



5, CHEMIN DU POMMIER  
CASE POSTALE 330  
1218 LE GRAND-SACONNEX / GENÈVE (SUISSE)

TELEPHONE (41.22) 919 41 50

FAX (41.22) 919 41 60

E-MAIL [postbox@mail.ipu.org](mailto:postbox@mail.ipu.org)

**Promoting inclusive parliaments:  
The representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in parliament**

**Report on a Panel Discussion on “Managing Diversity”**

Wednesday, 8 April 2009

The panel discussion took place during the 120<sup>th</sup> IPU Assembly in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), 6-10 April 2009. This report was prepared by Ms. Elizabeth Powley.

## **1. Summary**

This panel discussion, part of a joint IPU-UNDP project on promoting inclusive parliaments, examined various aspects of managing diversity, with a particular focus on the political participation of minorities and indigenous peoples. Senator Ricardo Monreal of Mexico moderated the panel. Senator Donald Oliver of Canada spoke on the topic, “A Parliamentary View on Pluralism and Diversity Today.” Honorable Netsanet Asfew of the Ethiopian House of Peoples’ Representatives presented, “Managing Diversity: the Ethiopian Experience.” Professor John Packer from the University of Essex, United Kingdom, addressed the topic, “Meeting the Challenges of Difference: Managing Diversity in a Globalized World.” Approximately 90 representatives attended the panel. France, Lesotho, Bahrain, Niger, Iran, and the Pan-African Parliament made interventions from the floor. The discussion addressed the benefits of diversity in the global economy, the international agreements and protocols that support the rights of minorities and indigenous groups, and various mechanisms for ensuring the political participation of all sectors in society. Several speakers highlighted the challenges inherent in the peaceful management of diverse interests, while others presented positive examples of the ways in which their parliaments reflect the composition of their societies. The need to protect minorities, and provide for their political participation in the face of majority rule, was affirmed.

## **2. Presentations**

### **2.1 Senator Donald Oliver of Canada: “A Parliamentary View on Pluralism and Diversity Today”**

Senator Oliver began by giving an overview of Canada’s experience with diversity and its successes and failures with regard to pluralism. Historically, immigration in Canada was from Europe, most immigrants were white, spoke English or French, and were Christians. This began to change in the 1960’s. Today, the bulk of Canada’s immigrants come from Asia. The 2006 census indicated that people in Canada come from more than 200 different ethnic groups.

The 2006 census also found that about five million people in Canada belong to a “visible minority.” This term is used in Canada within the context of federal employment equity legislation. Visible minorities are “persons, other than Aboriginal persons, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour.” Canada’s visible minority population has grown steadily over the last 25 years. In 2006, visible minorities comprised 16 percent of the population of Canada.

According to Senator Oliver, Canada has embraced a culture of pluralism. Much of the progress with regard to encouraging pluralism has come through laws that protect individual and employment rights. These include the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, the *Canadian Human Rights Act*, and the *Employment Equity Act*. Senator Oliver explained that the first two protect individuals against discrimination, while the third, the *Employment Equity Act*, seeks to affirmatively promote diversity and correct the under-representation of four major target groups: women, members of visible minorities, Aboriginal persons, and persons with disabilities. He argued strongly that both the protection of basic rights, and the affirmative inclusion of minorities are vital.

Senator Oliver also outlined some of the remaining problems – discrimination in employment, treatment by police and the justice system, education, etc. – before turning to the topic of the representation of minorities in Parliament. Voting rights evolved over time in Canada to include previously excluded groups, such as women and Aboriginal people. There has also been an evolution in terms of representation in Parliament, with increasing diversity, but there is still far to go. Though women make up half the population of Canada, they are only 22% of the lower house and one-third of the upper house. Visible minorities are particularly under-represented.

In order to redress these disparities, Senator Oliver encouraged parliamentarians to work within their political parties to reach out to youth, to new Canadians, and to visible minorities. He said, “When people of all ages, races, and ethnic groups see themselves reflected in the make-up of parliament, they are far more likely to feel represented.” Senator Oliver also asserted that the electoral system could be reshaped to promote diversity. Currently, Canada has a first-past-the-post system, but it is clear that proportional representation would be better for encouraging the participation of more women, Aboriginals, and visible minorities. Reforming the electoral system is difficult, he conceded. Voters in Canada have consistently rejected such reforms, as well as quotas for women.

The senator closed by emphasizing the need for public outreach to disadvantaged groups, and called for better communication between elected officials and members of visible minorities. He said, “Our citizens must be able to recognize themselves in their democratic institutions and be able to understand how decisions are made on their behalf.”

## 2.2 Representative Netsanet Asfew of the Ethiopian House of Peoples’ Representatives: “Managing Diversity: the Ethiopian Experience”

Representative Asfew presented Ethiopia’s experience managing the interests of national minorities. She explained that among Ethiopia’s 77 million people, there are 80 cultures and 80 languages. Claiming that diversity is natural – “we find it in the plant world, natural world, human world” – she outlined the way in which Ethiopia’s constitution and parliament accommodate such diversity.

Article 35 of the Ethiopian constitution establishes the equality of men and women. Article 39, which she indicated had been “controversial” when introduced, gives all people, nations, and nationalities the right to self-determination, up to the process of secession. At its inception, some people were “horrified” by this strong language and emphasis on minority rights, but the country has not splintered.

The House of Federation is the upper house of the bicameral Parliament of Ethiopia. It has 112 members. Each nation, nationality and people is represented in the House of Federation by at least one member. Beyond that, each nation or nationality is represented by an additional representative for every one million people. The lower house is the Council of People’s Representatives. It has 547 members elected to five-year terms in single-seat constituencies, with 22 seats reserved for minority nationalities.

The speech emphasized the rights of girls and women, and their representation in government. Asfew is adamantly opposed to quotas for women’s participation, but is proud of the recent increase in women’s representation in parliament, achieved without the aid of quotas. Last year women earned 117 of the 547 seats in the House of Peoples’ Representatives, up from only 13 seats ten years earlier. She highlighted recent improvements in education, health care, and access to social services, emphasizing the right of people to learn and receive services in their local languages.

Representative Asfew asserted that the term “minority” is problematic in Ethiopia, particularly when there are so many “minority” groups of various sizes. She stated, “Do not call us ‘minorities’ – we are ‘peoples, nations, and nationalities.’ We are the people of Ethiopia.” She was a strong advocate for the parliamentary system in Ethiopia, and in particular the way in which the House of Federation accommodates Ethiopia’s diversity.

### 2.3 Professor John Packer from the University of Essex, United Kingdom: “Meeting the Challenges of Difference: Managing Diversity in a Globalized World”

Professor Packer established the global context for his remarks: a diverse and increasingly complex and globalized world, where exclusionary politics and the use of ethnicity to distribute power and wealth is a public danger.

He then proceeded to identify an international normative framework for managing diversity, comprised of the following six standards: 1. respect for human rights, including provisions for both equal rights and non-discrimination; 2. autonomy of identity, culture, and way of life, including the right to self-determination; 3. right of participation, the right to have a voice, 4. rationalism, or deliberative decision-making; 5. the rule of law, and 6. the non-use of force.

According to Professor Packer, differences and the competition of ideas are a natural consequence of diversity. Some differences can be reconciled, but others cannot. This is not inherently bad, but rules and measures must be in place to peaceably resolve such conflicts when they arise. The presence of irreconcilable differences without rules can lead to war. Thus, the importance of the six international norms listed above.

### **3. Interventions from the floor**

Representatives from France, Lesotho, Bahrain, Niger, Iran, and the Pan-African Parliament made interventions from the floor. Some of the interventions highlighted positive practices, such as the MP from Lesotho who explained how her country had moved to a mixed member proportional system, which better accommodates the interests of minorities. Others raised questions for the panelists; the MP from France, for instance, asked technical questions about the role of statistics and data collection related to ethnic minorities, and why affirmative action for minorities is treated differently than for women.

The MP from Niger was very outspoken; he asserted that the focus on minorities' rights was "divisive." He claimed that certain groups in Niger manipulate terms like "indigenous" in order to get unwarranted protection from the international community. He also claimed that as a Muslim-majority nation, Niger would never accommodate minority views that were contrary to the Koran. The MP from Iran concurred with this last point, while assuring the assembly that all citizens in Iran, even Christians and Jews, were equal.

In response, panelists tackled some of the questions raised – responding to the MP from France, for instance, by explaining that the collection of ethnic statistics is vital for public policy planning, and that modern sampling techniques can be used to protect peoples' privacy/anonymity – and tried to address concerns that were raised about this delicate topic. Panelist John Packer emphasized the fact that nominal equality of minorities is not enough, it is substantive equality that matters. In a democratic system, a minority will always be outvoted, he explained, so "what do we do for them?" Their mere presence in an elected body is not enough; there must be measures in place to insure that they have the opportunity to make substantive input. A democracy requires not just responsiveness to the will of the majority, but the protection of minorities.