

## **AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL EXCHANGE COUNCIL**

### **24th AUSTRALIAN DELEGATION TO THE SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM**

**2 JUNE to 8 JUNE 2023**

#### **Delegation**

**Mr Michael Pettersson MLA - Delegation Leader** (Australian Labor Party)

Member for Yerrabi, Australian Capital Territory Legislative Assembly

**Ms Caitlin Collins MLA** (Australian Labor Party)

Member for Hillarys, Western Australia Parliament

**Mr Benjamin Small** (Liberal Party of Australia)

Finance Chairman, Liberal Party of Australia (Western Australia Division)

**Mrs Kathryn Jackson** (Liberal Party of Australia)

Managing Director Western Australia Planning and Logistics Pty Ltd

**Ms Beth Leese** (Australian Greens)

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Assistant State Secretary, Victorian Labor Party

**Mr Chris Wade** (Council Representative)

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## **Executive Summary**

The 24th Delegation of the Australian Political Exchange Council to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was hosted by the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union Central Committee in June 2023.

The delegation visited Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang City and Hanoi across a busy one week itinerary. Upon arrival in Ho Chi Minh City, the delegation was welcomed by Ms Nguyen Minh Chau, who escorted the delegation throughout the exchange.

During the visit to Ho Chi Minh City, the delegation participated in many different activities including visiting the Cu Chi tunnels, a courtesy call with the Deputy Leader of the Department of External Relations of Ho Chi Minh City and a working session with the Ho Chi Minh City Youth Union Headquarters. These varied activities allowed the delegates to glean a better understanding of Vietnam's history and the role of young people in the modern state.

The delegation travelled to Da Nang City where they visited Hoi An Old Town for a cultural tour through the historic streets. In Da Nang City, the delegation then had a courtesy call with the Leaders of Da Nang City People's Committee as well as the Da Nang City Youth Union. In these meetings climate change and entrepreneurship were key topics of conversation.

In Hanoi, the delegation undertook a wide array of meetings such as briefings with officials from the Ministry of Education and Training as well as the Ministry of Industry and Trade. The delegation was also received by the Commission for Foreign Relations of the Party Central Committee and a key meeting was held with members of the National Assembly. This discussion highlighted the important strategic partnership between Vietnam and Australia and the important role that future political leaders have in maintaining close ties.

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 2 June**

The delegation departed from Canberra and travelled to Ho Chi Minh City. Upon arrival, the delegation was greeted by Ms Nguyen Minh Chau, Official of the International Department of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union Central Committee who escorted delegates to the accommodation and detailed the itinerary of meetings for the exchange.

## **Saturday 3 June**

### **Cu Chi Tunnel Visit**

In the morning, delegates visited the Cu Chi tunnel network. The tunnels are an important cultural and historical location for the Vietnamese people due to their use by the Viet Cong. The tunnels were used extensively by the fighters for a wide array of purposes including logistics, accommodation, food preparation and health facilities as well as providing an extensive network of hiding spots for combat. The tunnel complex measures over 121 kilometres and is broadly comprised of three levels that range as deep as 12 metres underground.

The delegation was shown a multimedia presentation depicting life in the tunnels and then toured a small selection of publicly accessible tunnels.



## **Courtesy Call to the Deputy Leader of the Department of External Relations of Ho Chi Minh City**

The Deputy Leader welcomed the delegation upon our arrival in Ho Chi Minh City, emphasising the city's robust trade relationship and cultural ties with Australia.

As the largest recipient of foreign investment in Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh City has also garnered significant attention from Australian investors. Australian entrepreneurs rank as the 19th largest cohort of foreign investors in the city contributing AUD \$300 million.

Ho Chi Minh City serves as an important hub for trade events benefiting Australian exporters. The *Taste of Australia* event was recognised as a particularly exciting trade event but it was communicated that education fairs were of more widespread interest. The delegation and department exchanged ideas on how to cultivate further investment in Vietnam and discussed the importance of the trade offices in facilitating that investment. Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia have established trade offices and the department would like to see further Australian jurisdictions establish a presence in the city

The Deputy Leader highlighted the sizable number of Vietnamese students studying in Australia with a considerable presence of Australian university alumni in the city. Both parties agreed that higher education was a key area for collaboration as Australian universities have already built a strong reputation in Vietnam.

Lastly, the Deputy Leader expressed his delight that Ho Chi Minh City was chosen as the first destination of the exchange as the city is the most visited Vietnamese city by Australians.

## **Working Session with Ho Chi Minh City Youth Union Headquarters**

Ms Phan Thi Thanh Phuong, Secretary of the Ho Chi Minh City Youth Union and member of the 15th National Assembly, met the delegation along with representatives of the Ho Chi Minh City Youth Union.

The Youth Union briefed the delegation on the various ways that young Vietnamese are encouraged to learn about their country's history and government as well as engage in the political system.

The delegation was particularly interested to learn how the Youth Union catered to various age groups. The delegation learned that young Vietnamese are eligible to join the Youth Union between the ages of sixteen and thirty years old. For this age group they provide social activities, support to start a business, employment services and

support to complete academic studies. These services are provided alongside lessons in the country's history, politics and participating in movements.

Those who are not yet sixteen years old can participate in the Young Pioneers which is supervised by the Youth Union. The Young Pioneers undertake age-appropriate lessons, activities and excursions to begin their learning on the role of the youth movement. The Youth Union reports that 60 percent of students are members of the Young Pioneers program and most continue their participation through the Youth Union.

The delegation provided a broad summary of the ways that young Australians engage in the political system through political party membership and their respective youth wings and other less formal means. It was noted that it was unusual in Australia for parliamentarians to be below the age of forty but it was common for parliamentarians to have experience in their respective political party's youth wing.

This experience was shared by the Youth Union representatives that detailed how involvement in the union was a common precursor for service in public office. They reported that there are currently twelve secretaries of the Youth Union in the National Assembly, and that nine per cent of the National Assembly was under the age of forty and at the provincial level thirteen percent of representatives were under the age of forty.

At the conclusion of formal remarks, the delegation was invited to tour the facilities of the Youth Union.



## Sunday 4 June

The delegation departed from Ho Chi Minh City and travelled to Da Nang City. From Da Nang airport, the delegation travelled to Hoi An Old Town for a cultural tour.

The walking tour covered Hoi An Old Town where the delegation learned that it is a well preserved historic southeast Asian trading port. It was a prominent centre of trade through the 15th to 19th century and is most recognised for its *Temple Bridge*. This bridge dates to the 16th and 17th century and stands proudly on the outskirts of the district near the Thu Bon River. The delegation enjoyed the colourful streets and appreciated an opportunity to walk along the busy streets with locals.

Upon completion of the walking tour, the delegation travelled back to Da Nang and checked into the accommodation.



## Monday 5 June

### Courtesy Call to the Leaders of Da Nang City People's Committee

The delegation was welcomed by the Deputy Chair to Da Nang City and introduced to representatives of the Youth Union, the External Affairs and Education Departments. An informative briefing was provided to delegates, centred on the four pillars of economic growth that Da Nang City hopes will build on its solid economic performance:

- Tourism
- Education & Innovation
- ICT & Digital Transformation
- Agriculture, particularly fishery



Local GDP growth is at 7.3% in the most recent quarterly data, with growth considered to have a healthy trajectory from a modest base in terms of living standards.

Da Nang City considers its relationship with Australia to be well-established, with considerable trade ties and MoUs signed with a number of Australian states, predominantly Queensland and New South Wales. The depth of the relationship in terms of higher education was apparent to the delegation, with the Deputy Chair of the People's Committee - an alumni from studying in Brisbane - fondly recalling his time studying abroad. Additionally, the Deputy Chair highlighted an old Vietnamese expression that 'difficult problems are only overcome when young people become involved' as a way of emphasising his pleasure at seeing the Youth Union facilitating the delegation.

Perhaps unexpectedly, the delegation was very pleased to learn that Da Nang City has considerable charitable ties to Australia, with the Fred Hollows Foundation very active in the area. Additionally, significant efforts have been made by Australians since 2011 to build lifesaving capability on Da Nang's beautiful beaches and provide swimming lessons in elementary schools to lessen an alarmingly high incidence of drowning in young Vietnamese people.



### **Working Session with Da Nang City Youth Union**

The 24th Australian Delegation was honoured to be the first international delegation hosted by the Leaders of the Da Nang City Youth Union, with the First Secretary, Vice-Secretary, Chief of Office and Head of Media.



It was very fitting that the Delegation Leader was able to acknowledge this first international delegation to Da Nang's Youth Union as occurring in the 50th anniversary year of diplomatic ties between Australia and Vietnam.

The Youth Union leadership were united in their focus on the global imperative to address climate change, with particular impact on Da Nang given the prevalence of tropical storm impacts. The Youth Union acts as a volunteer emergency service, responding in the wake of natural disasters. Notably, the Youth Union mobilised more than 30,000 members to clean the beaches of debris when a tropical storm impacted Da Nang one day before the city hosted the 2017 APEC Leaders' Summit.

The Da Nang Youth Union were extremely open and informative in discussion, explaining that as a socio-political organisation responsible to the Communist Party, they saw their role in protecting youth interests, educating young people and finally making government policy more approachable for young people. After the French and US Wars (as locally described), Leninism and Marxism shape the view that Vietnam must protect its sovereignty through hard times.

The Da Nang Youth Union has three missions:

- Educate young people
- Help generate economic growth through startup support
- Assist young people to protect Vietnam from foreign threats

Da Nang Youth Union's focus on fostering technology startups was fascinating. Programs are in place to foster innovation, business development and provide mentoring to young business leaders through incubators.



The working session of the meeting was perhaps one of the most open and engaging of the entire delegation. Through questions and answers, the delegation canvassed a wide range of issues, including climate change, the role of natural gas in the energy transition and internal dynamics of a one-party state, the role and risks of companies such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok and the imbalances in labour demand and supply.

**Tuesday 6 June**

### **Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum and Memorial Complex**

The delegation's first morning with Hanoi began with a visit to the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum, where the delegation laid a wreath on behalf of the Australian Political Exchange Council. The delegation paid their respects to President Ho Chi Minh and noted the extent to which Ho Chi Minh remains a revered figure in Vietnamese society.

The mausoleum itself is modelled on Lenin's mausoleum in Moscow, and stands in the centre of a large parade ground opposite the National Assembly. It is surrounded by colourful, large letter signs and one can plainly see the parallels between this structure and mausoleums in other communist countries. Following the visit to the mausoleum, the delegation received a guided tour around the grounds of Ho Chi Minh Memorial complex, which contains both Ho Chi Minh's living quarters during the Vietnam War, and also the large palace that housed the Governor General of Indochina, now used as the Presidential Palace.

### **Headquarters of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union**

The delegation visited the headquarters of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union in Hanoi, and worked with representatives of the Youth Union to learn more about their activities, structure and role in Vietnamese society. The Youth Union delegation was led by Ngo Van Cuong, the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union. Previous working sessions provided delegates with a more thorough understanding of the activities undertaken by local branches of the Youth Union which allowed the delegation to focus the discussion on the national activities of the Youth Union.

There are more than five million members of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, who are organised into four levels based on geography. The Congress of the Youth Union takes place every five years, and most recently took place in December 2022. The Congress consists of 981 delegates, which then selects 144 members to be on the Central Executive Committee.

The Congress set three priorities for the work of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union for the next five years, with the next Congress being in 2027. These priorities are; building union officers and organising capacity, supporting youth innovation through start ups, and building the digital capacity of youth. The delegation found the focus on building digital capacity particularly interesting, given the ongoing challenges and debate about the role of technology and social media in Vietnamese society.

To give effect to both supporting youth innovation and building digital capacity, the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union also plays a role, seemingly auxiliary to the Vietnamese education system, of providing young people with learning opportunities in foreign languages and coding. The Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union also encourages young people to take these opportunities through the education system. It was clear to the delegation that the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union sees its role as assisting the Vietnamese government pursue its priority areas in skills development.



The delegation asked a question about the role of the four organisation levels within the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, the way in which the Youth Union uses this structure to pursue its aims, and the feedback mechanisms that are built into this structure. The clear answer from the Secretary of the Central Committee was that the priorities of the organisation are set by the Congress, and it is the role of the Central Committee to guide the city and district levels of the organisation, which then guide the lower levels based on the information that has ultimately come from the Central Committee. This was consistent with the organisational structure which we had come to learn about in our various working sessions with both Youth Union leaders and city leaders during our time in Vietnam. The contrasts between this approach and the federated approach not just of our government, but also of our national political parties and organisations, was very apparent.

The delegation also asked about the outlook of youth in Vietnam towards climate action, and particularly the use of fossil fuels as a power source. The Secretary of the Central Committee responded that there is a general consensus amongst Vietnamese youth that climate change represents a significant threat, and that the continued burning of fossil fuels for power was generally seen as a negative in the broader context of continuing adverse weather events. The Secretary highlighted the role that the Youth Union plays in organising both activities for Vietnamese youth to protect the

environment, and also the role of the Youth Union in mobilising young people. following natural disasters.

Following the working session, the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union representatives hosted the Australian Political Exchange Council delegation near Hoan Kiem Lake. This was an opportunity for the delegates to engage with local representatives in a more informal way and this was greatly appreciated by all participants. During lunch some of the delegates discussed with Mr. Ngo about his recent visit to Australia as part of a delegation hosted by the Australian Political Exchange Council. It was interesting to get the perspective from a Vietnamese leader about our political system, and the impressions that he had of our system coming from the vastly different Vietnamese political context.

### **Working session with leaders and representatives of the Commission for Foreign Relations of the Party Central Committee**

The delegation moved to the central government district of Hanoi, near the Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum and the National Assembly, to be received by representatives of the Commission for Foreign Relations of the Party Central Committee, who were led by the Deputy Secretary of External Relations of the Communist Party of Vietnam.



**Wednesday 7 June**

**Ministry of Education and Training**

The meeting, attended by Mr. Nguyen Van Phuc, Deputy Minister, and Mrs. Nguyen Thi Thanh Mihn, Deputy Director General of the International Cooperation Department, discussed the strategic partnership between Vietnam and Australia in the field of education.

Education was highlighted as one of the key areas of collaboration, with a substantial number of scholarships being provided to Vietnamese students. The Australian government has committed \$50 million AUD annually to sponsor scholarships for Vietnamese students, with additional support from universities. Currently, there are 26,000 Vietnamese students studying in Australia, and over 35 joint programs are being offered by Vietnamese and Australian universities. RMIT in Ho Chi Minh City was mentioned as a notable example of this collaboration.

The education system in Vietnam was discussed, with a focus on efforts to modernise and catch up with global standards. Initiatives include the implementation of new curricula with an emphasis on STEM and English, as well as granting universities more autonomy to promote competitiveness. Improving the quality of education in Vietnam was also addressed, with plans to send lecturers abroad, including to Australia, to obtain PhD degrees.

During the discussion, questions were raised about university entrance rates for Vietnamese students. It was noted that there are over 230 universities in Vietnam, and while most students are able to secure a spot, admission can be more competitive for programs such as law and medicine. Financial considerations, as well as a government loan program for certain courses like teaching, were identified as factors influencing access to higher education.

Regarding the entrance process for Vietnamese students in Australia, the Deputy Minister sought clarification. Additionally, the delegation raised the question of whether the courses available in Vietnam align with the investment areas the country is seeking to attract, such as robotics. It was acknowledged that while these fields are modern and in demand, the quality of education in Vietnam may not yet be at its best. Many affluent families prefer to send their children to study abroad, but efforts are being made to improve education in these areas, including investments in laboratories, infrastructure, and qualified lecturers.

The impact of COVID-19 on Vietnamese students studying abroad, particularly in Australia, the UK, US, France, Germany, and South Korea, was also mentioned. It was noted that many students who study abroad do not return to Vietnam.

Overall, the meeting highlighted the strong partnership between Vietnam and Australia in the education sector, with an emphasis on scholarships, joint programs, curriculum improvements, and the importance of international exposure for Vietnamese students. Efforts to enhance the quality of education in Vietnam, particularly in modern fields, were discussed, along with challenges related to university entrance and the influence of COVID-19 on student mobility.

## **National Assembly**

The delegation was received at the National Assembly by Hon. Mr. Dang Thuan Phong, Vice Chairman of the Committee for Social Affairs; Hon. Mrs. Nguyen Thi Mai Hoa, Vice Chairwoman of the Committee of Culture and Education; Hon. Mrs. Nguyen Than Cam, Permanent Member of the Committee for Social Affairs; Hon. Mrs. Tran Thi Than Lam, Permanent Member of the Committee for Social Affairs; and Hon. Mr. Le Can Kham, Permanent Member of the Committee for Social Affairs.

The attendees noted that most representatives in the National Assembly are from the southern region of Vietnam. The country is led by the Communist Party, and the concept of "everything owned by the people" was emphasised. The National Assembly and the People's Council were highlighted as legislative bodies, while other organisations primarily serve administrative functions. The National Assembly is responsible for making and proposing laws, determining areas of importance, and ensuring the implementation of laws.

Key points about the structure of the National Assembly were discussed:

- The National Assembly convenes twice a year for one month each session.
- The National Assembly consists of nine committees and three councils.
- In 2026, the National Assembly will celebrate its 80th anniversary.
- The National Assembly includes 151 female members, accounting for 30.2% of the total.
- There are 89 members from ethnic groups, 47 members under the age of 40, 14 independents, and 296 first-term members.

The Social Affairs Committee, comprising 12 people, was discussed in detail. The committee is responsible for supervising laws related to work and is divided into five



divisions covering areas such as labour, employment, healthcare, gender equality, and social crimes. Topics such as trade unions and Vietnamese workers overseas are covered under the laws around work. Healthcare, with an emphasis on enhancing quality and capacity for pandemic and epidemic defence, and gender equality and family matters, particularly laws to protect against domestic violence, were also identified as high-priority areas.

A topic of great interest to the delegation was the conduct of question time in the National Assembly. Questions are collected from around the country and brought to the Ministry, with answers provided by the ministry officials. The answers undergo revision to ensure suitability. Up to five ministers attend the question time for half a day to listen and respond. Unsatisfactory answers may lead to debates between National Assembly members and ministers. Official documents are created to record policies and promises made during these discussions. Additionally, it was clarified that committees are responsible for supervising their relevant areas, investigating, and proposing actions. Matters that cannot be resolved at the committee level are brought to question time for further scrutiny.



In summary, the meeting provided an overview of the National Assembly's functions, the composition of its committees, and the important role played by the Social Affairs Committee in supervising laws related to work, healthcare, gender equality, and family matters. The question time process and the accountability of committees were also discussed, emphasising the responsibility of the National Assembly in ensuring the government's actions align with the interests of the people.

## Thursday 8 June

In the morning, the delegation visited The Temple of Literature, which is a renowned historical place of learning in Hanoi. The temple was founded in 1070 and served as Vietnam's first national university, dedicated to Confucian studies. Today, it stands as a symbol of knowledge, learning, and cultural heritage. The guided tour provided the delegation with insights into Vietnam's rich intellectual traditions and educational practices throughout history.

The delegation expressed deep appreciation for the well-preserved architectural marvels within the temple complex and admired the picturesque courtyards, tranquil gardens, and ornate pavilions, which collectively showcased the beauty of Vietnamese traditional architecture. The delegation also had the opportunity to view ancient stone stelae mounted on the backs of stone turtles, inscribed with the names of Vietnam's most outstanding scholars. The Temple of Literature is a UNESCO World Heritage site, which is a testament to Vietnam's efforts in preserving and promoting its cultural heritage.

Ngoc Son Temple, situated on a small island in Hoan Kiem Lake, is one of the most iconic landmarks in Hanoi. Renowned for its tranquillity and scenic beauty, the temple holds great historical and religious importance to the Vietnamese people.

The tour provided the delegation with insights into the temple's rich history, legends, and cultural practices. The temple was constructed in the 18th century and has had subsequent renovations throughout the years.

The delegation marvelled at the stunning blend of traditional Vietnamese and Confucian architectural styles of Ngoc Son Temple characterised by ornate roofs, intricate wood carvings, and beautifully adorned altars. The picturesque location of the temple amidst the serene waters of Hoan Kiem Lake further added to its charm.

During the visit, the delegation had the opportunity to learn about the temple's cultural and spiritual significance. They were introduced to the various deities and historical figures worshipped in the temple, including the revered scholar Van Xuong and the legendary giant turtle of Hoan Kiem Lake. The delegates gained a deeper understanding of the spiritual practices and beliefs that are an integral part of Vietnamese culture.

The delegation departed Hanoi with a renewed appreciation for Vietnam's rich heritage.

## **Conclusion**

The success of the exchange is only possible due to the tireless work of many officials in both Australia and Vietnam.

The delegation would like to thank the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union Central Committee for hosting and organising the exchange. Their eagerness to exchange ideas and to cultivate stronger ties left an indelible impression on the delegation.

All delegates would also like to thank the officials in the Department of Finance who provide secretariat support to the Australian Political Exchange Council. Their assistance in advance of our departure and throughout was flawless.