

143rd IPU Assembly, 26-30 November 2021, Madrid (Spain)

**Speech delivered on 26 November 2021 at the inaugural ceremony by:
Ms. Meritxell Batet, President of the Congress of Deputies of the Spanish
Cortes (Parliament)**

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Delegates,

I wish to welcome you to Madrid on behalf of the members of the Congress of Deputies of Spain.

Our country and this city had welcomed the IPU Assembly already three times in the past. We feel particularly responsible as we host this fourth event as it is the first time after 15 years that the Assembly is being organized in a European Union country and, above all, as it marks a return to an in-person Assembly. Getting together as we used to make it possible to resume and create institutional and personal links that go beyond simple debates. These links are the basis of cooperation between parliaments and societies which is the main objective of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

To host more than 1,000 representatives of more than 120 parliaments and the IPU in times of a pandemic is a responsibility but also a show of confidence in our ability to ensure the security and sanitary conditions for this event.

The scientific and pharmaceutical efforts to develop and produce a vaccine have had unprecedented success in halting the spread and health impacts of the virus in many countries. Nevertheless, we are aware that, despite the progress made and regardless of our nationality, absolute priority must be given to ensuring full access to vaccines to the whole world and all people. It is justice and solidarity that impose on us this objective but it is also a question of efficacy in the fight against the virus.

Stimulating economic and social recovery is also a priority in this crisis. And it is governments and parliaments that must concentrate their efforts to achieve this.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also posed specific challenges to the functioning of our parliaments and democratic systems. I primarily have in mind the functioning of parliaments during the pandemic, the development of information and communications technology we need to be able to work, the need for agility and flexibility in adopting appropriate measures at every step in the evolving sanitary situation. We and our countries have focused on and have been developing all these aspects while we were able to keep abreast of these developments and implement solutions almost simultaneously thanks to the contacts between our parliaments.

With the pandemic the need to work on recovery, on strengthening the political integration of our societies, and to prepare for future inclusive efforts in exercising our parliamentary functions have become even more relevant and urgent.

All crises generate mistrust of and alienation from institutions, especially by the most severely affected people and those who are least supported by public authorities. The COVID crisis has no doubt worsened the current alienation and distrust of democratic institutions.

The challenges to democracy and parliamentarianism, to the fundamental principles of pluralism, respect for fundamental rights and freedoms and the welfare state, emanate from this drift. The threats emanate from factors internal to our own societies but can also, at times, come from outside.

In the face of crises and situations of danger or need, there is always a temptation to find easy, even illusory, solutions. There is also a need to find security in cohesive groups and to protect this cohesion by rejecting doubts and discrepancies, by closing oneself off to alternative options, and by entrenching oneself gradually which leads to confrontations in our societies. All this often brings about profound dissatisfaction with politics and democratic institutions.

The consequences of such a situation are evident worldwide. They take the form of irresponsible populism, growing polarization, confrontation and exclusionary dynamics in political debates and action, which makes it more difficult to construct and reinforce agreements and important consensuses which are the foundation of our democracies.

The delegitimization of public institutions, parliamentary pluralism, political debates, negotiations and agreements, is fertile ground for political crises that not only hinder recovery but are also a threat to stability and the very foundations of democracy.

This is why together with the IPU President and IPU Secretary General we decided to have as the central theme of this Assembly a debate on the current challenges to parliaments and democracy.

Pluralism, openness, cooperation, and reaching agreement in diversity are the very essence of parliaments and this world Parliament, as the Inter-Parliamentary Union has at times been called. My sincere thanks to you all for your participation at this Assembly and for the inclusion you will subsequently work on in your respective parliaments.

When political inclusion has to be consolidated within societies, parliaments generally support political pluralism, debates and majority agreements. However, contrary to this drive for pluralism, on the national level there are also institutions that are primarily dedicated to expressing unity and consensus that underpin our democratic systems and the very idea of a political community.

It is to my great satisfaction that His Majesty the King of Spain is taking part in this event today. Parliamentary monarchy is a form of State where the Head of State is the embodiment of constitutional values, of national unity, of respect for and guarantee of principles and objectives defined by the Constitution. This demands personal commitment and daily efforts which, in Spain, King Felipe VI has been honouring for the past seven years, a difficult period marked with successive crises with their consequences.

His Majesty's presence here today, for which I, as President of Parliament, am grateful, is not merely in line with the exercise of your functions as Head of State, but also with your vocation and daily work in favour of inclusion, political integration and the expression of our constitutional consensus.

I would also like to thank President Duarte Pacheco for entrusting us with holding this Assembly in Spain, as well as for his efforts in promoting the Assembly's work and strengthening the Inter-Parliamentary Union, both in terms of enlarging its membership as in increasing its capacities and instruments of cooperation. The Cortes of Spain is honoured to contribute to this work.

This Assembly is an Assembly of hope. This Assembly is an Assembly of democracy.