

**Speech by Mr Sean BARRETT, President of the Houses of the Oireachtas (Ireland)
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Placing democracy at the service of peace and sustainable development: Building the world the people want;

Excellencies, Fellow Speakers, distinguished guests

I very much welcome the theme of this general debate and the opportunity to address this conference today. I welcome also the well chosen themes on parliamentary oversight and Sustainable Development Goals – both of which are very important and timely.

Before I commence, I would like to pay tribute to the two co-facilitators of this report “Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” UN Permanent Representative of Ireland, Ambassador David Donoghue, and the UN Permanent Representative of Kenya, Ambassador Macharia Kamau under the direction of the President of the UN General Assembly, His Excellency Sam Kutesa (Foreign Minister of Uganda).

I wish to start, however, with some reflections on parliamentary democracy from an Irish perspective. Ireland is in the midst of a decade of centenaries. 2019 will see Ireland marking what is for many citizens, the first meeting of Dáil Éireann or our House of Representatives. In 1919 that Dáil adopted a Provisional Constitution, approved a Declaration of Independence and a Democratic Programme and adopted a Message to the Free Nations of the World. It was very ambitious, somewhat enlightened for its time and more importantly - the start of a national democratic process. It did not lead to peace immediately as our relationship with the United Kingdom was still troubled but eventually it would do so. We have peace on the island of Ireland today with a young dedicated and well educated workforce and an economy on the way to recovery and long may it remain so. From peace comes progress.

With that historical backdrop in mind I cannot but reflect on the fact that we who are here today and who represent our parliaments are fortunate to live in parts of the world with constitutions - written or unwritten and with stable democratic governance or with the

hope of having this and where we can elect and change governments through the exercise of the will of the people. We live in societies with fundamental democratic and civil rights, where human rights are protected by law and where the rule of law prevails. We enjoy the freedoms based on these pillars of peace and democracy. We have respect for the separation of powers and match that with well balanced powers of oversight and democratic controls that were hard fought and hard won in most cases and which we cannot, through the passage of time or through complacency, take for granted.

As we meet today it is against the worrying backdrop of a wide spread international crisis in the Middle East and North Africa and of conflict in the Ukraine. It is the absence of freedom and democracy which is at the root of the current difficulties we see in parts of the Middle East and North Africa. This has resulted in serious conflict and has led to migration on a massive and unprecedented scale. People fleeing conflict or oppression are being trafficked into Europe as part of a criminal enterprise and in a totally uncontrolled way. Recent tragedies in Austria and on the Mediterranean Sea are a stark reminder of the dangers these migrants face as they flee towards Europe. I regret the pointless and sad loss of lives and I would urge the need for further measures aimed at reducing such tragic losses. Equally what we have witnessed in Ukraine over the past two years represents the most serious crisis in Europe in recent years. I mention these conflicts because today we are reflecting on peace. Without peace we have little hope of progressing the Sustainable Development Agenda.

On the positive side I welcome greatly the success of multilateral diplomacy and the work of the IPU in relation to Sustainable Development agenda 2030. I welcome also the fact that the 2030 Agenda calls for action by all countries, poor, middle-income and rich and that no one will be left behind. To my mind the ‘five Ps’ identified in the preamble to the document —people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership—capture the broad scope of the agenda.

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the associated 169 targets address social, economic and environmental development, and, in addition, seek to introduce a virtual fourth pillar on effective governance and the promotion of peaceful societies. All

of these goals are related and interlinked and this increases the complexity of implementation and monitoring. I would like to focus attention on some key goals or ones which I think have particular importance. Of course, global problems need global solutions but education is a key goal. The power of improving standards of education lies in its ability to unlock potential into the future and to drive the achievement of other goals such as the elimination of hunger, the realization of good health outcomes for more of the world's population and for the making available of clean water – a basic human need for everyone. While I don't advocate a strict hierarchy of goals the achievement of progress in these key goals will, in my view, make it easier to achieve progress in other areas of the Agenda.

Parliaments can and must play a role in pushing this Agenda. The question is what role?

The agreed outcome document includes references to the essential role of national parliaments in realising the 2030 Agenda through their enactment of legislation and adoption of budgets and their role in ensuring accountability for the effective implementation of national commitments. In addition there is a role for parliaments in supporting the review processes established at the national level and this is to be welcomed. This is the standard view as to how parliaments should proceed. In my view, parliaments, while working with governments to achieve these goals have to have an independent and public monitoring function. I think that progress should be monitored on a global, continental, regional and national level. The information on progress has to be timely, relevant and publicly available. Peer pressure allied to regular reporting will be one of the most important ways of ensuring that the focus is constantly on the achievement of targets rather than just the collection of data.

In my case I will be proposing a mechanism for the new parliament due in a few months in Ireland for an overarching committee which can monitor these goals and which should publish reports to parliament and the public on a regular basis.