

Opening remarks by Ms. Mary Robinson, Chair of The Elders, former President of Ireland and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

148th IPU Assembly, 24 March 2024

Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates to the Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly,

It's an honour to address the General Debate of your 148th Assembly. I'm speaking to you as Chair of The Elders, a group of independent global leaders founded by Nelson Mandela, who work for peace, human rights and a sustainable planet. I'm also speaking as a former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, a former President of my own country, Ireland, and a former senator. I served for 20 years in the upper house of the Irish Parliament. In all these roles and throughout my career, I've appreciated the opportunity to engage with the IPU.

Parliaments play an indispensable role in building bridges for peace and understanding and consensus and how to tackle shared challenges. This role is particularly valuable today, in an era of increasing social polarization and geopolitical tensions. The IPU plays a critical role as a forum where parliamentarians can come together, exchange experiences and discuss the challenges of the hour. Something I learned from attending IPU events during my time in the Irish Senate in the 1970s and 80s. And it has been a privilege to be invited to address the Assembly on a number of occasions since.

Today, I'm happy to hear that the Assembly will also focus on multilateralism, in this year when the world is gathering at the upcoming Summit of the Future, convened by the UN Secretary General, to chart a new pathway forward for international cooperation. It's no exaggeration to say today that we are at a moment of crisis in multilateralism. Our world faces existential threats that can only be tackled collectively, from the climate and nature crisis and pandemics, to nuclear weapons and the risks of unregulated artificial intelligence. But at precisely the moment when cooperation is critical, geopolitical tensions and confrontations are rising, and too much decision-making is governed by short-term self-interested calculations.

While the COP28 summit in Dubai last December did make some progress, producing the first text that directly recognized the need to move away from fossil fuels, we remain in a climate and nature emergency. Each month since June last year has seen a new temperature high and the pathway we are on is unsustainable. Yet leaders are still not acting at the pace and scale required. We're four years on from the onset of COVID-19, a global pandemic that cost the lives of millions and exacerbated inequality between and within nations. But we are struggling to form consensus on a pandemic accord that would help prevent and better prepare the world for future pandemics.

55 years after the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, nuclear powers have not met their commitment to reduce their arsenals. Instead, the few remaining nuclear agreements mitigating catastrophic risk are expiring, and we face a renewed nuclear arms race, with some leaders openly threatening to use nuclear weapons in current conflicts. We see a proliferation of conflicts, including Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine, and Israel's disproportionate response to the horrific October attacks by Hamas. The multilateral international peace and security architecture, most notably, the UN Security Council, appears completely ill-equipped to deal with these crises. While conflicts elsewhere, from Myanmar to Sudan, are not getting the attention that they need.

It's against this backdrop that The Elders are calling for long-view leadership, to tackle existential threats and build a more resilient and equal society. Long-view leadership means showing the determination to resolve intractable problems, not just manage them, the wisdom to make decisions based on scientific evidence and reason, and the humility to listen to all of those affected. I'm convinced that with sufficient pressure from civil society and civic institutions, including parliaments, this model of long-view leadership can flourish, as can our hopes for a better future.

To those who dismiss such concepts as idealistic or naive rhetoric, I offer the abiding example of perhaps the greatest leader of my lifetime. Nelson Mandela. This year marks the 30th anniversary of the first free elections in South Africa, which swept away the apartheid regime and afforded every South African their democratic rights. I had the honour to attend Mandela's inauguration as President in May 1994. The words he spoke that day have a renewed resonance this year, when 40% of the world's population will have the chance to vote in hugely consequential elections: "We have triumphed in the effort to implant hope in the breasts of the millions of our people. We enter into a covenant that we shall build a society in which all will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity." And that was worth a reminder and a rallying cry for the crucial leadership role that parliamentarians like you can play in realizing the hopes and aspirations of citizens everywhere. So I wish you well with your conference. Thank you.