

## **Parliamentary diplomacy: diplomacy with a democratic mandate**

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### **Introduction**

It is a great pleasure to take the floor here in the beautiful city of Québec, a city impregnated by so many American, European and global cultures. I am particularly happy to be in the same panel with my colleague from Grand National Assembly of Turkey in the year in which our two countries, Turkey and the Netherlands, so cordially have celebrated 400 years of diplomatic relations. Our conferences of the IPU and the ASGP reflect the active role that our host country Canada has always played in the parliamentary diplomacy.

As the President of the Senate of Canada, Mr. Noël Kinsella, has said at the opening session of the IPU conference yesterday: *"Le Parlement du Canada établit et maintient avec d'autres parlements des relations qui vont du simple échange de renseignements à des visites officielles réciproques. Ces échanges parlementaires renforcent les liens avec les autres pays et facilitent le partage des idées, des valeurs, du savoir et de l'expérience."* All our parliaments ask themselves from time to time the question what parliamentary diplomacy means to them, what their activities in this field are, what their priorities should be and if they have organized their activities in an efficient way guaranteeing sufficiently that meaningful results are reached. I would like to share with you some thoughts based on a self-reflection carried out by the Senate of the Netherlands on this subject. I hope to provoke that you share with us your ideas and best practices in parliamentary diplomacy.

In its broadest definition, diplomacy can be defined as the art and practice of conducting negotiations between two or more groups in order to achieve a particular goal. In its most traditional definition, the term is used to describe formalised relations between what are usually independent political entities, generally states. However, as we can experience on a daily basis, in our globalized world, states are not the only ones able to convey their specific messages across national borders. In the most extreme view, the internet and social media have made every citizen an ambassador of his or her country, in the positive as well as in the negative way.

The traditional form of diplomacy - "from political state entity to political state entity" - has not been untouched by patterns of globalization. Most notably, the open nature of our economies and the importance of international trade and investment have made the term "economic diplomacy" into an international buzzword. And indeed, businessmen more often than not have become an integral part of "diplomatic" missions, thereby adding a commercial dimension to international politics. Other groups endowed with an international outlook, including academies and relief workers, have also rapidly expanded cross-border networks, sometimes in cooperation with national governments.

In a similar fashion, parliamentarians increasingly orientate themselves internationally. This is first of all a necessity given parliament's appointed duty to scrutinize government's policies - including its foreign policies. Historically, that policy area has proven to be the most difficult area for parliament to check government actions and approaches in a satisfactory way. By engaging in "parliamentary diplomacy", they can attempt to reduce this "international democratic deficit" as best as possible. In addition to enhancing its own adroitness, parliamentary delegations can add a dimension of pluralism to diplomacy, especially when bringing together different political colours and voices that characterize a healthy and well-functioning democracy. The tendency of increased democratization around the globe calls for an increased awareness and recognition of the added value of parliamentary presence in international forum.

## **The added value of Parliamentary diplomacy**

Parliamentarians acting abroad are, in essence, democratically mandated diplomats.

- Active involvement of parliamentarians in international forums and activities contributes to the knowledge and insights necessary to scrutinize a national government's foreign policies in a satisfactory way. Participating at the international stage is therefore an integral part of parliamentary work.
- Parliamentary diplomacy neither duplicates nor replaces traditional governmental diplomacy. Parliamentarians (from both government and opposition parliamentary parties) are ideally placed to build bridges between conflicting parties, unshackled by instructions from governments. They are well-placed to put across views which the official government representatives are not able (or willing) to convey.
- Parliamentary diplomacy can supplement government diplomacy because members of parliament can be more flexible when engaging in diplomatic activities. They are not, after all, bound by the positions taken by the government and can transcend their own government's interests by providing principled support for democracy and human rights. Parliamentary diplomacy provide a forum to smoothen and to deal with misunderstandings, complementary to and enriching and stimulating traditional forms of diplomacy.
- Parliamentary diplomacy implies the use and deployment of parliamentary contacts to promote the international democratic legal order. As legitimate representatives of democracy, they are placed to engage in a credible exchange expertise and to draw and to diffuse lessons-learned regarding the build-up of democratic institutions as well as for example political, intercultural and interreligious dialogues to safeguard pluralism.

- Personal contacts between members of parliament of different states are likely to enhance mutual understanding and to establish alternative channels beneficial for bilateral relations between countries. Such contacts can be used to place national developments in context, as well as to initiate activities, including those aimed at peace, security and strengthening democracy and human rights, economic development, improving education and social conditions.

### **Different manifestations of parliamentary diplomacy**

Parliamentary diplomacy comes in several forms. Some initiatives are taken in cooperation with national governments, for example when governments include parliamentarians in their official delegations for international travels. Other initiatives take place in a purely parliamentary environment. While not an exhaustive list, the parliamentary voice at the international stage can be expressed through:

- Active participation in the parliamentary assemblies of international organisations.  
From the perspective of the Netherlands, these include among other forums:
  - Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)
  - NATO Parliamentary Assembly
  - OSCE Parliamentary Assembly
  - Inter-parliamentary Consultative Benelux Council
  - Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly
- Organization of incoming and outgoing international visits, for example:
  - Reception of Heads of State and Government: inclusion in the official program of a tête-à-tête with the President(s) of parliament, an exchange of views or a discussion with members of Parliament on topics of mutual interest;
  - Exchange of views and discussion with colleagues from other parliaments on topics of mutual interest;

- Reception of delegations from international civil society, for example university professors, NGOs or interested youth groups.
- Activities for the provision of (mutual or unilateral) technical assistance. For example:
  - Activities such as promoted by the ASGP, which facilitates the exchange of information about best practices relating to customs within parliamentary institutions and their organisation and management.
  - Activities at the bilateral level, such as cooperating with study trips for foreign parliaments such as are often organized by NGOs - or organizing such a trip on own initiative.
- For the Netherlands, the inter-parliamentary dimension provided within the EU framework is of great importance. Since the Treaty of Nice (2000) deliberate measures have been taken to strengthen the role of the national parliaments in European cooperation. Similarly, enhancing parliamentary oversight and participation of national parliaments at the EU-level was one of the aims of the Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force in December 2009. While organizing many ad hoc inter-parliamentary meetings on topical subjects, the EU also knows several structured inter-parliamentary consultations, such as the EU Speakers' Conference of national parliaments, the so-called COSAC (the Conference of Community and European Affairs Committees of Parliaments of the European Union) and the Inter-parliamentary meeting on Common Foreign and Security Policy and Common Security and Defence Policy. The latter brings together members from all EU parliamentary committees for Foreign Affairs and for Defence.

## **How can we strengthen and improve the conduct of parliamentary diplomacy?**

We should acknowledge parliamentary diplomacy as an important part of the foreign political activities of parliamentarians.

We should encourage active participation in parliamentary assemblies, while monitoring that these are used for the purpose of increasing parliamentary knowledge and insights necessary to scrutinize a national government's policies. This monitoring could include:

- Adequate preparation and determination of the contributions to be made to meetings of assemblies/European meetings in the appropriate parliamentary committees
- Adequate (oral) feedback to the committees after the close of the inter-parliamentary activities: distribution of documents (such as resolutions, reports and recommendations) adopted in an assembly and/or conference;

We should encourage, in cooperation with national governments, the inclusion of parliamentarians in official international visits of our Heads of State and Government or other high officials and the inclusion of an exchange of view with parliamentarians within the official schedules of such visits.

Where possible, we should be hesitant to create new forums, but put our efforts in using the forums we already have, in a satisfactory way. When forums cease to serve the stated aims and purposes, we should seriously consider scaling them down or abolishing them.

We have to keep in mind the cost-effectiveness of parliamentary diplomacy: trying to boost performance while saving effort, time and money. In terms of parliamentary cooperation this can be translated into:

- integrating national and international parliamentary activities in order to enhance their effectiveness;
- promoting the efficiency and decisiveness of the existing parliamentary assemblies;
- strengthening cooperation between the existing assemblies in order to enhance the effectiveness of parliamentary scrutiny of government policy in different forums.

We should exercise restraint where it regards the establishment of permanent Friendship Groups. Except for between parliaments with very strong bilateral ties, bilateral parliamentary contacts should preferably take place as much as possible in conjunction with official international meetings.

To sum up. Certainly for a parliament with part time membership and a relatively small civil service staff, as is the case with the Dutch Senate, rational choices will have to be made from the virtually unlimited range of possibilities when deciding on how to be active internationally. It is necessary to be selective. What we have seen in the past few years in our Senate is that our activities in interparliamentary bodies and in interparliamentary meetings have been much better prepared than before. There is preparation in advance in relevant committees and there is feed back to committees after the meetings have taken place. There is much more intensive reporting on our websites on the work carried out in the interparliamentary assemblies and meetings, and about the contributions made by our senators. As far as foreign visits and the reception of foreign delegations are concerned, we have introduced an internal decision making process and we weigh carefully if journeys should be made and delegations from abroad can be received. Decisions involve balancing the purpose, value and rationale of visits against considerations of time, practical feasibility and budget constraints. Parliamentary diplomacy requires rationality. Carefully consider what you want to do in the international arena and try to be good in what you choose to do.