

Parliamentary action for peace, justice and strong institutions

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Dear colleagues

Ladies and gentlemen

Let me ask you a question.

Have you ever questioned your own institutions? Or your own parliaments?

Parliamentary democracy is being challenged. We are often accused of being out of touch. People think we live in an ivory tower, detached from reality.

And quite honestly, dear colleagues. From time to time, I think those critiques bear some truth.

We are faced by a persistent call from our citizens to be more involved in decision making. How can we achieve that? By referenda? By direct Democracy?

Personally, I am not in favour of referenda. To reduce the complexity and nuance of policymaking to a simple yes or no question, is too easy.

I am, however, a big fan of deliberative democracy. It is a completion of parliamentary democracy.

Deliberative democracy means canalising the feelings and ideas of citizens, in such a way that it can be used towards better policymaking.

We have made that possible, in Belgium.

We have changed the law, to allow representative panels from all layers of our society.

And we've opened up the Federal Parliament to welcome the panels, and to assist them in their deliberations.

I give you another good example.

Our German speaking parliament has permanently embedded citizen's panels in its regional democracy.

They come together a few times a year, they put forth suggestions to the government on a certain topic, the government implements them or gives a good reason why they can't be implemented. Then, new panels are drafted, and the process begins all over again, on a new topic.

The trust in democracy in this region has doubled.

Doubled.

Let it sink in.

We talk about measures to strengthen democracies.

We talk about ways to prevent rioting against parliaments.

We try to find reasons why trust in democracy is backsliding.

I say, let's talk about *this* solution. Let's talk about reinventing democracy.

Not to replace it. But to make it better.

Ireland is a good example too, of how citizens can decide on tough questions, without completely polarising society.

In Ireland, citizens' panels talked about same sex marriage, and abortion. Both are legal today, and widely accepted. My congratulations.

And in Iceland, the entire constitution was rewritten by citizens. They were surrounded by experts, of course, but citizens made the tough calls. Impressive!

They took responsibility.

And there are numerous examples of local initiatives, and parliamentary initiatives, all around the world, which further prove this point.

If the people are allowed to cooperate, they will cooperate.

If the people have a voice, they will use it.

And if the people, in the end, feel their voice has been heard, their faith in democracy will rise.

Dear colleagues,

It's because of this, that I ask you to be critical about your own parliaments.

Dare to reinvent the old ways.

For the old ways date back to a different time.

It's a new world we live in.

A different world, with a big voice for citizens.

I, as president of the Belgian Senate, have proposed to completely reform my own institution, and to install permanent citizens' assemblies.

I believe they can save democracy.

I thank you.