

AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL EXCHANGE COUNCIL
14th AUSTRALIAN DELEGATION TO THE PHILIPPINES
4 to 10 May 2024

Delegation

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Executive Summary

The 14th Delegation of the Australian Political Exchange Council to the Philippines visited Metropolitan Manila as well as the Provinces of Albay and Bulacan across a comprehensive one-week itinerary. The delegation was facilitated by the Philippine Center for Young Leaders in Governance (PCYL) who are the counterpart organisation of the Australian Political Exchange Council. The delegation was hosted throughout the exchange by PCYL representatives Mr Norman Cualteros, Ms Liza Castaneda and Ms Cheska Ronsayro.

The delegation began preparations for the exchange in Canberra by undertaking a range of briefings and meetings which included meeting with Ambassador of the Philippines, H.E. Mrs Ma. Hellen De La Vega. These briefings provided important context and understanding before the exchange formally commenced.

Upon arrival in Manila, the delegation was welcomed by representatives of the Philippine Center for Young Political Leaders (PCYL) who would be hosting delegates throughout the week. The delegation then transited to Legazpi City to meet with the Provincial Government of Albay. Delegates were greeted with traditional cultural dances before meeting with Governor Edcel Greco Lagman. In Albay, delegates were able to sample local produce and visit local agricultural and artisan sites with the assistance of Provincial Administrator Sheina Onrubia.

Delegates then returned to Manila to visit the Senate of the Philippines where they observed a heartfelt condolence motion for former Senator Rene Saguisag. Delegates were fortunate to meet with several Senators and tour the Senate's museum.

In Manila, the delegation met with the Mayors and various officials of Quezon City and Manila City governments and learnt about their priorities. The delegation also observed a session of the House of Representatives where they were acknowledged and welcomed by the Deputy Speaker. The delegation also visited the Manila Clock Tower Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts. The Executive Director of the PCYL hosted the delegation on their final night in Manila for a farewell dinner.

On the final day of the exchange, delegates visited Bulacan where they were hosted by Mayor Agay Cruz to learn about the unique Barangay system which handles a wide array of local government responsibilities. Delegates were fortunate to visit Museo ng Republika 1899, the site of the beginning of the first Philippine Republic.

The many briefings and meetings that the delegation participated in were of great value and provided a forum for further commitments to foster important economic and cultural connections.

Friday 3 May

The delegation prepared for the exchange by undertaking various briefings, meetings and administrative tasks in Canberra.

Delegates met with Ambassador of the Philippines, H.E. Mrs Ma. Hellen De La Vega for a briefing on bilateral relations between Australia and the Philippines. The Ambassador was keen to highlight the strength of the two countries relationship as well as its historical importance which is evidenced by the recent decision to elevate relations from “comprehensive” to a “strategic partnership”.



(The delegation meeting with Ambassador of the Philippines, H.E. Mrs Ma. Hellen De La Vega)

The briefing largely focussed on economic and security ties. The delegation expressed a particular interest in the recent investment by ACEN Australia, a Philippines-based renewable energy company, which had led to the construction of the largest solar farm in Australia. Over lunch, the Ambassador highlighted the large Australian Filipino community and its growing prominence in culture and cuisine. Delegates shared with the Ambassador some of their historical connections to the Philippines as well as their understanding of Australian-Filipino community in their electorates.

In the afternoon, delegates were provided with a briefing on the Philippines' political system by Professor Nicole Curato, Professor of Political Sociology at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance at the University of Canberra. This briefing and dialogue provided an opportunity to better understand the similarities and differences in political processes as well as gain an understanding of the unique dynastic elements of their political system.

Saturday 4 May

The delegation departed from Canberra and travelled to Manila. Upon arrival late in the evening, the delegation was greeted by representatives of PCYL who escorted delegates to their accommodation and provided a detailed briefing on the agenda for the week.

Sunday 5 May

The delegation travelled in the morning from Manila to Legazpi City in Albay. Upon arrival the delegation was greeted by representatives of the Provincial Government of Albay and transferred to our accommodation where we were greeted by a local dance performance.

After checking into the accommodation, the Albay Provincial Tourism, Culture and Arts Office escorted delegates throughout the afternoon to selected historical and natural attractions in the district including the Cagsawa Ruins and the surrounds of Mayon Volcano. Delegates were then hosted by Mr Ares Goyena (an alumni of PCYL and Chief of Staff to Senator Bam Aquino) for dinner alongside young political activists from local universities.



(The delegation was greeted by the Albay Provincial Tourism, Culture and Arts Office)

Monday 6 May

The delegation started the day with a visit to the Albay Governor's Guest House. When delegates arrived at the Governor's Guest House, they were greeted with traditional cultural dance from members of the local community. This was followed by a dance troupe made up of public servants from the Provincial Government of Albay, who then invited delegates to participate in the dance with them. This was a great experience to learn about the local culture of Albay, through the dances and costumes that mark different occasions.



(Delegates joining in a traditional dance performance at the Governor's Guest House)

Delegates then met with the Governor of Albay, Edcel Greco Lagman and senior officials. The governor's election was somewhat unique in that he assumed the role following the disqualification of the former governor. The meeting began with formal introductions between the two delegations, before one of the officials presented us with the top priorities of the province under Governor Grex, which has been packaged in a framework called 'Albay HEATS UP'.

There were a number of priorities outlined in this agenda, including universal healthcare, sanitation, education, urban planning and rural development. Agriculture is a significant part of the Albay economy, with kamote (more commonly known as sweet potato) being their top crop of production. We also discussed the energy requirements of the province, as they use thermal energy from Mount Mayon which is an active volcano located in Albay Bicol. They are also focused on increasing their transition to renewable energy, to achieve their target of 100% renewable energy by 2030.



(The delegation meeting with Governor of Albay, Edcel Greco Lagman)

Following the meeting, provincial officials organised a local produce exhibition to showcase local businesses and learn about their local delicacies and crafts. Delegates were able to experience various types of Pili Nut, ranging from a plain to salted to honey coated, as well as including cato pie, carabou milk, coconut sap and even chilli ice cream.

One of the businesses showcased Mayon Gold Chocolate, which was started by an Australian man with the aim of assisting people out of poverty through social enterprise. The profits of the business go toward building typhoon proof homes and supporting education scholarships.

The Magayon Festival was taking place throughout the exchange and delegates were invited to attend the Albay Provincial Capitol to visit an exhibit showcasing masks created by local artists to celebrate Filipino culture. Delegates were guided through the exhibit to learn about what each of the different masks meant and the various textiles that were used to make them, which was largely recycled materials. While at the

Capitol, delegates were given a tour of the building and were able to witness proceedings in the chamber.

Following the visit to the art exhibition, the delegation then proceeded to the Albay Farmers' Bounty Village where delegates met with officials from the Provincial Agricultural Office to learn more about the agriculture of the province. The Village itself was set up as a 'one-stop shop' agricultural complex to teach farmers how to improve their farming practices and learn about new technologies. While delegates were there, local officials were in the process of setting up for their 'Agri Fiesta 2024', which is an opportunity for farmers across the province to display and sell their produce, attend training events, and crown Miss Agri Queen. After a short meeting with the Provincial Agriculturist Cheryll Rebeta, delegates then visited the bee farm, to taste honey from the stingless bees, and toured the dairy barn to get up close to some cows and caribou.

The delegation then visited an artisan village at Sumlang Lake, which was set up to showcase the work of abaca weavers. Abaca is a natural fibre that is produced from the trunk of a tree that is like the banana tree. Delegates were able to watch local workers using traditional equipment, with one worker making a large abaca rug and another making a patterned placemat. Delegates asked the women how they got into the craft of working with abaca and they explained how it was taught to them by their mothers and grandmothers while growing up.

In the evening, delegates experienced a traditional Filipino dinner with the Provincial Administrator Sheina Onrubia in which delegates spoke to PA Sheina in depth about her role.

Tuesday 7 May

In the morning, delegates travelled from the Province of Albay to Manila and upon arrival proceeded to the Senate of the Philippines. Delegates were able to witness a moving of a condolence motion for former Senator Rene Saguisag. This motion was co-sponsored across all of the Senate, and delegates were able to watch moving and passionate speeches from Senators.

This was a unique experience as delegates were able to witness all Senators, all unified in commending the former Senator's record as a champion for human rights, justice and opponent of martial law. After the motion, delegates were honoured to meet Senators including Gingoya Estrada, Pia Cayetano, Lauren LaGuarda, Rissa Hontiveros, Frances Doletino and Bong Go.

During the visit to the Senate, delegates were also provided with a guided tour of the Senate's museum. The museum is home to a vast array of Senate related treasures and memorabilia bestowed upon the Senate by visiting dignitaries and officials.

Delegates were particularly interested in gifts from Australian dignitaries which happened to include the book *Outback Australia*, a book of panoramic photography by esteemed Australian Photographer Ken Duncan. This was a particular coincidence for the delegation as the book had been gifted to the Senate by former Australian Ambassador, Bill Tweddell. Ambassador Tweddell is a relative of delegate, Mr James Griffin MP, NSW State Member for Manly.



(Condolence Motion for former Senator Rene Saguisag)

Wednesday 8 May

The delegation made its way to the impressive Quezon City Hall where we were warmly greeted by City Councillor Albert Alvin L. Antonio III and the Director of the City's Small Business Development and Promotion Office, Ms Mona Yap. First stop was in the gardens surrounding City Hall where we visited Kilos Kyusi Store, a Quezon City Government initiative aimed at reducing fast fashion waste by reselling pre-loved clothing and accessories by the kilograms. We were informed that the store's profits go towards supporting tutoring programs focussed on improving public school students' literacy and numeracy skills.

Following our visit to Kilos Kyusi, we were welcomed into Quezon City Hall where we met with the Mayor of Quezon City, Ms Joy Belmonte, and other City officials. Mayor Belmonte spoke passionately about the City's aspirations and initiatives and provided an overview of her agenda which focussed on social services, economic development, the environment and good governance.

We were briefed on the City's Enhanced Local Climate Change Action Plan which aims include building climate resilience, achieving carbon neutrality, pursuing green economic development and improving the quality of life for the community.

We were informed that most of the City's CO2 pollution is from transport followed closely by commercial and government electricity usage. One initiative to reduce the City's CO2 emissions is by the installation of solar panels on 50 public high schools in the City.

Following our meeting with Mayor Belmonte, we were invited to observe a budget hearing session in the City's chambers. The City's Barangays were presenting their budget proposals to the City Council which considers and allocates the Barangays' administered funds. The session was briefly paused as we were welcomed onto the floor of the chambers to meet with councillors.

The delegation then moved to the Philippines' House of Representatives where we were honoured to be invited to the floor gallery to observe a parliamentary session. There we were announced to the chamber by the Deputy Speaker and graciously welcomed individually by Members.

In the evening, we attended an event hosted by the Australian Embassy where we met with the Deputy Head of Mission, Dr Moya Collett, Embassy Officials, Filipino politicians and business representatives. The event provided a good opportunity to speak with our representatives in the Philippines to learn about the important work they are doing, including in the context of the Strategic Partnership between the Philippines and Australia that was announced in late 2023.



(The delegation receiving an acknowledgement on the floor of the House of Representatives)

Thursday 9 May

The delegation travelled to Manila City Hall where we were greeted by a wonderful orchestra band performance. We then proceeded to the Manila Clock Tower Museum where we learnt about the devastating effects of World War II on Manila including the loss of civilian lives and the destruction of Manila including the Clock Tower itself. The Museum also hosts many artworks by prominent Filipino artists.

The delegation then had a brief courtesy call with the Mayor of Manila City, Ms Honey Lacuña, who was elected as the first female Mayor of Manila in 2022. The delegation was then hosted for lunch by the Head of Communications for Manila City and PCYL alumni, Ms Princess Abante.

Following lunch, the delegation visited the National Museum of Fine Arts which is in the former legislative building of the Philippines. There we viewed many of the 29 galleries and exhibitions. A particular highlight was in the former Senate chamber where we viewed the famous artwork titled *Filipino Struggles Through History* by Botong Francisco. The artwork was originally commissioned for the Manila City Government in the 1960s and depicts the history of Manila from the 1500s through to Spanish Colonialism, the Revolution of 1896, American and Japanese occupation and the years following World War II.

In the evening the Executive Director of the PCYL, Mr Rollie Fabio, hosted a farewell dinner for the delegation where we reflected on our experience and what we had learnt.



(The delegation visiting the Manila City Hall Museum)

Friday 10 May

The last day of the exchange saw delegates visit the Province of Bulacan. Notable highlights included a visit to the Sangguniang Barangay, a tour of the Museo Republika ng 1899 (Museum of the Republic of 1899), and a visit to the Bulacan Provincial Capitol. All three visits were hosted by Mayor Agay Cruz, who recently visited Australia as a delegate in an equivalent program facilitated by the Australian Political Exchange Council.

The visit to the Sangguniang Barangay was a notable experience, as the Barangay tier of Government was unique to the Filipino political system. Delegates were able to learn what made the Barangay system unique, acting as a locally based engine room of service delivery within the Filipino political system. In this brief visit, delegates learned that in the Barangay system, political representatives on this level of Government are responsible for local health management, dispute settlement and for the Barangay's first responders.

At the Museum of the Republic of 1899 delegates were guided through the historical and political significance of the region. The museum is situated at the convent of the Barasoain Church in Malolos, Bulacan and it was the site of the beginning of the first Philippine Republic, also known as the Malolos Republic in 1899 at the end of the Philippine revolution against Spain. The first Philippine Republic is of particular significance as it was the first democracy ever established in Asia.



(Reception for delegates hosted by Mayor Agay Cruz and officials of the Sangguniang Barangay)

Conclusion

The 14th Australian Delegation to the Philippines would like to thank the Philippine Center for Young Leaders in Governance for hosting and organising the exchange.

Delegates would like to thank representatives Mr Norman Cualteros, Ms Liza Castaneda and Ms Cheska Ronsayro for their assistance. Their deep understanding of the Philippine's political system was vital in aiding the success of the exchange.

Delegates would also like to thank the officials in the Department of Finance who provide secretariat support to the Australian Political Exchange Council.