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# The International Relations of the National Assembly of Quebec

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by Louise Harel, Speaker of Quebec National Assembly

*The National Assembly of Quebec is one of the oldest parliamentary institutions in North America. Through the years it has developed many contacts with foreign Parliaments as well as with a variety of interparliamentary organizations. In so doing the National Assembly participates in many international activities, contributing thereby to Quebec's outreach abroad. This article presents an up-to-date picture of the international relations of the National Assembly, first by defining their field of action and their distinguishing features, then by explaining how they are conducted, by defining their objectives, and finally by stating the priorities for action.*



The changes that have occurred on the world stage, particularly since the early 1990s, have influenced the international stance our Assembly has adopted. The internationalization of exchanges together with the volume of the information available and the speed with which it circulates, now act upon every dimension of public life in contemporary societies and are of

concern to the entire political class worldwide. That is all the more true of parliamentary institutions. Is it not the duty of elected officials to step to the fore when the well-being of their fellow citizens is affected directly, and sometimes harshly, by globalization? Ought they not to be the intermediaries to whom citizens spontaneously

turn to find immediate solutions when, for example, jobs are lost because of a decision taken by the board of directors of a large multinational enterprise meeting thousands of kilometers away? Are they not the very ones who, as the custodians of the popular legitimacy conferred upon them through their election by universal suffrage, can make good the democratic deficit that is so often decried in connection with major international trade negotiations?

In this context parliamentary institutions must, more than ever, occupy the field of interparliamentary and international relations, in particular by strengthening the ties among Assemblies and by intervening in the major political issues of our world. Parliamentary diplomacy, whose necessity and versatility are increasingly acknowledged by governments and intergovernmental organizations, is accordingly becoming a key instrument through which elected officials can assume control over the international dimension of their representative function. The National Assembly of Quebec, which is proud of the international expertise it has developed over the years, intends to be a major partner in this field.

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## The International Activity of Parliaments: Its Field of Action and Distinguishing Features

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The expression "interparliamentary relations" usually denotes the international relations carried on by the legislative branch of a state. These relations are conducted first and foremost among Parliaments themselves, either on a bilateral basis or within well-structured networks of multilateral interparliamentary organizations. The latter bring together Parliaments on either a regional basis (the Asia Pacific Parliamentary Forum), a global basis (the Inter-Parliamentary Union), or a sectorial basis (the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie or the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association).

While the ties among Parliaments are their essential component, the international relations of the legislative branch are not limited to these alone. Indeed, Parliaments also carry on relations with various international intergovernmental and non governmental organizations as well as with the members of the diplomatic and consular corps.

The first principle underlying the international activity of Parliament, and from which it derives its distinctiveness, is independence of action. In our democratic systems based on the separation of powers Parliaments act independently when conducting their international relations. This independence leads them to pursue objectives, to choose partners, to apply principles, and to lend their activities a style and a pace that are fundamentally congruous with their primary functions, namely to enact legislation, to oversee government activity, to consider matters of public interest, and to represent the population.

In tandem with independence of action is a second principle that likewise forms the groundwork of the international action of Parliaments and makes it unique: It is a respect for political pluralism. The international relations of Parliaments generally take into account the interests and political sensitivities of the various parties represented within them. This principle manifests itself concretely in the creation of pluralistic delegations to take part in interparliamentary activities. Thus, a parliamentary delegation will as a general rule comprise parliamentarians from the various political groups represented in the House, both those in power and those in opposition. This approach safeguards the nonpartisan nature of interparliamentary activities, since the diverse points of view present in society can find expression within them.

These two fundamental characteristics, independence of action and a respect for political pluralism, also ensure the legitimacy of the international activity of Parliaments above and beyond the credibility inherent in the office of

parliamentarian. Indeed, in their capacity as elected representatives of the population and on the strength of the democratic authority they thereby enjoy, parliamentarians wield considerable power of influence to voice the needs, concerns, and interests of the society they represent.

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## The Conduct of the International Relations of the National Assembly

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Like a number of other Parliaments, the National Assembly of Quebec places the responsibility for its international relations in the hands of the Chair of the Assembly. Standing Order 1 of the National Assembly even identifies it as one of the three powers of the Chair:

The President shall chair the meetings of the National Assembly and direct its services; he shall likewise represent it, most particularly in its relations with other Parliaments.

The Speaker (President) thus directs the international relations of the Assembly, sets their priorities, and organizes their implementation.

Faced with the significant evolution that has occurred in the international activities of the National Assembly during the past ten years, the Chair has created a structure to assist it in conducting the Assembly's international relations. This structure consists of "sections" or "delegations" of the National Assembly of Quebec for interparliamentary relations. It has the advantage of ensuring the cohesion and the continuity of the international activities of the National Assembly by entrusting to Members of the Assembly (MNAs), notably, the responsibility for following through on specific matters. The sections or delegations are called upon to carry forward the Assembly's relations with a given country, region, or interparliamentary organization or in a particular sector of activity (for example, interparliamentary cooperation). As soon as they are elected, MNAs are offered the opportunity to join three sections or delegations, according to their preferences.

Each section or delegation comprises some fifteen MNAs and has a steering committee made up of four parliamentarians: the Speaker of the National Assembly, the president of the section or delegation, and two vice-presidents drawn from the two main political parties represented in the Assembly. The steering committee oversees the preparations for and the followup to the activities of the section or delegation. Each section has at its disposal the services of an administrative secretary chosen from the staff of the Interparliamentary and International Relations Branch.

The appointment of MNAs to sit on the steering committees, to conduct missions abroad, or to join in the host

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delegations that receive foreign visitors at the National Assembly is the prerogative of the Speaker. In practice the Speaker of the National Assembly makes these appointments in consultation with the Whips of the two major political parties. In the British parliamentary system the Whips, as important parliamentary figures, are responsible for coordinating the participation of Members in the various facets of parliamentary business, particularly their presence in the House and in parliamentary committees. At the request of the Chair the Whips accordingly suggest the names of MNAs for each of the international activities or positions. However, the Chair retains full discretion to accept or refuse the suggestions put forward by the Whips.

It is with the underpinning provided by this structure that the National Assembly conducts its international activities, which may be grouped in three broad categories, as follows:

#### **Multilateral activities**

- Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie;
- Commonwealth Parliamentary Association;
- Parliamentary Confederation of the Americas;
- Council of State Governments;
- National Conference of State Legislatures.

#### **Bilateral relations**

The National Assembly of Quebec has signed agreements with:

- France (National Assembly and Senate);
- Bavaria;
- the Central American Parliament;
- the French-speaking community of Belgium;
- Brazil;
- Catalonia;
- California;
- Niger;
- Ontario;
- Wallonia.

#### **Interparliamentary cooperation**

- The interparliamentary cooperation program of the National Assembly of Quebec, which has been particularly active since 1996, has led to the conception and execution of a number of programs, seminars, information workshops, exchanges, and training and professional development initiatives intended for both the parliamentarians and the administrative staff of

partner Assemblies. To date these activities have been carried out in close collaboration with the National Assemblies of Benin, Burkina Faso, Haiti, Madagascar, Mali, and Niger.

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#### **The Objectives of the International Relations of the National Assembly of Quebec**

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The participation of the National Assembly of Quebec in multilateral interparliamentary organizations and the bilateral relations it entertains with foreign Parliaments are configured around four major axes:

- Maintaining and strengthening the effectiveness of the parliamentary institution and of elected representatives in their duties of enacting legislation, overseeing government activity, considering matters of public interest, and representing the population;
- Active participation by the National Assembly in building a global community based on democracy, peace, justice, and prosperity;
- Improving the international stance of the National Assembly and broadening the outreach of Quebec society;
- Fostering the institutional outreach of the National Assembly within interparliamentary networks.

The National Assembly pursues a certain number of specific objectives relating to the particular nature of each organization to which it belongs.

Over the years the National Assembly has committed itself in greater depth in certain fields whose social and universal scope are of major significance for the international community. We thus have been very active in taking into account the interests of the young generations regarding the future, in particular by initiating and hosting, in July 2001, the first Francophone Youth Parliament, carried out in close cooperation with the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie and the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie. During that event more than 80 young people from all the continents of La Francophonie gave expression to their concerns in a "Charter of the Young Francophone Citizen of the Twenty-First Century," which was tabled before the heads of state and government of La Francophonie at their Summit in Beirut last October 18.

In the same spirit the National Assembly of Quebec hosted the World Youth Parliament for Water this past November 22. More than 75 young participants aged 14 to 18 from 27 countries on all five continents, where water resources are polluted or at risk of becoming so, gathered to share their concerns on the themes of access to water, water purification, water governance, and international solidarity in the management of water. The leg-

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islative proposal that was passed in Quebec City by the World Youth Parliament for Water will be presented at the World Assembly of Water Wisdom Initiative, which will meet in Kyoto during the Third World Forum on Water in March 2003. To this end a young parliamentarian from Quebec presented the legislative proposal to the Japanese delegation of young parliamentarians, who officially transmitted it to the Japanese delegate to the World Assembly of the Water Wisdom Initiative.

The National Assembly has also taken an interest in the presence of women in the political sphere. Although they occupy an increasing number of official positions and seats as elected representatives and are bringing about noteworthy changes in the various institutional structures and in the setting of government priorities, women remain a minority within these bodies. Indeed, they continue to be underrepresented in parliamentary institutions. Even though their number has quadrupled during the past 50 years, they still account for only 13.8% of elected representatives worldwide, whereas they form 52% of the population. The National Assembly has accordingly invested a great deal of energy over the years in contributing to the creation and the institutionalization of networks of women parliamentarians, most particularly within the *Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie* (APF) and the *Parliamentary Confederation of the Americas* (COPA), while remaining very active in the *Women's Network of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association*. The initiatives undertaken by these networks include holding the first APF seminar for women parliamentarians in Africa in the spring of 2003. As well, they not only are developing a documentary bank on women within the framework of the COPA that will monitor legislative measures on women's rights adopted in various countries represented by the members of the network but also are establishing a large number of Internet links and electronic resources on the status of women in the Americas and on the other continents.

### Conclusion

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In the present context, in which governmental and democratic structures have been weakened by globalization, the international activity of Parliaments is more than

ever a response to the socioeconomic constraints arising out of the international environment that affect our societies from day to day. Parliamentary institutions and elected Members can, and must, act as mediators between the international environment and the regions, communities, localities, and citizens they represent. It is their duty to ensure that their voices are heard not only by their colleagues in other parliamentary and interparliamentary institutions but also by nongovernmental, governmental, and intergovernmental organizations that can influence local issues.

This parliamentary diplomatic activity can also bear fruit in promoting parliamentary democracy, which has become a necessity in a world in which the inequalities between wealthy countries and less privileged countries ought no longer to be tolerated. The ability of citizens to choose their leaders freely, to influence the political agenda, to oversee their government through legitimately elected parliamentarians, and to pursue an effective and operative legislative process is the most reliable guarantee that political stability and a more equitable sharing of the collective wealth will be secured. Through interparliamentary cooperation Quebec parliamentarians are thus able, in a dynamic of reciprocal sharing, to assist their counterparts in Parliaments that are undergoing democratic consolidation, thereby simultaneously strengthening democratic institutions and democratic processes. What is more, the international activity of the National Assembly of Quebec will contribute to a more promising and equitable future for the younger generations and for women.

Having returned from Beirut, where I had the pleasure, as President of the *Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie*, of representing the parliamentary branch of La Francophonie before the heads of state and government meeting for their Ninth Summit, I consider it to be more important than ever for Parliaments to move decisively to occupy the field of international relations. Will such a course of action not enable us to offset, at least in part, the oft-criticized democratic deficit surrounding major international negotiations? I sincerely believe it will.