

Parliaments of the Pacific go online with Australian support

The Australian Parliament has a focus on the Pacific region, particularly through the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA). In addition to promoting bilateral relations, the Parliament provides a considerable amount of training and equipment to Pacific parliaments and the Parliamentary Relations Office (PRO) provides a regional secretariat to support both Australian and Pacific branches of the CPA. This encompasses support for a range of conferences, seminars and visits at both the regional and the individual branch levels and included in its general support is training for other parliaments.

In recent years, a key focus has been assisting Pacific Parliaments to develop their websites with a view to improving access to these resources. The idea is to help populate the site, make it live with the help of the local service provider and then train a person to maintain it. It's a significant achievement to see each Parliament join the virtual network, especially given each assignment is completed with just a week on location.

I was fortunate to have been given several assignments in the Pacific developing the parliamentary websites for the islands of Kiribati, Cook Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu and Nauru between 2007 and 2009.

The initial work is done back in Canberra with a shell of the website being created, following a considerable amount of correspondence with staff in the Parliament to work out what was needed. Information such as - was Hansard available electronically, did they have internet access, and was there a service provider on the island?

My first visit was to Kiribati in 2007. It was great landing on this lovely island with picture perfect scenes of beaches, locals fishing and children everywhere. The Parliament building was a pleasant surprise, appearing as sails on a narrow part of the island with the sea sparkling in the background. Inside it was deliciously cool and the best thing was the wireless setup in the building which made life so much easier for access to the outside world. I set about firstly finding just what material was available electronically and what my contact Eni Tekanene (Deputy Clerk) wanted to see on the site. The next step was to meet with the service provider in the town - that being a tiny collection of buildings with several shops and administration buildings. The material available electronically was very limited so a lot of typing took place over the first few days.

It was not all hard work though - one thing I did look forward to each day was driving to and from the Parliament building along a narrow road with a speed limit of 40kmh, taking in the wonderful scenes of life in the villages. Mass on Sunday at the Catholic cathedral was so colourful, with the most beautiful singing by the congregation and the wonderful sight of everyone dressed in their best. Dinner at the High Commissioner's was an added delight. The best thing though was when the site went live a couple of weeks after my visit (<http://www.parliament.gov.ki/about.htm>).

My next trip was to the Cook Islands and Raratonga.

Again, I went in for just over a week, and as in Kiribati I had corresponded with the Parliament ahead of my visit, in particular with Isaac Solomona (Editor of Debates), so I had a site ready to be developed as soon as I arrived. As we had learnt from other locations, negotiations with the service provider was our first priority, ensuring they would be able to host the site as soon as it was completed. The Parliament building being situated on the beach (and Parliament being in recess) I did my work in the Prime Minister's office amidst the scent of perfumed flowers and the sounds of chickens wandering along the beach front and the surf rolling in behind. All went well and the site was live just as I was departing (<http://www.parliament.gov.ck/>).

Tonga was the next assignment for this program. Tonga is in fact an archipelago of 176 islands with the capital in Nuku'alofa. This time, I was walking to and from work along roads lined with rainforest trees dripping with vines, being greeted continually by the people along my path. By now, our model for website development was well-practiced and all the arrangements for setting up the Parliament's website were in place ahead of my visit, managed by Sione Tekiteki (Deputy Clerk & Legal Advisor) and the staff. Tonga's website joined the growing community of online Parliaments just after I finished my visit (<http://parliament.gov.to/>).

Vanuatu has also been a recipient of assistance through this program. The capital, Port Vila, is where the Parliament meets and the building is quite splendid, being poised on the side of a cliff overlooking the sea. I worked closely with Leiwia Moli, the Parliamentary Librarian, to produce the website (<http://www.parliament.gov.vu/>).

There was just enough time to include a wander through the 24-hour fruit and vegetable markets and nearby waterfalls and villages, the very interesting museum and, of course, indulge myself just a little with French baguettes and cheeses.

My last trip for 2009 was to Nauru in October of that year and proved to be immensely rewarding. The Parliamentary Counsel, Katy Le Roy, was my contact there and following seven solid days of work we had the website up and running. Despite being heavily pregnant Katy had enormous drive - which was quite infectious - helping us to keep going through the long hours required to produce the website (<http://www.naurugov.nr/parliament/index.html>) in the allotted time. Once more the site was up and running shortly after my visit and is being well maintained today.

I loved every minute of my trips and felt honoured to be able to provide assistance in helping our fellow professionals and the islands in their growth.

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The view from the Parliament of the Cook Islands



The Parliament of Nauru

