

# AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL EXCHANGE COUNCIL

## SEVENTEENTH AUSTRALIAN DELEGATION TO THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM

6-12 APRIL 2013



### DELEGATION

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## **Executive Summary**

The 17<sup>th</sup> Australian Delegation to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was hosted by the International Youth Cooperation Development Center (CYDECO). We were lucky to be able to visit this vibrant, complicated and diverse country, and gain an insight into the economic, social and political issues affecting Vietnamese people from prominent young leaders as well as experienced members of the Government.

We visited three cities in Vietnam; Hanoi, Da Nang and Ho Chi Minh City. While meeting with officials in each of the different cities we were able to gain a sense of the various challenges that each region faces, their triumphs, and also the sheer diversity encased within Vietnam.

All meetings and experiences were highly productive and informative. The main contributing factor in making the discussions valuable was the frankness and openness in which all delegates were able to speak and be spoken to – including discussions on somewhat controversial issues such as corruption and freedom of speech.

We all came away from the experience with a much deeper understanding of the intricate structures of government in Vietnam – the organisation and power associations of the Communist Party are complex and Vietnamese representatives were patient in explaining the relationships between the various different instruments. The delegation was able to gain a detailed snapshot of how Vietnam sees its place in the world, an insight into how history has shaped and impacted the Vietnamese psyche but also how this has strengthened them as a nation.

Whilst of course the experience of visiting Vietnam was deeply appreciated by the delegation, it was clear from the outset how programs such as this political exchange were intensely valued by the Vietnamese, as a way of developing strong ties with young Australian leaders and Australian political and government structures.

The relationship between Australia and Vietnam has been developing since diplomatic relations were established in 1973. There is now more than \$6 billion worth of two-way trade between the countries, as well as Australia being a leading study destination for Vietnamese students. The importance of quality education for Vietnamese young people was emphasised again and again by our hosts and at meetings and there is recognition that Australia has a vital role to play in that space. The program of events that was organised by our hosts incorporated a wide variety of experiences and topics of specific interest to the delegation including health, international relations, economics, media/mass communications and the environment. We also participated in amazing cultural experiences such as visiting the ancient city of Hoi An.

All delegates expressed deep gratitude for the opportunity to participate in the exchange and appreciate the support from the Australian Political Exchange Council in making the visit possible, as well as our gracious hosts.

## **Sunday, 7 April 2013 - Hanoi**

President Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum was our introduction to Vietnam and the country's dedication to one man and a Communist regime. The first stop on our itinerary, the Mausoleum and surrounding area were regimented and quite obviously a sacred place for Vietnamese people.

Opened in 1975, the building is situated in the centre of Ba Dinh Square where three decades earlier, Ho Chi Minh read the Declaration of Independence, establishing the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The leader's embalmed body is preserved in a cooled room within the building, protected by a military honour guard. Dim lighting illuminates the final resting place of this celebrated man, whose tomb is a popular tourist destination just as it is a memorial.

### **Presidential Palace Historical Site**

The Presidential Palace and its surrounding buildings and gardens were the location of Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary life (from 19 December 1954 to his death on 2 September 1969). The palace itself was built between 1900 and 1906 to house the French Governor-General of Indochina. When Vietnam achieved independence in 1954, Ho Chi Minh refused residence in the grandiose structure, preferring the humble abode that was previously home to the palace's electrician. A few years later, he relocated to a traditional north-west Vietnamese-style timber house within the palace grounds. This modest building served as his living quarters and office space until his death.

### **Ho Chi Minh Museum**

Built in the 1990s and located adjacent to the Presidential Palace historical site, the Ho Chi Minh Museum is dedicated to the country's late leader and its revolutionary struggle against foreign powers. The museum features an array of photographs and inspirational quotes from Ho Chi Minh as well as an eclectic mix of art, assembled in his honour. It is interesting to note the absence of policy references and examples of momentous decisions made by the Communist Party of Vietnam during and after the time of Ho Chi Minh. The museum essentially offered a succinct history of the revered leader and his ideologies that changed a nation.

### **Hanoi Temple of Literature**

The Hanoi Temple of Literature provided a colourful introduction to Vietnam's rich and ancient history. Dating back to 1071, the temple was a hive of activity, attracting locals and tourists alike. Our Accompanying Officer, Mr Nguyen Dang Bang, explained that school graduates often visited the temple in traditional dress for photo opportunities. There were probably just as many graduates as there were tourists when we visited!

The temple is a former centre of learning and includes Vietnam's first national university. It is devoted to the memory of Confucius and the philosophers of Confucianism. Confucius (551-479BC) was a Chinese teacher, politician and philosopher who encouraged personal and governmental morality, correctness of social relationships, justice and sincerity.

### **Bat Trang Ceramic Village**

It's safe to say that when we left our hotel on Sunday morning, not one of us expected to be perched on a miniature stool, manipulating a ball of clay into a work of art (we use the term 'art' loosely). It was certainly an experience, and one that only Bat Trang Ceramic Village in Hanoi could offer.

The afternoon started with a walking tour of the seven-century old village. Our local guide led us through the narrow back streets and claustrophobic alleyways, stopping momentarily for us to catch a glimpse of life in the village. It was explained to us that when the French invaded Hanoi, they were too scared to chase locals down the winding laneways. They feared becoming lost in the maze of seemingly unending junctions, boarded by towering buildings.

Situated on the banks of the Red River, Bat Trang is an area rich in clay – a material that produces high quality porcelain and ceramics. During our walking tour we saw the pottery-making factories, storage warehouses and retail outlets all within the one precinct. It is certainly an efficient method, having production and retail services in the one area, and one that attracts tourists and their dollars. An interesting sight was watching how locals transported their fragile cargo. Once ready for export, the goods are loaded into the back of a vehicle between quantities of hay, which act as a natural cushion. Much more environmentally friendly than bubble wrap.

## **Monday, 8 April 2013 - Hanoi**

### **Visit to Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union (HCYU)**

Our first meeting was one of the biggest that we attended in Vietnam, with a large number of representatives from the Communist Youth Union. Included in the group were members of the Central Committee of the Party, which plays a key role in determining the policies and priorities of the Party.

The Youth Union represents Vietnam's 23 million youth, who are all encouraged to follow the teachings and philosophy of Ho Chi Minh and be active in the Party. Engaging young people into the Communist philosophy of the nation is seen as vital to Vietnam's stability and peace.

During the meeting we gained a strong understanding of the broad role of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union. As well as recruitment to the Party, the Union sees its role as supporting young people in education, training and job opportunities.

At the meeting, Mr Dang Quoc Toan, Secretary of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, spoke to us about the HCYU and its numerous activities. We discussed youth mobilisation and participation, youth education and other matters relevant to young people.

The two sides also exchanged ideas about the Vietnam National Union of Students, the Vietnam Young Entrepreneurs Association and the Australian counterpart, the National Union of Students. It was noted that we did not have a formal or strong support structure for young entrepreneurs in Australia and perhaps it was something we could collaborate on, and learn from the experience of Vietnamese Young Entrepreneurs. Our hosts indicated that the Vietnam National Union of Students hopes to establish a Vietnamese Student Union in Australia.

At the end of the meeting, Mr Dang Quoc Toan expressed his hope for enhancing cooperation so that there will be more exchange programs between our two countries and wished the delegation a wonderful and successful trip in Vietnam.

### **Meeting with Professor Nguyen Thanh Long, Vice Minister of Health**

The meeting was very informative and we learnt a great deal about health care in Vietnam and Vietnam's relationship with Australia in jointly supported health initiatives throughout the country. Vietnam has both public and private hospitals and a large part of their health policy involves making services more accessible to rural and remote areas. Included in this plan involves 30 per cent of the health budget directed towards preventative health measures such as immunisations country wide, including rural areas.

Health policy is also directed to the training of medical professionals and this effort has recently increased dramatically with doctor training increasing from 3,000 doctors per year to a current goal of 6,000 doctors.

Meeting discussions also focused on current health practices in Australia being followed in Vietnam, namely Australia's experiences and model used to fight AIDS in sex workers. Aspects of Australia's aid program in supporting Vietnam and its health initiatives were also recognised by the Vice Health Minister.

## **Tuesday, 9 April 2013 - Hanoi**

### **Meeting with Mr Ha Huy Thong, Vice Chairman, Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Assembly**

In this meeting we learned about the structure and role of the National Assembly. The Vietnamese National Assembly was founded in 1946. As of today we are in the company of the 13<sup>th</sup> National Assembly, which held its election two years ago. There are two main sittings a year, but steering committees meet in between. There are 10 committees which are part of the National Assembly. These committees provide oversight for the legislative arm of the Party.

Delegates were interested as to whether different members have different specialisations and it was explained that the National Assembly does not cover all sectors but covers major sectors such as trade, finance, youth, banking, insurance etc.

There were also questions from the delegation as to how the judiciary is appointed. The National Assembly elects the judiciary. Powers are almost separate between the legislative arm and the judiciary but are working to separate more as part of the constitutional reform process.

Mr Ha Huy Thong explained that he only joined two years ago, but has already seen some changes in the function and operations of the National Assembly to make it more streamlined. Priorities include land laws and constitutional reform. The National Assembly is also currently forming a five-year legislative plan for the nation.

Discussion also centred around the work that is happening at the international level on the Mekong River Delta with other nations that share the stream. China was invited but does not participate. Mr Ha Huy Thong said that the process was designed to make sure that all members benefit. He explained that you cannot get your benefit at the cost of others. He raised these issues with Minister Tony Burke MP and asked for Australia to share its experience with Vietnam in dealing with cross-border river issues like that of the Murray-Darling River.

Interestingly, we learnt that Vietnam is looking to establish an Anti-Corruption Commission which would be constitutionally independent, with its success to be judged by the National Assembly through annual reports and specialised reports on request. It will also be financed separately through the National Assembly.

Our host said that infrastructure is the biggest challenge facing Vietnam, including the need for a national highway system. There is a 5, 10 and 20-year infrastructure plan. On the issue of environment, it was mentioned that they are trying to do work on sustainable fishing, for example, making rules around net size.

### **Courtesy Visit to Leaders of Hanoi City**

The Leaders of Hanoi City, Vice Chairman of the Hanoi People's Committee and Ms Nguyen Thi Bich Ngoc welcomed us to Hanoi City. Members of the delegation asked a number of questions including the representation of women in higher level positions. Ms Ngoc indicated that she took opportunities to mentor young women within the Party.

### **Meeting at the Australian Embassy, Vietnam**

Delegates had a frank discussion with Embassy representatives about Vietnam's politics, economy and governance from their unique perspective of living 'in-country'. It was a wide-ranging conversation covering topics such as factions in the Communist Party in Vietnam, moves to combat corruption and its effectiveness and the role of the Ministry of Cyber Security, to name a few.

The Vietnamese wish to enhance their partnership with Australia to a strategic level. In saying that, the Australia-Vietnam partnership is more strategically aligned than the partnership that Vietnam has with the United Kingdom. Staff noted that the US-Vietnamese strategic partnership dialogue is well progressed. There was a strong sentiment that the Vietnamese know how to communicate with China however, there are tensions between China and Vietnam with regard to the Spratleys in the South China Sea.

### **Wednesday, 10 April 2013 – Da Nang City**

#### **Visit to Hoi An Ancient Town**

Delving into the history of a foreign country and glimpsing first-hand what life was like in a society so incredibly different from our own is the experience offered by Hoi An Ancient Town. Situated on the south central coast of Vietnam, Hoi An is a remarkably well-preserved example of a south-east Asian trading port dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century. Archaeological finds and excavations indicate a port and trading centre in the area as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.

Hoi An's history has been influenced by the many foreign merchant ships which frequented the port for annual commercial fairs. Traders from Japan, China, the Netherlands and India descended on the town and with each fair lasting about six months, there came a need for permanent residency. These travellers established their own quarters and emporiums, creating a unique township that in 1999 was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

Our delegation was taken on a brief walking tour of the main town centre, where we saw ancient temples and alters of worships, and traditional homes that still provided a residence to this day. Shops offered an array of locally produced items with silk, crafts, ceramics and textiles being the main features. A series of museums had also been established to preserve and display the town's rich and long-standing history. An interesting aspect of the tour was our visit to one of the old houses that operated as a tailor shop. Not only were clothing and other items sewn here, but silk worms were also farmed and their silk spun, all under the same roof. Methods were rudimentary compared to more large-scale operations but the final products were testament to the refined skills displayed by the tailors.

### **Thursday, 11 April 2013 – Da Nang City**

#### **Da Nang Young Government Officials Club**

Our meeting with Da Nang Young Government Officials Club members provided a forum to exchange ideas on how best to engage youth in political activities.

Ms Nguyen Ha Thao Chi introduced the dignitaries before Mr Nguyen Ba Canh spoke of how the Australian delegation played an important role in strengthening international relations. He had studied in Australia and said it was imperative for countries to share knowledge. Mr Nguyen Ba Canh said club members volunteered within the community and helped with construction work in rural areas, while the Club's Young Creative Movement focused on scientific research and economic projects.

Mr Nguyen Duc Tien, delivered a presentation about the Club's Student Association. He said the association promoted the 'right orientation' in life, good lifestyles and good spirits.

Mr Nguyen Duc Tien said scholarships were made available for students with limited funds, and study abroad, especially in Australia, was highly sought after. Members of the Association regularly volunteered in the community and also donated blood.

Mr Le Canh Duong, Vice Director of the Young Government Officials Club, provided more detail about its missions, organisational structure and key activities, which he described as policy consultation, research, capacity building and community development.

Mr Le Van Hieu of the Da Nang Young Businessman Association spoke of organising seminars and training workshops, sporting events and exchange activities to engage young people. He said the Economic Corporation Forum he was involved with was a popular event.

Mr Le Van Hieu asked the delegation for ideas on how Australian political parties encouraged young people to become involved in political activities. It was Ms Vaughan's view that Vietnam actually had more success in this area. She said university students could join unions and mentioned the National Union of Students, the peak representative body for undergraduate students in Australia.

Ms Vaughan said it was important to foster political activism in young people though many young Australians were apathetic about politics. She said encouraging volunteering was an ideal way of engaging political party members, especially young members, and it should be promoted.

Delegation member Mr Tom Palmer said manufacturing workers were often encouraged to join the Australian Labor Party and support Members of Parliament who, in turn, supported manufacturing.

### **Leaders of Da Nang City**

Dr Phung Tan Viet, Vice Chairman of the People's Committee of Da Nang City, presided over our meeting with Da Nang's leaders. Many of those dignitaries present were involved with the Da Nang Young Government Officials Club.

In his opening speech, Dr Phung Tan Viet discussed how Da Nang was one of the five big cities that belonged to the Central Government. He said the city was currently experiencing major growth with a great deal of construction and business taking place. He said contributions from other countries including Australia were welcomed in order to advance the city. An example he gave was Da Nang's Information Technology Park, which, according to a recent *Saigon Times* newspaper report, was funded by foreign investors (mainly the USA and Japan). Construction started last month on the US\$278 million project, which covers 341ha and will comprise areas for production, research development, healthcare services, a supermarket, school and office space.

Another main focus for Da Nang was public transport, according to Dr Phung Tan Viet. He discussed how plans for underground infrastructure would address traffic congestion problems. It would also pave the way for Da Nang residents and visitors alike to enjoy a more modern lifestyle. Delegation member Mr Kane Silom asked the leaders if rail was the focus for Da Nang's underground public transport option. Dr Phung Tan Viet confirmed this as the master plan, which would have the city connected to outer-lying urban and rural areas via a series of rail networks.

Ms Vaughan questioned the leaders about Da Nang's new hospital and whether construction had finished. Dr Phung Tan Viet advised that it had opened this year and was operational. He said it was hoped that international support would allow the hospital to offer free treatment to poor people. Focus was then shifted to international investment, with Mr Silom asking the leaders if they were concerned that development could be stalled because of the global financial crisis. He asked if there was too much development and whether the leaders were worried that Da Nang could be left as a



'skeleton city' with half-finished buildings due to a lack of foreign investment. Dr Phung Tan Viet said the world economy had definitely affected Vietnam and Da Nang, though periodical investment was offered to assist local developments.

Mr Silom then posed the final question to the leaders, enquiring about Da Nang's strategy to increase tourism. Dr Phung Tan Viet said the strategy was clear – focus on construction projects, for example, plan ahead for resorts and for public transport to service the airport, maintain a website to promote the city and its attractions, partner with other countries to promote one another's tourism industries, and cooperate with surrounding local precincts to promote heritage sites.

## **Friday, 12 April 2013 – Ho Chi Minh City**

### **Meeting with *Thanh Nien* Newspaper**

We met with staff members of the *Thanh Nien* and were presented with an informative presentation outlining background information about the newspaper.

In total, 400 staff make up the business including editorial, production and administrative personnel. Of this, 86 are journalism graduates and 243 are university graduates from other degree backgrounds. Their editorial board consists of eight people and a strong emphasis is placed on training and skill development for staff.

It was interesting discussing the different kinds of media at *Thanh Nien*. Print stands as the main source of income and \$20 million is raised each year from advertising. *Thanh Nien* targets both Vietnamese and English speaking audiences with the Vietnamese website receiving 2.5 million hits each day and the English website receiving 400,000 hits each day.

We were able to gain a good understanding of the role of the media in political affairs, notably that there is not the freedom to question government officials on all topics and/or specific current affairs issues. Discussions indicated that finding a balance between good journalism and upholding the party line is challenging. Despite this everyday challenge, *Thanh Nien* maintains it has a significant role in managing these competing expectations, so it can provide good media and support the fight against corruption.

We were pleased to hear that *Thanh Nien* is currently designing an application to assist in making media more accessible to all throughout Vietnam and the international community.