

Do Parliaments Still Matter?

Anders B. Johnsson, Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union

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The sight of protestors clashing with police amidst flames just outside the Greek parliament in February whilst MPs debated austerity measures inside prompted a BBC correspondent to muse that although these scenes were emanating from a country so profoundly associated with democracy, these were not normal times.

Implicit was the notion somehow that at times of crisis, parliaments and parliamentary democracy were somehow irrelevant or redundant.

I couldn't disagree more.

It is during deep social, political and economic crises that a strong parliament, the symbol of democracy the world over, is most vital. The political history and democratic values that the institution represents is a siren call that still resonates powerfully amongst the electorate globally.

Yes it is true that parliaments are under greater public pressure and scrutiny than ever before, partly due to various incidences of misconduct and partly due to their failing in their key role of holding government to account.

It is also clear that the world over, parliaments are facing a major crisis of trust at a time when public expectations of democracy are growing. Support for parliaments in the established democracies of North America and Europe is ebbing with trust in the US Congress at its lowest point ever at 9% according to one poll late last year. Similarly disturbing are the low levels of trust in the institution in the other regions of the world.

But as the new Global Parliamentary Report (GPR), jointly produced by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UNDP shows, parliaments remain inextricably linked to the idea of a State's legitimacy.

Parliaments are, after all, a powerful and unique link between citizens and their government whose functions and services cannot be provided by anyone or anything else. It helps to explain why 190 out of 193 countries have some form of parliamentary assembly.

Little wonder then that in the aftermath of the Arab Spring which underscored the importance of parliament in people's quest for greater political voice and democracy, the establishment of a functioning, effective parliamentary democracy led the desire for a new beginning. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) is working with these countries to help them on that path.

These countries are not unique. Every process of political transformation following a major upheaval has a common denominator - to look for a way to solve national problems through a fair system of political representation. Elections for a parliament or some form of assembly are high on the political agenda in the immediate aftermath of any crisis.

But we all forget what this implies. There is a two-way process in the relationship between the electorate and those elected to parliament, which if ignored or neglected, always has a political and human cost.

Parliaments have to be much more closely attuned to the needs of a public wanting more democratic engagement with the institution it elects in between visits to the ballot box. It is not just about an electorate wanting to know more about what its parliament is doing on a daily basis and to have a say in that, but also what it demands from an MP.

Recognising this, many, if not most, parliaments around the world have already undertaken measures to better inform the public on what they do and what they achieve. These initiatives vary from improving websites, using social media, establishing open days, or in the case of Afghanistan and Namibia, the use of radio programmes linking MPs in Kabul to their constituents in remote rural areas or taking parliament on a bus into the bush to solicit input on legislation.

The world over, MPs are also telling the IPU they are spending an increasing amount of time on constituency work because voters think an MP's primary role is to respond to their very individual or local needs. In some African countries, this includes paying a constituent's funeral costs. As a result, some constituent development funds have seen major reforms to achieve more for the community as a whole.

But all these measures and others still fall short of allowing genuine public influence over parliamentary outcomes. What initiatives there are, are the exception.

Parliaments are also failing to use their power to legislate and hold government to account more effectively. The financial crisis is a case in point.

If parliaments are to turn their image around, they must ensure the public's voice on legislation is heard and that they systematically live up to high standards of probity and accountability.

For their part, the public has to ensure that parliamentary reforms such as limiting a representative's mandate don't shackle or impede parliaments' critical role of legislative and government oversight. Otherwise, parliaments are doomed to disappoint and democracy will suffer.

Anders B. Johnsson, Secretary General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), Geneva, Switzerland

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The *Global Parliamentary Report: The changing nature of parliamentary representation* is published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the United Nations Development Programme. For more information, go to:

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