

International Conference on Benchmarking and Self-Assessment for Democratic Parliaments

March 3–4, 2010, Paris, France

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the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie (APF)

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would first like to express the great thanks of the *Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie (APF)* to the *World Bank Institute* and the *United Nations Development Programme* for organizing the **International Conference on Benchmarking and Self-Assessment for Democratic Parliaments**. I am pleased, as outlined in the programme, to tell you about who we are, our tools, the design of our presentation, our operating guidelines and our ongoing work.

The Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie, which is currently chaired by Mr. Yvon Vallières, Speaker of the National Assembly of Quebec, brings together 77 parliaments and parliamentary associations from every continent. Its main objectives are to promote democracy, peace, cultural diversity, human rights, the spread of the French language and the valuable role of parliamentarians.

In the world of the international Francophonie, we are the parliamentary branch of the executive power, headed by the Conference of Heads of State, which is held every two years. One of the highlights of the Conference is the meeting of the

APF, the parliamentary branch of the international Francophonie.

The APF therefore brings together parliaments from every continent. In addition to annual conferences uniting parliamentarians from each region and an annual meeting uniting parliamentarians from every branch, the APF's executive is made up of representatives from every region. Business is conducted through four committees: political affairs, culture, development and parliamentary affairs. The APF also includes the very active Women's Parliamentary Network.

The functioning of our member parliaments is clearly at the heart of our purpose and concerns. It therefore follows that the APF does not welcome representatives from countries where democracy has been overthrown.

In the Parliamentary Affairs Committee, which I chair, over and above discussing substantive issues we hold a number of workshops on parliamentary cooperation to improve the operation and working methods of parliaments:

1. Training seminars led by senior parliamentarians who discuss with new parliamentarians the scope of their mandate;
2. Training workshops for senior officials in our parliaments;
3. Technical help to publish proceedings of parliamentary debates;
4. The NORIA project, a parliamentary information management program, which takes the specific needs of participating parliaments into account;
5. The Francophone Youth Parliament to familiarize youth with democratic institutions;

6. Follow-up to international Francophonie electoral observation missions involving APF parliamentarians;
7. Under the responsibility of the Parliamentary Affairs Committee, the APF has committed to a very ambitious project to survey member parliaments about parliamentary practice and procedures. This compendium, coordinated by Ms. Michèle André, French Senator and Vice-Chair of the Parliamentary Affairs Committee, will be finalized at the APF's next session, in July 2010. Contributions from the various branches and the first chapters of the compendium have already been posted on the APF website.

The project of developing criteria for evaluating the democratic reality of parliaments falls under the APF's natural mission.

The launch of this project coincided with the signing of a cooperation agreement with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in New York in January 2009.

The APF intends to play an active role in the global reflection on developing and strengthening democracy. To this end, it has undertaken, for the Francophone world, to develop what we call "*criteria for evaluating the democratic reality of parliaments.*" We therefore wish to actively contribute to a common reflection, alongside the 50 or so other organizations at this Conference as well as inter-parliamentary associations.

We aim to recognize the contributions of the various parliamentary traditions in the Francophone world that reflect, each in their own way, the wealth of this organization. The APF unites parliaments from countries with various parliamentary traditions and at various stages of development. **The challenge**

of this exercise was to combine all these differences into a single document in which countries could recognize themselves.

A rough draft was produced in the form of a comparative study of the standing orders of several parliaments in the Francophone world and proposals from our branches.

We also included excerpts from reference documents of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, including

- the *Bamako Declaration on Democratic Practices, Rights and Freedoms in the Francophone World* (Bamako, November 2000); and
- the *St. Boniface Declaration* issued by the Ministerial Conference of la Francophonie on conflict prevention and human security (Canada, May 2006).

The rough draft was submitted to the APF's Network of Women Parliamentarians for their opinion. Subsequently, two seminars were held in connection with the spring 2009 meetings of the Committee on Parliamentary Affairs (March 23–25, Switzerland) and the Committee on Political Affairs (April 9–11, Laos). In both cases, Francophone parliamentarians, academics and representatives of the Association of Secretaries General of Francophone Parliaments debated the draft document. A text was subsequently adopted.

Following consultations with all of the APF's branches, a consolidated draft document was produced by APF Chair Yvon Vallières and the Secretary General of the APF, French Senator Jacques Legendre. Final changes were made by the APF's executive, leading to the document's adoption at the 35th Session of the APF in July in Paris. Given the document's recent

adoption, we have not had an opportunity to finalize the evaluation.

The document is divided into four main parts:

- 1. Elections and the status of parliamentarians**
- 2. Rights and duties of parliament**
- 3. Organization of parliaments**
- 4. Parliament and communications**

Each of these parts includes a number of subparts, which are covered in our brief.

The comprehensive range of criteria, which makes it possible to better identify the challenges and objectives of parliamentarians around the world, necessarily leads to reflection on the priorities to establish. We noted that, while consensus was reached on a number of universally recognized criteria, others gave rise to debate, in part because of each country's cultural heritage.

To illustrate my point, I would like to give a few examples.

- Let's first look at the balance between parliamentarians' right to freedom of expression and party discipline, especially in the difficult debate on "crossing the floor," that is, a parliamentarian elected under one party banner who voluntarily quits his party for another during the session in progress. Generally, parliaments of the North run up against those of the South over their perception of this change of allegiance.

A parliamentarian's defection during the session in progress can pose problems for both his party and his constituents. It can even change the outcome of an election. A number of parliaments have therefore adopted anti-defection measures whereby any parliamentarian who crosses the floor would lose his seat.

However, some countries find these measures unacceptable because they compromise the independence of parliamentarians.

These different approaches can be explained by realities that are themselves different: in some countries, this practice is infrequent and is limited primarily to individuals; in others, the scope is entirely different, and it is not uncommon for a group of parliamentarians to switch party allegiance all at once.

On this matter, we were unable to find a solution that satisfied everyone. More reflection is therefore needed.

- Another issue that caused debate is *the extent to which we can truly talk about a free, fair and transparent election* if there is discrimination with regard to gender, race, religion, language, sexual orientation, economic situation or disability of those standing for election. While some of these are considered essential criteria, others clash with cultural considerations such as discrimination based on sexual orientation.

- Another example: with a view to greater transparency, many countries have made it mandatory for parliamentarians to declare their financial and real estate assets. A number of countries have expressed reservations about this requirement. Should such a *procedure* be considered an essential criterion for good governance, or is this a matter for each parliament to decide?

- It was also unanimously agreed that, to fulfill their role, parliaments must have qualified staff independent of the executive to provide impartial assistance to parliamentarians in a number of areas. Yet there is a considerable gap in the parliamentary resources and materials of developed countries compared with developing countries. It is also difficult to establish universal criteria guaranteeing a democratic recruitment process. Should the *recruitment and promotion of*

parliamentary staff be done through a merit-based competition having fair and transparent criteria?

- Final example: the problem multilingual parliaments face. *Should parliamentary institutions be required to use multiple languages of work* to ensure understanding among its members? If so, what criteria should be used? Equity, equality or proportion?

It is clear that these questions require semantic and methodological reflection to help us further clarify our evaluation method. They can help us better understand the meaning of shared commitment to successful democracies in countries we aim to support while respecting their respective paths.

In identifying the criteria against which parliamentary democracy can be gauged, our Assembly was able to mobilize and to reflect on the best means of ensuring that parliament as an institution works and has legitimacy. The exercise enabled us to share our experiences and look objectively at the best ways of serving democracy.

The document we produced is more a collection of prescriptive criteria. **It lists the objectives to strive for by member parliaments of the APF.** Above all, it is a constructive document that aims to form the basis of a regular, targeted and progressive process. It finds its meaning in our desire to constantly improve the functioning of our parliaments, as we have sought to do over the past 30 years and as we will continue to do for 30 more.

During that time we have seen a strong trend toward increasing democratic reform, including in former democracies.

Moreover, to restore public confidence in the integrity of parliamentarians, in recent years many parliaments have adopted funding rules for political parties and codes of ethics.

Measures aimed at ensuring better social and political representation have been examined, such as provisions to increase the representation of women and minorities.

Reflection has also been given on how to combat voter apathy. Various measures have been considered to make parliamentary institutions more transparent through the use of new technological tools, thereby fostering citizens' access to parliamentary information.

Democracies must always therefore adapt to an ever-changing world.

In the coming months, the APF will have to decide on the next step for its document on criteria evaluating the democratic reality of parliaments. An assessment by some of our branches will perhaps lead us to make amendments or additions.

I will listen attentively to the experiences and assessments that have been conducted by parliaments to date using tools developed by different organizations. Exchange and synergy can serve only to stimulate and optimize our reflections on how to develop and strengthen democracy.

My dear colleagues, the history of humankind, from the point of view of each man and each woman, is, all told, a long march, an ongoing quest for men and women to more fully and truly participate in taking charge of their own destiny. It is our duty not to disappoint them.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention.