

ACPAC'S ROLE IN STRENGTHENING ACCOUNTABILITY IN INTERNATIONAL PARLIAMENTS

ACPAC 2013 Presentation

Looking around the room today, I see an ACPAC conference with a more diverse group of attendees than any time before; and wonder if those that created ACPAC ever expected to see such a broad range of jurisdictions engaging with each other and sharing their knowledge and expertise.

I'm sure those ACPAC founders would agree with me in seeing this diversity as both a sign of the growing importance of Public Accounts Committees around the world, and also as an opportunity for further collaboration.

But with diversity comes complexity. And in a world of limited time and resources we need to think more deeply about how to navigate this complexity to achieve valuable and ongoing outcomes.

This is the thrust of my speech today – asking the question of how do we build on the fantastic diversity and collaboration we already have and take this to the next level in a strategic, practical and sustainable way?

So, today I'll lay out my understanding of the current international engagement landscape and then sketch some ideas for future action.

In-particular, I'll explore:

- the growth regional PAC councils and other multi-national initiatives;
- the increasing number of requests for individual country collaboration;
- a rationale for international engagement and some of its practicalities;
- some current mechanisms in place to foster engagement; and
- some potential future steps and opportunities.

I do this with the aim of starting a conversation, as I don't pretend to have all the ideas – and the ideas I do suggest will need to be combined with ideas from around the room if we are to develop a meaningful international engagement strategy which builds upon ACPAC's current success.

{Regional bodies}

Starting with regional initiatives, in recent years there has been an increase in the number and activity of regional groupings of PACs.

These include:

- East Africa's EAAPAC;
- West Africa's WAAPAC, which has six confirmed members and seven members yet to be confirmed;

- Southern Africa's SADCOPAC comprising all the states of Southern Africa;
- The Republic of South Africa's Association of Public Accounts Committees — which includes Provincial PACs; and
- Asia's ARAPAC;

In addition, in mid-March, representatives from several South Pacific PACs met in Suva, Fiji to discuss the establishment of a Pacific Council of PACs.

I understand there's a panel planned tomorrow for the role of PACs in parliaments in the Asia-Pacific, and I imagine we may hear more about the planned Pacific body and Asia's ARAPAC.

However, for the purposes of this presentation, I'd like to provide a little bit of information about these two initiatives to assist in understanding their composition and their links to ACPAC. I'll also talk about some interactions beginning to emerge between nations of the Commonwealth.

It would also be interesting to get a perspective on the African regional councils and their interactions from our colleagues during the discussion session after this presentation.

{ARAPAC}

The Asian body for PACs, ARAPAC, was established in December 2010, consists of 10 members, and draws its membership from a broad range of countries.

Member states are primarily in South Asia, though there are also several members from South East Asia, including Indonesia.

Established with the support of the World Bank Institute, ARAPAC is a relatively new organisation and aims to develop technical knowledge and practical skills to enhance participation, transparency and accountability around national budgets.

{Pacific PAC Council}

Moving to the Pacific — as I just mentioned, a meeting to discuss establishing a Pacific council of PACs was held in Suva, Fiji last month.

It brought together an impressive list of participants, including Auditors-General and PACs from Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Vanuatu, and Tonga and officers from the World Bank Institute, the Centre for Democratic Institutions, the United Nations Development Program, the Commonwealth Secretariat and Parliaments from Australia and New Zealand.

The meeting agreed to push forward with the development of a Pacific PAC network. The preliminary focus of this potential network is to strengthen PACs within Pacific parliaments and to build capacity in Pacific PAC members and staff.

A transitional working group led by the Tongan PAC Chair has been established to coordinate engagement with other Pacific PACs and to begin identifying logistical requirements for the network.

Also, the UNDP, CDI, World Bank and Pacific Parliamentary Partnership members have agreed to collaborate on potential support and projects for the network.

As you can see, ARAPAC and the potential Pacific PAC council have similar objectives. Further, with the current climate of fiscal restraint, these jurisdictions will be looking for cost-effective ways of fostering staff development and capacity building, making it likely that interactions between ACPAC, and ARAPAC and Pacific council members will increase — but I'll return to this later.

{Potential Commonwealth PAC Council}

Moving beyond Asia and the Pacific to other multilateral initiatives — there are also preliminary discussions around establishing a Commonwealth PAC Council.

To my knowledge this idea is still on the drawing board, with more work to be done before something concrete arises.

However, the establishment of such a council would have the potential to better integrate regional councils in Asia, Africa, the Pacific, and ACPAC. Although, it would also add another layer of complexity — through only covering some of the nations within each of these regional groupings.

For now I'd simply encourage all Commonwealth nations to participate in any discussions about the potential establishment this additional Council, so that if it does get legs it will be well considered and will add value to the global PAC landscape.

{CHOGM Communique}

In a related vein, CHOGM will be held in November this year in Sri Lanka, and provides another opportunity for Commonwealth member nations to discuss the role of PACs.

To provide a catalyst for this conversation the JCPAA is taking a lead role. We're proposing that the heads of all Commonwealth nations officially acknowledge the important role that PACs play in parliamentary oversight, and that this be captured in the meeting's communique.

In the near future we're planning to go out to consult with other PACs on the exact form of words for consideration at CHOGM. But, in summary, the intent is to outline the basic characteristics

of an effective PAC — including that it operates apolitically; meets and reports in public; and is adequately resourced.

If these sentiments are adopted and included in the CHOGM communique we hope they will help cement the role of PACs in Commonwealth countries; in particular by providing endorsement from the highest level of government.

I hope that you share my motivation for this initiative and that all Commonwealth members and their PACs will advocate for the communique and support its passage at CHOGM 2013.

{Increasing demand for engagement at the country level}

Having identified our counterpart regional councils, let's move on to examine how we currently engage as individual jurisdictions.

Starting with the JCPAA, over the last year we've experienced a marked increase in direct requests for assistance from overseas PACs. With this increase in demand we've made a conscious decision to increase the support we've provided.

While in the past we may have simply welcomed a delegation or made a quick visit to provide advice; last year we went further by hosting a two month secondment of an officer from one of the Indonesian PACs — the BAKN.

The secondment gave the officer an immersive experience working in a busy PAC through both sitting and non-sitting

periods. Importantly, the Committee agreed to give the secondee full access to its private meetings and all workings of the Secretariat.

The purpose of this privileged access was to enable the secondee to better understand the critical relationships that underpin the operation of the JCPAA. The relationship between the Secretariat and the Committee, the Committee and the Auditor-General, and between Secretariat and Government officials were all actively observed.

This was a key goal identified in discussions with the BAKN, and it highlights the importance of making sure that these arrangements are well planned and have clear performance objectives, rather than being a simple visit or a one hour delegation meeting.

While I don't want to speak for the BAKN, I understand that the secondment was beneficial. In particular, working so closely with the JCPAA staff allowed the secondee to understand which operational elements could be tailored to the Indonesian context and potentially used to further improve the performance of the BAKN.

As a committee and a secretariat, we also found it enriching from our perspective — learning about a different jurisdictional approach and parliamentary structure. This experience highlighted that there are many different ways in which a PAC

can be constituted and the powers it may hold, but that objectives are often common — and, in my experience, where there are common objectives this facilitates sharing and mutual learning. Talks are underway for another BAKN secondee to be hosted by the secretariat later this year.

Last year the JCPAA was also scheduled to welcome a secondee from Papua New Guinea's Permanent Committee on Public Accounts. Unfortunately, this secondment was cancelled at short notice due to unforeseen outside circumstances. However, the JCPAA remains ready to re-establish the secondment or support a similar capacity building activity in the future.

The JCPAA has also recently received a request for collaboration from the Afghan PAC. This is still in the discussion stage and, as with any collaboration, it would need to be framed within the specific complexities and the unique challenges faced by the Afghan PAC and Afghan Auditor-General.

The Australian Parliament has also undertaken several other initiatives under its parliamentary strengthening program — with one example being a recent visit from an ex-JCPAA Secretary to Tonga to discuss the functioning and capacity of their PAC.

These requests for assistance have given the Committee pause to consider what support we can and should realistically offer in the future.

More broadly, this of course links to what role ACPAC's other members can play in assisting overseas jurisdictions, and what role ACPAC itself should play in linking with other emerging regional PAC groupings.

To this end, the JCPAA recently sought information from all Australian and New Zealand ACPAC jurisdictions about their recent international engagements. We found that there has been a range of activity since the last ACPAC conference, including:

- A PAC workshop in Kiribati conducted by the ACT PAC Secretary;
- A visit from the Clerk of the WA Legislative Assembly to the Cook Islands regarding PAC capacity building and a reciprocal visit from members of the Cook Islands PAC to observe proceedings;
- A study visit from the Chair of the Tongan PAC to South Australia in 2011;
- A visit from a staff member from the Tuvalu PAC to participate in a course held at Deakin University; and
- Various forms of assistance provided by the Centre for Democratic Institutions;

I'm sure this list isn't complete, but I hope that I've laid out a picture of some of the current international PAC activities.

And I think you might agree with me that with all of these individual collaborations, combined with the growing number of regional councils, that there's more happening in the world of PACs than most people might first imagine.

{The rationale and practicalities of engagement}

The next step on this journey is to consider if any new approaches to international engagement are needed, and if so the practicalities involved.

The proliferation of regional bodies similar to ACPAC seems to suggest that overseas PACs are seeking to broaden the dialogue with their neighbours—to share information about potential challenges and to fully grasp opportunities as they arise.

This also provides an opportunity for ACPAC as a body to better connect with its fellow councils, and to provide information and assistance where needed.

This may be especially useful in overseas jurisdictions that are based on Westminster principles; though I'm sure there would also be value for jurisdictions based on other principles. After all, it should be our role to advocate the practices of effective PACs, not to promote specific structures.

As a long established council, with new and emerging councils springing up in our region, I believe ACPAC has a responsibility to work with and support these organisations until they find their feet. The benefits we have all enjoyed through ACPAC should also be made available to our neighbours and friends overseas.

For example, the potential development of a Pacific council provides a new opportunity for greater interaction between ACPAC members and Pacific nations. There's the potential for Pacific Island ACPAC jurisdictions to also be members of a Pacific council, allowing them to share their experiences and knowledge gained as an ACPAC member with their Pacific counterparts.

While I believe it is important for ACPAC and its members to reach out to other jurisdictions and regional organisations, it is equally important to ensure that engagements are: strategic; targeted; valued by all parties; and are not occurring simply for their own sake.

It is vital that interactions are comprehensively planned with clear objectives; that outcomes are evaluated; and that lessons are widely disseminated.

The costs borne by collaborating jurisdictions and the practicalities of managing workloads must also be factored in. Given our accountability mandates, making the most from the often small budgets available to PACs is essential.

However, having a more strategic approach to engagement might allow these limited funds to be linked and potentially supplemented by funding from development programs such as those under AusAID, the World Bank Institute, UNDP and the Centre for Democratic Institutions.

These are some of the reasons why I believe that ACPAC should be actively thinking about its international engagement strategy.

Much can be gained from increasing the activities and strengthening the links we already have. However, in the longer term, it's important that all of this be woven together under a strategic framework to make the most from all our efforts and all the time spent.

{Mechanisms to foster interactions}

So, what are the mechanisms to foster collaboration?

One potential way of fostering assistance from ACPAC members to their counterparts overseas may be to more effectively harness the links already forged through the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's twinning program.

The following jurisdictions are twinned:

- ACT with Kiribati
- NSW with Solomon Islands and Bougainville

- NT with Niue
- QLD with Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu
- SA with Tonga
- TAS with Samoa
- VIC with Nauru and Tuvalu
- WA with Cook Islands

Under the twinning program, the Australian Federal Parliament and New Zealand undertake an oversight and support role. As these two jurisdictions are not formally twinned, and they are both national jurisdictions, there may be scope for these jurisdictions to take a lead role in working with colleagues outside the Pacific region, and also in building links between regional PAC bodies, which I'll come back to in a moment.

I understand that while twinning mechanisms exist, and have led to successful capacity building projects in the past, they have not often been actively used to foster PAC to PAC contact. There are several notable exceptions, for example the link between the ACT and Kiribati, where there is an opportunity for capacity development planned for later in the year. Another example is between Western Australia and their twin the Cook Islands, which I mentioned earlier. I hope that we can hear a little more about these interactions and potentially others during the Q and A session following this presentation.

None of this should mean that ACPAC and its members focus exclusively on engagements with PACs from the Pacific or even Asia. ACPAC has had contact in the past with African jurisdictions. Indeed, several African delegations from the national and provincial levels join us here today, and we warmly welcome them.

{Council to Council interactions}

Building upon this nation to nation collaboration there is considerable scope for ACPAC as a consolidated body to engage with other regional councils.

We may find that ACPAC is of most assistance to these bodies in their establishment and consolidation phases. Having been around as long as we have, we have learned a bit about organising ourselves and creating conferences that provide value to member jurisdictions.

The first step is for the ACPAC Council to seek to establish lines of communication with our fellow regional PAC councils and to start sharing experiences. This has the potential to create two-way learning between the councils.

Understanding how other PAC councils operate and working to determine areas in which we can work together for mutual benefit will be a good start.

Developing ways in which information can be shared is also important. Initially this could be as simple as sharing conference papers, by uploading them to the new ACPAC website. Sometimes worthwhile collaborations come from such inauspicious situations, and this would be a relatively cost-effective way of reaching out to other councils.

Over time more frequent or formal ties could be pursued as specific needs are identified.

Again, I emphasise that it is important to be able to prove that these interactions are of value and that they meet a demand, but I believe at this stage simply making contact and building relationships is heading in the right direction.

{Proposal}

As a way of bringing this all together, I will be recommending at this afternoon's council meeting that ACPAC develop an international engagement strategy.

I'll be suggesting that we start by using the mechanism of the parliamentary twinning network and by making contact with other regional councils.

However, my hope is that this strategy will grow to be something more substantial and valuable over time.

I believe the best way to add more colour and depth to this idea is to start talking.

So, for those jurisdictions that are twinned and have their twin in attendance at the conference, I encourage you to get together later today to discuss your recent experiences and whether more work is needed. Council members can then bring this information to the meeting this afternoon to add to the discussion.

And with that, I'd like to thank you for your time today, and open up discussion to the floor by asking:

- what other ways are there to build and improve international collaboration? and
- in the past, what has been of assistance and what hasn't worked?