

Messages from the Commonwealth Ombudsman of Australia

*Prof. John McMillan**

Congratulations to the Thai Ombudsmen and staff upon the occasion of their Seventh Anniversary. There is much to celebrate in the remarkable success of the Office of the Thai Ombudsman. In a short period of time the office has firmly established itself as an effective agency in providing the Thai public with redress of grievances. The public has quickly developed confidence in the professional Ombudsman approach of the Thai office.

It is a matter of special pride for the office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman that it has been closely involved with the Thai Ombudsman office during its establishment and growth. It has been our privilege to witness and to assist the significant professional strides that the Thai Ombudsmen have made from inception in April 2000 when His Majesty, the King of Thailand promulgated a Royal Order to appoint the first ombudsman. Today there are three Ombudsmen presiding over a dynamic and growing organisation.

* Commonwealth Ombudsman

The partnership between our two offices began in late 2002 under my predecessor, Mr. Ron McLeod. Our initial collaboration focused on building understanding and providing training opportunities for Thai Ombudsman officers. This included training courses run by my office and at the Australian National University. The Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) provided funding for this and subsequent activities. Thai officers came to a variety of professional courses and short placements in small groups of two or three, and sometimes individually.

From 2003 onwards, the partnership between our offices has grown to include more staff exchanges and training opportunities. I personally had the privilege of hosting a visit by the Thai Ombudsmen to my national office in Canberra, and in making a return visit to Bangkok in 2005. On each visit there has been a lively interaction and discussion between the staff of both our offices. Our contact has shown me how much the Thai office is driven to continually do better and to maintain an active program of support to improve staff professional competencies.

The Thai Ombudsmen and staff have met the challenge to establish and raise the office's performance to internationally accepted standards for Ombudsman work. The Thai office has reached out to Ombudsman offices in other regions to absorb the lessons that have been learnt by those offices over a longer period in dealing with public grievances against government agencies.

There has been a strong focus throughout this development on staff training. An important element of this program has been a 'Train the Trainer Course', the most recent course being held in February 2006. Because of the commitment of the Thai office we were able to expand this course, both as to the length of the course and the

number of participants – from two Thai officers in the first course, to five participants, and then to ten Thai officers for a set of training sessions that were conducted over 12 working days. This growth in the training activity was made possible by the Thai Ombudsman office funding the air transport of the officers as an additional contribution to furthering our work together. In this way, we have managed to establish a partnership of equals between the Australian and Thai offices.

At this point in our relationship we were also able to involve a significant training input from the NSW Ombudsman office, which is one of six State Ombudsman offices in Australia. Because of the federal division of government responsibilities in Australia, the national and State Ombudsman offices deal with complaints in different areas of government activity. For example, the NSW Ombudsman office is more actively engaged than my own office in dealing with police complaints, and with local government. The involvement of the NSW Ombudsman office in the training program with Thai Ombudsman staff enabled them to develop a greater range of competencies. Areas covered in this extended course included topics as diverse as complaint handling for frontline staff, difficult complainants, mediation, negotiation, analytical skills, investigating systemic issues, and practical ‘train the trainer’ exercises.

As part of this training I had the opportunity to hold a seminar with the training group to review various principles of ombudsmanship. The response of the Thai staff in this seminar provided another reminder of the strength and depth of Thai staff resources.

We followed each substantive training session with a conversion session chaired by a facilitator who was a Thai familiar with Thai Government systems, fully fluent in

English and Thai, but not an ombudsman. The facilitator helped the ten Thai officers to convert all material from each substantive session into meaningful material for use in Thailand. The conversion process itself provided a fresh focus on the substantive topics that were being discussed, and ensured that the training session culminated with the preparation of written documentation in Thai that was culturally sensitive to the Thai situation and adapted to the legislation establishing the Thai office. An objective was to develop a set of training materials that could appropriately be used in the Thai office and provide the basis for an initial in-house training program.

The relationship between our offices is now very much a partnership of equals. An example is the presentations that have been given by Australian staff visiting Thailand, and by Thai staff visiting Australia. These presentations deal with practical issues being faced by both offices in providing an Ombudsman service, and with the principles and professional challenges of ombudsmanship.

This new stage of our relationship reflects the great strides that the Office of the Thai Ombudsman has made in professional service, technical support and outreach. This has been most informative for my own office. Pleasingly, I note that the Thai office has continued in a professional and competent manner despite recent changes in Thai government and politics.

Another forum in which there has been close contact between the Thai and Australian Ombudsman offices is in the activities of the International Ombudsman Institute. Both our offices are active participants in this important international organisation, that includes among its members Ombudsman offices from over one

hundred countries around the globe. Though we belong to different IOI regions (the Asia region, and the Australia-Pacific region), we have both attended each other's regional conferences. This experience has demonstrated how much we share in common.

Viewed from Australia, the Office of the Thai Ombudsman stands out as a global leader among ombudsman offices in its commitment to outreach and the strength of its outreach program. The office succeeded in conducting a highly effective nationwide advertising campaign about its services. The coverage reached in this advertising was at least if not more effective than that achieved by any other Ombudsman office internationally.

Just as importantly, the Thai office is making itself more accessible to the public by implementing a system to enable complaints to be received around the nation. The system is being adapted to enable vulnerable members of society to lodge complaints. This is another example of how the Thai office has been leading the way in a brave manner that acknowledges problems of literacy and access. This is a fine example to be followed by other offices within the international community of ombudsmen.

These actions demonstrate a commitment to all levels of society. The success of the office in meeting this challenge is all the more impressive because it has been achieved in such a short period of seven years. The staff of the Thai office have grown in numbers and professionalism, and have become ever more effective across the breadth of Thailand. It is not surprising that the office now faces a need for more office space. This is a healthy sign of a strong and growing organisation.

The staff of the Commonwealth Ombudsman's office join with me in congratulating the Thai Ombudsmen and staff on this milestone. I am sure the next seven years will bring more success as you face the many challenges that confront all ombudsmen in the continuing struggle to enhance good governance and accountability and to foster professional complaint resolution.

Prof. John McMillan

Commonwealth Ombudsman

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