

AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL EXCHANGE COUNCIL
13TH AUSTRALIAN DELEGATION TO THE PHILIPPINES
18 August to 24 August 2023



Delegation

- **The Hon Laura Henderson MLC** – (Delegation Leader)
 - Member of the Legislative Council (SA)
 - Liberal Party of Australia
- **The Hon Peter Foster MLC**
 - Member for Mining and Pastoral Region (Legislative Council, WA)
 - Australian Labor Party
- **Cr Joseph Haweil**
 - Mayor and Councillor, Hume City Council (VIC)
 - Australian Labor Party
- **Mr Andrew Scott**
 - Acting Assistant State Director, the Nationals Victoria
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- **Ms Michelle Hofmann**
 - Campaign Chair, Liberal Party (Western Australian Division)
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- **Ms Emily Bailey**
 - Ministerial Liaison Officer, Ministerial Office of the Hon Dr Tony Buti (WA)
 - Australian Labor Party
- **Mr Connor Costello**
 - Representative of the Australian Political Exchange Council

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Executive Summary

The 13th Australian Political Exchange Council Delegation to the Philippines ('the Delegation') took place between the 18th and 24th of August 2023. This was the first outbound APEC delegation to the Philippines since the COVID-19 Pandemic. It included delegates from the Liberal Party, National Party and Labor Party from Western Australia, Victoria, and South Australia. This delegation provided members with the opportunity to gain insights into the political system in the Philippines and to build enduring networks between young political leaders from Australia and the Philippines.

The relationship between Australia and the Philippines is long-standing and is built on mutual trust and cooperation grounded in a commitment to peace, stability, and prosperity in our region. The APEC Delegation notably took place a matter of weeks before Prime Minister Anthony Albanese was due to visit the Philippines to sign a Strategic Partnership with the President of the Philippines, HE Ferdinand R Marcos Jr. The new Strategic Partnership establishes an enduring framework for closer cooperation with the Philippines, one of Australia's key partners in Southeast Asia, based on a strong alignment of strategic interests.

This report will provide an overview of the activities of the delegation in Manila, Bohol, Muntinlupa, Quezon City, Pasay, Makati, and Metro Manila. Delegates are grateful for the opportunity to have travelled to the Philippines on an APEC Delegation, to learn firsthand about the differences and similarities in our political systems, and the long-standing relationship between Australia and the Philippines.

Report

Friday August 18: Welcome dinner

Friday August 18, 2023, was spent travelling from Canberra to the Philippines, with the Delegation reaching the hotel in the late evening. The delegation received a briefing on their trip from the Philippines counterpart over dinner and retired for the night.

Saturday August 19: Bohol/Crisis Centre/Provincial Officials at National Museum

After a night of broken sleep for some due to a combination of excitement and acclimating to the warmer weather, we were greeted by the warm staff of Astoria Plaza Hotel for breakfast. Most members of the delegation only had a much-needed coffee, while some indulged in perfectly ripe tropical fruits.

Liza, our enthusiastic and knowledgeable guide, advised us that the traffic was clear, and as such it should only take about ten minutes to journey to the Ninoy Aquino Airport. After cramming our luggage onto the transit bus, we set off.

It was a sunny day - blue skies with a hint of city smog and vestiges of storm clouds from the night before.

We were privy to a hive of activity on our drive - trade being undertaken at market stalls, cranes at work on various road infrastructure projects. Our driver expertly navigated weaving ambulances, motorbikes, tuk tuks and of course the famous Jeepneys.

There was an abundance of colour, from the bright blues to the muted greens to the daffodil yellows to the candy pinks of building facades to the verdant greenery of tropical plants. Some scenes looked like they were straight out of a Studio Ghibli film - apartments strung with fairy lights, housing multitudes of potted plants with clothes airing on the balcony.

In the words of delegate Joseph, "they do high-rise well". There was no shortage of towering apartment dwellings, showing an economisation of space that's imperative in the densely populated Manila.

Stately frangipanis, thriving in the humidity, heralded our arrival at the bustling Ninoy Aquino Airport. Inside, tiny kiosks sold pastillos and hot dogs alongside ube biko langka in a microcosmic display of Spanish and US influence on Filipino cuisine. The airport was teeming with travellers, including a daschund sporting a nappy that drew the attention and delight of the delegation.

After a delay in boarding and then departure, we jetted off. Smog had gathered by this stage and gave the sky a hazy hue. The view from the plane during ascent offered a sprawling metropolis as fast as the eye could see.

We were treated to incredible views on our short 90-minute flight - pristine sandy islands dotted in the azure water, and the remarkable topography of the seemingly Dr Suess-inspired Chocolate Hills.

After touching down in Bohol-Panglao Airport - the first eco-friendly airport in the Philippines - we had a friendly welcome by passionate Boholano and our guide, Christopher. This included the gifting of wooden necklaces featuring adorable effigies of the tarsier, the beloved tiny primate of the Philippines.

After boarding the minivan, Christopher shared generously about his home island. Bohol has two main industries - agriculture and tourism. In fact, Bohol Island the Philippine's first UNESCO Global Geopark, a nod to the unique rock formations that draw thousands of tourists every year.

By the time we arrived at Bohol BeeFarm for lunch, we were famished. Following a tour of the impressive production facilities on site (which included sampling decadent ice cream made from 70% coconut milk), we took our places at the table with our government official guests. Vicky, who manages Bohol BeeFarm, chatted to us enthusiastically about the diversification of operations at the farm and her passion for empowering others through employment as the delegation tucked into delicious fare.

After lunch, we visited the Bohol Crisis Centre, the only crisis intervention centre that is owned and operated by the Provincial Government of Bohol with the Department of Social Welfare and Development. It was an incredibly moving experience to spend time with survivors of child sexual abuse. All members of the delegation were struck by the resilience of the girls and young women we met. Delegation members played games with the girls, and there was even a dance-off! The delegation left with our hearts full and wide smiles on our faces, and the visit remained a highlight of the APEC delegation trip for many.

After freshening up at our lovely accommodation, the delegation was graciously hosted for dinner by provincial officials in the stunning National Museum. It was an evening of wonderful entertainment, warm conversation, and endless requests for 'selfies'. By the time the festivities had wrapped up and we'd arrived back at our hotel, delegate members were ready for a sound rest in anticipation of a full schedule the following day.



Photo: APEC Delegation at the Bohol Crisis and Intervention Centre

Sunday August 20: Bohol/Loboc River Cruise/NMYL Officers Dinner

On Sunday 20th August, the Australian Political Exchange Council Delegation spent a 2nd day further exploring Bohol. Bohol is a province of the Philippines and is in the Central Visayas region in the Philippines. Bohol itself is the 10th largest island in the Philippines, with the Province of Bohol consisting of itself and seventy-five minor surround islands. We learnt that the province is home to almost 1.4 million residents, of which approximately 105,00 reside in the capital Tagbilaran which was our first official stop.

We had the honour of traveling in a Province of Bohol supplied bus on this date, and the Delegation is grateful to the hospitality of the Governor and the Provincial Board.

Bohol has a Provincial Government headed by Governor Erico Aristotle C. Aumentado, and Vice Governor Dionisio Victor A. Balite who the delegation had the honour of meeting. They are assisted by a Bohol Provincial Board which is made up of 13 members who are elected every three years. The Board oversees the implantation of programs and projects carried out by the Provincial government, oversees laws and ordinances that effect the province, initiate and maxims revenue and use of resources for the implementation of programs and projects, ensure the delivery of basis services and facilities for constituents and oversees the implementation of provincial development plans.

Our first stop was the Blood Compact Monument located in Tagbilaran where the Delegation was able to stop and take a photo and learn about the significance of its' history. The blood compact was an ancient ritual in the Philippines intended to seal a friendship or a treaty. The contracting parties would cut their hands and pour their blood into a cup filled with liquid, such as wine and drink it. This blood compact took place in 1565 between Spanish explorer Miguel Lopez de Legazpi and Datu Siktatuna, who was the Chieftain of Bohol.

This is significant as this is the first treaty of friendship between the Spaniards and the Filipinos. It is believed that the ritual took place in the vicinity of the monument, which is very popular with locals and tourists alike.

Bohol would later be colonised by the Spanish for three hundred and twenty-seven years. The cultural of Bohol is heavily influence by Spain with many traditional dances, music, dishes, and other aspects of cultural having Hispanic influence.

Following this stop, the delegation travelled to the Baclayon Church also known as the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary Parish Church. The Church was founded in 1596 by the Jesuits and is the oldest Christian settlement in Bohol. The Philippines is one of two nations in Asia substantially following the Catholic faith with over 86% of the populations identifying as Roman Catholic. The present stone church was constructed by the Jesuits and was finished in 1727. The church consists of an Altar, Baptistry, Sacristy, Convent, Watchtower and Mortuary chapel. On the 15th of October 2013, a strong earthquake heavily damaged the church, and it was reconstructed by the National Museum of the Philippines between 2014 and 2018 when it was reopened to the public and includes a museum inside these days with original artefacts which were saved.

The next stop was the highlight of this day for the Delegation – visiting the Tarsiers. It was a short bus ride from the Baclayon Church into the lush green mountains where we arrived at the Philippine Tarsier Sanctuary. It is believed that Tarsiers inhabited rainforests all around the world, and sadly only exist on a few islands in the Philippines, Borneo, and Indonesia. The Tarsier were common on the island of Bohol until the 1960s as many were caught for pets, and threatened by deforestation of their natural habitat, and it is believed that only 700 remain. As a result, the Provincial Government of Bohol has passed several ordinances to protect the Philippine tarsier. The Delegations, led by guides in silence, were able to view the Tarsier in their natural habitat and take some photos. The Tarsier are nocturnal, shy, and are solitary and currently listed as endangered.

After visiting the Tarsiers, the Delegation travelled to Loboc and embarked on a lunch cruise with the National Movement of Young Legislators (Bohol Chapter) who are led by Attorney Jamie Aumentado Villamor. We enjoyed a lunch cruise along the scenic Loboc River and have the privilege of enjoying songs sung by the Loboc Children's Choir and a short cultural show. It was a great opportunity to network with the Young Legislators (40 years and under) about the differences between the Australian political system and the Philippines political system, many of which some serve as Councillors, Vice Mayors, and Provincial Board Members.

The Delegation then travelled to Bohol's famous Chocolate Hills via the Man-made Forest near Bilar which is a two-kilometre stretch of Mahogany trees. The trees were planted over fifty years ago as part of a reforestation project and is popular spot for locals and tourists to take photos.

Our destination was the Chocolate Hills. These unique geological formations consist of at least 1,260 hills spread over more than 50 square kilometres and are another famous tourist attraction in Bohol. The Hills were formed ages ago by the uplift of coral deposits, limestone, shaped over time with rainwater and erosion. These hills are covered in grass, which turn chocolate brown during the dry season. The Chocolate Hills are protected under legislation and are part of the Bohol Island UNESCO Global Geopark which celebrates the island's geological identity along with other landmarks such as the Danajon Double Barrier Reef, and its history.

The island of Bohol is proud of both its' historical and natural heritage, and that is why the island is popular with both domestic and international tourists – with direct flights to Korea and China fuelling its growing tourism, and with Philippine Airlines now connecting with Sydney and Perth it is opening to further possibilities.

To end the day, the Delegation enjoyed a meal with the National Movement of Young Legislators at the Henann Resort, which houses a Convention Centre, and is situated closely to the Bohol-Panglao International Airport which is an eco-airport, implementing measures to conserve the local environment and energy efficiency. It was great to further discuss local culture and politics, opportunities between our two countries, and exchange business cards for future contacts.



Photo: APEC Delegation at the Chocolate Hills

Monday, 21 August - Muntinlupa City

On Monday, 21 August 2023 we spent time in Muntinlupa City, one of 16 municipalities of Metro Manila. The total population in Muntinlupa from the last census in 2020 was approximately 543,000.

Muntinlupa Disaster Command Centre

We were joined by Councilor Alexson V. Diaz as we visited the Muntinlupa Disaster Command Centre. The disaster centre is particularly essential in Muntinlupa, given the frequency and severity of disaster events in the Philippines, such as typhoons (approximately 30 per year), floods and earthquakes. We were briefed on the resources at the Centre, including systems to monitor traffic incidents and smoke detection, as well as rainfall measurement, earthquake intensity readings and earthquake events monitoring, analysis of building stabilisation post-earthquake, monitoring of tsunamis and typhoons. The Centre also has capability to communicate with residents across their City with radio communications to loudspeakers. As well as constant monitoring and weather forecasting, the Centre undertakes post-incident assessments, provides training to first responders, pre-positions resources (rescue, response, emergency and medical resources) to help with recovery, and liaises with the Metro Manila Disaster Association to co-ordinate regional and national efforts. We were shown the newest investment, a Mobile Learning Hub bus, as well as the inventory of rescue equipment.

Museo ng Muntinlupa

Our visit to the Muntinlupa Museum provided insights into the history and culture of the Muntinlupa area. The Museum was opened in 2019 and includes permanent galleries based on the themes of Buhay (life), Talino (intelligence) and Lakas (strength). The museum showcases the history of the area, which was under the religious supervision of the Augustinians since 1601 and explores the breadth of the agricultural sources of livelihood.

Bayanan Baywalk Fishing Industry

We were delighted by a visit to the Bayanan Baywalk Fishing Industry headquarters, the heart of the fish hatchery that provides a livelihood for many people of Muntinlupa. The locals were very friendly, and we discussed some of the sustainable technology being implemented on Laguna Lake (such as solar powered paddles to aerate the water) and heard about the

challenges they face from fish poaching by people from other areas, invasive water plants and pollution.

City monuments

As we travelled through the city we saw key historical monuments, such as Liwasan ng mga Bayani, which is the hero's monument for those who fought the Japanese invasion during World War II, as well as modern facilities like Northgate Cyberzon, an 18.7-hectare registered IT zone, which is master-planned and built around the needs of technology-based companies. We visited The Heritage Building, built in 1924, which was the main vaccine and serum research unit in the Philippines for many years. The building boasts a replica of National Hero Jose Rizal's clay sculpture of *The Triumph of Science Over Death*, which is a symbol of hope in a building that helped save patients who were usually victims of snake bites or suffered from tuberculosis.

Muntinlupa City Council

We were warmly hosted by Mayor Rozzano Rufino B. Biazon, who hosted us so that we could meet with many members of the Muntinlupa City Council. It was an excellent opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the similarities and differences between our political systems, and gain insight into the work of elected politicians in Muntinlupa.



Photo: APEC Delegation at the Muntinlupa Disaster Command Centre

Tuesday, 22 August 2023 – Quezon City/House of Representatives

Visit to Angat Buhay/Museo ng Pag-Asa

The day's programme commenced with a visit to *Angat Buhay* (Filipino: uplifting lives) and its associated *museo ng Pag-asa* (Filipino: The Museum of Hope).

Angat Buhay is a non-governmental organisation working on active citizenship and volunteer-based initiatives embracing a *bayanihan* philosophy (namely, a spirit of civic unity and Filipino cooperation). Its origins lie in a previous anti-poverty program in the Office of the Vice President during the tenure of Atty. Maria Leonor (Leni) Gerona Robredo, the 14th Vice President of the Philippines. Its initiatives are focused on education, health and nutrition,

disaster relief, rehabilitation and community engagement and empowerment. Mrs Robredo is the organisation's Chair/President.

Museo ng Pag-asa is a small museum of visual installations, artwork, memorabilia and artefacts from Mrs Robredo's unsuccessful 2022 presidential election campaign, known by her supporters as the 'People's Campaign'. The delegation was received by Ms Joy Curtiz, the museum's manager, who provided an overview of the 2022 campaign and its focus on open government, good governance, freedom of information and sexual rights. Ms Curtiz highlighted the campaign's significant support from middle/upper middle-class communities; its heavy reliance on volunteers, creatives; and the festival atmosphere of major campaign rallies. This overview was followed by a brief museum tour.

The delegation was then received by Mr Raphael (Raffy) Martin Rivera Magno, Executive Director, Angat Buhay at the organisation's onsite office. A robust and lengthy discussion followed, covering campaign voter dynamics, tactics, and the contrast between aspirational policy-based campaigns on the one hand and those that directly address daily needs in a developing society on the other. The delegation heard about and reflected on the challenges faced by political figures, activists and society during the 2022 campaign including threats and intimidation by those within existing power structures.

Mr Magno reflected on the program's foundation as a mechanism for the private sector to support community development in 2016 with an initial reach of 50 municipalities and the mobilisation of \$1 billion pesos of private sector development interventions. Mr Magno then highlighted the following with respect to the organisation's work since its formation on 1 July 2022:

- the organisation's work is concentrated on 4 'Advocacy Pillars', being public education, public health, disaster relief and rehabilitation and community engagement and empowerment.
- an important current project is improving access to education for students in remote areas through the construction of student accommodation (dormitories)
- the funding model of the organisation is concentrated on support from foreign embassies, private donations and successful benefactors.

Luncheon Hosted by Quezon City

The delegation then proceeded to the Provenciano Restaurant where a luncheon was given by Quezon City and attended by municipal councillors and officials.

Visit to Quezon City Hall

Following the end of luncheon, the delegation was received at Quezon City Hall by The Hon. Josefina (Joy) G. Belmonte, Mayor of Quezon City. Present also were a number of municipal councillors, the City Administrators and many of the City's senior municipal officers. A robust dialogue followed covering the City's municipal profile, organisational structure, programmes and initiatives. The following was of particular note:

- Quezon City hosts the largest annual pride festival in Southeast Asia with an attendance of 25,000 in 2022 and a forecast attendance of 50,000 in 2023.

- ‘Learning poverty’ remains a major issue in The Philippines. While education is a jurisdictional responsibility of the national government, local governments do provide support including Quezon City’s Scholarship Program providing financial assistance on the basis of academic achievement, economic hardship, athletic and cultural achievement and youth leadership, among other fields. The City is also home to a Quezon City University, an institution of 11,000 students funded by the municipality offering a range of technical and vocational courses.
- The City’s 3 public hospitals face similar operational challenges to those being experienced by the sector around the world, including Australia. Namely, high staff turnover, cost of living and salary levels impacting service delivery. One particular challenge is the demand for Filipino nurses and medical staff internationally and the impact of this ‘brain drain’ on the operations of institutions in the home country.
- Under the auspices of the City’s *Housing, Community Development and Resettlement Department*, the city has a number of robust socialised housing and resettlement programs to support underprivileged, homeless and Informal Settler Families (ISF) constituents. The city is responsible for construction projects which are made available to qualifying residents under a housing loan scheme. The delegation was advised that up to 210,000 persons in Quezon City are considered informally homeless.

Visit to House of Representatives

The delegation’s next engagement was at the House of Representatives where Speaker, The Hon. Ferdinand Martin G. Romualdez formally acknowledged the presence of the delegation in the public gallery, warmly welcoming it to the session of the 19th Congress.

During a brief suspension of standing orders, many representatives offered their personal welcome and greetings to members of the delegation. This included Her Excellency Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, 14th President of the Philippines and current Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives. The delegation was also greeted by a number of representatives who were alumni of the Australian Political Exchange Council/Philippine Centre for Young Leaders in Governance partnership.

Dinner Hosted by PCYL Alumni (2023 Batch)

Following conclusion of the day’s formalities, the delegation travelled to Makati City where a dinner was given at *Nikkei* restaurant by alumni of the 2023 delegation of young political leaders to Australia. The dinner was also attended by PCYL staff.



Photo: APEC Delegation at the House of Representatives

Wednesday, 23 August 2023

Manila City

Our first stop, after braving the Manila traffic, would be a visit to the Manila City Council, the oldest city in the Philippines. Upon arriving at the city council building, we were greeted with a full marching band. This was another moment in our trip when the locals had gone above and beyond to welcome us, and we were very humbled. After making our way inside the council buildings, we were walked into a room with a massive mural that wrapped around the whole roof. We later found out that it was the history of the Philippines and Manila. We were all taken aback by the beauty of the room. After we had taken in the room and listened to the details of the mural, we were ushered into the Mayor's Office where we met Mayor Honey. Mayor Honey is a highly respected and hardworking Mayor who made a special trip to welcome us to her city. She is the first female mayor in Manila's 452-year history, and she presided over three million residents of the city and 1.8 million voters, including the Presidential residency. Mayor Honey explained that Manila is made up of seven cities, each with its own unique characteristics.

After meeting with Mayor Honey, we were taken around the city museum which offered more information on the history of Manila, how World War 2 devastated the city and left it in rubble. The photos and artefacts from the period were truly awful and it was hard to believe that the city had built back from that time.

Visiting the Senate and Meeting Senator Risa

After lunch, we headed to the Philippines Senate, where we would meet a member of the opposition party, Senator Risa Hontiveros. She was one of only two members of the Opposition in the Senate, which houses 24 representatives. The Senate acted in a similar fashion to our Senate, acting as a house of review and an upper house chamber, but they were not elected based on party lines. The members of this chamber are elected at large by the entire Philippine population. Senators are accountable to the whole country rather than only a district constituency, which should mean they have a broader outlook on the problems of the country, instead of being restricted by narrow viewpoints and interests. The 24 Senators often change their party lines throughout their terms to gain favour with other members or the President.

We sat down with Senator Risa for about 45 minutes, where she detailed her goals and policy interests. She is known in the Philippines for her progressive agenda and fighting for women and children's rights. In her role as the Chairperson for the Senate Committee on Women, Children, Family Relations, and Gender Equality, she has passed 22 laws regarding women, children, and other marginalized groups within the Philippines. Examples of her work are increasing the age of criminal consent to 16, outlawing child brides, expanding maternity leave to 106 days, and the mental health bill to aid the mental health crisis in the Philippines. She went into detail about her office helping authorities to prosecute and stop human traffickers at the border, highlighting that some women believe they are moving countries to start a new career but quickly get forced into work they did not agree to. It was inspiring to hear of the efforts that Sen. Risa and her office go through to try and make the Philippines a better place. She mentioned that she would support more seats in the Senate because 24

seats to represent 110 million people means it is hard to represent all the groups within the Philippines. It was truly a great conversation.

After meeting with Sen. Risa, we were shown around the Senate Museum, which had various mementos from all over the world. From guns to medals, this museum was fascinating. One item that grabbed the attention of us all was Manny Pacquiao's 2016 Championship belt. Pacquiao had served as a Senator from 2016 to 2022 and was a good example of the popularity needed to become a Senator with only 24 positions available.

Afterward, we were ushered into the Senate Chamber, which was a lot smaller than the House of Representatives we had visited the day before. We were welcomed by the President and viewed the proceedings of the Senate for a period of time. The feel in the room was much less intense than our Senate, and there was often loud chatter and the Senators walking around the room to talk with guests and chat with other Senators. It was a great experience to compare to the House of Representatives from the day before. Overall, the Senate is a more intimate building and place to work but just as crucial to the operations of the Philippines' democracy.

Dinner with Senator Risa and her staff

After downtime to rest and freshen up, we were on our way to dinner with Senator Risa and her chief of staff Rowley, who had been with her throughout all her campaigns, including the unsuccessful ones in 2010 and 2013. Rowley spoke of the changes in politics since then and the nature of political campaigns to include more social media, especially TikTok, which is seen as a valuable tool to reach the younger generations. He detailed the lessons learned from the unsuccessful campaigns and what went right in her Sen. Risa's third attempt in 2016, which saw her elected to the Senate. This made me admire Senator Risa more, given the time and effort she put into getting elected to change what she saw as the injustices within her country.

Overall, this was another significant day, meeting with officials and representatives, talking about their communities and issues facing their people. The highlight was meeting the people and seeing the adversity they have overcome to deliver change for their communities.



Photo: APEC Delegation at the Senate with Senator Risa

Thursday August 24: Departure

Thursday August 24, 2023, the delegation returned to Australia.

Conclusion

The Delegation appreciated the opportunity to learn about the political system in the Philippines. An interesting observation of the delegation was made during our visit to the Angat Buhay/Museo ng Pag-Asa that despite there not being mandatory voting, there was large engagement in political rallies and elections. The delegation appreciated the opportunity to meet with members of varying levels of Government, providing the opportunity to gauge a broader and deeper understanding of their political system compared to Australia's and to learn about the way in which members of the community can engage in their political system. Members of the delegation are grateful for the opportunity to have travelled on the APEC Delegation.