



INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

World e-Parliament Conference 2008

Keynote address

Anders B. Johnsson
Secretary General

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I would like to start by thanking the organizers of the second World e-Parliament Conference for having conferred on me the honour of addressing you as the conference starts its proceedings. Let me say at the outset that I am pleased to see that both senior officials and members of parliament are attending this event. It makes all the sense in the world since they have to work together to ensure that parliaments and citizens can benefit from ICT.

The subject that I want to explore with you is e-parliament and its role in today's democracies.

E-parliament is really synonymous with parliament in the modern world. The World e-Parliament Report released earlier this year defines e-parliament as a parliament that is empowered to be more transparent, accessible and accountable through the use of ICT. An e-parliament empowers people to be more engaged in public life. It provides higher quality information and greater access to its parliamentary documents and activities.

E-Parliament uses information and communication technologies to support its primary functions of representation, law-making and oversight more effectively. Through the application of modern technology and standards and the adoption of supportive policies, a parliament fosters the development of an equitable and inclusive information society.

Asked to comment on the institution of parliament a couple of years ago, the then IPU President said that the paradox of our times is that we hail the victory of democracy while lamenting the fact that in many countries parliament - the central institution of democracy - is facing a crisis of legitimacy. What is wrong with parliament and with democracy?

For one thing, public life is dominated by men. For most of history, and in most countries, government has been a male preserve. This is still true, and it is rare for women to be participating in public office in proportion to their numbers in the population. This not only undermines the democratic principle of equality, it deprives public life of women's full contribution.

Experience shows that the situation will only really change when political parties feel obliged, either through public pressure or legal requirement, to change their procedures for candidate selection. Getting to that point requires public awareness, focus and debate.

Almost always, improvement of this nature comes through organized pressure from the public itself. That is one of the beauties of democracy; its capacity for self-correction. In fact, I would argue that the solutions will always involve greater transparency and accountability and better access to information. Let me give you a few more examples.

One important reason why democracy may be seriously in trouble has to do with corruption. Corruption is usually defined as the abuse of public office for private gain. It contradicts the principle that public office in a democracy is exercised on behalf of the people. Chronic, corruption undermines public trust in government and support for the democratic process itself.

Paying public servants a decent wage may help with one side of the problem. Improving the likelihood of exposure and enforcement of sanctions on defaulters may serve as a deterrent on the other side. Here the media and anti-corruption organizations of civil society can play a significant role.

Another phenomenon undermining democracy and parliament is the so-called “Tyranny of the majority.” Decisions taken in accordance with a majority view are necessarily more democratic than decisions taken by a minority. However, they can become oppressive when they infringe upon the basic democratic rights of an unpopular individual or group to participate in political processes, or when an ethnic, linguistic or religious minority is excluded from any share in power.

Addressing this problem requires constitutional protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, backed by effective law enforcement. The exclusion of minorities from any share in political power can be addressed through the electoral system, through quota provisions, through power-sharing arrangements, and through decentralization of government.

Executive control over parliament also stifles democracy. Where parliaments lack effective independence from the government, whether through inadequate resources and expertise, or through tight ruling party control, they are unable to carry out their oversight function effectively, with consequences for the quality of policy and legislation as well as reduced public accountability of the government.

For parliaments to be fully independent of the executive arm of government, they need control over their own staffing, procedures and organization of business, effective powers of investigation, and sufficient resources and expertise to be able to carry out their functions independently. Ensuring that the incentives and sanctions available to party leaderships do not render parliamentarians subservient to government is, however, much more difficult to legislate.

Lack of pluralism in the media constitutes another negative element. The key requirement for the communication media in a democracy is *pluralism*: multiple sources of information and diversity of views and opinions. This diversity can be threatened from two directions: from government, through control over public media or more subtle forms of pressure and censorship, and from the private sector, when there is undue concentration of ownership of different forms of media.

Government control of, or interference in, publicly funded broadcasting can best be prevented by establishing an independent broadcasting authority with a politically inclusive or non-partisan membership. Concentrations of media ownership can be addressed through legally enforceable limits on ownership, including cross-media interests.

And then, of course, there is public apathy. Loss of public interest in politics, of confidence in government and of belief in the value of the democratic process poses dangers to the survival of democracy itself. It is usually symptomatic of something seriously wrong with the system of government and of a widespread sense that people are powerless to change or influence it.

There is little evidence that people anywhere have lost interest in the major issues that affect their lives; rather, many have lost confidence in the institutions of representative democracy to do much about those issues, and in their own ability to influence those institutions. Improved electoral choice, more effective and responsive government, and better political leadership are all needed. There is no one single solution.

The common denominator in all these points is ensuring that citizens have the information which is indispensable to ensuring the genuine exercise of their participatory rights. ICT is a powerful tool to achieve this objective; to improve citizens’ access to information about, firstly,

the role of parliament, secondly, the legislative agenda and thirdly, the activities of their elected representatives.

Today only a small number of parliaments are harnessing these tools effectively. Doing that job better will require political choices which can seem minor, but which ultimately have a major impact on the quality of democracy and its evolution in coming years.

Just as we make choices in our daily life, so parliaments make choices about the kind of institutions that they want to be. Does parliament see itself as a closed institution that needs to protect itself from the intrusive glare of the outside world, or as a dynamic, vibrant institution that is keen to establish links with the citizens that elect it?

When IPU puts this question to parliaments - albeit formulated in a less tendentious manner - they nevertheless clearly told us that their objective was to be more transparent, more accessible and more accountable to their citizens. They gave us many examples of good practice that can inspire others.

Decisions about moving towards an e-parliament are first and foremost political. After all, deciding to make draft legislation available to the public amounts to opening up the institution to scrutiny, questions and perhaps criticism. Yet democratic dialogue, where people are able to express their opinion on the matters that concern them, is fundamental to democracy. We should not fear dialogue but embrace the possibilities that ICT offers to enhance it.

Nor should we be concerned when people ask 'how can we do this...?' or say that they do not have the necessary technical skills. The experience and expertise that is assembled in this room has already found solutions to most of the technology problems. I am confident that collectively you will be able to find solutions to the new and emerging challenges.

The way forward is through collaboration and we are all in this together.

From the very beginning, UNDESA and the IPU embarked on a systemic approach to e-parliament. It resulted in the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament that was established at the World Summit on the Information Society in Tunis in 2005. That was only three years ago. Few would have imagined the incredible progress we and you have made since then.

In little more than two years we have produced the 2008 World e-Parliament Report, held the first World e-Parliament Conference in Geneva, undertaken a whole host of activities and established a network of individuals and institutions which today are represented at this second World e-Parliament Conference in more than a hundred delegations.

During this short period we have found that the fast pace of innovation and the characteristics of ICT allow us not only to identify and exchange solutions and experiences, but also to develop some of them jointly. The experience of the regional UNDESA programme in Africa demonstrates that collaboration is also possible on advanced solutions by using document standards and open source information systems.

The establishment of learning and knowledge networks, as well as working groups on specific topics, is necessary to reinforce this process of inter-parliamentary collaboration and cooperation.

I would like to congratulate Dr. Sorour for having hosted the Cairo Conference that established the Charter of the Africa Parliamentary Knowledge Network, and all African parliaments that

have endorsed it. I would like to take this opportunity to invite his colleagues in Latin America, in the Caribbean, and in other regions of the world, to emulate his example and to create similar vehicles of cooperation among officials and members dealing with the parliamentary machinery.

Working in a global partnership is not easy, but it is essential to achieve greater results. Under such a framework, asymmetric coalitions of parliaments, universities, international organizations can respond to the call for assistance from assemblies in poorer nations by pooling resources, be they human and financial resources or substantive specific expertise and knowledge.

After this conference is over, the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament and the members of its high-level Board will have the task to translate its outcome into concrete activities.

I therefore invite you to see the plenaries and parallel sessions at this Conference as part of a broader process and to express your ideas and recommendations openly. I am particularly glad that one of the sessions will seek to improve on the guidelines on parliamentary websites which the IPU published in 2000. While many of the guidelines retain their validity, it is an opportune moment to incorporate the evolution in the technology environment and the many lessons that have been learnt by parliaments on the web.

I would like to end by inviting the donors and international agencies to join this process with IPU and UNDESA and to support it for the benefit of all. I call on the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament to pursue its efforts to build a forum for collaboration among the parliamentary community, and I call on you, parliamentarians and parliamentary staff, to be leaders in the move towards more transparent, accessible, accountable and effective parliaments.

Thank you.