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## **Parliaments and Parties: New Directions for International Democracy Assistance**

**David French, Chief Executive, Westminster Foundation for Democracy**

It is now widely accepted in Washington that international democracy assistance requires a period of rehabilitation. Its unwelcome association with regime change has presented US agencies involved in this work (the US being by far the largest contributor internationally, at over \$800 million *per annum* on latest figures) with new challenges, particularly in parts of the Arab world where, at the extreme, they have acquired near pariah status.

UK and European agencies, whose sponsor governments have always been lower profile advocates of democracy programmes, are less vulnerable to, though not immune from, these consequences. The work these organisations do has also come to be recognised as a vital part of wider governance programmes, now attracting increasing prominence among the policy priorities of virtually every major international development donor. The title of UK's most recent international development white paper of July 2006, *Making Governance Work for the Poor* makes the point. Expensive aid programmes will have diminished impact as long as beneficiary governments maintain weak and opaque systems of governance.

The Westminster Foundation for Democracy, the UK Government's official democracy assistance agency (sponsored by the FCO with a modest grant-in-aid of £4.1 million per annum, its largest source of income) has recently redefined its specialisms after a period of review. WFD now works in two main areas: political party development – undertaken through the Westminster political parties which are represented by eight of the 14 members of WFD's board – has always been a priority since WFD's establishment in 1992. Parliamentary strengthening is a newer field of development, where we are beginning to make more of the network of expertise associated with Westminster.

Conventionally, supporting civil society – strengthening the demand side of democratic life – was seen as the most likely route to effective democratic politics in post-communist countries, along with public service reform, strengthening the judiciary and a vigorous free press. These all remain important; but parliaments and political parties have received much less attention, not least because they are politically sensitive areas into which development officials are often reluctant to venture.

As the then Secretary of State for International Development, Hilary Benn, put it in his introduction to the 2006 White Paper, 'What makes the biggest difference to the quality of governance is active involvement by citizens – the thing we know as politics'.

Assistance and capacity building programmes with parties and parliaments can be developed effectively provided governments work through recognised arms length agencies. The first ever donor coordination meeting on parliamentary strengthening, of which DFID was a main sponsor, took place only in May 2007; and donors are now recognising the need for parliamentary capacity building to catch up – though they remain nervous about supporting party work.

WFD responded last year by developing the Westminster Consortium for Parliaments and Democracy, a joint venture with the Overseas Office of the House of Commons, the National Audit Office, the UK branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and a group of

other organisations with experience internationally in parliamentary work. Combine this experience with that of the Westminster parties – all of which run international programmes with WFD funding – and we have a powerful resource which few other countries can match. The real potential lies in finding ways to bring this expertise to bear appropriately in developing democracies; and the challenge in developing our capacity to do so.

Recent initiatives include a highly successful series of workshops, run by all the Westminster parties together, with DFID funding, with parties in Sierra Leone in the run-up to their parliamentary elections in August 2007 – which saw a change of government and the defeat of a sitting President through a free and fair electoral process.

Last month WFD ran a workshop on budget oversight in Cairo for 50 members of the Egyptian Parliament as part of our FCO supported parliamentary programme there – illustrating that it is not only Commonwealth countries or those with Westminster based parliamentary constitutions that are interested in UK experience. Westminster MPs provided external expertise, supported by senior clerks experienced in financial oversight from the Commons and the Indian lower house, the Lok Sabha – the latter being an innovation we are keen to encourage. Also in the Middle East, WFD now has a field office in, and generously provided by, the Lebanese Parliament in Beirut.

It can often be in bringing together politicians across the whole political spectrum to examine real issues that we make the most difference – particularly where the tradition of dialogue with opposition parties is weak.

We are now looking to repeat the Sierra Leone experience, with the UK parties working together on a cross party basis in other challenging Africa settings such as Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and to develop parliamentary programmes in countries as diverse as Ukraine and Macedonia, Lebanon and Yemen, Uganda and Sierra Leone. The list has the potential to become much longer; and the portfolio of programmes broader as we address different aspects of party and parliamentary life.

The key to success in these programmes will be in finding ways to apply best practice principles of local ownership and sustainability to parliamentary and party settings. Our main focus is therefore on training local trainers and working with local institutions – universities and NGOs - to develop centres of parliamentary knowledge and practice. Those we have consulted are keen to be part of an international network of accreditation linked to Westminster experience.

Westminster and its associated organisations have far more to contribute to this effort than has yet been realised. Whatever we may understand about its shortcomings, Westminster is still revered internationally, and the mother of parliaments still has the best brand in the business – in the world.