

Rejuvenating Democracy: Giving voice to youth

Hon Annette King, Parliament of New Zealand

Mr President, distinguished colleagues, it is a great privilege to be asked to speak at the opening of the General Debate of the 134th Inter Parliamentary Union Assembly.

I am Annette King from the House of Representatives of New Zealand. I have been a Member of Parliament since 1984 and I'm currently Deputy Leader of the Opposition.

I would like to acknowledge and thank Mr Patrick Matibini, Speaker of the National Assembly of Zambia and the people of Zambia for hosting us in your beautiful country.

As our delegation departed for the Assembly a major New Zealand newspaper published an article inferring that people of our age were not those who should be talking about rejuvenating democracy- giving voice to youth. Apparently we are too old to have a progressive view or are too entrenched in the status quo.

Their criticism could be leveled at many of us sitting here today. Parliaments have not been the domain of the young. A recent IPU report states there is chronic under representation of young people in the world's parliaments.

In my own Parliament a shift to a proportional voting system in 1996 has seen significant improvement in representation based on gender (although we need to do better) and ethnic identity but little progress on age.

Those born after World War 2, known as the "baby boomers" including myself still dominate making up over 54% of all our Members of Parliament. Less than half, 44% are from Generation X and only one Member of Parliament comes from Generation Y.

To return to that newspaper article I mentioned earlier, I disagree with their conclusion.

We are the Parliamentarians who should be debating the issue of young peoples' involvement in democracy and politics. It's part of our job to break down barriers between parliamentarians and young people, to promote inclusiveness.

We have a duty to promote inter generational commitment to democracy, to pass on the torch to young people. As IPU President Chowdhury said there is a need to open a new front to fight for equality, to safeguard a stronger democratic future.

For stability and prosperity of societies, participation and engagement of young people in politics is critical.

Our role must be to motivate, encourage if possible inspire this rapidly growing population. People between the age of 15 and 25 currently make up one fifth of the world's population. This proportion is rapidly increasing particularly in developing countries.

Young people however are living in a world changing at a speed not experienced before.

It's believed by 2025 jobs which are common place today will no longer exist. That's less than 10 years away. Students graduating in 2016 will have obsolete qualifications by 2025. Changing jobs, the type of work, the hours of employment will change many times for young people over their lifetime. Gone are the days of a job for one's working life.

The digital age is transforming lives, jobs, education, expectations and opportunities while at the same time global youth unemployment is increasing.

Across the world young people are facing growing pressures, insecurity, violence in their homes and communities, armed conflict and terrorism, joblessness, poverty, educational disparity, drug and alcohol abuse.

There is emerging a toxic mix of disillusionment, alienation and distrust among young people at the inability of parliaments to address urgently their concerns.

Many cannot see why they should engage.

Young Parliamentarians attending the 3rd Global Conference earlier in the week recognized the need to leave no one behind and set their sights on enhancing transparency and oversight of public finances to fight against corruption. Issues which they identified as one of the greatest challenges to implementing fair, equitable and sustainable development.

Disengagement is a universal issue. In my country of New Zealand we have seen participation of young people voting in general elections decline. In the most recent election of 2014 over half of the people who were enrolled but did not turn out to vote were aged under 40 years of age.

So our challenge is how do we turn it around? How can we make parliaments and parliamentarians relevant to young people's daily lives? How can we encourage and in many cases awaken interest.

It's not to say many positive actions haven't already been put in place, from establishing Youth Parliaments and promoting civics education, to UN development goals with an emphasis on youth. There are strategies, national development plans, laws and increasing use of social media and online tools to reach out. But obviously we need to do more.

I wish I could stand here with all the answers. I can't. But I do understand that democracy dies without hope. Young people need hope.

I saw hope in New Zealand after a devastating earthquake in one of our major cities, Christchurch, 5 years ago.

A young man called Sam on seeing the destruction and the desperate need of thousands of people single handedly set up a group of students subsequently called the Student Army, and without directions or instruction, assisted many traumatised people, particularly of the older generation.

They worked day and night shifting layers of silt and rubble saving possessions and comforting distressed people.

When the immediate crisis was over they had discovered the value of collectivism, the strength of community engagement and the motivation to engage beyond their own world. The key was they took on the responsibility themselves. No barriers were erected by parliamentarians, officials or institutions to hinder them. There was no time to question and procrastinate.

Their success has motivated them to continue to work for and engage with their community. The Student Army has come out to help on a number of occasions since. And as for Sam he went on to stand for and win election to his local council.

I'm not suggesting it needs a tragedy to motivate or awaken young people's interest in their community and politics, it just took allowing them to take responsibility.