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# Québec 2008 and the Francophone Parliamentary Community

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by François Côté

*From July 4 to 7, 2008 the National Assembly of Québec welcomed the parliamentarians of the global Francophone community to the 34th Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Francophonie (APF). A record number of 447 delegates from about fifty parliamentary assemblies and organizations participated in the APF activities which coincided with Québec City's 400th anniversary celebrations. In addition to the Plenary Assembly, the APF Bureau, the four standing committees, the Network of Women Parliamentarians and the Americas Regional Assembly met during this year's Session. In conjunction with the APF Session and the 400th anniversary festivities, a Conference of the Parliamentary Presiding Officers of the Francophonie was also held at the National Assembly on July 4, 2008. This article looks back on the summer's memorable events.*

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Francophonie (APF) is a forum for discussion, proposals and the exchange of information. As the Francophonie's Consultative Assembly, the APF was founded to reflect and illustrate the cultural pluralism of the Francophone peoples of the world. Today, it also aims to promote and defend democracy, the rule of law, human rights, the international status of the French language and cultural diversity. The APF is composed of 77 parliaments and interparliamentary organizations divided into Sections, which meet annually in a Plenary Assembly to discuss subjects of concern to Francophones and their elected representatives. The APF usually determines its agenda in keeping with the priorities established during summits of the heads of state and government of the Francophonie. The theme of this year's general discussion was *The Environment and the Development of Societies*, one of the major issues on the agenda for the 2008 Summit of the Francophonie.

The proceedings of the 34th Session were chaired by Guy Nzouba Ndama, President of the National Assembly of Gabon and Chair of the APF. During the formal opening meeting, the Secretary General of the International Organization of the Francophonie (IOF), Abdou Diouf, described Québec as a "shining symbol of the Francophone presence in North America"<sup>1</sup> and warmly thanked the APF for encouraging discussion and supporting the actions of the Francophonie in "a common effort in the service of the French language, linguistic and cultural diversity, solidarity and development, democracy, human rights and peace"<sup>2</sup>. The Secretary General then read his annual report on the activities of the Francophonie and answered questions.

At the opening of the general discussion on *The Environment and the Development of Societies*, Steven Guilbault, guest speaker and co-founder of Équiterre, a Québec environmental organization, gave a sustainable development awareness talk. A resolution on that theme was proposed by the Cooperation and Development Committee and adopted by the Plenary Assembly. The resolution encourages the states and governments of the Francophonie to ratify and implement as soon as possible the international conventions and agreements on the

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*François Côté is Secretary General of the National Assembly of Québec.*

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protection of the environment, to integrate the concept of sustainable development in their legislation and even in their constitution, to work multilaterally and multi-dimensionally to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, to study the development of renewable energy sources and to bolster the fight against desertification and deforestation, especially in tropical regions. The APF is also requesting the IOF to direct additional financial resources toward further enabling the parliamentary institutions of the Francophone states to develop and implement national sustainable development strategies.

Other current issues were also discussed during the Plenary Session. Macky Sall, President of the National Assembly of Senegal, spoke on *The Food Crisis and the High Cost of Living*, a subject that stimulated intense discussion among the parliamentarians and led to a resolution requesting an increase in food aid from the World Food Program, funding states and the international community. In the face of the sudden rise in the price of foodstuffs and the resulting social, political and international consequences, the APF also called on the IOF to hold an emergency debate on these issues during the upcoming Summit of the Francophonie.

The Québec Section made a proposal to the Cooperation and Development Committee for a resolution with respect to the deadlock in the World Trade Organization's multilateral trade negotiations. The resolution calls for the Doha process to be resumed in a spirit of compromise to foster free and fairer trade, while respecting the constraints of developing and less advanced countries.

The participants also adopted a resolution with respect to the future of TV5 Monde, lauding the agreement that guarantees the multilateral character of the Francophone station and recommending that the APF member states support the station as a leading institution in the French-speaking world due to its key role in the expression of cultural diversity.

In its role as watchdog of democracy in the Francophone community, the APF rigorously examines the situation of certain countries weakened by various types of political crisis. This year, on a proposal by the Political Committee, the APF condemned the attacks against parliamentarians in Burundi and Lebanon and the acts of violence against the civil populations of Lebanon, Mauritania, Palestine and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The Assembly also expressed the desire to send a fact-finding mission to Burundi and an assessment mission to Chad and the Central African Republic, in collaboration with the IOF. The parliamentarians further proposed that the IOF undertake the next steps in the consolidation of the DRC's institutions and

the peace process and continue its support of the transition underway in Ivory Coast.

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### Other Meeting

The Bureau, the executive body of the APF that oversees the implementation of the decisions of the Plenary Assembly, met in Québec City on July 2 to take stock of the past year and discuss future APF policy directions, especially with respect to committee work and various APF programs.

The four APF standing committees--the Parliamentary Affairs Committee (PAC), the Cooperation and Development Committee (CDC), the Political Committee (PC) and the Education, Communication and Cultural Affairs Committee (ECCAC)--provide an important forum for discussion. The Assembly bases its recommendations on reports from these committees. Aside from the topics on which resolutions were adopted in the Plenary Assembly, the committees examined subjects as varied as public access to parliamentary information and parliamentary life (PAC), agriculture and the contribution of the Francophonie to the adoption of national sustainable development strategies (CDC), the implementation of the Bamako Declaration (PC), cultural diversity and the fight against HIV/AIDS (ECCAC).

The Network of Women Parliamentarians, created in 2002 on the initiative of the Québec and Canada Sections, strives to foster increased participation by women in political, economic, social and cultural matters and to strengthen the place and role of women in APF member parliaments and international organizations. During the Québec meeting, the Network discussed children's rights, the situation of women refugees and human trafficking.

In response to the July 4, 2008 rescue of French-Columbian hostage Ingrid Bétancourt, the women parliamentarians drew up a declaration expressing their joy at the former senator's release and their support for the hostages still being held by the FARC in Columbia, as well as all other hostages, especially women and children, held throughout the world. The declaration was immediately taken up by the Political Committee and subsequently adopted during the Plenary Assembly.

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### Resolution on the Vancouver Olympics

The APF is divided into four main regions: Africa, America, Asia-Pacific and Europe. The Americas Region, whose secretariat is hosted by the National Assembly of Québec, held its 24th Session on July 1 and 2, 2008, a few days before the APF Session. About sixty parlia-

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mentarians from the legislative assemblies of Canada, Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Québec, Saskatchewan, Louisiana and Maine discussed heritage conservation (Québec Section), Francophone youth parliaments (Ontario Section) and linguistic duality during the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games (Canada Section).

On the theme of linguistic duality, the Americas Region drew up a resolution to recommend that the IOF create the position of Grand Témoin de la Francophonie d'Amérique or "Great Witness" for the Games, whose mandate would be to raise awareness within the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games of the official status of the French language, in accordance with Rule 24 of the Olympic Charter. The resolution also reminds the Globemedia network of its commitment to ensure that the Games are broadcast and accessible in their entirety in French. The Americas Region of the APF forwarded the resolution to the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games and to the many public authorities associated with the Games, including the governments of Canada and British Columbia.

### **Strengthening of Parliamentary Democracy**

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On a proposal by the Speaker of the National Assembly of Québec, the Conference of Parliamentary Presiding Officers of the Francophonie was held once again this year, for the first time since 1995. The presiding officers of 45 parliaments of the French community met on July 4, 2008 in the National Assembly Chamber to discuss their role and the means at their disposal to strengthen parliamentary democracy within their respective assemblies. After a presentation by Louis Massicotte, holder of Laval University's new Research Chair in Democracy and Parliamentary Institutions, the presiding officers took the floor and shared their perspectives on the measures required to reinforce the impact of democratic institutions. They also discussed the importance of public participation in political life.

At the end of the meeting, a final declaration in favour of strengthening democratic practices and enhancing the role of parliamentarians was unanimously adopted. The presiding officers intend to encourage more citizen participation, especially that of women and young people, by raising awareness of the role and workings of legislative assemblies and making all parliamentary precincts more accessible to the public. They also committed them-

selves to taking the steps required to strengthen the capacity of assemblies to adopt legislation and oversee government budgets and government activity in the public interest, and reiterated the importance of further developing the knowledge and skills required to better perform their duties as presiding officers. They thus committed themselves to fostering ongoing dialogue among APF members in order to consolidate democracy in the global Francophone community.

### **The 12th Summit of the Francophonie**

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Approximately 200 million of the world's inhabitants speak French, making the Francophone linguistic community the ninth largest on the planet. July's activities were centred around the French language. Québec City during the celebration of its 400th anniversary was the ideal location for the summer's meetings, especially since it also hosted the 12th Conference of Heads of State and Government of Countries Using French as a Common Language, better known as the Summit of the Francophonie, from October 17 to 19, 2008.

This year, the Summit of the Francophonie addressed the following issues: democracy and the rule of law, economic governance, the environment and the French language. As the Consultative Assembly of the Francophonie, the APF adopted a report in July addressed to the heads of state and government of the Francophone community, which APF Chair Guy Nzouba Ndama submitted during the summit. The report included texts adopted during the APF Plenary Assembly and a follow-up on the action plans previously adopted by the APF.

This year's APF Session was very rewarding experience for both the National Assembly of Québec and its Members. Not only did the numerous discussions enable our parliamentarians to discover or rediscover the global Francophone community and establish strong ties with their peers, but our institution was also given an exceptional opportunity to position itself as a key player on the Francophone parliamentary scene.

### **Notes**

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1. Talk by H.E. Abdou Diouf, Secretary General of the Francophonie, 34th Session of the APF, Québec (Québec), July 4-7, 2008.
2. Talk by H.E. Abdou Diouf, Secretary General of the Francophonie, 34th Session of the APF, Québec (Québec), July 4-7, 2008.