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ASSOCIATION OF SECRETARIES
GENERAL OF PARLIAMENTS

Evaluating Parliament: objectives, methods, results and impact

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Presentation by Ms. Françoise Fassiaux, Belgian MP representing the French-speaking Community and member of the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie (APF)

Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen,

My name is Françoise Fassiaux. I am a Belgian Member of Parliament representing the French-speaking Community and a member of the Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie (APF). I am pleased to be with you today to share my views about the complex question of evaluating parliaments and the criteria for doing so.

The APF is la Francophonie's consultative assembly. It brings together 77 parliaments and parliamentary organizations spanning the world. It debates subjects that are of interest and concern to its members and the people they represent. The APF makes its positions known to the Heads of State and Government of la Francophonie. Promoting democracy, peace and human rights, heightening the influence of French as a language and enhancing the role of parliamentarians are but some of its goals. The APF is divided into four geographical regions, namely: Africa, the Americas, Asia-Pacific and Europe. It has four standing committees and a network of women parliamentarians.

The APF has long been interested in the way its member parliaments work. Let me highlight two examples of this: 1) for several years now it has been implementing cooperation programmes for parliaments with a view to enhancing the way they function and their working methods; 2) under its Committee on Parliamentary Affairs, the APF has committed to a very ambitious project aimed at producing a compendium of parliamentary procedures and practice within its member parliaments. This compendium, coordinated under Ms. Michèle André,

Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Parliamentary Affairs, will be finalized at the APF's next session, in July 2010. Contributions from the various sections and the first chapters of the compendium have already been posted on the APF website.

1. Objective of the evaluation method

The project of developing criteria for evaluating the democratic reality of parliaments falls under the APF's natural mission. As the parliamentary assembly of la Francophonie, it is our duty to be sensitive to and proactive vis-à-vis the functioning of parliamentary institutions and the best practices that serve democracy.

The project I am presenting to you today was launched to coincide with the signing of a cooperation agreement with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in New York, in January. The purpose of this agreement is to work in partnership in the area of democratic governance and the development of parliaments throughout the world.

The APF intends to play an active role in the global reflection on developing and strengthening democracy. To this end, it has undertaken to develop jointly with UNDP, for the Francophone world, what we call criteria for evaluating the democratic reality of parliaments. The APF will thereby complete the work started by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, by extending the reflexion to parliaments which, for the most part, come from a different tradition.

2. Process of fine-tuning the evaluation method

first, the APF engaged the services of an intern from Laval University in association with the Research Chair of democracy and parliamentary institutions. A rough outline was produced in the form of a comparative study of the Standing Orders of several parliaments in the Francophone world. Included were extracts of reference documents of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, such as the Bamako Declaration on democratic practices, rights and freedoms in the Francophone world (Bamako, November 2000) and the St. Boniface Declaration issued by the Ministerial Conference of la Francophonie on conflict prevention and human security (Canada, May 2006).

The rough outline was submitted to the Network of Women Parliamentarians for their opinion. Subsequently, two seminars were held in the wings of the spring 2009 meetings of the Committee on Parliamentary Affairs (23-25 March, Switzerland) and the Committee on Political Affairs (9-11 April, Laos). In both cases, Francophone parliamentarians, academics and representatives of

the Association of Secretaries General of **Francophone Parliaments** debated the draft document and proposed amendments to it.

The entire set of amendments was sent by the Secretary General of the APF, Mr. Jacques Legendre, to the various APF sections with a view to obtaining their comments. At a later stage, the APF Secretary General produced a consolidated draft document. This version was examined by the members of the APF Bureau (our Assembly's executive), and subsequently approved by the two relevant Committees. It was finally adopted at the 35th Session of the APF in July in Paris.

3. Specific content of the evaluation method

The document that I have placed at your disposal is divided into four main parts:

Elections and the status of parliamentarians

- Elections
- Eligibility
- Status of parliamentarians
- Material situation of parliamentarians

Rights and duties of parliament

- Organization of parliamentary work
- Law-making functions
- Parliamentary oversight
- Parliamentary committees
- International relations

Organization of parliaments

- Status of political parties, parliamentary groups and the opposition
- Status of administrative staff
- Budget
- Material resources

Parliament and communications

- How accessible is the parliament ?
- Dissemination of parliamentary information

4. Future direction and conclusion

In identifying the criteria against which parliamentary democracy can be gauged, our Assembly was able to mobilize and to reflect on the best means of ensuring that parliament as an institution works and has legitimacy. The exercise enabled us to share our experiences and look objectively at the best ways of serving democracy.

In the coming months, the chairpersons of the relevant Committees and the Secretary General of the APF will have to decide what is the next step for this project. Their ideas will be shared with the members of the Bureau, who will meet in early 2010.

The document we have produced is by no means a set of standard criteria but rather benchmarks to which all parliaments should aspire. How to achieve this ideal may vary depending on the cultural, historical, economic and social specificities of each country. In other words, it is not an end but a means. It will become meaningful through our willingness to constantly enhance the way our parliaments work.

I will listen attentively to the experiences and assessments that have been conducted by parliaments to date using tools developed by different organizations. Exchange and synergy can only serve to stimulate and optimize our reflections on how to develop and strengthen democracy.

Thank you.