

DEMOCRACY

Parliamentarians, as key players of democratization in the Americas

Summary of the conferences and discussions on Saturday, September 20, 1997

Chair:	Mr. Cristóbal Fernández Daló President of the Senate of the Republic of Venezuela
Vice-chair:	Mr. André Boulerice Member of the National Assembly of Québec Assistant House Leader of the Government
Speakers:	Mr Kély C. Bastien President of the Chamber of Deputies of the Republic of Haiti Mr. Carlos Alberto González Garabelli Chairman of the External Relations Committee of the Senate of the Republic of Paraguay and Member of the Joint Parliamentary Committee of Mercosur
Secretary:	Mr. Carlos Augusto Valle Chairman of the Peace Committee of the Central American Parliament M. Charles Thumerelle Assemblée nationale du Québec

Mr. Kély C. Bastien is President of the Chamber of Deputies of the Republic of Haiti. Elected in October 1995, he was Vice-President of the Chamber until January 14, 1997, on which date he became its President. A physician by training, he is a member of the Committee on Health and of the Committee on the Status of Women. He is also Vice-President of the Haitian Section of the International Assembly of French-Speaking Parliamentarians.

On the threshold of the 21st century, the concept of democracy must not remain the only common denominator between the peoples of the Americas. President Bastien considered that broad-based measures must be undertaken in order to allow a real integration of the poorest nations into the global economic system, thereby contributing to the reinforcement of democratic spaces.

This process depends above all on the following elements: the satisfaction of fundamental needs of the peoples of the Hemisphere; the creation of productive spaces allowing all States to contribute normally to international exchanges, thereby ending the dependency of certain countries on conditional international aid; a balanced interdependence between States; the self-determination of peoples; and the reestablishment and reinforcement of political ethics.

Moreover, a true economic integration at the hemispheric level must also be based on other factors: the organization of regional and international parliamentary associations; the setting up of forums relating to major socioeconomic projects; the arrangement of programs for the exchange of expertise between Parliaments; informing the population to whom these projects must be submitted, and whose suggestions must be listened to.

Indeed, in the view of Mr. Bastien, the democratization of the Americas by no means represents a chimera if one considers that it is up to parliamentarians to explore the pathways involved.

Mr. Carlos Alberto González Garabelli is Chairman of the External Relations and International Affairs Committee of the Senate of the Republic of Paraguay. From December 1996 to June 1997, he was President of the Joint Parliamentary Committee of Mercosur. Mr. González now divides his time between the Parliament and the Judiciary Council, where he represents the Senate. He is the author of a number of books and publications on political and legal topics.

The emergence of “social constitutionalism”, which results from the expansion of the “Social State”, brought about an unprecedented development in the role of Parliaments in the world. In Latin America in particular, the disappearance of dictatorships in favour of democratically elected governments, taken together with the increasing importance of the global integration process, has increased the influence of parliamentary institutions. This evolution suggests to Mr. González two types of reflection.

First, the reinforcement of the credibility of parliamentarians in relation with public opinion must remain a priority objective in a context in which the media often ascribe to them an ineffectiveness in solving complex issues. It is therefore essential that Parliaments have available to them the appropriate technical and human means, that they remain in contact with the different actors in society, and that they benefit from relevant information in order to effectively face the increasing of their responsibilities.

Secondly, Parliaments have a fundamental function relating to integration processes, since on the one hand, although it is up to the executive authorities to negotiate international agreements in the area of integration, Parliaments must ratify them. On the other hand, they have the duty to echo the concerns of the population about integration processes, to ensure that these are not carried out to the benefit of certain sectors of society, and to the detriment of vast social groups.

In conclusion, Mr. González underlined that, just as the spinoffs of integration must not be for the benefit of a limited group in society, the integration processes must duly take into account the situation of the less economically developed countries. It is only with this approach, based on international solidarity, that it will be possible to ensure, with no risk of error, that integration processes enhance the development of all peoples, without any forms of discrimination.

Mr. Carlos Augusto Valle is Chairman of the Peace Committee of the Central American Parliament, of which he has been a Member since 1995. In 1990, he was elected Member of Congress of the Republic of El Salvador, where he chaired the Committee on Municipal Affairs. Founder of the “Avanzada Nacional” Party, he has held the positions of Assistant Secretary General and Member of the National Management Committee, among others.

Despite its great diversity, the Hemisphere of the Americas has democracy as its common

denominator. However, the recent establishment of democratic institutions must not overshadow the existence of a tendency toward autarchy that still threatens this fragile balance. In this context, Mr. Valle underlined that it becomes imperative to implement and consolidate the interparliamentary mechanisms of integration, in order to strengthen the “hemispheric democracy”.

Within this process, which requires major structural changes in the internal organization of States, parliamentarians have an essential role to play as legislators, coordinators and mediators. In this regard, the latter must always keep in mind that economic development must never take place to the detriment of democratic values, at the risk of leading to the under-development of human societies.

It is true that integration, which already finds its expression in regional forums, such as the Central American parliament, represents an irreversible phenomenon capable of consolidating democracy. Nevertheless, this process must be considered above all as a collaboration between States, in a spirit of mutual respect and recognition. Its viability requires going beyond economic, social and cultural rivalries, as well as the implementation of mechanisms for dispute resolution and peaceful negotiation capable of attaining a complete pacification of the Hemisphere on the threshold of the third millennium. In this respect, the signature of the agreements on October 29, 1996, in Guatemala, which made it possible to bring to an end 36 years of fratricidal war, is a concrete example of openness toward a real and coherent integration at the hemispheric level.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

In the course of the debate that followed the presentations, the question of inequalities between rich and poor countries stood out in importance. In particular, the point was raised that democracy represents only a means of arriving at a viable integration, but that it does not suffice to feed the most underprivileged. Only an integration based on the principle of solidarity of the economically strong peoples toward the weaker ones can achieve this. Indeed, as in the case of democracy, free trade remains a fragile process which demands particular attention. From this viewpoint, a fair treatment clause in an integration agreement could make it possible to improve the living conditions of the economically weakest populations and to reinforce hemispheric democracy.

Moreover, other participants pointed out that it is essential to take into account the different civil organizations within any integration process, by creating institutionalized spaces to this effect. The elected Parliaments should undertake to maintain consultative relations with such organizations (for

example, associations of small traders, associations of small and medium businesses, cities, etc.), which represent a wide spectrum of interests on a societal level, and which would also have an opportunity to get across their different viewpoints on important issues such as environmental protection, literacy, etc.

Taking into account these various elements, it would be possible to give democracy a more elaborate social content and to confer upon it greater credibility, going beyond just the guarantee of public freedoms.

Moreover, although it is true that the Constitutions now prohibit the phenomenon of lifetime presidencies in most States of the Americas, other participants emphasized their concern about the immovability of the persons in charge of leading the political parties. It was therefore requested that greater vigilance be shown in the future regarding this phenomenon, which most often leads to a personality cult that is damaging to democracy.

During the question period, the problem was raised of the threat represented by the military power for certain young democracies in Latin America. In order to face this danger, countries such as Paraguay have adopted concrete measures that now enable the civil authorities to exercise permanent control over the army, particularly through the adoption of a law providing that members of the military will no longer be allowed to affiliate themselves with a political party.

It was also stated that the international parliamentary organizations should be vigilant and prompt to react, each time that they observe a violation of Human Rights at the hemispheric level, in order for the integration process to be properly carried through. In this respect, communication between Parliaments has been judged essential in order to allow a quick reaction to any danger of this type.

Nevertheless, certain listeners also raised the great difficulty of applying the principle of an external armed intervention, for the purpose of reestablishing order and democracy, whereas the sovereignty of States is exercised everywhere. It was pointed out that the use of armed force remains unacceptable, apart from certain particular situations, and when it is applied in accordance with a

resolution of the United Nations Security Council. Generally, external intervention was most often presented as a last recourse, and not as a panacea. For this reason, it was suggested that to the extent possible, the peaceful democratization of States be promoted, based on the reinforcement of the rule of law and of institutions.

In this respect, economic integration was evaluated as a process of the future, able to facilitate the deployment of mechanisms aiming to prevent any violation of these basic principles within member States.