

IPU General Assembly, May 2021. Virtual meeting. Written Statement on the General Theme of the Conference, '*Overcoming the pandemic today and building a better tomorrow: the role of parliaments*', by **Seán Ó Fearghaíl, TD, Ceann Comhairle, Dáil Éireann** (Speaker, lower House of the Irish Parliament)

I welcome the valuable opportunity to place on the formal record some remarks on the important theme of this year's General Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. We are all disappointed that this year's event must remain online due to the ongoing health pandemic, but we can equally be optimistic that better times are ahead as the dark clouds of Covid-19 begin to dissipate from our troubled horizons.

These past months have forced us all to be more imaginative in the way we do our business, including the essential business of national parliaments. In the case of Ireland, that has led to more innovative techniques to communicate and engage with our citizens. The legitimate expectations from those we are honoured to represent to increase the range of public services predated Covid-19, and the Houses of the Oireachtas, like many other parliaments, has risen to the challenge to perform more effectively. While our parliament's doors regrettably remain closed to most visitors, innovative processes in communicating the work of our committees and plenary sessions in Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann have reflected the need for parliaments to be fully accessible 24/7. I commend my parliamentary colleagues and all our staff for engaging in the logistics and challenges faced by continuing our work in such difficult circumstances beyond our control.

The theme of this year's IPU General Assembly is two-fold. The current task of overcoming the pandemic and the future challenges of making ours a better, more humane, more just world. The ongoing work to overcome the scourge of Covid-19 continues apace, and I congratulate all national parliaments for their contribution in tackling the greatest health crisis in a century. We must also pause to consider the vital work undertaken by international agencies over the past year. The United Nations, the European Union and many others have been to the fore. In anything, the past twelve months have shown that we work better when we work together. I may be excused if I mention the important role played by a number of Irish citizens in international agencies and bodies in dealing with Covid-19, which is a source of great pride to us here in Ireland. I also commend the Interparliamentary Union for its engagement with members throughout the pandemic to ensure parliamentarians can continue to share best practices and to continue to engage with each other. It must be noted that we are

all considerably more adapt in communicating via Skype, Zoom and Teams than we were a year ago!

Reflecting on the second part of the General Assembly's theme, I consider this moment in our shared history and experience to be crucial in deciding what sort of world will want to inhabit over the coming months and years. Though the circumstances which facilitated it are truly dreadful, we do have a valuable opportunity to make this shared space of seven and a half billion people a better, healthier, cleaner, more just world, both for us and also, more importantly, for our children and our children's children. After a year of death, illness, misery, economic and structural difficulties and the very questioning of what it means to be a shared society and community, we can seek to exit these deeply troubling times with the determination that our future will be better and brighter. We must seize the narrow window to make significant structural reforms to our nations, societies and communities. And again, it will be more effective and more productive if we work together. Future economic development must lead to a fairer, greener, more sustainable path. Ireland has signalled its commitment to place the European Green Deal at the centre of its economic response to Covid-19. Other climate change actions must be incorporated into any future recovery measures and economic stimulus packages to make for a more sustainable, resilient economy, the fruits of which will be more evenly divided among our citizens.

For our post-Covid parliaments, we must seek to adapt more family friendly policies that have been shown to have worked well for many MPs and their staff over the past number of months. Remote working is here to stay, in some shape or form, and while different parliaments will have different legal and constitutional requirements for personal attendance, it is also incumbent on parliamentarians to lead by example and strive to ensure our parliamentary communities are safer, more family-friendly places in which to work. In the case of the Houses of the Oireachtas, Ireland's parliament, for example, I established in March this year a Forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament, composed of politicians, parliamentary staff, political staff, and experts in gender politics, employment law, human rights and business. These diverse backgrounds and experiences will inform the debate on how best to make our parliament a better place once we can fully return to do our important in-person business.

I look forward to learning more of the experiences of other parliamentary colleagues and friends over the course of the IPU General Assembly. It is important to reiterate; we work better when we work together. The IPU has a crucial role in this regard and I look forward to continuing, fruitful engagement over the coming weeks and months as our parliaments

continue their vital role in fighting this pandemic. And as we cautiously emerge from this past year of darkness and despair, we should use that traumatic, life-changing experience to seek imaginative and creative ways to make our shared future a better, greener, more equitable place in which we can live and thrive.