



THE HON MILTON DICK MP

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH: INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION, LUANDA, ANGOLA

GENERAL DEBATE

Parliamentary action for peace, justice and strong institutions

Mr President, fellow delegates,

I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this fundamentally important issue on behalf of the Australian Parliament.

Asia-Pacific Group – webinar series

At the centre of the IPU's 2022-2026 Strategy which prioritises action towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals is a specific commitment to improve the representation of women, youth and minorities in Parliament.

As these issues are amongst my key priorities as Speaker of the House of Representatives and as current Chair of the IPU Asia-Pacific Group.

In fact, in my capacity as Chair of the Asia-Pacific Group, this year I initiated an Asia-Pacific Group webinar series focused on youth engagement with parliament as well as women's leadership and engagement with parliament in the Asia-Pacific region.

The purpose of the webinar series was to provide a forum for delegates across the Asia-Pacific region to come together and discuss common challenges, consider best practice initiatives and share solutions.

I'm pleased to report that over the webinar series, we had 13 speakers from across our region, and 61 participants from 18 countries in attendance.

I thank Dan Carden, President of the Board of the Forum of Young MPs and Cynthia López Castro, President of the Bureau of Women Parliamentarians who were the keynote speakers for the webinars.

Australia and SDG 16

As a Presiding Officer of the Australian Parliament, I am acutely aware that diversity, equality and inclusion in our parliamentary workplace improves representation and decision-making overall.

So today I want to highlight important areas in which Australia is taking action to provide for a responsive, inclusive and participatory Parliament while also strengthening the effectiveness and accountability of public institutions.

Women's engagement and leadership in Parliament

Last year, we saw a record number of women elected to the Australian Parliament. In fact, we achieved the highest representation of women in its history with the upper house becoming a female-majority chamber. Today, 45 per cent of all Members of Parliament are women.

Similarly, the percentage of women holding ministerial offices in the Australian Parliament has increased, where nearly half are women. And last year, our first female of Islamic faith and first female First Nations person were appointed to serve as a cabinet ministers.

These statistics and recent appointments are significant events within the Australian Parliament. It demonstrates the growing trend of increasing diversity amongst our parliamentarians.

But this growing trend must be accompanied with ongoing work to ensure the workplace changes with the increasing diversity.

As a Presiding Officer of the Australian Parliament, alongside the President of the Senate, I have an important role in overseeing the substantial changes being made to ensure the Australian parliamentary workplace, is a safer, and more supportive environment.

Regarding safety in the workplace, the current Australian Parliament recognises that it plays an important role in setting an example for the rest of the country by promoting safety and respect for all in Parliament itself.

To that end, as I have previously discussed in this Assembly, we have implemented a number of far-reaching reforms in recent years to promote and prioritise high standards conduct, respect and inclusion.

Develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions – the NACC

A crucial part of continuing to build confidence in Australia's public institutions is addressing all instances of corruption.

Australia has strong laws that criminalise bribery of foreign public officials and Commonwealth public officials and is consistently ranked as one of the least corrupt countries in the world.

In July 2023, these arrangements were strengthened when the National Anti-Corruption Commission commenced operations. The NACC is an independent agency responsible to investigate and report on serious or systemic corrupt conduct in the Australian Government public sector.

The NACC has the ability to investigate all public Commonwealth officials including ministers, parliamentary, staffers and statutory office holders. It is deliberately set up to be independent from government, demonstrating to the Australian people that they can trust their governing institutions.

Parliamentary Education Office

Finally, we recognise in Australia that trust in our public institutions must be earned and should be fostered from a young age.

We have more than 3 million young people in Australia today. Their involvement in public decision-making processes provides an opportunity for civic engagement as well as education and understanding about government and our democracy.

Such engagement increases young people's sense of social responsibility, communication skills and ability to resolve conflicts through negotiation while also strengthening the accountability of public institutions.

To this end, a key part of the work of Parliament is the Parliamentary Education Office, which runs programs at Parliament House and online for school-aged children across the country. I am pleased to note that over its 31 years, more than 2.4 million students have participated in the PEO program.

These programmes, which reach over 90,000 students a year, teach them how laws are made, the responsibilities of parliamentary representatives, and how government is kept accountable. In this way, we teach children how Australian democratic institutions function, show them how parliamentary democracy works, and inform them of the ways they can make their voices heard.

Last year I launched a new initiative to make civics education accessible to student regardless of their location. I have also visited more than 50 schools in rural and remote parts of Australia where students would otherwise not have the opportunity to travel to Parliament in Canberra.

In this way, we seek to strengthen the involvement of young people in public decision-making processes and encourage their engagement in Australia's vibrant civil society which is a key feature of our democracy, cohesive society and success as a peaceful, multicultural nation.

I thank the Assembly.