

Promoting Democracy Abroad

What Role for Canadian Legislators?

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Introduction

Good governance is essential for achieving peace, security and sustainable development. Inclusive governance is one of the pillars on the new Canadian Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP).

We all are vulnerable to different diseases but how often we get sick and how fast we recover depends on our immune system.

Governance is the immune system for «diseases» of our societies: poverty, lawlessness, corruption, violence, discrimination.

Parliaments

A well-functioning parliament is fundamental for good governance: it is the only elected pluralistic governance institution. It is the most inclusive institution. It is also the institution that oversees the executive.

Canada

Around the world our country continues to be seen as a beacon of democratic governance, interest in our experience remains high and we are a welcome and trusted partner.

The Parliamentary Centre is a Canadian story of innovation in the field of international assistance.

In the mid 90's Canada became a leader in supporting the strengthening of parliaments worldwide. From 2006-2016 there was a decline in resources available within the Canadian Government to support the strengthening of governance, including parliamentary development. Other countries (the UK, USA, EU and Scandinavian countries) have taken a lot more active role in this field.

Canada's overall funding for international assistance is lower than that of countries with comparable economies and population. Furthermore, out of all funding that Global Affairs Canada provides for ongoing international assistance projects, only 1.4% goes to support legislatures and political parties.

Through the Parliamentary Centre and other international organizations Canadians have been contributing to democratic development for many years. Some of you have been part of that story through parliamentary networks such as the CPA, AFP, ParlAmericas, GOPAC, IPU.

Regardless of government spending, Canadians play important roles in democracy development but the larger portion of this now happens under the umbrella of non-Canadian organizations, where the Canadian flag is not always very visible.

Examples of the role of parliamentarians

Parliamentarians from any country are most receptive to exchanging experience with their international peers. Recent examples from the Parliamentary Centre's work:

- Hon. Deepak Obhrai, David Christopherson, Hon. John McKay participated in the first parliamentary exchange between Canada and Myanmar;
- Hon. Kirsty Duncan exchanged her experience with women in the parliament of Myanmar;
- Former Chair of the Public Accounts Committee Shawn Murphy has helped strengthen the parliamentary budget process in Zambia;
- Speakers of the House and the Senate, parliamentarians, parliamentary committees and parliamentary staff have met incoming visits. Last spring the Canada Africa Parliamentary Association met a delegation of parliamentarians headed by the former Speaker of the National Assembly of Burkina Faso.

Future challenges and opportunities for inclusive, democratic governance

We live in an increasingly dynamic and complex world, the world's population is growing and is better connected than ever by new technologies, there have never been so many countries with

democratic regimes. Yet, rarely have we experienced so much conflict and instability. Large groups, including women, young people and various minorities, are feeling disconnected and disenfranchised with governance institutions and processes. Parliaments are no exception.

There is growing evidence, such as a much quoted recent OXFAM report, that economic growth leads more and more to concentrating wealth among very few, while the situation of large groups remains unchanged, or gets even worse. This can jeopardize sustainable development and security.

Political participation remains the area where the least progress has been made in closing the equality gap between women and men. The progress of women into leadership positions, including women in parliament, has been slow even in established democracies. Parliaments and political parties have an essential role to play in addressing this challenge.

As Canadians we need to help parliaments make measurable progress in increasing the participation of women in politics.

Some trends to consider:

A) Aging population in mature economies and youth in emerging ones

In 2050 there could be 9.8 billion people in the world; in Africa 2.6 billion or a little more than 26%. Africa will increasingly be the continent of the youth. This brings both: opportunities and **major challenges**.

B) The digital revolution is real

By 2050 a single computer will be as powerful as all computers operating today in the Silicon Valley!

The executive branch of government and large corporations have tools to consult and influence citizens directly without an intermediary. What does this mean for parliaments?

According to a report produced by the Berggruen Institute in 2017, information and communications technologies have provided greater access to knowledge and more avenues for connecting and engaging with each other but the downsides are also becoming apparent: the proliferation of misinformation and political polarization, among other consequences seem to be exacerbated by digital technologies.

Potential areas for discussion

- Should we be doing more to strengthen parliaments?
- Are limited Canadian taxpayer dollars used in the most effective way? Do we need greater transparency, accountability and innovation?
- How can parliaments and political parties make measurable progress towards greater participation of women in politics?
- What role can social media and technology, especially AI, play in promoting and strengthening democratic governance?
- What lessons can Canadian parliaments and legislators at all levels share with - and what can we learn from - our counterparts in other countries?