



**SPEAKING NOTES FOR SPEAKER HOUSAKOS ON
PARLIAMENTARY PRIVILEGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY**

**PREPARED FOR THE CANADIAN GROUP OF
THE INTER-PARLIAMENTARY UNION**

**FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE OF
SPEAKERS OF PARLIAMENT
NEW YORK, UNITED STATES
31 AUGUST–2 SEPTEMBER 2015**

Dara Lithwick
Constitutional and Parliamentary Affairs Section
Parliamentary Information and Research Service

26 August 2015

Mr. Secretary-General of the United Nations,
Mr. President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union,
Dear colleagues,
Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Friends:

I am honoured to be with you here today at this distinguished gathering in this most special place – the headquarters of the United Nations, a “centre for harmonizing the actions of nations” to improve the lives of the world’s inhabitants.

Over the past 126 years, since its founding, the Inter-Parliamentary Union has served to promote parliamentary dialogue and improve the state of democracy around the world. This, the Fourth World Conference of Speakers of Parliament, enables us to focus together on parliamentary engagement on the international stage.

The Third World Conference concluded with a Declaration¹ pledging parliamentary leaders to support one another to make their parliaments more representative, transparent, accessible, accountable, and effective. It recognized that “accountability and representation lie at the heart of democracy.”

It built on the IPU’s foundational [Universal Declaration on Democracy](#) adopted in 1997, which exclaims that democracy is “a basic right of citizenship to be exercised under conditions of freedom, equality, transparency and responsibility.”

One question facing Canada and other parliaments is how to balance the democratic values enshrined in the IPU’s [Universal Declaration on Democracy](#) with the rights and immunities enjoyed by parliamentarians. Indeed, the scope and exercise of these rights and immunities should be aligned with the standards of transparency and accountability essential to Parliament’s public reputation in the 21st century.

Parliamentary privilege is an important element of our democracy. Parliamentarians enjoy certain rights and immunities in order for parliament to function effectively and efficiently without undue impediment.

In Canada democratic and human rights are enshrined in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, a part of our Constitution. Indeed, Canada is the only Commonwealth country with something akin to our Charter. Parliamentary privilege is also constitutionally protected.

Until this past year, no parliamentary or legislative body in Canada ever completed a comprehensive study of parliamentary privilege. This past June the Senate Standing Committee on Rules, Procedures, and the Rights of Parliament published an interim report titled [A Matter of Privilege: A Discussion Paper on Canadian Parliamentary Privilege in the 21st Century](#) that was based on the earlier work of a subcommittee.

In the report the Committee suggested that it is incumbent upon parliamentarians to establish a framework for the exercise of parliamentary privilege that is consistent with public values of accountability, transparency and the rule of law (as enshrined in the Canadian Constitution).

¹ Third World Conference of Speakers of Parliament, United Nations, Geneva, July 2010, Declaration adopted by the Conference, [“Securing global democratic accountability for the common good.”](#)

Perhaps we can arrange together, through parliamentary discussions and networking, to have representatives from our various parliaments come together to further reflect on how the exercise of parliamentary rights and immunities can be better balanced with the principles of transparency and accountability that “lie at the heart of democracy” (in the words of the IPU’s *Universal Declaration on Democracy*).

We would like to solicit expressions of interest in holding a conference on this topic in the coming year or so.

In closing, I believe that it would be beneficial to come together to further explore the modernization of parliamentary privilege and would welcome discussion on how this can be accomplished. To paraphrase from the Committee’s report: the adaptation of parliamentary privilege to the 21st century can help facilitate and protect the work of parliamentarians, while also instilling pride in our parliamentary institutions around the world.

Thank you. Merci.