

135TH IPU ASSEMBLY, GENEVA (SWITZERLAND)

THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTS IN PREVENTING HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES

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Distinguished Chair, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Each of us here, we all have a responsibility to prevent violent conflict. Canada takes this role seriously, from our efforts 15 years ago to develop the responsibility to protect, to our renewed commitment to peacekeeping, to our contributions to development assistance beyond our borders, and to settling refugees within them.

We are also committed to peace through international diplomacy, whether it is here at the IPU, or through the United Nations, where we've announced that we are seeking a seat at the UN Security Council.

This week, we've debated the role of parliaments as early responders to prevent conflict precipitated by human rights abuses. One after another we stand here and profess, in general terms, our deep commitment to human rights. And yet, there is a great disconnect between our words here and our actions at home.

To give a Canadian example, the historical treatment of our First Nations has been marked by human rights abuses. It means nothing for me to stand here and speak to human rights, if I do not make a real commitment to address those rights at home. We must all make the same commitment to address abuses within our own borders, and by our own governments.

A commitment to take action against human rights abuses at home means a commitment to the idea of independence. If parliaments are to be early responders to human rights abuses, we must commit to independence in our institutions, in our citizens, and in ourselves.

First, it is important for our institutions to be independent. This goes beyond, but necessarily includes parliament, as an institution that can not only play an important role in promoting human rights, but can also mediate the differences within society through peaceful debate. Parliament must be sufficiently independent of government to speak freely on behalf of those we represent.

That independence is even more important for parliaments as oversight and accountability mechanisms to executive power, especially through committees. To be effective, parliamentarians cannot fear reprisals. For this reason, it is shocking that just last year, the IPU's committee on the human rights of parliamentarians investigated 320 cases of alleged rights violations against parliamentarians in over 40 countries. That is over 20% of countries.

These violations are unacceptable. Far from limiting rights, parliaments should be empowered to hold governments accountable.

Now, parliaments are important, but partisan as they are, we should also recognize their limitations. We must therefore build up other independent institutions that can shine light on government misconduct and human rights abuses.

Who here believes in a free press?

Who here believes that it is not only acceptable for the media to criticize governments, but that it is an important public function?

Democracies depend on an informed citizenry, and an independent press is necessary to that end.

Who here believes in the rule of law?

And I do not mean, simply, rule by courts. Unless those courts are impartial, independent, and apply the same public and prospective rules evenly. Equality before the law. If courts are independent, can disagree and overrule governments, and if governments respect and abide by those decisions, we build trust and protect against abuses.

Who here believes in free and fair elections?

If we do, then we must demand independent election officials. The conduct of an election must be arms-length from those of us who stand to benefit from its outcome.

In addition to elections, independent watchdogs in other areas can play important roles, including commissioners of privacy, of access to information about government decisions, and of budgets to oversee government spending. Those who will create and increase transparency, ensure citizens have greater access to information in the public interest about government, and ensure greater protection of information in their personal interest from government.

Knowing the limitations of parliaments, we must build independent institutions to outlast our time in office, thereby building the confidence of our citizens in our democracies.

Second, we must not only build citizens' confidence, but the independence and autonomy of citizens themselves. Parliaments bear the responsibility to hold government to account, but citizens ultimately bear the responsibility to hold us all to account.

As legislative bodies, we must protect and not infringe their right to engage in that debate. Human rights cannot be paper rights only.

More, we must empower citizens, and need look no further than the sustainable development goals of ending poverty and providing quality education. These two goals, if

met, would do more for peace than any military intervention. Especially when we can ensure that men and women are empowered equally.

Again, our democracies and our human rights, in the end, they depend on citizens being informed, active, and both willing and able to hold us to account.

Which brings me to my final thought: it is important that parliaments are formally independent, but it is equally important that we, as parliamentarians, act independently.

Standing up here, paying tribute to rights, it matters not without action. Our words may change minds, but our actions – not mine, or yours, but taken together, collectively – can change the world.

If we are truly committed to human rights, then each one of us must stand up in our parliaments – stand up with and, if necessary, against our governments, in support of rights. We cannot condone legislation that infringes upon rights, we must call for action and redress where we see violations, and we must avoid complicity.

It is our job to do what is right, regardless of the political consequences. That takes a real commitment to independence in our institutions, in our citizens, and in ourselves.

All of us here – we chose to be trustees of the public interest – and we must take that responsibility seriously.

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