

INAUGURAL CEREMONY

ADDRESS BY SENATOR DONALD H. OLIVER,
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Honourable parliamentarians,
Distinguished representatives of governments and
international organizations,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the annual session of the Parliamentary
Conference on the WTO.

It is my great pleasure to greet you on behalf of the world
organization of parliaments, the Inter-Parliamentary Union.
Bringing together legislators from over 160 countries, the IPU
takes pride in embracing the full spectrum of geographical,
political, cultural and ethnic diversity that makes up the
richness of today's global parliamentary community.

For nearly a century now, our organization has been
headquartered in Geneva. This city plays host to a multitude
of other international organizations, starting with the United
Nations. They serve noble purposes and do useful work.
However, not all of them attract as much attention from the
media, parliamentarians and civil society as the World Trade
Organization. Why is that?

As we see it, the WTO is unlike most other international organizations. Vested with binding rule-making and adjudication powers, it is equipped with an effective dispute settlement mechanism that serves to resolve trade quarrels and enforce agreements. The WTO has a unique combination of powers and functions. Its rules extend beyond the traditional domain of tariffs and trade in goods and reach deep into domestic affairs. WTO rulings have direct economic consequences for entire nations, as well as the private sector.

It is for that reason that, ten years ago, IPU Members decided that the WTO required an effective mechanism of parliamentary oversight.

Trade between nations, they argued, is one of the cornerstones of the edifice of international peace and cooperation. In an increasingly interdependent world, they said, questions of international trade have become so important that they can no longer be left to governments and international bureaucracies alone.

At the time, the IPU and the European Parliament ventured to bring their synergies together in order to build a meaningful parliamentary dimension of the WTO. Our common undertaking is now known as the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO.

For the second year in a row, the annual session of the Conference is taking place at the Centre William Rappard, dubbed in Geneva as the "House of Trade". A bridge has thus been erected between the House of Parliaments – the name commonly used for IPU Headquarters - and the House of Trade.



The political symbolism of this link is hard to overlook. Following years of doubts and hesitation, the WTO has finally opened itself up to elected representatives of the people. External transparency of the WTO is a reality. This is a step in the right direction.

I avail myself of this opportunity to express our appreciation to the WTO General Council for its understanding of the political importance of this opening. I also address words of gratitude to the WTO Director-General, Pascal Lamy, who has always been supportive of this initiative. In his own words, “the entire WTO stands to benefit from the unique perspective that the world’s parliamentarians are able to bring”. Our sincere thanks also go to the colleagues at the WTO Secretariat for their assistance and exemplary cooperation.

The WTO has offered to host our session in spite of its own heavily packed schedule of meetings held at its Headquarters. On average they organize over 8,000 meetings per year. Just imagine that! What better proof is there of the incredible complexity of the Doha Round?

Unfortunately, the news reaching us from the WTO negotiation rooms is not very heartening. The talks have been stalled for a few years now. Nonetheless, the WTO Director-General has recently suggested that work in the Doha Development Agenda had seen “signs of momentum” and that the main players were demonstrating a “collective desire to re-engage”. We certainly hope so.

Tomorrow, we will have an opportunity to ask Mr. Lamy about it first-hand. The Director-General will join us for a hearing, whose format will be not unlike those we regularly hold with Ministers in our own parliaments.

Let’s make good use of this chance to ask questions and make comments. I suppose we should be interested first of all in the state of play in the Doha Round and in what they call “early deliverables” of the negotiations. At the same time, it would be interesting to hear Mr. Lamy’s views, for example, on the challenges to multilateralism and on lessons to be learned from the enduring economic and financial crisis.

We should not hesitate to also pose these questions to Ambassadors representing our respective countries at the WTO. I see quite a few of them in this room. Let me thank them for being attentive to our Conference.

It is Ambassadors who chair various WTO councils, committees and working parties. They are therefore responsible for moving the process forward or – let’s be frank – for making consensus a little harder to achieve. As a member-driven organization, the WTO is largely dependent on the work of the diplomatic corps in Geneva.

One of the Ambassadors, His Excellency Mr. Shahid Bashir of Pakistan, is seated at this table together with me. I take this opportunity to thank him for having accepted our invitation to address the Conference in his capacity as the current Chairman of the WTO Dispute Settlement Body. Two other Ambassadors, from Mexico and Sweden, will take part in our panel on trade in services tomorrow.

As organizers of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO, we are convinced of the usefulness of this platform for direct dialogue between parliamentarians and government negotiators involved in WTO talks.

It is not by chance that no fewer than five parliamentarians, former members of the Steering Committee of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO, subsequently received ministerial portfolios in their countries and were given the responsibility for WTO negotiations by the executive. On the other side of the same coin, the Rapporteur of our Conference, Mr. Benoît Ouattara of Burkina Faso, is himself a former minister of trade.

All of this gives me good reason to hope that our discussions will be interesting and productive. To enhance the impact of our debate by focusing on issues of particular importance for parliamentarians, the Conference

Steering Committee has decided to give the session an overarching theme: "Back to basics: Connecting politics and trade".

Indeed, the situation with the Doha Round requires a political response. As parliamentarians, we are convinced that a balanced, ambitious, comprehensive and development-oriented outcome of the Round is still possible.

The main substantive theme of our session is equally political and focuses on trade as a tool of economic growth, job creation and poverty alleviation. For us, trade policies must reflect broader development objectives and be used as a driver of prosperity. While discussing this subject, let's not forget to look at our own role as legislators in the formulation of integrated and coherent national trade, industrial, labour market and social policies.

Debate on the main theme will start today and continue tomorrow. We will listen to the views of parliamentary delegates from both developed and developing countries. We will also benefit from the expertise of internationally renowned experts. Some of them are part of the recently established high-level WTO Panel on Defining the Future of Trade. Their views are of great interest.

At the concluding sitting, we are expected to adopt an outcome document. Its initial draft was prepared by the Rapporteur, Mr. Ouattara, and placed on the IPU website. Parliaments had until 5 November to submit their amendments – and many of them did so. Tonight, the Steering Committee will conclude its consideration of all the amendments thus received and elaborate a revised draft, which will be made available to all delegates tomorrow morning. It is my hope that we will be able to adopt it by consensus.

The co-organizers have invested much time and energy in the preparation of the session. I wish to express my sincere thanks to the leadership and staff of the European Parliament - our partner in this exercise - for everything they have done to facilitate the process. We hope that the session will be crowned with success and look forward to a rich and constructive debate, in the true parliamentary tradition.

With these words, let me officially declare the annual 2012 Session of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO open.

I now pass the floor to the Vice-President of the European Parliament, Mr. Georgios Papastamkos.

