

Australian Political Exchange Council

5th Delegation to the Philippines

November 2011



On Saturday the 12th of November, 6 delegates from Australia left on an eye opening political exchange to the Philippines. Over the next 8 days, these delegates would learn that this country with a turbulent yet proud history was moving towards a system of Government that was more open and accountable than at any stage in its history.

Its amazing natural resources, perfectly complimented by its wonderful and hospitable populace make the Philippines a fantastic destination for the tourist, and it is something that the numerous levels of Government in the Philippines are working towards.

With a renewed focus on transparency under extremely popular President Aquino, the Philippines is on a path to be a strong and committed partner in the region with Australia, and any opportunities such as this delegation which strengthen bi-lateral relations should be encouraged.

Sunday – November 6

An early flight saw us arrive in the Province of Bohol mid morning, where we were warmly greeted on the tarmac by representatives of Governor Edgar Chatto who would be our host for the next 2 days. We were also introduced to Provincial Administrator Alfonso Damalerio and Board Member Abeleon Damalerio who we would both assist us throughout our stay in Bohol.

Bohol has a number of natural attractions which are being developed to increase the number of visitors. From peaceful river cruises, to white sandy beaches and friendly locals who are proud of their province, Bohol has enormous potential to be a prominent international tourist destination.

Bohol Province is home to the Tarsier, one of the smallest primates in the world, and an endangered species. The area we visited is using tourism dollars to help fund breeding programs, and is having great success in re-establishing the tarsier population.

As well as the tarsiers, Bohol is home to the famous Chocolate Hills, an astounding group of over 1,500 conical hills that in the dry season turn brown, thus the name. The Chocolate Hills are listed as one of the Philippines major tourism attractions, and has been proposed to enter the UNESCO World Heritage list.

An appropriate final stop on our tour of the province was the Blood-compact monument. This is a monument celebrating the 1565 peace treaty between the Spanish and the local Filipinos who entered into a peaceful relationship by performing a ceremony whereby each leader put a drop of blood into a cup of wine which was then shared to prove their friendship and secure a peaceful relationship.

The final function for the day was an official function hosted by Governor Chatto to formally welcome us to Bohol. We were shown a presentation about how the province is working towards developing a strong and sustainable tourism sector, all with the worthy goal of increasing investment and jobs to fight poverty in the region.

One thing that was discussed as a necessity to take the Bohol tourism sector to another level is a larger airport. We were informed that there are plans being discussed to develop an international airport on Panglao Island which would service visitors from around the country, and indeed, around the world.

The highlight for the day was a performance at this function from the Loboc Children's Brass Band. This was an amazing show by around 50 children who were studying music thanks to funding from AusAid. AusAid provides instruments and scholarships for students who enter into the program, and it has become so successful that over 600 students are now attending school thanks to these scholarships.

Monday – November 7

In the morning the delegation had the opportunity to tour the island of Panglao, one of the areas premier tourist sites. We had the opportunity to discuss the plans for developing an International Airport on the island to increase the access to the province.

After this, the delegation attended a forum in Tagbilaran where a number of presenters discussed the regions goals over the short, medium and long term.

In the short term they have been working on a project to increase tourism and with it jobs in the area, all with the goal of reducing poverty. In Bohol, the literacy rate is well over 95%, and they have enormous opportunities to use the natural resources of the Province to increase tourism dollars and jobs.

The second step is to better allocate resources to road maintenance. The quality of the roads has been identified as an area that may encumber tourism, as some are not to an international standard. Using modern GPS and surveying, the local authorities are mapping and targeting the roads that require the most attention, so that the resources can be most efficiently allocated.

One other project which has been developed is a roving caravan that travels the province, assisting locals in a number of ways through information, education and providing footwear to disadvantaged children. The caravan does a fantastic job, and the delegates wanted to support their efforts and made a donation to the cause.

We also had a presentation from the Bohol Chapter of the Philippine Australian Alumni Association, an association of over 30 people who have studied at an Australian University as part of a scholarship program funded by AusAid. The scholarships enable students to finish their education at an Australian University, and there is an expectation that they then use their knowledge to better serve the communities when they return. Many of the alumni are now working in the local government, using their training in accounting, engineering and human resources to assist the community in its goals of poverty reduction.

Tuesday - November 8

The day commenced with our departure from Bohol Province returning to Manila. Due to a flight delay, we were not back in Manila until mid-afternoon. We traveled to the Senate Building where we met with Senator Teofisto (TG) Guingona in his office. The Senator was very generous with his time and was able to provide us with an overview of his role as one of the twenty four Senators for the Philippines, as well as touching on his key priorities and issues as a legislator.

Philippine Senators represent the entire nation, with twelve being elected alternately every 3 years. This results in each Senator having the same constituency of approximately 60 million people. The Senator informed us that he was elected on a platform of fighting corruption, and that has been his priority in the legislature since taking his seat. The main element of this fight is capacity building of democratic institutions that people have faith in. This in turn allows such institutions of integrity to tackle the key development priority for the Philippines of reducing poverty.

The Senator also touched on the troubles in Mindanao with the Islamic insurgency. He raised Australia's restrictions on fruit imports from the Philippines and also commented that Australian mining investment was welcome provided the environment was respected and local benefits were realized from such projects.

After our Senate meeting, we traveled to a pre-dinner meeting in Makati City with representatives from the Australian Embassy: Nick McCaffrey (Counselor – Political, Economic and Public Affairs); and Will Robinson (Third Secretary – Political). We received a security/safety briefing from them related to the rest of our time in the Philippines, as well as the opportunity to hear what our Australian Embassy's priorities are regarding our relationship with the Philippines Government.

We were then joined by Senator Kiko Pangilinan who hosted us for dinner in Makati. This was an informal opportunity to discuss similar issues with Senator Pangilinan as we had with Senator Guingona. The Senator talked about development priorities for the Philippines, especially in the area of tourism where the Philippines only receives 2.5 million tourists annually despite Thailand receiving 12 million. Poverty reduction and fighting corruption were also key priorities for the Senator, as well as stemming the enormous tide of Filipinos leaving for foreign employment opportunities.

Senator Pangilinan also discussed his struggles against previous regimes in the Philippines, including his successful run for the Senate as an independent. He was generous enough to provide us each with a copy of a book on this topic. He also raised market access for Filipino fruits into Australia and talked about opportunities for Australia and the Philippines to do more in a number of economic partnerships.

After dinner, the Australian Embassy hosted a cocktail reception for us with local alumni of the Australian-Philippines Exchange Program. Notable attendees included President Aquino's Undersecretary for Political Affairs, Chito Gascon. The event presented the opportunity for us to network with local leaders who had been to Australia in the past, whilst further broadening our exposure to the variety of representatives at all levels of government in the Philippines.

Wednesday - November 9

The Delegation met with the Secretary for Environmental Protection, Dr Neric Acosta. As an expert on the environment who authored the Clean Water Act while in Congress, Secretary Acosta was appointed by President Aquino to this role in 2011.

Secretary Acosta has also been given the role of heading the Laguna Lake Authority tasked with "cleaning up the lake". The environmental issues in the lake include the pollution created by solid waste, dredging, 95,000 hectares of fish pens and informal settlements housing hundreds of thousands of families. The Laguna Lake issue is a subset of the environmental challenges facing the country. There is passionate debate about balancing the environment with development, because the environment is the only social safety net for many Filipinos living below the poverty line.

As well as his role advising the President, Dr Acosta is also the Secretary General for the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats. CALD is affiliated with Liberal International, and is an organisation of Asian political parties that share the ideals of democracy, rule of law, freedom and human rights.

After the meeting with Dr Acosta, Undersecretary Jose Luis Martin 'Chito' Gascon hosted the delegation for a lunch meeting. Undersecretary Gascon is one of three undersecretaries in the Office of Political Affairs, and two assistant secretaries from this Office, Ernesto Ramel Jr. and Rafael Albert also joined us for the meeting.

The Office of Political Affairs has the task of facilitating the implementation of the President's political agenda. A major focus for the office at the moment is the mid-term Congressional elections to be held in 2013.

During the meeting, Undersecretary Gason also discussed the role of student activists in the Philippines, and how they had had a dramatic effect on the liberal movement.

The delegates then travelled to Quezon City and addressed students at the Multiple Intelligence International School. The School's 200 students attend an assembly once a week at which they are given a talk on leadership by someone in a leadership position.

After the School visit, the delegation travelled to the House of Representatives and met with Rep. Teddy Baguilat Jr. who represents the Lone District of Ifugao. Despite the indigenous population of the Philippines being estimated at 14 million, Rep. Baguilat is the only full-blooded indigenous Congressman.

There is a great deal of conflict between the traditional land rights of IPs and the needs of industry for mining and forest harvesting. Rep. Baguilat is not opposed to mining but would like to see environmental sensitivity and a greater contribution of mining revenue to the environment, local employment and downstream processing.

The delegates had a dinner meeting with Secretary Joel J. Villaneuva, the Director General of the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA). Providing technical and vocational skills is of particular importance to the Philippines, as ten percent of its Gross Domestic Product - or \$18 billion - is from remittances from Overseas Filipino Workers .

Thursday – November 10

On Thursday we travelled via shuttle bus for a four hour trip from Manilla to Quezon Province. Passing through the area we immediately realised the rural nature of much of the Province. Our first destination was Pueblo por la Playa, a resort on the coast.

Our host for the stay was Congressman Irvin M. Alcala, Representative of the 2nd Congressional District in Quezon Province. Congressman Alcala was a member of the 5th Philippine delegation to Australia earlier this year and he wanted to return the honour and favour of being hosted in Australia, having had such a fantastic experience when he visited.

We had the opportunity to experience the natural beauty of the area, and a motorised outrigger boat was provided to take our group on a 40 minute cruise to a nearby island. The locals were informative along the way, explaining the history of the fish farms set up in the harbour and the establishment of a power station off in the distance.

Dinner was graciously hosted by Congressman Alcala and he was engaging, fresh, entertaining and thoroughly down to earth. We learnt a lot about his province as well as the local customs and culture. The Congressman took the opportunity to discuss with us the day to day work of a Congressman in the Philippines, which was a fantastic insight. As a first term Congressman, he works very hard in his community to hear from the locals about their issues so that he can better represent them.

The highlight of the evening was a performance by a local youth dance troupe displaying many traditional dances and costumes from all over the Philippines. It was a wonderful presentation of vibrant colourful clothing and traditional, energetic dancing.

We were treated to a traditional ceremonial welcome and provided a traditional meal that was locally sourced from the area and were introduced to the locally produced coconut wine.

Friday – November 11

The APEC Delegation spent two days in Quezon Province, staying in the town of Pagbilao. Approximately 10 kilometres from Lucena City, the capital of Quezon Province, this tiny municipality of roughly 50,000 Pagbilaoins is rich in natural resources. It is also renowned for its exceptional craftsmanship in a wide range of products, including pottery, which the Delegation was able to experience first hand.

The Delegation met with Mr Diony Rodlfa, the Executive Assistant to Governor David C. Suarez who was unable to meet with us on that day. From Mr Rodlfa we learnt that Quezon Province was named after Manuel Quezon, the second President of the Philippines and has a population of approximately 1.9 million people.

Mr Rodlfa spoke about this being Governor's first term, as he was formerly the Vice-Governor of the Province. He explained to the Delegation that health, education and agriculture were Governor Suarez's main policy priorities. He believes the current administration needs to set the right priorities for the country and the Province, particularly in respect to agriculture.

Mr Rodlfa impressed upon us that Quezon is the country's leading producer of coconut products, including coconut juice, oil and copra. A significant part of the province is covered in coconut plantations. As part of his key policy platforms the Governor wants to give priority to reviving the coconut industry. The example given was the inability of the Philippines to take advantage of growing demand in the USA for coconut juice.

Mr Rodlfa also hinted that the Government needs to come up with a more substantial development plan for tourism, particularly for the Quezon Province.

The Delegation visited the Philippines Electoral Commission in Quezon and received a briefing on the electoral system in the Philippines.

The Philippines elects on a national level a head of state, the President, and a legislature. The President is elected for a six-year term and the Vice-President is elected at the same time on a separate ballot. National and local elections are held on the second Monday of May every third year, starting from 1992. The presidential and vice presidential elections are held every six years.

The country's political system is characterised by a volatile multi-party system, with numerous parties which rarely gives the opportunity for one party to gain power alone, requiring the parties to work with each other to form a coalition government.

We learnt during our visit that leaders of the various political parties select the candidates themselves, and party membership is liquid. It is very common for politicians to switch political parties depending on the party allegiance of the President, provincial Governor or local mayor.

The next presidential election will be held in May 2016 and Legislative elections will be in May 2013.

Our final day of the program also included visits to an organic learning farm where farmers are taught sustainable agricultural techniques, and a visit to an award winning local Barangay, which was utilising data collection systems to better service the community and provide better healthcare outcomes.