



129th ASSEMBLY OF THE INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION AND RELATED MEETINGS

Geneva, 7 – 9.10.2013

PANEL DISCUSSION ON POLITICAL PARTY CONTROL OVER PARLIAMENTARIANS: STRIKING THE RIGHT BALANCE

8 October 2013 (2.30 – 4.30 p.m.)
(Rooms 3 & 4, level 0, CICG)

Concept note

There is often some friction between the individual mandate that parliamentarians receive from voters and their role as representatives of political parties. In a 2009 IPU survey of public opinion, a majority of respondents in 20 out of 23 countries considered that legislators feel free only sometimes or rarely to express views that differ from the official views of their political party¹.

In most countries, parliamentarians are elected on a party platform and have an obligation to support the position of their party, which may be different from that of their constituents. Parliamentarians are continuously trying to strike a balance between the competing interests of their constituents, their party and their personal convictions. It is a complex and delicate balance to strike.

Political parties have developed elaborate systems to maintain discipline over their members, enforced by party whips. In addition to informal mechanisms, a recent IPU study found that legal regulations related to political party control over the parliamentary mandate are in force in 42 out of the 162 countries surveyed (25.9%)². In some countries, parliamentarians who lose membership of their political party (through expulsion or leaving of their own volition) automatically lose their parliamentary seat.

However, in other countries, political parties may have weak structures and lack capacity to build cohesion among their members. Cases where parliamentarians change their party allegiance for personal benefit are but one consequence of this type of situation.

Both situations can be detrimental to the working of parliament and democracy but positive changes can also be observed. These include efforts to enhance intra-party democracy so that all members can be heard before a political position is adopted. Another example is investing parliamentarians rather than political parties with greater powers, for instance over the choice of members of parliamentary committees.

The panel will provide parliamentarians with an opportunity to hold an open discussion on the issue of political party control. It will draw on an analysis of interviews conducted with parliamentarians at the IPU Assembly in Quito (March 2013) on their relationship with their political party.

During the panel, party whips will exchange views with backbencher MPs, offering different perspectives on the question. The discussion should serve to identify the challenges that parliamentarians face and identify good practices in striking a balance between competing demands from parties, constituents and others, such as the media. It will hopefully provide guidance for further IPU research on the relationship between parliamentarians, political parties and the institution of parliament.

¹ World public opinion on political tolerance: A study of 24 nations (2009), IPU. <http://www.ipu.org/dem-e/idd/report09.pdf>

² The impact of political party control over the exercise of the parliamentary mandate (2012), IPU. Unpublished.