
The Partnership of Parliaments

by Alfons Schöps

In 1983, members from each state legislature of what was then the Federal Republic of Germany founded the Partnership of Parliaments. Their goal was to create ties between the regional parliaments of Germany and America's state legislatures. Canada was included in 1993, and the Austrian state legislatures became members in 2005. This article looks at the work of the organization and particularly its relationship with Canadian provinces and Territories.

The Partnership of Parliaments is a non-governmental, non-profit organization whose goals are to provide new contacts for its members, to promote transatlantic dialogue, and to improve relations in the fields of politics, economy, and culture. The Partnership of Parliaments does not seek to conduct foreign policy. Financing is mainly provided by its members who pay to belong. The financial support of the business sector is also possible.

The focus of the Partnership of Parliaments lies in the planning, organization, and facilitation of their projects. These projects include, among others, two-week Study Tours to the United States, Canada, Austria, and Germany for the purpose of meeting and developing contacts with the parliamentarians of each respective host country. The members of the Partnership of Parliaments work hand-in-hand in planning the travel routes and preparing programs to welcome the delegations to their home district. In this aspect of involvement, their members serve as the cornerstone to the success of such programs.

Membership is not only limited to parliamentarians of Germany, Austria, the United States, and Canada. The Partnership of Parliaments is committed to strengthen their participant base by extending membership to professionals from all walks of life. Anyone in support of the Association's goals is welcome to become a member.

Every fall, the Partnership of Parliaments invites all of its members to the PoP Annual Meeting. Elections

are held on a two-year rotation during the Annual Meeting.

In June 1993 a small delegation of German state legislators travelled to Winnipeg, Manitoba, to initiate our very special relationship with Canada. Due to the initiative of a former cabinet member of Manitoba, we extended our transatlantic network to the Northern part of America as well.

Since then our organization established close ties to the legislative assemblies of Alberta, Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, and the Maritimes. Just this year we are planning to send a delegation to the Northwest Territories as well.

Because of the similar federal structures of Germany, Austria, and Canada, this exchange program for state and provincial legislators is very worthwhile. Certain developments in Canada may become of political relevance in Europe months later.

One example is the reform of fiscal federalism and equalization in Canada during the 90's, a bitter process which is now on the political agenda of the German states. Usually the national parliaments are always very well connected. There are so called "parliamentary groups" which are meeting on a regular basis in Ottawa as well as in Berlin or Vienna.

Federalism, however, is exceptionally vital on the level of the provinces, territories, or "Länder". This is why we are organizing exchange programs for state and provincial legislators only. They are the ones who also have to make important decisions for the future of their respective home states or provinces, and they are the ones who also need to have a chance to participate in an international dialogue among colleagues. In addition, they need to implement locally and provincially some

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of the measures the Federal branch has decided on that are regulated by international treaties. Even though the provincial level is officially not involved in foreign relations, the political consequences of international phenomena hit this level nevertheless, if one thinks of the swine flu, the current economical crises, etc.

Moreover, certain policy fields are within the authority of the "Länder" level within the German federal system. These fields, such as education (primary, secondary as well as higher education), the police, and correctional services (especially prisons and gaols) to name a few, are the core responsibility and authority of the "Länder". It is crucial, therefore, to share common experiences and to learn from each other. The international contacts and experiences provide, furthermore, encouragement and insights to get a deeper and better perspective: If one looks at the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment it showed that the best results were produced within Germany by the Free State of Bavaria.

Although the Bavarian government was proud of this, if one looks closer one will see that when compared to the Canadian provinces Bavaria would come in between Newfoundland and New Brunswick the two provinces ranking second last and last within Canada. So while being the leader of the pack within Germany, there is still much to improve and learn from one another.

From a Canadian perspective it is equally worthwhile that elected officials from the provincial and state levels have the opportunity to meet with their peers outside of the political world of the Commonwealth as well.

Canada and Germany have very close relations. They share the same cultural values, and their belief in the principles of democracy and federalism is very close as well. This is why the PoP is active on this political platform.