INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

World e-Parliament Conference 2009

Opening remarks

Anders B. Johnsson
Secretary General

United States Congress
Washington D.C., 3 November 2009

Madam Speaker,

Under-Secretary Sha,

Distinguished delegates,

Every week of the year, people in at least one country are going to the polls to elect a parliament. At any given time, in three or four countries - if not more - an election campaign is drawing to a close. Today, Namibia is one of those countries. That explains why the President of the IPU, Dr. Theo Ben Gurirab, who is also the Speaker of the Namibian Parliament and a senior political leader in his country, cannot be with us here today. He asks for your understanding Madam Speaker since he has to do his part to be re-elected. He has therefore asked me to deliver these opening remarks on behalf of the IPU.

Let me start by saying how pleased I am to be here at the United States Congress. I want to thank you Madam Speaker and through you the US Congress for hosting this important meeting.

My thanks also go to the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs. Together we initiated the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament which is the powerhouse behind today's event.

Since its foundation in 2006, the Global Centre has made huge progress in bringing together a global parliamentary ICT community around the simple idea that sharing knowledge, good practices and information about developing trends in the field of modern information and communication technology helps make parliaments stronger.

The strategic goals we are pursuing through this Centre offer a comprehensive and coherent framework for helping parliaments become more transparent, accessible, accountable and effective through the use of ICT.

Madam Speaker, this is a matter of urgency. A worldwide opinion poll commissioned by the IPU in September 2009 confirmed that there is widespread support for democracy. Of the more than 20,000 respondents, 90% said that it was important or very important to live in a country that is governed democratically. However, the poll showed that citizens around the world have deep misgivings about the way political life functions in their own countries.

While almost everybody considers that it is important that people should be able to express their political views, even when those views are unpopular, only one person out of four thinks that they are completely free to express their views without fear of harassment or punishment.

On average more than two out of three people said that only sometimes or rarely do legislators feel free to deviate from the official views of their party. Moreover, a majority of people believe that opposition parties only sometimes or rarely get a fair chance to express their views and influence government policies.

Parliaments as an institution and parliamentarians as individuals must be concerned about the gulf that separates public aspirations for democratic governance and vigorous public debate, and the widely-held perception of political life as a closed space where there is little room for dissent and real consideration of alternative policy options.

ICTs may hold some of the solutions, especially where young people are concerned. Information technology is pervasive in many young people's lives in a way that formal politics is not.

Political apathy and a lack of interest in joining traditional youth organizations too often seem to characterize the younger generation in many countries. For many young people, the world of politics seems far removed from their daily realities.

However, the lack of interest by young people pertains primarily to traditional forms of social organization. The powerful new forms of engagement that emerged during the recent US presidential elections are instructive. In fact, today's experiences show that the young population does engage and it does so by using ICT tools.

Access to information is of course an important cornerstone that underpins citizens' involvement in political processes. Without access to information on all social problems, on policies being formulated and considered, and on the political actors involved in decision-making, citizens are not able to genuinely and substantially participate in decision-making processes.

The ability for citizens to hold parliaments to account also relies on the availability of accurate and up-to-date information about what parliament is doing. Constituents are increasingly interested in learning how their representatives have voted on key issues before parliament, and interrogating them about their actions. For members to have their voting record published, and to be able to give a reasoned defence of their record, is of the essence of political accountability. The extension of the Internet makes this requirement much easier to meet, and it is now a standard feature in many parliaments.

A recent report by the Demos think tank concluded that ICTs must ultimately, and I quote, "become the tool for changing the identity of political institutions themselves. ICT initiatives that are better designed and used strategically rather than simply being 'bolted on' as prosthetics should enable the kind of organizational renewal necessary to endow political systems with relevance and meaning. This applies not just to young people, but for the whole of a rapidly changing society."

May I encourage you to take up these challenges during this conference and to pursue them when you return to your parliament. Let me also assure you that the IPU will continue to support your efforts and do everything we can to facilitate your task in making your parliaments stronger and better able to legislate and hold government to account in the name of the people whom you serve.

Thank you.