

The Global Parliamentary Report – Parliament and Citizens

By Greg Power

Towards the end of 2011 the UNDP and the Inter-Parliamentary Union will jointly publish the first Global Parliamentary Report. The intention is to provide an assessment of the state of parliaments worldwide – examining their changing role and the way in which they are responding to the increasingly complex demands of governance, citizens and society. And, as part of the process, we are keen to draw on the insights and expertise within the Agora community.

The focus of what will be the first in a series of global parliamentary reports is the relationship between parliaments and citizens. Parliamentary legitimacy rests to a large extent on the way in which the institutions respond to the needs and expectations of voters. But this is a permanently shifting relationship, and parliaments need to be continually evolving and adapting to the challenges that they face. The aim of the report is to examine how these challenges are playing themselves out in different parts of the world and, critically, explore examples of parliamentary innovation which have sought to deepen the dialogue between people and politicians.

The analysis will be built around four broad themes – and it is in each of these that we are seeking advice from members of Agora. The first is the way in which political representation is itself changing. It appears that parliaments old and new are facing similar pressures from citizens for greater consultation, forms of more direct democracy and heightened public expectations created by the immediacy of modern communication methods.

We need to understand how those pressures are manifesting themselves. Particularly in relation to the role being played by political parties (and their parliamentary caucuses) as the principal vehicles for representation and their critical role in determining the effectiveness of the parliament. We are also



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attempting to find out whether parliaments of a similar age are facing similar problems – those in each of Samuel Huntington's 'three waves' of democracy for example.

The second theme is more specifically how parliaments *collectively* engage with and represent the public. In other words, it will look at how parliaments involve individuals and organisations during the course of their legislative, budgetary and oversight functions. What are the ways in which parliaments draw on evidence from the public, how easy is it for members of the public to participate and which parliaments are using innovative ways of consulting voters?

It will seek to assess how well parliaments are engaging with the outside world in key policy areas, such as health, education or the environment, and highlight innovative ways (including the use of ICT) in which greater consultation has had an impact on policy development. It will also seek to identify good practices – among parliaments, governments,

the media and civil society – that enable voters to better understand the role and work of parliament and improve the quality of legislation and oversight.

As well as a collective representative function, politicians have an *individual* representative function. This is the third theme – exploring the way in which they respond to individual voters or groups of voters. This is a key dynamic in every parliament, and often at the heart of how politicians see themselves, but one which is too often overlooked.

How, for example, does the ‘electoral incentive’ affect their work inside and outside parliament? This varies according to the electoral system, with list systems encouraging greater loyalty to party chiefs, and constituency systems meaning that politicians are often judged by voters on what they deliver locally.

Anecdotal evidence suggests there is a huge amount of innovation being undertaken by politicians, and a huge variety in the way in which these roles are pursued. We will aim to highlight these and identify some key characteristics of constituency work. We will also look at the impact of constituency development funds in different countries, exploring the pros and cons of this recent trend.

The final theme is the way in which parliaments are communicating with voters. That is, how they reach out and explain their role to the public. This will pay particular attention to public attitudes to parliament (and how these contrast with the opinions of parliamentarians themselves) about how well the institutions are fulfilling their expected roles.

It appears that in many countries attitudes are based on limited understanding and unrealistic expectations of what politicians can do. But that perception needs to be understood. The analysis will look at the issue of trust in politicians and parliaments, its causes and dynamics, and highlight some of the measures that parliaments have taken to address mistrust.

As a first stage we are aiming to map the field of parliamentary development programmes and identify stories, examples and case studies, particularly around the four themes. We would welcome examples of support programmes designed to improve the relationship between voters and politicians, the challenges of public expectations in different countries and innovations in constituency service, parliamentary practice or outreach.

Our analysis is premised on the belief that parliaments perform vital roles in representative democracies which cannot be replicated by any other institution or actor. But maintaining their legitimacy means continuing to evolve at the same pace as the societies they seek to represent. We hope that with your help the report will offer insights, advice and innovation to this end.

The Global Parliamentary Report is designed to be a practical rather than an academic analysis of the state of parliaments. We are therefore very keen to draw on the experience of those working in the field. To this end the AGORA Trusted Area group *Global Parliamentary Report – Parliament and Citizens* is designed to find real examples about the way in which the parliament-citizen relationship is changing in different countries, and about how parliaments (and politicians) are responding to those challenges. We want to identify examples and case studies which provide substance for the report, and information on the range of parliamentary support programmes designed to improve representation - and AGORA members provide the most useful source of expertise and insight.

To request membership of Trusted Area and join the group *Global Parliamentary Report – Parliament and Citizens*, please go to

<https://agora.trustedarea.net/login>

If you would like further information please contact Greg Power – greg@global-partners.co.uk.