
The Impact of Globalization on Parliamentary Action

by Olivier Giscard d'Estaing

National parliaments are losing some of their importance because of the little influence they have over so many aspects of globalization. This article suggests we move away from a world of international structures, based on nations, to an intercontinental world.

Ideas about global democracy have been advanced since Tocqueville and Schumpeter but in terms of time and space, we have crossed into a different realm where information is instantaneously available on a global scale. This revolution affects our psychological state of mind and the important decisions we are called upon to make. We are all party to major global events as they unfold. That is the true lesson to be drawn from the events of September 11. The aftershock of the tragic events of that day was felt around the world. Every day, we witness events such as floods in Bangladesh, the death of children in Africa by starvation, major soccer games. People the world over find a common voice in day-to-day events, whether serious or pleasant in nature. Politicians need to take this fact into account because it impacts the feelings and reactions of their constituents.

We often hear how the world is a village, a village without municipal officials and therefore a village in a state of anarchy. There is no governing body to deal with common concerns on a global scale. Joseph Stiglitz in, *La grande désillusion de la mondialisation*, illustrates his point by noting the following: Trade ministers discuss the world's major trade problems; Finance ministers focus on major financial problems. Who focuses on human resources and social issues? Obviously, these ministers follow government orders. When heads of state meet, such

concerns may be on their minds, but their primary focus is defending the interests of their own nation and people. In truth, defending these interests could prove prejudicial to others if there is no one to speak out "globally" on major economic, social and humanitarian issues.

This is, I believe, a major source of unease in our societies. What is needed are persons willing to devote some time to resolving conflicts of national interest and to addressing global problems, all of which implies democratic action which would go a long way toward reassuring people. I am flabbergasted by the deafening silence of parliamentarians when it comes to major global debates. Be it in Seattle or in Johannesburg, we have not heard the representatives of the people express their views on these problems and say: Here is what we expect from our governments! I find this state of affairs extremely alarming.

We hold our collective breath and wait to see if tragically, the United States will invade Iraq. The fact is that we do not have any means of expressing our views other than through our heads of state. However, the United States Congress is the body granting the President the authority to intervene militarily. Congress made this decision, against the recommendation of the United Nations, Chancellor Schroeder and President Chirac. The problem we are facing is global in nature, because a war in Iraq will have global repercussions in terms of energy, relations with Middle East countries and all of Islam, not to mention the rift that such a conflict will create and the myriad economic, moral and psychological problems that a terrible conflagration will cause. Recently, a head of state who is a strong proponent of peace had this to say: "In this day and age, it is unthinkable to even con-

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sider resorting to violence to resolve international problems. Our powers to destroy are such that once we begin, we have no way of knowing where our actions will lead us." This is a good illustration of the problem we face.

I would also like to talk about the European example, about the efforts to establish an international political and parliamentary institution, namely the European Parliament. I would like to quote from a statement made by George Bush Senior to the United Nations in October 1990: "I see a world where democracy continues to win new friends and convert old foes and where the Americas, North, Central and South, can provide a model for the future of all humankind, the world's first completely democratic hemisphere, and I see a world building on the emerging new model of European unity; not just Europe, but the whole world, whole and free."

Allow me to recall briefly the history of this European achievement which came on the heels of Germany's destruction and the aftermath of the war, both of which I witnessed. What actually happened is that Churchill first came up with the suggestion of a united states of Europe in a speech delivered in Zurich on September 19, 1946. The idea was again taken up by the Congress meeting in The Hague on May 10, 1948. The result was the birth of the European movement and the creation of the first international European institution, the Council of Europe. I will pass over all of the details, the successive stages in the process and the success and failures associated with the building of Europe. We now have a European Parliament, a European institution, a Council of Europe and a legislative and decision-making process in place. We try to ensure that these institutions work together because decisions referred to the European Parliament that deal with international treaty issues are taken up again by national parliaments and debated before they are passed into law by these same national parliaments. At this very moment, representatives of national parliaments, the European Parliament, the Commission and governments are meeting to propose a new model for a European convention or constitution. I would like to see a comparable shift in position on a global level, that is to see one of the world's major leaders propose the creation of new global institutions. Parliamentarians and associations could promote this alternative and the opinions and views of the public would have an opportunity to be heard.

Many initiatives are being taken in this area and we are seeing gestures of some symbolic value. I recall a man by the name of Gary Davis who, during the 1950s, tore up his passport on the grounds that he was a citizen of the world. The concept of world citizenship is gaining acceptance and has become the focus of certain lobby groups, notably our committee for a global parliament and the

Athens Club, to name only two. A number of associations are lobbying for global democracy and many documents can be accessed via a host of Internet sites.

We refer to ourselves as an action committee and as such, in order to establish a global Parliament, we need to look to history for inspiration. How do we go about changing institutions? Is war the solution? Does the political will for change exist?

Do heads of state bring about change, or does it come about as a result of popular pressure or revolution, as we have seen several times in France?

Let me give an example which ties in more with parliamentary action. A project is in the works to create an E-Parliament, that is a Parliament linking up all of the world's parliamentarians via the Internet. In theory, participation is geared primarily to democratic countries. We are collecting the e-mail addresses of some 25,000 parliamentarians, either by contacting them directly or their national parliament, and the goal is to have committees or groups work together on international issues. We have held three meetings to discuss this topic, in Venice and in New York in 2001; and in Tenerife in 2002. Various Internet groups have been created: one to examine energy concerns, another to look at the rights of children and still another to consider AIDS. We already have on file addresses of 18,000 parliamentarians out of the 25,000 we hope to reach.

What are the specific areas of concern for a global parliament? This parliament should refrain from getting involved in national problems and restrict its focus to global problems, namely the major problems facing the United Nations. The focus needs to be put on the WTO, on trade, the environment and agriculture; on UNESCO, our universal heritage and education, on the ILO and social standards, child labour and trade unionism; on UNICEF and child protection; and on the WHO and health, AIDS and inoculation programs; on the UN program for sustainable development. In addition to these official agencies, we need organizations willing to assign resources – here is one example of where global taxes would be a good thing – to addressing these concerns and national priorities recognized by an international body.

I call upon all the world's parliamentarians, and their national governments to voice our concerns and to work toward the revitalization of parliamentary action, representative democracy and the establishment of a global, democratic and institutional governing body that would restore people's hope and trust.