

# **Opening of the Assembly for the Inter-Parliamentary Union and Related Meetings**

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**Governor General David Johnston**

City of Québec, Sunday, October 21, 2012

### CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Thank you for your warm welcome. I am delighted to have the opportunity to address this important assembly.

On behalf of all Canadians, allow me to begin by welcoming those of you who have travelled great distances to be here in the City of Québec for this gathering.

As governor general, I have the honour of representing Her Majesty The Queen in Canada. And, as you may know, one of my most important responsibilities is to ensure our Parliament functions effectively and democratically, and that our country always has a prime minister and a government in place that have the confidence of Parliament.

It is a responsibility I take very seriously. In Canada, as in your respective nations, Parliament is the highest expression of our democratic ideals.

And I mean that in every sense: Parliament is the place where democracy is enacted in the hard work of governing and of loyal opposition, and it serves as the ultimate symbol of our values of equality, fairness and justice.

That is what makes this gathering so important. In a sense, this union can be viewed as the Parliament of Parliaments, and your example as a forum for dialogue and co-operation continues to instruct and inspire.

As your co-founder Frédéric Passy once said, we must never stop dreaming of a better world.

“The world is made of achieved utopias,” he said. “Today’s utopia is tomorrow’s reality.”

But nobody said parliamentary democracy would be easy.

That is certainly true of Canada, where our present system of representative government was achieved only after great struggle.

That it eventually flourished was thanks to the spirit of respect and inclusivity that is the oxygen of great democracies.

In fact, just as the Inter-Parliamentary Union was born at a meeting between French and English parliamentarians in 1888, parliamentary democracy in Canada can be said to have been born of a partnership between a French- and an English-Canadian in the 1840s.

Their names were Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin.

It is impossible in a short speech to do justice to the years LaFontaine and Baldwin dedicated to the struggle for democracy. But as John Ralston Saul writes in his biography of the two men, LaFontaine and Baldwin “laid the foundations of Canada at its best” by formalizing a system of government dedicated to fairness and inclusivity.

To his credit, my predecessor Lord Elgin, who was governor general at the time, also saw in Canadian democracy an idea whose time had come, even though change was resisted by many who preferred the status quo.

In fact, Canada’s first parliament in Montréal was destroyed by an angry mob on April 25, 1849, even as members were sitting in session! Five days later, when Lord Elgin went to meet LaFontaine and Baldwin to reassert the supremacy of parliament, his carriage was attacked by opponents.

Today, a number of stones that were used to smash the windows of Elgin’s carriage are kept in the archives in Ottawa. They serve as eloquent reminders of the price that too often must be paid for democracy.

We see this price again being paid around the world today, as new democracies struggle into being, and established ones strive to adapt and evolve.

As your conference agenda indicates, these are exciting and challenging times for parliamentarians. But despite the rapid and profound changes we face, the fundamental principle of parliamentary democracy remains as fresh and as vital as ever.

That principle is embedded in the word “parliament” itself, which comes from the Old French parlement, or “speaking.”

Parliament is where we resolve issues through words, rather than force, and that is why your success is so critical to the smarter, more caring world of which we dream.

As you work to strengthen our democratic institutions, ask yourself the same questions posed by Joseph Howe, another central figure in the development of Canadian democracy.

To explain: in 1835, Howe won a landmark case in the struggle for a free press in Canada when he successfully defended himself against a libel charge brought by members of the powerful Halifax Family Compact.

In his newspaper, The Novascotian, Howe had accused the ruling class of profiting at the expense of the people. He was acquitted after presenting proof of his assertions in a famous, five-hour defence that took place, I should note, in the Nova Scotia Legislature.

Howe had been called a traitor for stating the truth, but fortunately for us he persuasively made the case for justice and reform, telling the court:

“The only questions I ask myself are, ‘What is right? What is just? What is for the public good?’”

With this in mind, I would now like to declare the 127th Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and Related Meetings open. Have an enlightening and productive gathering.

Thank you.

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