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Statement by IPU Secretary General, Anders B. Johnsson, at the *Governing Democratically in a Tech-Empowered World Conference* Silicon Valley, California USA (23 April 2013)

Harness change or be overwhelmed

Harness change or be overwhelmed? For politicians and for parliaments (if we could ask the institution) the answer seems evident. But let's just pause for a second.

A popular recent video on YouTube entitled Did You Know version 3.0 makes the following affirmations. We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist. They will be using technologies that haven't yet been invented in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet.

We are living in exponential times. 4 Exabytes of unique information will be generated this year, which is more than was created in the last 5000 years. At its current rate, the amount of new technical information doubles every two years.

When I was born there were no computers. A hundred years later people will be able to buy a thousand-dollar-computer that will exceed the computational capabilities of the entire human race.

Now, juxtapose this with Parliament. It is a time-honored institution. It was created a long, long, long, long, time ago. Even more recent parliaments trace their roots to an institution that emerged during the middle ages. Today parliaments are still based on rules of procedure from the nineteenth century.

Life in parliament is about taking competing interests into account and reaching decisions in the public interest through a process of dialogue and deliberation. Compromise is an essential part of decision-making. So is careful examination, to make sure that the best possible decisions are taken.

It is not possible for everyone to get everything they want, because people want different things. The art of politics is building support for one's ideas and seizing opportunities for progress where they can be found. It is often messy and frequently unsatisfactory. No decision can ever be ideal for everybody.

So where does this leave us? Fast-moving technology and a slow-moving parliament. If this was a race, the outcome would surely be clear. But, of course, it isn't. Can technology

help strengthen democracy? Yes, it can. Can it speed up the way politics is done? Of course it can. Can it make the process more transparent and inclusive? I think we are all convinced that it should, and is already doing so. But there will be limits.

In a democracy, being responsible is not always the same as being responsive to public demands. Democracy is built on a system of checks and balances, designed to ensure the protection of the rights of all members of society, including those who cannot make their voices heard.

Having said this, parliaments are modernizing. Looking out over the plenary hall at IPU's Assembly last month, I was struck by the changing face of MPs. They are increasingly younger, energetic and tech-savvy. They helped push for greater use of social media for citizen engagement in politics and adopted social media guidelines for parliaments.

There were also more young women among them. Today, for the first time in history, one in every five MPs is a woman. This represents significant progress even though we are still many decades away from achieving gender equality and parity in political life. We know that living conditions and public policies improve when women achieve greater levels of social and political participation, so we have every interest in speeding up the process.

The World e-Parliament Report shows that the percentage of parliaments using or planning to use social media to reach out to citizens increased from 27% in 2009 to 66 % in 2012. Parliaments are resorting to technology to help improve internal procedures and communicate with the public. They provide information on work in parliament in real time and open opportunities for the public to contribute to work in parliament.

The benefits of mobile technologies for parliaments are becoming increasingly evident. They are more flexible, faster to implement and can be used to communicate with citizens in new ways. They enable parliaments to meet members' demands for information and documents regardless of where they are located, and MPs are able to work in a paperless and mobile environment.

Making it possible to communicate better with citizens is important. It weakens the exclusive influence of powerful lobbies and allows parliaments to be more accessible and accountable to the people. However, communication is a two way process; it involves talking and listening. There is a real risk of public disillusionment unless parliaments can demonstrate that they are truly listening and taking people's views into account in the law-making process. That is not yet the case.

This point came through very strongly in the Global Parliamentary Report on relations between parliaments and citizens, which IPU published with UNDP last year. The report showed that almost every parliament is trying harder to gather views and suggestions from the public. However, political, party and institutional imperatives continue to shape how decisions are taken in parliament.

So, let me end with a couple of suggestions of things we can do to bring further improvements to the quality of democracy with more strategic use of technology.

Support the development of democratic parliaments: Technology can be a key enabler. It can help ensure that parliament is more open and transparent, more accessible, more accountable and better able to do its job of legislating and holding government to account. Yet, far too many parliaments still lack the IT infrastructure, skills and planning capacities to be able make the best possible use of technology in the service of democracy. This needs to change.

Develop systems to help manage competing interests when taking political decisions: There are lots of very powerful tools for drawing attention to problems, or expressing a point of view through e-petitions. Can we similarly use technology to help members of parliament in their constituency relations? And can we find a way to use technology to assist the complex process of deliberation and decision-making, to provide a workable interface for dialogue between politicians and the public, and to find solutions in the public interest?

Innovative ways of engaging citizens: There are many fine examples from the USA, but there is also a lot of innovation in other countries, where technology patterns and usage may be quite different. When smartphones are rare, people are finding ways to use text messaging or other forms of communication to come together around common goals, and to engage in political action. Are we doing enough to support and nurture these initiatives? We should because an informed and active citizenry is the foundation on which democracy is based.

To conclude, adapting to change and putting innovation to good use is essential. Anticipating the effect of change on society is equally important. The pace of change is exponential. Yet, in parliament we very largely focus on the here and now. One foresighted parliament – Finland - recognized the inherent danger of this many years ago and created a special committee to reflect on our future.

Looking at its output over the years is illustrative: Challenges of the Global Information Society, Crowdsourcing for Democracy and Democracy in the Turmoil of the Future are just some of the thought provoking studies they have produced. It seems to me that more parliaments and many of us should invest in preparing for the future so that we can keep up with developments and resist being overwhelmed by change.

Thank you.