PARLIAMENTARIANS MUST DEFEND THE MOST JUST CAUSES OF HUMANITY

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to join you today, as you did 14 years ago on the occasion of the first Assembly of the Parliamentary Confederation of the Americas. The honour remains the same, though much has changed in the Americas since then. When I started out in politics 40 years ago, a meeting such as this would have been impossible. Indeed, the very idea of bringing together such a large number of democratically elected representatives, including a fair number of women, would have been considered a pipe dream, for at the time, not all of our member countries were acquainted with the privileges of democracy. Citizens were not considered equal before the law and legal constitutions. Not all peoples were free, and fundamental rights were often trampled upon. The legislatures you represent bear witness to the progress made since then by our nations toward achieving the democratic ideal.

In every State in the Americas, except Cuba, the will of the people is now expressed through regular elections, multi-party diversity and respect for individual human liberties. Although we may tend to forget it at times, our countries have made great—indeed giant—steps forward. Whatever the shortcomings of our legislative assemblies, we must not lose sight of the simple fact that the existence of a democratically elected parliament is, in itself, an indisputable sign of political maturity.

And therein lies the most powerful message we can send to the rest of the world: we are here not to try out democracy, but to evaluate it; not to establish democracy, but to defend it; not to call democracy to account, but to improve it. The cause of democracy is one that we know well. We are convinced that even the most imperfect democracy is more respectful of human rights than the most enlightened dictatorship.

Democracy is a fundamental victory for our continent. We know now that the future of our nations will be written in terms of democracy and liberty, or will not be written at all. Parliaments are synonymous with democracy, peace, and equality between men and women. When parliamentarians gather to discuss, debate and share ideas, it is undeniably the will of free people that is expressing itself. I remain convinced of the importance of parliaments in the life of our nations. In a shrinking world that is increasingly complex and selfish, the political and moral force of parliaments must always defend the most just causes of humanity.

I was a member of the legislature of my country. This experience helped me to understand that a legislative assembly is defined by dialogue, negotiation and a constant willingness to compromise, and that success requires knowing how to concede a point and not believing one has a monopoly on the truth. I also learned that, to reach a compromise, negotiation necessarily entails listening to electors, party colleagues and political adversaries. I came to understand that, when fighting for a cause considered essential for a stronger democracy, there is no such thing as defeat. Biding one's time in no way implies that one has given up or lacks the strength of one's convictions.

Today, "democracy" is a household word for billions of people around the world. Almost without exception, it refers to that which is good, just and conducive to hope. But I do not agree with those who think that good things continue to march forward of their own accord. To remain strong and healthy, democracy not only requires citizen participation, individual liberties, free elections and human development, but also reflection, analysis, and criticism from within. It must, above all, appeal to reason and rationality, two elements that are often found lacking in the parliaments of Latin America. Democracy depends just as much on what we do as on what we don't do. As one recognized authority on the matter has put it, "democracy will not persist by default."

In Latin America, there is no shortage of reasons to question the stability and longevity of the democracies we have so painstakingly established. Throughout the Americas today, there is talk reflecting perfectly legitimate concerns about strengthening our democratic systems which, however imperfect and disorderly they sometimes become, are yet infinitely superior to the systems set up by the satraps of the past. We must never lose sight of the fact that democracy is the only system of government which can provide the foundations for a new and better world. Nor must we forget that democracy is the only political system that allows individual citizens to take an active part in building a better future.

It is thus our responsibility to ensure that the light of democracy continues to shine throughout the continent. To make this happen, we must analyze and confront three major challenges: first, we must improve our democracies without destroying them and without succumbing to populism or authoritarianism; second, we must find ways to improve their efficiency as levers of growth and development; and third, we must make them more representative by increasing women's participation in politics. I would like to take a few minutes today to examine each of these challenges.

Regarding the first challenge, some would argue that a democracy cannot be destroyed by efforts that are intended to improve it. I am not so sure. History abounds with examples of democratic heroes turned enemies of the people. These individuals mistook their own will for that of the people. They abolished individual liberties solely to tighten their grip on the reins of power. This underscores a dilemma we have not yet been able to solve: How do we deal with democracies whose leaders are authoritarian in their behaviour, but whose regimes cannot, strictly speaking, be called dictatorships? There is only one true dictatorship remaining in the Americas today. All of the other regimes, whether or not we agree, must be considered democracies, albeit in varying stages of consolidation or decline.

One form of ideological deception very much in vogue in Latin America and several other parts of the world consists in convincing people that each nation can fashion its own particular brand of democracy and freedom. Too often, this serves as a smokescreen for oppressive or authoritarian goals. Personally, I believe that the principles of democracy are universal, and that countries are democratic to different degrees, depending on how closely they follow the system introduced by the Greeks, improved on by the Americans and the Canadians, and fine-tuned by the Scandinavians—the same system we are now trying to implement, with varying degrees of success, in several countries in the world.

Power in a democracy is always subject to limits. By definition, a democratic leader encounters political opposition, media scrutiny and criticism by interest groups, is subject to restrictions imposed by the legislative and judicial branches, holds office for a predetermined time, must act within a particular legal framework, and faces constant public scrutiny and public evaluation of his or her administration. Such are

the basic givens for exercising power in a democracy, and anyone who ignores them runs the risk, even if duly elected by the people, of drifting toward authoritarianism.

Some governments in Latin America and other regions of the world have wrongly assumed that their popular mandate entitled them to change the electoral rules in order to advance their own political agendas. We must remain vigilant. While elections constitute one of the cornerstones of the democratic process, they do not constitute the whole process. Leaders who trample on individual human rights, restrict freedom of expression and unjustifiably attack free enterprise undermine the very democratic systems that brought them to power in the first place.

By the same token, those who aspire to overturn or oust such governments by violence or by means contrary to the constitution and the law are playing the same autocratic game as the governments they claim to be combating. If there is a lesson to be learned from the painful example of Honduras, it is surely that a coup d'état is never a good idea. The only way to subvert the power of those who justify their actions on the grounds of their popular support is to undermine that support through education, development projects and ideas. Speaking before this Assembly 14 years ago, I had this to say about education:

"Education is necessary for a strong democracy. It transforms inhabitants into citizens. It dispels, once and for all, the centuries-old illusion that it is possible to found a republic in the absence of republicans. Education is necessary because it prepares citizens to contribute creatively to the advancement of their societies; because it forearms them against the seductive words of demagogues and despots; because it informs them of their rights and responsibilities as citizens and enables them to stand up for those rights and assume those responsibilities in the full knowledge of their meaning and significance. Education is necessary to ensure that no one, through ignorance, forfeits the opportunity to take charge of their own unique and transcending destiny, which is the basic axiom that underlies the doctrine of human rights."

Unfortunately, 14 years later, we find that not everyone has learned to resist the charms of demagogy and populism. The heart of the problem is not so much the false messiahs themselves as the people who continue to worship at their feet. Ousting one authoritarian leader from power serves no useful purpose if it is only to replace him or her by another actor eager to play the same role.

This brings us to our second challenge, namely, the need to make our democratic systems—especially our legislative assemblies—more effective, so that citizens do not fall prey to the misleading promises of authoritarian leaders in the hope of meeting their urgent needs. In 1997, I made the following reflections before this Assembly: "How much poverty can democracy bear? The question is not rhetorical. With a few rare exceptions, the enthusiasm that greeted Latin America's new democratic regimes in the 1980s has steadily declined. Every day our democracies fight a decisive battle for their own survival, confronted by levels of violence and apathy that make governing almost impossible."

It may be useful to see the problem in its historical context. The face of Latin America has not always been what we see today. The conditions under which our societies emerged were at least as favourable as those in other regions. However, we did not always make the most of those conditions. When Harvard University first opened its doors in Boston in 1636, and Laval University was founded in 1663, there were already well established universities in Santo Domingo, Lima, Mexico City, Sucre, Bogota, Quito, Santiago and Cordoba. In 1750, the per capita income of Latin America approached that of the United States. By 1820, it had declined by almost half. It is now about one fifth of that of the U.S. and Canada. We gained our independence 100 to 150

years before South Korea and Singapore, two countries also formerly under the yoke of powers that exploited their wealth. Yet their per capita income today is higher than ours, despite their lack of natural resources.

It is easy to point fingers and cast about for enemies. More difficult, but of paramount importance, is to acknowledge one's own mistakes. Since gaining their independence, Latin American countries have struggled more than most in attempting to achieve the level of development that exists in industrialized nations. Even so, two centuries since gaining independence from Spain or Portugal, no Latin American country has yet achieved that goal.

We are all responsible for the choices we make. And while it is true that certain countries have influenced the destiny of Latin American countries, it also true that today's developed nations were also once subject to the domination of hegemonic forces. It would be unfair to argue that Latin American countries alone encountered major obstacles on the road to greater prosperity. But Latin Americans appear to remain little inclined toward self-criticism. Nationalist slogans and anti-imperialist diatribes abound with us. The victim mentality is a big seller with the electorate, and our governments and parliamentarians spend more time justifying their inaction than getting results.

This absence of critical examination has exacted a heavy toll in the increasingly disillusioned attitude of our peoples toward politics. It is no accident that our legislatures are harshly criticized by the citizenry year after year, as repeatedly reflected in the well-known public opinion survey, *Latinobarómetro*. Hence the importance of assemblies like the one we are holding today, since they offer us an opportunity to take a critical look at ourselves. Latin America needs to send out a wake up call to its chronic moaners and complainers—a public outcry that will help our nations rise to their feet again after so much time spent on their knees. If we acknowledge our own responsibility for the fact that we are lagging behind more developed nations, we will begin to understand that we are capable of changing the situation.

To achieve this, we must start by admitting that certain aspects of our culture and institutions have systematically undermined our development opportunities. Examples include resistance to change, a weak sense of entrepreneurship, problems in governing, uncertainty about our justice systems, protectionism, a lack of competitiveness, dissatisfaction with the political class, and the power of the military.

Latin America is more resistant to change that any other region on earth. Such conservatism would be more understandable in a country like the U.S. or Canada, where people might be tempted to stick with the formula that facilitated their growth in the first place. In Latin America, however, this attitude is frankly disconcerting. In some cases, it can be explained more by a fear of the unknown or, worse still, by a desire to protect acquired privileges, than by a desire to maintain the status quo. We live by the notion that the known is always preferable to the unknown. We cling to our pain and our needs, afraid to lose what we already have. We invest our hopes in everything except the future.

Anxiety and fear are normal reactions to the unknown, but in Latin America fear has become a paralyzing force. It not only raises expectations, but also paralyzes our ability to act. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that too few of our political leaders have developed the patience and aptitudes that would enable them to lead the public step by step through the reform process.

During my first term as President of Costa Rica, most Costa Ricans favoured military intervention to end the armed conflicts in Central America. I set about convincing them that war would only bring on more pain and suffering, and that the

only avenue open to us was peace. At the 11th hour and after much debate, a peaceful solution was found. Twenty years later, during my second term, the population was seized by fear of the possible negative effects of globalization, and thus continued to support obsolete public monopolies without attempting to establish trade agreements with other parts of the world. I therefore began a vast operation to open up public monopolies and integrate trade by forging new diplomatic and commercial ties with the world's largest economies. After a lengthy information campaign, Costa Ricans came to understand the importance of these reforms for their future. For this reason, I have often said that governing consists not in pleasing, but in informing the public. Governing means making decisions, not putting them off until tomorrow.

Even more important than political education is the education of children and young people in our schools, colleges and universities. Latin America will not reach the Economic Development Threshold unless it improves the quality of education and increases the number of people being educated. At the beginning of the year, the New York Times published the findings of the most recent PISA student assessment survey, which was carried out in 65 countries by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The survey focuses on the reading, mathematics and science performance of 15-year-olds, and is the most well-recognized assessment of educational quality in the world. Student performance in reading was highest in Shanghai, followed by South Korea, Finland, Hong Kong and Singapore. The U.S. ranked 17th, whereas Brazil ranked 53rd and Argentina 58th. The results were similar in mathematics and science. In contrast, Québec ranked 5th in mathematics, 10th in science and 6th in reading.

I wish to insist on one point: our universities are not turning out the kind of graduates we need for our future development. In Latin America, for every graduate in the hard sciences and every two in engineering, there are six in the social sciences. To be sure, social scientists are necessary, but not three times as necessary as engineers. Progress will not happen until our education system mirrors the kind of society we wish to establish. Visiting a Latin American campus is like taking a trip back in time: the ideological confrontations of the 1960s and 1970s are common currency, as though the Berlin Wall were still standing, and China and Russia had not adopted the production methods of the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe. We are preparing our young people for a world which has ceased to exist. Instead of giving them the tools they need to succeed in a global environment —language skills, technological tools and business start-up support—our universities are teaching outmoded theories and long-discredited doctrines.

This situation must change. Latin American nations must start rewarding creativity and innovation. We must focus on private initiative and celebrate individual success. We must invest in science and technology and reform our university programs. We must facilitate the extension of credit and simplify the process for those who wish to start a business. We must take measures to attract investors and promote the transfer of knowledge. We must understand that pragmatism is the new world ideology and that, as Deng Xiaoping aptly reflected, it matters little whether the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice.

Other obstacles to Latin American development are a lack of confidence and a degree of uncertainty about our justice systems. We have a tendency to forget that confidence is fundamental in a global economy. Our Achilles' heel—and this is something we must urgently try to change in the coming years—is that we are full of surprises, in the bad sense of the word. In some Latin American countries, property owners are expropriated without the slightest motive, permits are revoked because of political pressure, and court decisions have absolutely no foundation in law.

Equally urgent is the need to reform the State apparatus. The sclerosis that has traditionally paralyzed our States is the worst pitfall for our development and democratic stability. For any real change toward a culture of freedom to take place, we must ensure that our governments respond quickly and efficiently to citizens' needs, and that our revenue departments have sufficient resources to ensure that richer individuals pay their fair share of taxes. But increasing State revenues is not enough. We must also spend them wisely. In determining our plans and priorities, we must keep human development foremost in mind. Latin America has an enormous shortfall to make up in this regard, not just because it has spent little on human development, but because its spending overall has been irresponsible. The multiplication of arms, armed forces and soldiers is stalling the growth of our nations. It is at the very least ironic that reducing military spending was not mentioned even once during discussions on how to deal with the international economic crisis. Our legislatures have conducted heated debates on financial bailouts and economic recovery plans, but not a word has been said about military spending, which totalled $1,630 billion internationally in 2010. These monies feed war efforts—not children; they pay for soldiers—not doctors. Many countries have reduced their funding of social programs because of the international economic crisis, but their military spending continues to spiral out of control.

The third and last challenge I wish to discuss today is the need, if we are to build more just and truly democratic societies, to increase the number of women in politics. Although it is true that history is always moving forward, it is also true that, in the sphere of political freedom and the right of citizens to elect their own representatives, practically nothing has been done to eradicate some of the oldest and most deeply rooted violations of human rights. And while it is important to remember that the Berlin Wall once prevented millions of people from becoming masters of their own destinies, how much more important it is to remind ourselves that people in underdeveloped countries remain slaves of extreme poverty to this day, and that women are too often placed in positions of subordination.

We must become agents of profound change and not remain indifferent to the suffering of people who are victims of discrimination. Today, I would like to place special emphasis on the need, the relevance and the urgency of combating a form of discrimination which may be qualified as ancestral. I am referring to discrimination against women. Every day, women and a growing number of men are discovering new ways of pushing forward with the most important revolution in human history: the dismantling of an unjust and sexist culture. This revolution seeks to put an end to the insidious exploitation of half of humanity.

There can be no permanent social harmony or democratic stability as long as the most pernicious form of domination and exploitation—that based on gender—continues to exist. We are well aware that discrimination against women results in flagrant injustices with regard to employment, health care and education, whether in terms of quality or suitability. Such discrimination is responsible for much economic and political inequality, not to mention wage and employment disparities between men and women.

Let me approach this question from a slightly more general point of view. We must not forget that there is a direct correlation between violence and exclusion. The violence we are witnessing in the world around us has as its cause our rejection of diversity, collaboration and equality. This violence is being unleashed because too many people have been systematically denied the right to everything that contributes to human dignity, notably the possibility of being the master of one's own destiny and of helping to shape the destiny of one's own society. Our world is violent because it cultivates exclusion. The fight against sexism, racism and poverty, along with all the other causes

that promote the right of each individual to participate fully in the life of his or her community, is therefore of vital importance for humanity as a whole. Combating exclusion and facilitating equality-based participation are ways of eliminating the seeds of the violence that is a source of preoccupation in the modern world.

I have long argued that one of the most effective instruments for combating poverty and inequality is education. But the effort here must be directed toward the most vulnerable members of society and give priority to the educational needs of women. The challenge is not merely to offer women a better education, but to provide them with an education that fosters their development rather than their subordination. As I have said on several occasions, when we educate a woman, we educate an entire family.

Humanity's most admirable and enriching characteristic is its diversity. Each gender, group and individual is unique and irreplaceable. We are all blessed with a unique sensibility, intelligence and creativity. To suppress these traits is to impoverish humankind. Once the word "we" begins to refer to the human race as a whole, the world will be able to look forward to a brighter future.

My friends,

Let's not allow the new century to mirror the last one. We must work energetically toward creating a world characterized by more solidarity and less selfishness; by more transparency and less corruption; and by more equality and less injustice. A world that values education over ignorance, and trade integration over protectionism. Globalization, economic growth and democratic institutions are not a panacea, but they do offer numerous opportunities we must not miss.

We must strike out in a new direction, not haphazardly, but in an intelligent and well thought-out manner. Such is the scope of your task, of your mandate as elected representatives: to improve the lives of those who have elected you to office for a set period of time. Your mandate is to serve the common good, to defend the democratic values of tolerance, patience, generosity and pride made possible by civilized political commitment.

Ludwig Wittgenstein once aphoristically wrote: "If someone is merely ahead of his time, it will catch up to him one day." We owe it to ourselves to take this kernel of wisdom to heart. In particular, Latin American men and women must raise their sights to move ahead of this era and stay ahead in the next. We must think big, bearing in mind the historical implications of our actions. We must project our dreams beyond the horizon. Otherwise, our time will catch up to us once again, and the future will be nothing more than the present repeating itself ad infinitum.

Thank you.