



# INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION

5, CHEMIN DU POMMIER  
CASE POSTALE 330  
1218 LE GRAND-SACONNEX / GENÈVE (SUISSE)

TELEPHONE (41.22) 919 41 50 - FAX (41.22) 919 41 60 - E-MAIL [postbox@mail.ipu.org](mailto:postbox@mail.ipu.org)  
TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS : INTERPARLEMENT GENEVE

## **ADDRESS BY THE IPU PRESIDENT, MR. PIER FERDINANDO CASINI, ON THE OCCASION OF THE INTERNATIONAL DAY OF DEMOCRACY**

*Athens, 15 September 2008*

Ladies and gentlemen,  
Dear friends,

The first International Day of Democracy, instituted a year ago by the United Nations, could not be celebrated in a more fitting manner. Greece is not only the cradle of philosophy, science, historiography and fine arts; it is also the cradle of democracy. The Inter-Parliamentary Union - over which I have the honour of presiding - was actively involved in having this Day proclaimed. Indeed, it has been a topic of debate for some time now at the United Nations Headquarters.

Allow me first of all to pay tribute, as the former Speaker of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, to the Speaker of the Hellenic Parliament, Dimitris Sioufas, a talented politician of great integrity and a personal friend. While he served as a minister, Speaker Soufias collaborated with my country in the gas pipeline project to link Asia and Europe, a project that would unite Greece and Italy by 2012. More generally, he was one of the architects of the European energy policy. The Hellenic Parliament is fortunate to have as its Speaker a person who is held in such high esteem.

Another reason for my presence here today is the friendship and admiration I hold for the Deputy Speaker of this Parliament, Elsa Papadimitriou, who was recently elected Vice-President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, where she represents a very dynamic geopolitical group. Based on the work we have accomplished together at the IPU, I can say that Elsa will bring to the Hellenic Parliament the dedication and iron will that she is known for in order to defend the ideals of democracy. This attests to the fact that democracy works better when the choice of the many is for the best individuals.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today's event is neither a historical nor an abstract celebration. In many countries of the world, parliamentary democracy is either threatened or still in its early stages. Even those countries that can boast of a tradition of secular democracy must, day after day, reaffirm this commitment in order to be true to the classic definition of democracy. It is a definition that you all know well and that we have all adopted as the be-all and end-all, the very *raison d'être* of our political commitment.

I would like to cite the definition proposed by Thucydides in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. in his famous epitaph to Pericles: "Our constitution", he wrote during the Peloponnesian War, "does not copy the laws of neighbouring states; we are rather a pattern to others than imitators ourselves. Its administration favours the many instead of the few; this is why it is called a democracy".

Athenian parliamentary or "participatory" democracy was an extraordinary discovery of the Hellenic mind. But it is precious and fragile, as its subsequent drift towards tyranny has shown. Democracy - a process that evolves over time - has taken centuries to become a model and result in liberal and constitutional democracy. In short, in a parliamentary democracy, the sole custodian of sovereignty, and therefore of freedom, is the citizen.

The State and its institutions are not a bequeathed heritage but rather an individual one. The "government of law", to coin another phrase used by your ancestors, must serve the freedoms, rights and aspirations of the components of the City, and it must be formulated, interpreted and codified through the representatives of the citizens, freely elected.

Therein lies the essence of democracy, and this philosophy of law and of the state originated in its first concrete expression here in Athens.

To cite Aristotle's *Politics*, the fundamental principle of a democratic government is freedom. In other words, freedom is the purpose of any democracy.

Even the Romans, with a different sense of government than that of ancient Greece, welcomed with open arms the teachings of the Greeks whether it was to strengthen the Empire or to endow it with rules. The evolution of democracy was compounded by new additions. One important addition was the extension of the law of the city, a current issue nowadays and one which, in my view, should be addressed in terms worthy of an evolved democracy.

I remember that in the days of the Republic already, Rome had established the title of praetor of foreigners, entrusted with extending to foreigners, in addition to citizens, the guarantee and protection of *jus civile*. Subsequently, Roman citizenship was attributed to the inhabitants of Latium and other Italic peoples. But the decisive step came with the *Constitutio Antoniniana*, an edict issued by Emperor Caracalla in 212 A.D., when finally all the inhabitants of the Empire - who were not slaves - were able to call themselves Roman citizens.

History teaches us lots of things.

It would be timely, on the International Day of Democracy, to reflect on the need to extend democracy, not just to disseminate it. An to reflect on our moral duty - beyond and above political and social considerations - to integrate into our national communities second-generation immigrants, and particularly the young people who, in the opposite scenario, would be victims of discrimination vis-à-vis other youth of the same age, at school or at work. I am speaking about the need to transform in certain countries - starting with my own - the very foundations of the law on citizenship, by recognizing *jus soli*- the right of soil - and the link to the territory. I think that, far more than the right of immigrants to vote in local elections, it is the right associated with birthplace that should be at the centre of the current debate. Migratory flows have forced our democracies to face one of the trends of the day. The strength of a democracy can also be measured as a function of its capacity to take up this challenge without becoming distorted.

The progression of several countries that have historically been in favour of *jus sanguinis* - the right of blood - is heading precisely in this direction. That in turn has much to do with democracy.

In two millennia, the democratic ideal has taken root and has spread throughout the world. On several occasions its pace was hampered, its flame was extinguished, but it has always had a capacity for rebirth with renewed strength and vigour. The birth of new parliamentary democracies across the world owes much to ancient Greece. Millions of men and women have given their life for that ideal, dating back to the time of Pericles.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union - the world organization of parliaments - has a membership today of 150 national assemblies.

We can be proud of that.

Yet when we talk of Greece and democracy, much like when we talk of Italy and the Roman Empire, over-simplifications should be avoided.

I am here today to pay tribute not only to the cradle of civilization and parliamentary democracy, but to appreciate, on this special day, the vitality and solidarity of the democratic institutions of modern Greece.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Parliament is the central institution of democracy. It represents society in all its diversity and embodies the will of its citizens.

Parliaments have a responsibility to resolve conflicts of interest between different groups and communities, thereby translating agreements concluded through dialogue into political decisions and initiatives. This can be achieved through mediation - which is typical of parliamentary debate - and through seeking compromise. Under my presidency, the IPU undertook an analysis of democracy, or more specifically a study of fundamental criteria against which a parliament can consider itself to be truly democratic. We did not wish to establish rankings or place parliaments into categories. Our objective was to disseminate good practices, without meaning to be paternalistic in the least.

We concluded from that study that a democratic parliament should have five essential characteristics: it should be representative and reflect as far as possible the social and political diversity of the country; it should be open and transparent, meaning that it should conduct its work in a manner that is visible to the general public; it should be accessible, i.e. the public should be able to participate in its work; it should be accountable so as to offer voters the possibility of holding their parliamentarians responsible for their actions during their parliamentary mandate; and, above all, parliament should be effective, i.e. it should be at the service of the aspirations of the entire population.

These criteria are based on a core document adopted by the IPU some 11 years ago practically to the day: the Universal Declaration on Democracy. In paragraph 1, the Declaration stipulates that "Democracy is a universally recognised ideal as well as a goal, which is based on common values shared by peoples throughout the world community". A famous 20<sup>th</sup> century statesman said that democracy was the lesser of two evils and I wish to underscore that democracy is never "finished"; it is never acquired "for good". It is rather an art which must be constantly

perfected, embellished and improved. It cannot flourish where there is not a constant willingness to reinvigorate it, to strengthen its roots, to nourish it and to grow it. All these things can be done and we at the IPU, we do them in various ways, and also through parliamentary diplomacy and ever greater collaboration with parliaments and inter-parliamentary cooperation.

My presence here today and your invitation fall under that type of activity, that openness and collaboration, that exchange. Together, we must do more. Emerging parliaments must be strengthened; they must be furnished with appropriate tools to carry out the constitutional mandate, so crucial to freedom. By this I refer to new technologies, another challenge that national assemblies must meet, and opportunities which they must seize.

Many things have been said about the failings of the Internet, on the need for institutions to adapt to the new lingos and mechanisms that have emerged from its use (and sometimes abuse). It is a topic that I wanted to address without delay, already when I was Speaker of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, by promoting inter-parliamentary initiatives that I subsequently developed when I assumed the presidency of the IPU.

That is why, in collaboration with the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), we established, two years ago, the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament, headquartered in Rome. We have put in place a concrete form of collaboration between the United Nations and parliaments to promote parliaments' access to new technologies in fledgling democracies with a view to strengthening the parliamentary and democratic processes.

The theme of the information society is in fact closely linked to the dissemination, development and flourishing of parliamentary democracy. This is because parliaments are the central institutions of any democratic society and the custodians of the legislative branch must be the very actors behind the development of strategic technologies for the future of every society.

This is also the message that the International Day of Democracy must send. Democracy is a goal. Good distance has been made since the first miraculous glimmers of democracy that shone for the first time here in Athens. Nevertheless, the road ahead is a long one.

If we truly cherish democracy, we should be ready to promote it, to strengthen it and to defend it.

Thank you.