"Open Parliament": More Than Data

A three-day global summit on open government brought a diverse group of legislators, stakeholders, activists, educators and government employees from around the world to Ottawa in May 2019. In this article, the author focuses on discussions emerging from the Parliamentary Track of the conference, explains how "open parliament" can mean different things in emerging or established democracies and notes how new technological advances are assisting parliamentarians with their duties in ways previous unimagined.

Wendy Reynolds

In late May 2019, the City of Ottawa hosted a remarkable international gathering - the Global Summit of the Open Government Partnership.[1] The three-day event attracted legislators, stakeholders, activists, educators and government employees from around the world. On the agenda were initiatives from around the world to make democracy more inclusive, transparent and, well, democratic.

May 29 was a day of learning which will be of particular interest to this audience. I attended the Parliamentary Track of the conference, which was organised by ParlAmericas (an organisation operating to improve democratic processes in the Americas).[2] The diversity of the participants was impressive – I met with a House of Commons Deputy Speaker, a city counsellor from Austin, Texas, a youth representative from Sweden, a Parliamentarian from Kenya, two Senators from Sri Lanka, and a parliamentary staffer from New Zealand (working in the Clerk's Office).

For me, one of the most surprising insights was how broad the definition of "open" parliament can be. For those of us working in North America, the idea of "opening" government or parliaments is largely a technological undertaking. We focus on making data available to citizens – usually in machine-readable formats – so that they can build apps and do analyses of information in ways that we hadn't anticipated (and may benefit from!). It's about co-creation.

For those in new or emerging democracies, openness is more fundamental. It includes the physical safety of those wishing to participate in democratic processes – standing for election, voting, questioning public policy. It's about fundamental issues such as:

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- Attracting candidates from marginalized communities, including racialized groups, women, youth, and people with disabilities.
- Financial transparency – opening information to prevent (or reduce) corruption. Disclosure of beneficial ownership of companies doing business with governments, and preventing decision-makers from awarding work to concerns they own.
- Safety for journalists, academics and others who critique the work of parliaments and governments, including freedom of assembly, freedom of expression, internet access and control.
- Citizen participation in policy-making: e-petitions, participation in Committee deliberations, attendance of sittings, consultative processes (in person and virtual)
- Helping citizens understand what parliaments do, and what they can expect from their elected officials.

During a roundtable discussion, the parliamentarian from Kenya told our group about some initiatives that have gained traction in her parliament. They have leveraged the rapid adoption of smart phones in the country to expand their ability to collect comments and data from people in remote areas. For example, a committee considering health care issues sent out a message to their followers asking: "What is health care like in your village?"

The Ministry had provided the committee with high-level statistics. They knew how many clinics were operating in Kenya, and what the budget was to continue to offer the service. The responses from their followers gave them a completely different perspective. One village reported that they had a clinic, but no doctor. Others reported a lack of supplies or a workable space. Armed with on-the-ground information, the Committee was able to recommend improvements to the allocation of resources, matching the "official" story more accurately to the lived experience of citizens.

Participants in the ParlAmericas Open Parliament Day session in Ottawa on May 29, 2019.

An impressive gathering, and a fantastic learning opportunity. More information is available about the Open Government Partnership at www. opengovpartnership.org.

Notes

1   https://ogpsummit.org/en/summit-program/agenda/

2   http://parlamericas.org/en.aspx