

IPU Genève – General Debate
Parliamentary diplomacy: Building bridges for peace and understanding.
24 maart 2024 – 11h00-13h00

Dear colleagues
Ladies and gentlemen

The world we know is changing.

The climate is on the loose. We are bracing for a potential return of illiberalism in America. The Chinese economy is cooling off and Russia is heating up tensions.

The world order that shaped our institutions and politics since the nineteen fifties is crumbling before our very eyes.

And yet... International cooperation and rules have made us all richer and more free than ever before in human history.

But human history is also a pendulum swinging between progress and setbacks.

There can be no doubt we live in a time of setbacks.

A golden age of free trade and free movement has gradually evolved to this era of trade wars and real wars.

This goes hand in hand with another evolution.

Trust in democratic institutions and politicians is dropping down. While liberal democrats were busy winning history, they forgot to defend their bases for the future. Democracy itself appears to slowly evaporate.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, there are only twenty-three full democracies in the world. And in the last decade, four more countries went to an autocratic leader. Forty percent of the world's population lives in an autocracy.

For years on, the global democracy index declined. Wars and conflicts undermine democracy, and more and more countries retreat from the world to focus on themselves.

Should this worry us? Yes.

Is it a disaster? No!

It is impossible to turn back the clock on globalisation. Both in matters of economy, as in matters of global security, we will remain reliant on one another.

All wars must one day end, all hatches must one day be buried.

The best way to achieve this, is through parliaments.

Parliaments are where the people's voices are heard.

We must be aware of the potential power we hold.

We must use it, not only to better the lives of our own, but to better the world. Even in this time of setbacks, it's up to us to push back the tide.

I believe that even when parliament buildings are being stormed, when participation rates in elections drop, when people say they no longer believe in the system; it is no failure of democracy.

It is a failure of politicians. A failure of not rising to the standards that the democratic system demands.

Many times, I too feel frustrated.

At home, when decisions get delayed, or when compromises fall short.

Globally, when leaders drag their feet to resolve pressing issues, threatening the security of us all.

Polling in my country shows that seventy percent no longer trusts political parties. One in three would rather see an authoritarian leader take over. And sixteen percent would be okay if the military was in charge!

Are we surprised that some people turn their backs?

I sometimes compare some politicians today, with a bad football match.

Like the World Cup match between Germany and Austria in 1982.

Both teams knew, that when the Germans won, they would both qualify for the next round, and the Algerians wouldn't. So they made a deal. Germany scored a goal, and for the next eighty minutes they just passed the ball around.

Not trying to score. Barely pretending they cared.

The match became known as the *Disgrace of Gijon*, or *le match de la honte*.

And it's just the same as politicians who are less interested in finding solutions for today's challenges, than they are in the next election.

We, presidents and members of parliaments, have a duty to make our parliaments perform.

There are ways in which we can do that.

There are ways to reinforce democracy.

We have built structures with the best of intentions, but today they are threatening us. Think of bureaucracy. When it becomes too big, it halts decision-making and stuns progress.

Or technocracy. There's nothing wrong with listening to experts, but when they are calling the shots on matters of politics, the people will feel ignored.

There are lobbyists with greater access to politicians than other citizens, there are judges overturning political decision.

The balance of power seems off. So reinforcing democracy means reinforcing representation of the people in parliament.

In the Belgian Senate we are exploring new ways to do this.

We have reports about combatting disinformation, and deterring foreign interference in elections. This strengthens the knowledge and legitimacy of both voters and MPs.

We have taken big steps into making our parliament gender sensitive. The only way to make policy that represents the people, is to have the people equally represented.

We first started with monitoring. Our research points out that men in parliament speak thrice as often, and thrice as long. Women also hold fewer important parliamentary positions, such as group leader or president of commissions. We are making MPs and

party leaders aware of the issue and ask them to take these gender dimensions into account in their work. We continue to monitor this.

Some changes we made were more obvious. We installed breastfeeding rooms.

And third. I am a firm believer of visual representation of women in the public sphere. The Belgian Senate has a lot of art, so much that it almost looks like a museum. But we saw only men in our pictures and paintings, made by men.

Today, there are also a lot of *female* artists represented in our halls.

Furthermore. We installed a deliberative democracy, better known as citizen's assemblies.

They already exist in multiple countries, on multiple levels of government. And when they're done right, they make for better policy, happier citizens, and a higher trust in the democratic process.

As I said, the world today is changing. Society is changing. Democracy must change alongside it.

To preserve democracy, we must not shy away from radical decisions. Maintaining the status quo, will only further the decline.

I have personally put down a proposal to abolish my own institution, the Belgian Senate, in its current form.

Soon we will vote on whether we want to change the constitution. After the elections in June, the new parliament will be able to make reforms, and will have to ask itself the question: does Belgium need two chambers of parliament, or will one be enough?

More importantly, it will be able to ask itself: how will we better represent the people?

It is my way to make room for new and better ways of representing the people, such as a citizen's assembly. It is my solution to make parliament a true house of democracy, rather than a home for politicians.

I am not saying this is *the* solution. Your countries may well benefit from other solutions.

What I am saying is that the only way forward is to act.

Modern democracies can no longer rely on ancient recipes. Trust will not magically fall from the sky.

Youngsters need to be educated. Educated adults will need to be involved in policymaking. Democracy needs to be more than voting once in a while, it has to become an integral part of our cultures, a fundamental way of life.

This is how the solutions for tomorrow's problems will take shape.

This is how we will end wars, end hunger, and save the planet.

This is how democracy will endure.