

# Remarks: Inter-Parliamentary Union Sixth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament

Michael Douglas, UN Messenger for Peace

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## I. INTRODUCTION

President Ackson, Secretary-General Chungong, Director-General Valovaya, Ambassador Rattray, Speaker Riniker...distinguished parliamentarians, peacemakers, and public servants – thank you. Thank you for your generous invitation, and warm welcome. Most of all, thank you for the extraordinary work you do on behalf of our democracies. Standing before you, I am humbled – and I am grateful.

Some of you may know me as Michael Douglas, the activist; others, as Michael Douglas, the actor. But 60-odd years ago, I was simply Michael Douglas, the student. And back then, a philosopher, architect, and inventor named Buckminster Fuller came to speak at my university. Fuller urged us to imagine our world as a shared vessel: *Spaceship Earth*, he called it. A fragile craft, careening through the cosmos, with no passengers – only crew. All of us, all of humanity, equally responsible for its care.

Fuller believed our greatest challenges – war, inequality, environmental exploitation – weren't inevitable. We had the tools to build, rather than destroy. We simply needed the willpower... and one another.

It's easy to say that in hindsight, Fuller's speech marked a turning point in my life. But I think I knew, even *then*, that his words changed something in me.

## II. MY CAREER

After graduating, I had the good fortune to travel the world as a young actor – and collaborate with international casts, and local crews. And what struck me, again and again, was how similar we all were. No matter what language they spoke, person they loved, or god they prayed to – everyone wanted the same things for themselves, and their children. Safety. Opportunity. Dignity.

And it wasn't just the people I met that compelled me to realize Fuller's vision. It was the work itself, too. In 1979, I helped make a film called *The China Syndrome*, about a near-meltdown at a nuclear power plant and the corporate cover-up that followed. In a terrifying twist of fate, the movie was released twelve days before the real-life crisis at Three Mile Island.

It was a frightening moment – and a galvanizing one. I started reading more, about the half-life of plutonium and sheer scale of ballistic missiles. Listening more to the experts who have long sounded the alarm about nuclear brinkmanship. And it brought me to the United Nations, where, in 1998, I was appointed a Messenger of Peace by Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

In this role, I've seen progress happen up close: not in sweeping cinematic gestures, but in small steps forward. I think about my time in the Kono diamond-mine district of Sierra Leone, back in 2002. At the time, the country was emerging from over a decade of brutal civil war. The wounds – physical, psychological, societal – were still raw.

Tens of thousands were killed or maimed; millions more were displaced, as warlords battled for control of institutions and resources. Over half of the rebel combatants – and a quarter of the government ones – were child soldiers: more than 100,000 young boys and girls, drugged, intimidated, torn from their families.

And yet, despite having every reason to give up on the world – the Sierra Leonean people hadn't. I spoke to survivors working with local peacebuilders to rehabilitate former child soldiers. I learned about women organizing to reclaim political power. I saw teachers returning to the classroom, nurses returning to clinics, civil servants returning to their communities.

And what made it all possible, was all of you...all of us. International institutions like the UN, lending development support. Bodies like the IPU, helping establish democratic governance and uplift its champions. Peacekeepers from around the world. Civil society leaders on the ground.

Now, Sierra Leone is far from perfect today. But it is far freer and steadier... its people more prosperous and hopeful... than I could have imagined 23 years ago. Indeed, there are so many countries and communities transformed by the work of institutions like this one; so many lives saved by our shared purpose, and collective action.

### III. WHERE WE ARE

And yet, right now, the world feels more dangerous than at any point in my lifetime.

Us nonproliferation folks have always been a quixotic bunch. But today, as the Doomsday Clock ticks closer to midnight...as *China Syndrome* appears less fiction than prophecy...our mission sometimes feels like a desperate holdout against the inevitable.

And it's not just nuclear weapons. Nations are spending more and more on machines of war, and less and less on the people they're purporting to protect. As defense budgets climb into the hundreds of billions, millions go without access to healthcare or childcare, food in their bellies or quality education – the true foundations of security.

As a result, inequality within and between countries is an ever-widening chasm. Look anywhere, and you see the consequences of our choices: generations trapped in cycles of violence, families ravaged by hunger, the Earth itself buckling under the weight of exploitation.

I know that many in this room entered public service to change that. But unfortunately, not everyone is driven by such noble motivations.

Esteemed parliamentarians, *greed is not good*. Money has corrupted politics. And now, what once felt like a uniquely American problem has taken root elsewhere: distorting representation, fueling corruption – and, in our case, propping up a two-party system that feels increasingly unfit to meet the moment.

### IV. THE CHALLENGE

The crises we face are far too large, complex, and interconnected for any one country to tackle alone. And that, of course, is why this body was created in the first place. To invite collaboration across borders, and amidst political and cultural differences; to remind us that compromise is not the enemy of sovereignty, but the foundation of peace and progress. The United Nations was born – just a few months after I was! – with that same spirit. And over the years, it has helped knit together a web of global organizations and norms.

It's easy to take our multilateral system for granted. That is, until it starts to unravel.

Just a few years after I became a Messenger for Peace, the United States withdrew from the IPU. In the time since, we've continued to distance ourselves from the very institutions we helped create: the UN and NATO; climate treaties and arms control agreements; as well as the spirit of shared responsibility Fuller spent his life advocating for.

And it's not just our foreign policy. This isolation runs deeper. We are more divided within our countries along political, racial, and economic lines. We are more lonely as individuals: flooded with digital content, but starved for meaningful connection.

And we are more detached from the institutions that connect us. For many, parliaments feel distant. Bureaucracies feel unaccountable. Multilateral organizations feel abstract. People don't just doubt their efficacy. They doubt their intentions: whether these bodies were built for ordinary folks in the first place.

And when that doubt hardens into cynicism, it opens the door to something darker. We've seen it in rising authoritarianism and political violence. In attacks on the free press and election workers. In a politics of us-versus-them that punishes cooperation, and demonizes the most vulnerable among us.

And nowhere is this crisis more vivid, more painful, than in my own country, the United States.

We were once leaders on the world stage. Architects of the United Nations. Participants in the IPU. Disciples of diplomacy and multilateralism. At home, too, we believed in the promise of government to accomplish big things, and protect the little guy.

But somewhere along the way, something broke. People watched powerful interests shape laws behind closed doors, while everyday problems went unaddressed – to say nothing of the urgent, existential challenges that face us all.

As a result, some have chosen to check out...while others have chosen to lash out. We've seen armed mobs storm our Capitol... public servants threatened, harassed, and even killed... elections called into question because the outcome was unfavorable to one side.

Our institutions are in trouble. Which means all of us are in trouble, too.

## **V. THE SOLUTION: I SEEM TO BE A VERB**

And yet, just as the IPU is threatened by this challenge...it was also purpose-built to address it. When the ties that bind us fray, when trust and cooperation erode – that's where you come in. More than just lawmakers, you're bridge-builders: leaders with power to restore, and restore faith in the institutions that serve us all – and remind the world that we can meet this moment, if we meet it *together*.

And to do that, I want to return to Buckminster Fuller one more time. Not to *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth* – but to another book of his: *I Seem To Be a Verb*. Fuller wrote: “*I live on Earth at present, and I don't know what I am. I know that I am not a category. I am not a thing – a noun. I seem to be a verb, an evolutionary process – an integral function of the universe.*”

And so, my friends, this is my call to you. Let us not be a system to defend, or a relic to preserve, or a symbol to aspire to. *Let us instead be verbs*. And in particular... this is what I ask that we do.

## **VI. LET US BE VERBS: TELL OUR STORY**

First, let us *tell*. *Let us tell our story*. And I know what you might be thinking: “tell” is an odd verb to begin with. Doesn't the story come before the telling? But that distinction is part of the problem. Too often, we draw a false line between action and communication, when the two are inextricably linked.

It's a lesson I learned from my father. He was best known for his roles on the silver screen – and by the way, if you ever thought you had a lot to live up to, try having Spartacus as your dad.

But at the height of the Cold War, my father traveled behind the Iron Curtain with the U.S. Information Agency – to screen his films, and speak about the principles behind them. Resistance to tyranny. Freedom of expression. The inherent dignity of every person. The values that enabled a poor Jewish kid...a “ragman's son”...from an immigrant family...to rise above his circumstances, and achieve the American dream.

My father was a veteran, and an activist...he fought on the battlefield and testified before Congress to defend those values. But some of his most impactful work happened in those screening rooms. Because telling stories can change hearts and minds. Telling stories can change the world.

Now, I'm not suggesting an IPU blockbuster – though I wouldn't be opposed to one. But here's what I am suggesting. The IPU has done so much good: defending the rights of persecuted MPs and promoting gender parity in legislative bodies; enabling dialogue amidst escalation and shepherding non-proliferation and disarmament legislation through parliaments.

This includes production of excellent parliamentary resources like the IPU's "Assuring our Common Future," an online handbook for parliamentarians produced in cooperation with the UN Office of Disarmament Affairs and PNND.

Now, in addition to doing that work...we also have to help people *see it*...or even better, *feel it*. We need to tell them about it, in terms they understand. Because that's how they'll know it's real. That's how they'll know it's worth protecting.

## VII. LET US BE VERBS: EXPAND OUR MOVEMENT

That requires looking to new storytellers...and new audiences to connect with. And that brings me to our second verb: *expand*. *Expand* our movement.

For people to trust institutions like this one, institutions like this one need to trust the people. To treat them not only as voters to be courted – or worse, roadblocks to an antidemocratic agenda – but as changemakers in their own right.

So, fling open your doors. Allow the world to step in, or better yet, allow yourselves to step out, into that world. Close the distance – literal and symbolic – between those who write the laws, and those whose lives are touched by them. Encourage people not just to observe the work, but to shape it. That especially goes for those at the margins: the women, people of color, religious minorities, LGBTQ+ people, and young people, who have, for too long, been absent from decision-making fora.

One of the most powerful ways we can do that is invest in local government: the school boards and city councils and zoning commissions that determine what our children learn, how our neighborhoods grow, and whether democracy is something people feel in their daily lives.

More than that, local government is where people hone their leadership, learn their values, and earn the trust of their neighbors. And so, when we expand our institutions, expand our *thinking*, to empower those leaders – especially young leaders – we're not only building stronger communities; we're building a pipeline of talented public servants for national office, too.

I think of my son, Dylan, who serves in local government in New York. He's young – about 50 years younger than his colleagues. But his youth endows him with that powerful combination of optimism and pragmatism; the ability to see what others may not, see *who* others may not. It's a spirit found in young people across the globe – activists, civil servants, community organizers, who refuse to sit down and wait their turn.

These leaders are closer to the ground, to the people they serve...less beholden to big money, or partisan politics. And so, expanding to include them is the floor. We must trust them to bring us into the future...and empower them to build a better one for us all.

## VIII. LET US BE VERBS: HOPE

There's one more verb I have for you. And it is, quite simply, to *hope*.

I'm not talking about wishful thinking, or willful ignorance. The idea that if we stop talking about nukes, they'll just go away... if we turn a blind eye to dark money, it doesn't exist.

No, hope is facing hard truths with clear eyes – and believing we can make a difference anyway. It's planting seeds of peace and prosperity, even if we're unsure we'll live to see them blossom...and trusting that the next generation will tend them, help them take root and grow.

I've been involved in nuclear nonproliferation for more than half my life. And I'll admit: when I first started, I thought someday, I'd see a world free of nuclear weapons. I don't think that anymore. But I still believe this cause is worth fighting for. And that hope isn't naïve...it's necessary.

Because without it...without hope in the face of overwhelming odds...we wouldn't see new treaties written, old arsenals destroyed, and critical bodies, like PNND formed. We wouldn't see young people dreaming, marching, campaigning for a safer world. We wouldn't see folks of every political stripe coming together to say that a nuclear war must never, ever be fought.

A few months ago, I visited Kiev. By then, Ukraine had been fighting for its survival for over two and a half years; thousands had died, millions more had displaced, the prospect of a just and lasting peace had, to me, all but disappeared. And yet, speaking with people on the ground, I was struck by something unexpected: radical optimism – especially around nuclear weapons. The hard-earned belief that the devastation of this war might be a wake-up call: prompting the world to finally confront the dangers of armament.

When your faith is in short supply...look to those dreamers. To progress, and those who make it possible. Most of all: look to one another. To leaders willing to choose compromise over ego. To parliaments that act as lighthouses, amidst a tempest of authoritarianism. To legislative bodies, struggling towards inclusive democracy – but refusing to give up. And to the parliamentarians not just in here, but out there, linking arms with the people in the fight against cruelty, against corruption, against kings.

## **IX. CONCLUSION**

Esteemed parliamentarians, we live on a tiny, miraculous, terrifyingly fragile marble of a planet. It's all we have. We are all we have. But I believe that's enough.

I believe we can issue a clarion call to action, like the one I received as a student, captivated by a man who thought us all to be *verbs, evolutionary processes, integral functions of the universe*.

I believe we can deliver a positive vision for the future, like the one I absorbed, almost through osmosis, growing up in parallel with the United Nations.

I believe we can reach out, and bring in those at the margins who have the capacity to make a difference...and just need the opportunity to try.

And I believe we can plant the seeds of a future – where might is not measured in missiles, but in the strength of institutions that deliver justice, freedom, and opportunity. In democracies free of corruption... societies free of want...and the next generation, free of fear.

So, let us be verbs. Let us tell our story, expand our movement, and hope that together, we can create that future. There isn't a moment to lose. Thank you. ###