in a unique position to our close neighbour and should take the opportunity to further the networks, ideas and relationships formed by this delegation and the reciprocal delegation to Australia from the PCYPL earlier this year.

My thanks must also go to the APEC organisation and Kim Baker, as the accompanying officer, for their fine work and a solid program of appointments and cultural activities.

Yours sincerely

Bernie Ripoll MP
Delegation Leader
Federal Member for Oxley

The Delegation

The visiting group was made up of the following people:

Delegation Leader:

- Mr Bernie Ripoll MP, Federal Member for Oxley (Australian Labor Party)
Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Industry, Infrastructure and Industrial Relations

Delegation Members:

- Mr David Anthony (Australian Labor Party), Office of Mr Kevin Rudd MP,
Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, Trade and International Security
- Mr George Lemon (Liberal Party of Australia), Office of Senator Gary Humphries
- Mr Tim Singh (Liberal Party of Australia), Office of Senator the Hon Rod Kemp,
Federal Minister for the Arts and Sport
- Ms Jane Templeton (Liberal Party of Australia), Office of the Hon David Hawker
MP, Speaker of the House of Representatives
- Cr Cathryn Wood (The Nationals), Councillor, Brookton Shire Council

Accompanying Officer:

- Mrs Kim Baker (Director, Australian Political Exchange Council)

Special Thanks

Our most sincere and special thanks must go to a number of people who made this delegation a wonderful success. We would like to thank in no order of preference, Congressman Edgardo Chatto and his staff, Congressman Del Guzman, Senator Francis Pangilinan and his staff, including George, PCYPL in particular Rollie and KP, and Ambassador Tony Hely and the staff, especially Andrei Seeto, of the Australian Embassy in Manila

These people made our visit not only informative and worthwhile, but also helped to build a lasting relationship between our two nations.

Pre-departure Briefing

The delegation received a pre-departure briefing from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Philippine Embassy, APEC and Professor Ben Kerkvliet from the Australian National University. These briefings provided the delegation with information on the bilateral relationship between Australia and the Philippines, our economic exchanges, trade, foreign aid assistance, and people to people and government relationships.

We were also briefed on recent ministerial level exchanges, in particular the recent BAM meetings and the growing interest in developing a stronger more mutually beneficial relationship at a higher government level. This has resulted in a number of senior visits that will continue into the future.

The matter of counter terrorism and regional issues was also discussed with a view to strengthening ties and organisations that deal with these matters. It was also noted that there has also been an increase in funding from Australia towards stronger defence relations and cooperation.

Program of Visits

Over the course of our visit to the Philippines, we had the opportunity to visit both Manila and “the regions” and meet with legislators and officials from all levels of government in the Philippines.

Outlined below is a brief overview of the places we were fortunate enough to visit.

Manila

Manila is the capital of the Philippines and like many Asian cities it is a regional hub, home to the Asian Development Bank and many major corporations. Manila is located in the Luzon region of the Philippines and is steeped in history and culture. During our time in Manila we were fortunate to visit Intramuros (Walled City) and the Malacanan Palace (Presidential Palace) as well as the Senate and the Congress. The opportunity to visit Malacanan, Intramuros and other culturally significant places was an absolute pleasure and gave us all a deeper understanding of the rich history of the Philippines.

In contrast to the historic centres of the Philippines, we were also extremely fortunate to visit the enormous SM Mall of Asia. Shopping malls are discussed later in this report, but the visit to the SM Mall of Asia demonstrated Manila’s balancing of its historic past with the needs of a modern, international city with almost 10 million people living in greater metro Manila.

Tagaytay City

A beautiful town just outside Manila, rich in agriculture and natural beauty, it hosts visitors from many regions of the world. Bananas and other fruits are famous in this area along with fruit conserves and other locally made products. A meeting with town officials highlighted the development and challenges in the region.

Bohol

Bohol is one of the provinces of the Philippines where we stayed for two days. Bohol is the home of Congressman Edgar Chatto and the delegation is very grateful to the Congressman’s staff for ensuring our visit to Bohol was so informative.

Loboc, Bohol

This rural town on the Loboc River displayed the true qualities of the Filipino people, generous hospitality and great talent. We were greeted by the local officials and treated to a beautiful performance of songs from the internationally recognised local children's choir. Their performance was truly world class and inspiring. It is hard to imagine as an outsider that a small town in rural Philippines can host such great talent.

We discussed a number of local issues and projects in the area including the growing tourism trade. The river and waterfalls play an important role in the local economy and trade and now form the hub of new job creation.

Also on Bohol we were able to visit the region's famous Chocolate Hills and see the Tarsiers – a small, cuddly mammal – which are native to Bohol. During our time on Bohol we were extremely fortunate to see Bohol's beautiful beaches and resorts, and to discuss local tourism opportunities with the Bohol Tourism Office.

Cebu

Cebu is a major tourist and economic hub for the Philippines and is located in the Visayas region of the Philippines. We travelled to Cebu directly from Bohol via an ocean jet watercraft.

During our visit to Cebu we met with the Governor of Cebu, Gwendolyn Garcia and officials from the Cebu City Council.

Our discussions with local officials gave us a valuable insight into the local administration of a major population centre in the Philippines. In particular, we gained an understanding of disaster management and social welfare policies.

Significant Issues

The delegation believed that the best way to report on the visit was to range through a series of issues and discussions from key meetings. The delegation appreciated the open and frank nature of all our discussions with officials and elected representatives among the many other people that we met.

The following issues are not meant to represent an exhaustive list of matters discussed, but instead a collection of impressions gained or issues that were of particular interest to the delegation.

Communicating via SMS

The people of the Philippines have an incredible penchant for technology – in particular, for mobile phones and the use of the 'short message service' SMS facility.

While we all at some level use SMS as a means of communication, the Philippines must take the honour of being among the most prolific users in the world. It seems that nearly every person has a mobile phone and uses SMS. Of more significance is the impact SMS has had on the political front. It is said that in election campaigns, SMS becomes a major tool and campaign technique. This is something widely used in the Philippines by people at all levels.

We experienced some of this on a day to day basis with the people around us constantly in communication with their offices and staff via SMS. This phenomenon seemed as natural as people having face-to-face conversations and was no impediment to the other activities and business that were going on around us.

Food and Hospitality

Famous for their food and hospitality, the Philippines did not disappoint. Whether wealthy or poor the Philippine people pride themselves on their culinary skills, their generosity and their open-arms welcome of guests. We were treated to a vast array of foods from different regions sampling some of the best produce available.

Fruit was a big part of the range of foods and in particular the famous bananas and mangoes grown in all parts of the Philippines. Pork and fish, among other meats, also featured as part of some of the wonderful meals we shared with our hosts. The high quality of the produce was often a point of discussion.

Smoking laws

One of the most surprising issues to be raised with the delegation was anti-smoking laws and the push for smoking law reform. This was first raised by Senator Flavio in our discussions with him. The delegation was very interested to learn that the Senator's law reform bill was partly influenced by anti-smoking legislation that he had seen in Australia.

The issue of smoking law reform provided the delegation with an example of "realpolitik" Filipino style and the power of the Senate. The bill was pushed through the Congress by the Senate's decision to hold up other important legislation until the bill was passed by Congress.

System of Government

One of the major themes to emerge from our discussions with Filipinos at all levels of society and right across the country was the issue of constitutional reform. In particular, the proposed movement from a Presidential-Congressional style of government to a Unicameral-Parliamentary style of government.

The Philippines currently have a system of government grounded on the American bicameral system with a directly elected President and a directly elected Congress and Senate. In difference to the American and Australian Senates, the Senate of the Philippines is directly elected by the country nationally. This gives Senators considerable power and prestige, as well as an enormous mandate for their policies.

It is usually from amongst the ranks of Senators, that Presidential candidates emerge.

The delegation was given the impression that many Filipinos supported the change to a parliamentary system as they felt that the current system could not adequately deal with issues such as corruption, nepotism and addressing a lack of modernising reform.

There was a considerable degree of discussion about general constitutional reform and there appears to be considerable goodwill towards reforming the lack of strategic direction, and the united front that maintains a system in desperate need to move out of the Spanish / United States / Marcos era and into its own era.

The political activists in the Philippines are young, confident, intelligent and progressive and are spearheading new ideas and values that are vital to the future success of the Philippine economy. They are aided and supported well by older mentors and have a broad range multi-party support system that goes beyond the Parliament to the public sector and private industry.

While no one system of government can ever be said to be perfect, the Philippines has a great platform and Churchill's maxim that democracy is the worst system of government except all others holds true.

The current debate on parliamentary reform, the changing of term limits and the change to a unicameral system with the general push towards a modernised parliament are complimentary. Regardless of which side one takes in these debates the ability to have them and strive for change is in itself just as important as the proposed change.

From the Australian perspective, it was a unique opportunity for the Australian Delegates to explain to our Filipino counterparts the perceived strengths and weaknesses of our own political system. Issues such as Republicanism in Australia, the nature of Australian federalism, public funding for elections and candidates and political parties, the strong party system and the operation of Parliament and parliamentary procedure were all discussed and analysed with openness and honesty from all sides.

As the Philippines continues to consider possible changes to its system of government, Australia has a unique opportunity to provide an example of a strong, stable parliamentary style democracy operating in the Asia-Pacific region. Given common links of language and shared influences from the United States' system of government, this provides a real opportunity for ongoing exchange and cooperation between Australia and the Philippines.

Environmental Issues

The Philippines like most other developing or developed nations has problems with its environment and sustaining the growth of the economy in harmony with protecting its people, flora and fauna. Past exploitation and poor regulation and control has left parts of the country struggling to cope with environmental degradation.

Mining activity coupled with poverty and a lack of investment has left many parts of the Philippines in poor condition while other parts remain virtually untouched and in pristine condition. This has made the development of future major projects in mining and industry all that more difficult in trying to balance economic growth with protecting the environment.

It was made clear to our delegation that past abuses by foreign companies have changed the way in which future projects are managed and accepted. This is an area of government control that needs to go beyond the local level and have strategic and national leadership to ensure there is a managed process of developing industry and protecting this beautifully rich natural country.

Shopping Malls

If anything can be said about those unique things that make up a nation, for the Philippine people it would have to be shopping malls. We were amazed not only at the size and variety of malls, but also the number that dot the country particularly in Manila.

They are a modern vibrant outlet that would be the envy of most in the west or more developed nations and are a reminder of the many cultural similarities that exists between nations and peoples. As Australians we are not unaccustomed to shopping malls, but perhaps not on the scale that we encountered or for that matter their cultural popularity. Again another reminder that we are not so different after all.

Tourism

Tourism is a very important part of the economy and one that has not seen its full potential. While there are tourists from different parts of Asia there still remain many underdeveloped markets, none the least is Australia. It came as a surprise the many opportunities that exist in the Philippines for extensive tourism markets.

The over 7,000 islands, beautiful beaches and weather, wonderful food, entertainment, great value and warm hospitable people can only produce further revenue and jobs. But a lack of basic infrastructure in some parts and a lack of direct marketing along with past problems of stability have stymied what can otherwise be a real economic boost and jobs creator.

During our visit to Bohol the delegation was very impressed to hear from the Bohol Tourism Office and to see the developments they have undertaken. Over the last ten years considerable initiative on the part of the Bohol Tourism Office has helped to market the unique attractions of the region. Increased tourism in Bohol can only serve to benefit the local community and bring a higher standard of living.

Poverty and the Gawa Kalinga Housing Project

The scourge of many a nation, poverty still remains the greatest challenge for all of us regardless of our background and fortune in place of birth. The Philippines is no different and struggles with its own poor and underclass.

Well acknowledged as one of the major challenges for the government the ability to openly and freely discuss these matters was a great experience and left the delegation with a distinct impression that more can be done and that there is a real focus at many levels to deal with this problem. Rural poverty, urban congestion, unemployment, shanty towns and housing availability along with energy and sanitation issues were common in many parts of the country particularly in the bigger cities.

The ability of a national government to adequately deal with the basic needs of ordinary people still poses many challenges for officials and holds back development of the nation as a whole.

The delegation was very inspired though by a visit to a housing development project for disadvantaged people being undertaken by the Gawa Kalinga Housing project. This project teams with the most disadvantaged of people and helps them through foreign aid and other assistance measures to build homes and communities.

This is an ambitious project seeking to house many families that otherwise have no hope of breaking out of the poverty cycle or giving their children a chance at an education and basic shelter, safety and good health conditions.

Music, Song and Dance

One of the wonderful and enchanting characteristics of the Philippine people is their love for music and song. This delightful national obsession is as much part of daily life as eating and breathing. For a delegation of Australians that loves to enjoy life this was a wonderful discovery that enchanted and surprised at many events. Music and song play an important role in the day to day lives of ordinary people.

Having to sing for one's supper is an old saying, but having to sing for one's lunch puts a completely different perspective on the working lunch. Nevertheless to say that all was enjoyed, productive and a refreshing change on what can at times be difficult meetings.

This love of music and song is not restricted to ordinary people, but to elected representatives, officials and bureaucrats alike. We were regaled by Senators, Members of Congress, and Governors with their ability to carry a tune beyond making political statements. We have much to learn from their love of music and the good spirits that it brings.

Happiness Factor

If anything can be said about the Philippine people it's their ability to be happy. This characteristic can be found in the cities, the farms, the provinces and towns and at every corner. No matter the level of adversity or poverty, the Philippine people are generally a cheerful and happy group that accepts their fate and work hard to better their situation.

There is an internationally recognised survey of the people of the world in which the Philippines is ranked very highly as one of the happiest people on the planet. Although a survey was not needed to highlight this attribute to our delegation which experienced many up-lifting moments on our visit. From visiting the town of Loboc and its beautifully harmonic internationally awarded children's choir, to the joys of life and celebration we encountered at our many receptions.

Many things can be traded, but happiness must be said to be truly a gift that belongs in the heart and is irreplaceable and the Philippine people are truly blessed for this.

Religion and Prayer

Both religion and prayer play an important and pivotal role in the daily lives of the Philippine people. Prayers are regularly said before meals and widely announced on public transport and at the opening of meetings. This was somewhat of a surprise to our delegation not accustomed to such open displays of religious conviction and public adherence.

The Philippines is about 95 per cent Christian (predominantly Roman Catholic) with the remainder being Islamic mostly in the Mindanao region of the South. Religion plays an important part of daily life of the Philippine people. There is a great acceptance in different beliefs with Muslim Members of Congress well established and part of the mainstream political process.

An office on Muslim Affairs has been formed – the delegation was pleased to meet its Deputy Executive Director, Solaiman Mutia. There is also a political party called the Democratic, Christian and Muslim Party which has a number of members from different regions.

Youth Participation

Young people seem to have great confidence and level of maturity beyond their years and are more accepted into senior positions than seems the norm in other cultures. This was clearly refreshing to a delegation of young political leaders from Australia.

Young people elected as Councillors, Congressmen and Senators, bureaucrats and officials were all inspiring with great hopes for the future that they are contributing to the positive development of their country. These young people possess an undying confidence in their own ability and the capacity of their nation and people.

One of the truly great assets of the Philippines is its people and in particular its youth. In its young people, the Philippines has a committed group of activists who are building a better and stronger society.

It is a tribute to all Filipinos that young people have been allowed to play such a pivotal role in public life and contribute to nation building.

Political Families

The issue of political families was never too far from conversation in discussion about power, wealth and government in the Philippines. Political dynasties remain a very real part of active political life and this was openly discussed with our delegation.

The traditions of family and strong community links have been perpetuated over many centuries of Filipino culture and give rise to the concept of a form of family peerage. The nature of political family dynasties is not in itself inherently negative, but it does give rise to a number of challenges.

Considerable debate is taking place to find ways to eliminate nepotism and non merit based patronage and decision making. With that said it needs to be acknowledged that there are many very capable and fine people in elected and senior positions based on merit, regardless of their family history and who have worked very hard and continue to work hard to improve the lives of the people they represent.

Infrastructure Issues

Economic development can often be characterised by a number of issues. Good governance, democracy, education and health and of course a strong infrastructure development program.

The Philippines is no different and faces many infrastructure challenges that hold up personal and public development. The condition of roads, schools, public housing, sanitation and the fundamental building blocks of an economy are still underdeveloped.

The greatest challenge for the Philippine government is the vast spread of its resources among the more than 7,000 islands and 76.5 million people (2006 Census) it needs to serve.

This poses an almost impossible challenge in the provision of basic services such as telecommunications, water and energy, roads and housing and so on.

The decentralised nature of its people means that delivering uniform and consistent infrastructure is easier said than done and requires huge amounts of revenue, something which the Philippines does not have.

With more refined assistance from foreign aid donor countries and a robust long term program of investment, the Philippines can continue its infrastructure programs that are delivering better roads, housing, schools and health facilities.

The development of infrastructure will also benefit tourism and other industries that rely so heavily on well-built environments. All of which, long term, will deliver a more independent and robust nation.

Organisational Issues

One area that seemed to be in need of urgent attention was the organisational capacity of some regions and institutions. While goodwill and enthusiasm will carry forward many projects and achievements, their development can be limited by the organisational capacity of the institutions that run them. This is an area where Australia can have a great influence and provide support.

Australian institutions are characterised by their professional and organisational skills and would be well placed to exchange ideas and systems. There also appeared, at times, to be some discomfort regarding facilities and the limited capacity from some organisations conscious of their limitations, but this was more than compensated by the quality of the people and determination they displayed.

Human Rights and Corruption

Human rights are the responsibility of all nations and all people. We must all respect and strive to improve our own national human rights programs and capacities.

The Philippines still struggle with some ongoing problems in these areas. The inability for people, in particular journalists and political operatives, to speak freely without fear of retribution or persecution limits the nation as a whole.

Reports of political and media killings, along with corruption and accusations of rigged elections, do not bode well for national stability and the rule of law. These issues are the subject of many debates in the country and form part of many political campaigns – unfortunately a lot more work still remains for the people of the Philippines.

Presidential Elections

With Presidential elections scheduled for 2010 and mid-term elections due in 2007, the country already appears to be in the early stages of national political campaigns. Polling continues to highlight those people most popular and with limits on the number of terms a person in Congress or the Senate can serve, change is always the norm rather than the exception.

The Filipino people are very much involved in political activity and take an active interest in their elections. By all accounts it appears that the 2010 elections will be an exciting time with change and reform at the top of everyone's agenda. Of particular interest will be who replaces President Gloria Arroyo and what vision the new President will have for the Philippines.

Overseas Foreign Workers (OFW)

An incredible number of Philippine people work and live in other countries as domestics, skilled and unskilled labour, doctors, engineers and many other professions. It is estimated that nine million people (each day more than 3,000 leave the country) are currently working overseas.

Australia is now becoming a OFW destination with our growing skills shortage driving more people to come to our shores for work.

So important is the OFW, as they are commonly referred to, that the government has established a department with a minister to deal with their issues and well-being. The OFW is very highly regarded as a person that sacrifices themselves for their family and works hard in sometimes difficult conditions to send money back home to their family and ultimately the Philippine economy.

OFW represent approximately US\$10 billion of revenue to the country (equal to about 12 per cent of GDP) which is a vital source of income for many families. Without this source of income many families in the Philippines would struggle or find it impossible to maintain their lifestyle. OFW are very important contributors to family income and can often be the only major source of income.

Recommendations

The primary recommendation of the delegation is that APEC continues the relationship and exchange with the Philippine Council of Young Political Leaders. This will ensure a continuity of work and a strengthening of the relationships developed during our exchanges.

It is also recommended that APEC organise an annual delegation to the Philippines of young political leaders that has a strong interest or connection with the country and its people, and also host a return delegation from the Philippines to Australia.

It is essential that some form of liaison be continued between past delegations and contacts with our counterparts in the Philippines. This should be maintained to ensure that the relationships are fostered into the future. This could be in the form of a half-yearly gathering of participants in Australia with a view to exchange information.

Finally it is recommended that APEC organise a collection of information and relevant news that would be communicated to delegates through email and the APEC website.

Conclusions

The inaugural delegation from Australia proved to be a real success and a great opportunity to better understand a close neighbour and friend. While for most of us it was our first visit to the Philippines it certainly will not be our last. The impressions and views formed by this delegation will only better help us to be more conscious of Philippine people living and working in Australia.

As young political leaders there is no doubt that at some point in our careers we will be in a position to influence public policy and the relationship between our nations. This visit will have aided us in making better decisions and having a clearer focus on those things which link us together.

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