



Inter-Parliamentary Union

For democracy. For everyone.

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Public address by the Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union

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Parliament House, Wellington, New Zealand

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Distinguished guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I welcome the opportunity to address you here today. I am doubly honoured to do so within precincts that are historically charged and have contributed immensely to the fashioning of New Zealand society today.

As I look around these hallowed halls of your imposing Parliament, it is only befitting for me to talk about the institution of parliament. I will therefore use this opportunity to share some thoughts with you today about parliament in its broadest sense – beyond these walls - and democracy.

Let me start off by saying a few words about the global organization of parliaments – the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). The IPU is the world's longest standing political multilateral organization, predating even the UN. It was founded in 1889 by a group of parliamentarians – visionaries really- who held dear the conviction that dialogue was the only viable solution to ending conflict. Our Members come from 166 countries, with often very different political systems. Yet they share a belief that ventilating different perspectives is healthy, indeed vital, to move forward.

Over the years, the IPU has dedicated itself to putting parliaments on the world map. It has striven to promote parliament's role at both national and international levels. While most of us are quite familiar with the role of parliaments at the national level, this role is less obvious internationally. Yet, parliaments today are increasingly devoting efforts to improving on global governance. They are helping shape the international agenda, contributing to international processes, such as the current one to design a new global sustainable development agenda. Parliaments' involvement internationally is premised on the need for international decision making to be informed by the views and opinions of those who have been elected to represent the people. Also, it is important for parliaments to help plug what had become known as the democracy gap in international decision-making. Decisions are increasingly being taken internationally, beyond national borders, with very little control by national institutions of governance and yet those decisions need to be domesticated and parliaments invariably are required to step up to the plate through their traditional law-making, policy-making, oversight and resource allocation functions to ensure that these decisions are effectively implemented and that governments live up to their billing.

The question then arises as to whether today's parliaments are equal to the task. Are they fit for purpose? Are they properly equipped to take on their roles as the worlds evolves in a very fast way?

Let me answer that question by stating that there is today a broad consensus that parliaments are necessary. Parliaments exist in one form or another in virtually every country in the world. It is a telling sign that when a country experiences a military coup d'état, parliament is usually one of the first State institutions to be suspended, because its deliberative and oversight role makes it an obstacle to the untrammelled exercise of power.

Parliament is the institution that represents the people's voice in government. Indeed, it is the cornerstone of democracy. The functions that parliaments fulfill, notably law-making, oversight and representation, are fundamental to the legitimacy of government. If parliaments did not exist, they would need to be invented.

Many recent events have reaffirmed the universal attachment to democracy as a form of government, and to parliament as the central institution of democracy. The call for democratic institutions that would represent the interests of all citizens was a main feature of the uprisings that swept North Africa in 2011. Tunisia has drafted a constitution through an inclusive process that has set the tone for a new and vibrant form of politics in the country. In Myanmar, the transition from half a century of military rule is underway, with new spaces being created for freedom of expression and political action.

Yet democratic transitions are fragile. Many examples show that when authoritarian regimes collapse, they are not automatically replaced by democratic institutions. Building a culture of democracy and political tolerance requires a long-term commitment. Transition is fraught with countless challenges, and extremist groups will often use violence to try to prevent democracy from taking root.

Only a few days ago the world witnessed a brutal and senseless attack on the Afghan parliament, which was nothing short of an assault on democracy itself. Regrettably, these are no longer one-off, isolated attacks. We need only to think back to last year, when a gunman went on the rampage at the Canadian Parliament. This type of incident demonstrates that while parliament is indeed a strong and vibrant institution, it is also very much a vulnerable one.

How many MPs across the world face fear and persecution, not to mention violations of their rights, in every part of the world? And why? For simply carrying out their constitutionally mandated functions. Indeed, being an MP is a very dangerous profession in today's world and Africa and Asia hold the record for the violation of MPs' rights. In sum, democracy is under assault everywhere. We need to be vigilant and can ill afford to be complacent, even in the most long-standing democracies.

The paradox is that while parliaments remain a symbol of hope and the belief that people can have a voice in decision-making, they continue to face many challenges, in long-established democracies as in fledgling ones.

Today, our mission is to work for stronger parliaments and better democracies. Allow me then to take this opportunity to highlight some of the most common challenges faced by parliaments today, and to sketch out some responses.

I am going to talk about four interrelated challenges:

- The composition of parliament
- Public perceptions of parliament
- The relations of power between the executive and legislative branches of government
- And institutional capacity, including the capacity for reform.

As I speak, let me add that every parliament is unique. Not all the challenges I describe will necessarily be experienced by every parliament, or with the same intensity or at the same time. Some may face other challenges, specific to their own particular context. Also, as imperfect as democracy is, for now it is the best political system the world has. Yet it is important not to impose any single model of democracy on other countries. The home-grown variety is surely the sweetest.

Composition of parliament

What does parliament look like today? A visitor from another planet might remark the preponderance of middle-aged men. Globally almost four-fifths of parliamentarians are men. Even if the average percentage of women in parliament has crept up over the last decade from 16% in 2005 to just over 22% today, with gender parity remaining a far-off mirage. With women accounting for 31% of parliamentary seats in New Zealand, this country ranks 29th in the world in terms of women's parliamentary representation. Meanwhile, the average age of the world's parliamentarians is 53 years old (though women tend on average to be a little younger).

It would be fair to say that an average parliament does not look like an average cross-section of the population. Should it? Few people would challenge the fact that the composition of parliament should mirror exactly the composition of society. But it is widely understood that a parliament in which one sector of society - older men - holds a disproportionate amount of power will struggle to be effective in representing the views of society at large.

The equal presence of women is a powerful symbol. So is the equitable representation of young people, indigenous peoples, minorities and other marginalized groups. Such representation brings a greater diversity of views to the decision-making process, and helps to ensure that legislative outcomes are more broadly aligned with the interests of all sectors of society. The presence of representatives from different social groups is also important. There is a growing trend in many countries towards the **“professionalization” of politics**, with people spending their entire professional careers, in different capacities, within the political domain, including as members of parliament. This reinforces public perceptions of a political elite cut off from the concerns of most citizens.

Public perceptions of parliament

It is no secret that citizens do not generally hold politicians in high esteem. This assertion is buttressed by ample empirical evidence gleaned through surveys in various parts of the world. Survey data everywhere suggest that public confidence in the authority of parliament is low and falling. Lots of reasons have been suggested as to why this could be.

- The competitive nature of politics means that there are almost always winners and losers, promises that cannot be kept and problems that cannot easily be solved. A toxic combination of adversarial politics, broken promises and a perceived inability to bring about positive change undermines public confidence in political processes.
- Media coverage generates and reinforces negative perceptions by focusing on the spectacular, theatrical aspects of parliament, which are more sensational than the debate and deliberation that make up the bulk of parliamentary work.

- Public understanding of the role of parliament is generally limited, and even the most highly educated people may struggle to distinguish what is the preserve of the executive and what is that of the legislative branch of government. This contributes to unrealistic expectations of what parliament and individual parliamentarians can achieve, and commensurate disenchantment when they are perceived to fall short.
- Concerns are regularly voiced about the influence of money in politics. This touches on many issues, from the financing of election campaigns and political parties to the impact of lobbying on decision-making. Citizens clearly expect their elected representatives to serve the public good and parliamentarians to be morally beyond reproach. Parliamentarians are arguably held to a higher standard in that way than other sectors of society. Instances of misconduct are magnified by the media lens, and a perception of unethical behaviour, even corruption, can spread to the entire political system. Ethics in parliamentary life is a matter of ongoing debate, and many parliaments have introduced codes of conduct for parliamentarians in an attempt to clarify the relevant rights and responsibilities.

And here I would like to talk about young people and how their disenchantment with politicians, with political rhetoric and our fallible political systems – sometimes rightfully so - leaves them with a deep sense of despair and frustration. That has translated either into political apathy or political demonstrations, with the Arab Spring being the most palpable and visible example of the over spilling of youth public sentiment. Youth disenchantment has also led them turning to radicalisation and extremism as the number of young fighters in ISIS in Iraq and Syria attests.

At the IPU, we are acutely aware of this malaise among young people and we are trying to remedy it by encouraging greater youth participation in the political process. You may know that the IPU has established its own Forum of Young Parliamentarians, which brings a fresh new perspective to our debates.

At the heart of public scepticism, perhaps, is a judgment about parliament's capacity to perform its functions effectively. People question the relevance of parliament when they do not see what it does on their behalf. Even without being constitutional experts, people have a sense of whether parliament can effectively influence the law-making process; hold government to account or debate opposing points of view. It can be difficult to demonstrate how the work of parliament is important to people's lives in concrete terms, and what life would be like if parliament did not exist.

If we step back a little, we see that the environment in which parliaments operate is changing, and in some ways very fast. And here, let me go back to what I said earlier in this address. **Much decision-making power no longer resides at the national level**, where parliaments can exert the most influence. Global financial markets increasingly shape our national policies, and international agreements can constrain a State's ability to regulate the economy independently. More decisions are taken within intergovernmental forums where parliaments typically have little influence – for example regarding the rules of international trade – and national politics are seen as powerless to influence developments.

The Internet, meanwhile, enables citizens to network and mobilize around issues even across national borders, in ways that are much faster and widely impactful than ever before. People are thus offered alternative forums in which to express their political views, largely bypassing – for the moment – political parties and parliamentarians.

Declining voter turnout is a widespread challenge. In most countries, legitimacy is conferred upon parliaments by elections, which give parliaments the authority to speak on behalf of the people. Where voter turnout is low, parliament's claim to be the most representative voice in society can be challenged.

Declining voter turnout has been a global trend in recent decades. Having remained stable at 75 to 80 per cent between the 1950s and 1980s global turnout for parliamentary elections has since fallen to between 65 and 70 per cent. Even more worrying, the participation of young people is much lower than that of the overall population. Research suggests that people who vote in the first two elections after becoming eligible to vote are more likely to vote in subsequent elections. It is therefore especially important to understand why young people are voting less than other age groups and to address the causes identified.

Power relations between the executive and legislative branches of government

The executive's role is to implement the political platform on which it gained power, responding to, and trying to shape, the political events of the day. Since it is in the interests of the executive to pursue its goals with the least obstruction possible, parliament is often perceived as a potential hurdle that needs to be managed. The executive, in other words, seeks to keep the balance of power in its own favour.

It has various means at its disposal. In countries with parliamentary systems of government – in particular though not exclusively – the executive can exercise control over the members of its political party (i.e. the majority party in parliament), with rewards for faithful support and sanctions for dissent.

In a large majority of countries, parliaments have the constitutional **right to initiate legislation**, yet most laws originate with the executive. The executive also often **controls the parliamentary agenda**, including if and when bills are scheduled for examination, a power that is often hard-wired into the political system. Just yesterday, I was having a discussion with Speakers from a number of parliaments in the Pacific and a recurring challenge they cited was the overwhelming weight of the ruling parties and the difficulties Speakers are facing in having to ensure adequate space for the opposition to express their views in parliament.

Parliament's **power to hold government to account** lies at the heart of executive-legislative relations. And yet in practice, the members of a party in government have strong incentives not to challenge that government, such that the oversight function is typically left to opposition parties. Parliaments are therefore trying to develop systems that allow for effective oversight of the executive without the appearance of launching an "inquisition".

Institutional capacity and parliamentary reform

Linked to the theme of executive domination is the notion of institutional capacity – the people, skills and resources parliaments need to carry out their work effectively. The human and financial resources available to the executive exceed those of parliament by many orders of magnitude. The executive also has significantly better **access to information** than parliament, and can largely control the quantity and timing of information made available to parliament: with regard to national budget preparation and execution, for example.

In many countries, the capacity of **the parliamentary administration** to provide effective support for the work of parliament – such as non-partisan research in the interests of informed decision-making – is limited.

Parliaments face the challenge of keeping up with changes in society, such as the **use of technology** to solicit input from citizens on issues under debate. In all parliaments, even the long established and well resourced, there is tension between the need to evolve in step with society and the desire to preserve traditions and working methods often forged through decades of hard-fought political battles.

The model for how many parliaments still function dates back to the late nineteenth century. Parliaments tend to be conservative institutions, and change tends to be slower and less coherent than many people would like to see. Capacity for reform depends very much on political circumstances, which can provide opportunities for change but also incentives to block or delay it: for example, where electoral reforms might cost sitting members their seats.

Modern parliaments are increasingly attempting to become **gender-sensitive**. Beyond the simple presence of women in parliament, such efforts have included a more deep-rooted examination of parliamentary rules and processes to ensure that legislative work takes into account the needs of both women and men.

Political parties are a vital component of democratic governance. Parties serve both to focus electoral choices and to ensure that these choices are carried through into the work of parliament and the ongoing public debate. While not highly regarded by the public at large, political parties are indispensable to the working of a democratic parliament. Operating as they do in two spheres – government and civil society – they form an essential bridge between them.

Political parties also act as gatekeepers, determining to a large extent who can become candidates for electoral office. It also falls largely to them to ensure that opportunities are available for women and other sectors of society, including young people.

What are parliaments doing in the face of these challenges? The first answer is that parliaments have always proved themselves to be resilient. They have always adapted to changes in society. This adaptability is the key to why democracy is the best system of government. Parliaments everywhere are engaged in reform processes that move forward in fits and starts, buffeted by politics and public pressure.

For the IPU, there are five core criteria of democratic parliaments. Namely: to be representative of social and political diversity; to be open and transparent; to be accessible to the people and accountable to them; and to be effective in their legislative and oversight roles. The ways in which these values are put into practice will vary from country to country. Parliaments that strive to embody these key democratic values in their own work will make a substantial contribution to democracy by engaging people more effectively, passing better laws and ensuring accountability for their implementation.

Lastly, I'd like to underline the importance of developing a culture of democracy. As an ideal, democracy requires that members of society treat each other, and be treated, as equals. Underlying democracy is acceptance and respect of the other. Democratic life entails the right to, and respect for, differing views.

Political tolerance is thus a vital element of democratic culture. It is the responsibility of all citizens, including political leaders, to practice political tolerance in their words and actions. Intolerance represents a threat to democracy since it discriminates against and may even silence certain parts of the population. Developing a culture of tolerance, however, takes time, and such ingredients as freedom of expression, civic education and pluralistic media reflecting diverse and critical points of view.

Through its work in setting standards and capacity building, IPU supports parliaments in their efforts to build strong institutions that are resilient as well as responsive to the people's needs.

Parliaments are keenly aware of the challenges they face. Many of the challenges are deep-rooted and extend beyond the scope of parliamentary action. Some will test the boundaries of what any political action can achieve.

The task is a daunting one. But I am convinced that there is a widely held belief in democracy, which corresponds to a universal aspiration for freedom, justice and equality. It falls to each of us, in our own ways, to contribute to making democracy and its institutions stronger, better and more responsive to the people they represent.

Parliaments across the world are striving to live up to these expectations and there is ample evidence to that effect. The challenge for organizations such as the IPU is to help them meet and why not even surpass those expectations?

Thank you.