

Parliamentary Diplomacy

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Summary

Parliamentarians have for decades been present and active in the international arena. 'Parliamentary diplomacy', however, has only quite recently become the common term used to describe the wide range of international activities undertaken by members of parliament in order to increase mutual understanding between countries, to improve scrutiny of government, to represent their people better, and to increase the democratic legitimacy of inter-governmental institutions. It is perhaps a sign of the times that this term has now been coined. The increased blurring of boundaries between national and foreign affairs means that parliamentarians must consider issues put before them with a global mindset. Correspondingly, the significance of international parliamentary contacts is growing, and it is unlikely to cease to do so in the coming years.

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Parliamentary Diplomacy

'Parliamentary diplomacy' is not yet a widely studied subject. Indeed, the recent past and near future will only begin to see its proper definition. While a sound theoretical analysis may so far be lacking, however, parliamentary diplomacy in practice has developed rapidly over recent decades and it seems to be increasing in relevance. The term 'parliamentary diplomacy' has been used in several different respects. In this article, it is held to mean the full range of international activities undertaken by parliamentarians in order to increase mutual understanding between countries, to assist each other in improving the control of governments and the

representation of a people and to increase the democratic legitimacy of inter-governmental institutions.

Although diplomacy has traditionally been an arena more or less exclusively reserved to the executive, the increased blurring of boundaries between what is national and what is foreign has led to a greater need for parliamentarians to consider with a global mindset the issues put before them. Countless examples spring to mind here, from transnational terrorism to border-neglecting pollution issues. Greater involvement by parliaments in international affairs is thus partly a result of what has so adequately been coined as 'globalization'. More and more issues that are put to parliament for consideration have their origins in international developments or structures. Recognition that growing governmental activity in international organizations must be better controlled grew alongside this need and has resulted, over recent decades, in a number of inter-parliamentary structures that are meant to facilitate the process of scrutiny. On the other hand, parliaments have also realized that they can no longer expect governments to take the sole lead and responsibility for action abroad. More than ever before, parliamentarians individually, and parliaments as institutions, are being called upon to do their share in resolving complex problems that require a multifaceted approach.

These two aspects of international parliamentary work — scrutiny of the executive on the one hand and more 'traditional' diplomacy on the other — are closely related and sometimes, especially where the work of organizations such as the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (PA) or the PA of the OSCE is concerned, may overlap to a great extent. However, although the term 'parliamentary diplomacy' may be applied to both, the purposes that it serves in each respect must be clearly distinguished.

Multinational and National Scrutiny of Executive Bodies

The exchange of ideas between colleagues that takes place in multilateral parliamentary fora, and the direct access to information that these networks provide parliamentarians with, primarily facilitate the democratic scrutiny of national governments in national parliaments. Furthermore, in some instances parliamentary assemblies may communicate their concerns or points of view directly to the respective governmental organizations to which they are linked. This 'collective accountability' is usually limited,

however, because of the size of the assemblies and their lack of formal powers to enforce the implementation of resolutions and requests.

The degree to which inter-parliamentary institutions are able to exercise collective control over executive bodies varies as much as the degree to which individual parliamentarians can use, on a national level, the information that they take back from international meetings. To name but two recent examples: the assertion, in the declaration of the Second World Conference of Speakers of Parliaments,¹ that the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) is the 'unique global parliamentary counterpart of the United Nations' does not really reflect the relatively limited impact that the organization has, either directly or via national politics, on the work of the United Nations. On the other hand, the declaration² issued by NATO's PA, urging NATO to begin an Intensified Dialogue (ID) with Georgia, may well have swung some opinions at the NATO executive level, resulting a few months later in the decision to grant Georgia the ID.³ It also had national impact — the declaration was translated into a national parliamentary motion by a Dutch member of parliament and member of the NATO PA.

Although it is difficult to assess the definitive impact of scrutiny and information exchange via inter-parliamentary institutions on world and local politics, two things may be said for certain. The first is that there is an impact, however limited it may be, and that it could be greatly increased and made more effective. The second is that the impact is very much dependent on the particular type of inter-parliamentary organization concerned, the procedures for the follow-up on its activities that are used in the national parliaments and, last but certainly not least, the individual members' efforts and commitment.

Bilateral and Multilateral Diplomacy

There is more to international parliamentary activity than the scrutiny of executive bodies. The more 'traditional diplomacy' exercised by parliamentarians serves a wider variety of goals, from promoting democracy and

¹ Conference of Speakers of Parliaments that are Members of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), held in New York from 7-9 September 2005.

² 'Declaration on Georgia's Relationship with NATO', presented to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly Plenary by the Standing Committee and adopted 30 May 2006 in Paris (France).

³ Meeting of the NATO Foreign Ministers in New York, 21 September 2006.

transparency to taking away misconceptions and promoting better inter-parliamentary, inter-party or other types of cooperation. Conflict prevention, whether on a bilateral or multilateral basis, between conflicting parties themselves or involving a neutral arbiter, is another diplomatic area in which parliamentarians can act constructively. In all of these processes, governments and NGOs are naturally involved as well, but parliamentarians may operate in the middle ground between them. They are representatives of a people, which perhaps gives them more political weight than NGOs, but at the same time their actions do not necessarily commit a government, which can make it easier for them to operate in particularly sensitive situations.

Parliaments are increasingly taking their responsibility in assisting, where possible, in the processes of democratization and state-building. This ranges from conflict prevention and resolution to guidance in the process of nation-building, democratization and securing civil and political rights for all citizens. This assistance is given on a bilateral basis, via NGOs or generated from inter-parliamentary organizations such as the Council of Europe's PA (PACE) or the PA of the OSCE. The Dutch House of Representatives, for example, has over recent years participated in several projects to help the new Afghan parliament, as well as the existing Kyrgyz, Georgian and other parliaments, in their development. It is interesting to note here, however, that not only parliaments from long-established democracies participate in these projects. Some of the countries in the Caucasus, for example, are still perfecting their democratic institutions, yet at the same time they are already setting an example for and giving assistance to neighbours that are still suffering from instability.

Alongside these development-orientated contacts, parliamentarians also meet quite regularly with colleagues from many different countries to discuss current affairs and their own institution's working methods, for democracy is not a static condition — there is no real 'end state' that can be achieved. Parliamentary diplomacy, therefore, is also of great importance to provide periodically both developing as well as developed countries with a mirror to examine their own virtues and faults. Bilateral contacts can be used to discuss very concrete, urgent problems and perhaps to discover new ways of approaching them. Members of the friendship group between the Dutch House of Representatives and the French *Assemblée Nationale*, for example, have met several times over the past few years

to discuss subjects such as integration problems in large cities, a subject of very topical interest, especially after the autumn 2005 demonstrations in Paris, and European affairs, particularly related to the situation that was created by the negative vote in both countries in the referenda about the European Constitutional Treaty.

Again, although it is difficult to measure the concrete effect of these contacts, they tend to be regarded as useful when they are focused on a concrete topic and are well prepared by all concerned. Ensuring that the contacts take place, as much as possible, between experts on the subjects at hand and not simply between foreign affairs' spokespersons also contributes greatly to their success. Finally, it helps to have a clear and realistic idea of what stands to be gained, whether it is a small contribution to increased international security by the consolidation of democratic values in a far-away country, or rather the achieving of concrete results on a national level from the outcome of certain international discussions.

Pitfalls and Complications

Parliamentary diplomacy is only in its infancy and, needless to say, it still faces numerous problems. Parliaments are relatively weak actors in the international arena when compared to governments, NGOs and businesses. The organizations in which parliamentarians work together often lack finances, resources and power to exert the influence that they could if better equipped. Mandates vary greatly among delegations, often leading to problems when formulating conclusions or declarations, which as a result are often terribly vague and noncommittal. Finally, the degree to which members of parliament earn regard, prestige or esteem for their international activities differs immensely between countries.

The Dutch multi-party, coalition governmental system is one factor that greatly limits the extent to which parliamentarians are free to embark on international activities. Strict party discipline and the demand that is placed on members to be present in parliament as much as possible, especially when a vote takes place, means that it is very difficult for them to travel abroad often or for longer periods of time. Furthermore, international affairs are — in the Netherlands — hardly a vote winner. Recent years especially have seen a quick subsiding of public attention for global

politics, and the time that members of parliament spend away from the Dutch political arena is quickly seen as wasted and interpreted as an expression of disinterest in national issues. Facilities in the Dutch parliament to support participation by its members in international organizations and their involvement in other international activities are limited, as are finances in this area. This is partly caused by but also partly a cause for the already mentioned disinterest among the public for international affairs, and it directly results in a very low level of interest among parliamentarians to exert themselves in the foreign affairs' field.

This seems to be very different in other countries. As far as the European continent is concerned, good examples of very internationally orientated parliaments are to be found in the new European member states and the countries in the Caucasus. Members of parliament there can very much distinguish themselves among their colleagues and to the general public by actively getting involved in international parliamentary organizations or by engaging in other multilateral or bilateral contacts. Because they recognized the importance of international engagement at an early stage of their democratic development, these countries have modelled their work and their institutions on a perfected version of that which already existed in West European neighbours, thus avoiding the mistakes made there and the difficulty of re-inventing existing structures that the older parliaments face.

Conclusions

We are only at the beginning of a long process of defining parliamentary diplomacy, its working methods, purposes and impact. Much more study can be done into some of the issues already mentioned, such as what the impact of parliamentary interchange has been so far and how it can be made more effective, both on a political and institutional level as well as on a practical. There are, furthermore, countless additional questions to address, such as what the relationship, if any, should be between governmental and parliamentary diplomacy, whether these can in fact act complementarily or whether in some cases this would endanger the role or effectiveness of either. Concrete suggestions could then be made, perhaps on a longer term, about how parliamentarians can make better use of the instruments of diplomacy and what they should avoid. It would also be

useful to establish a link between the concept of parliamentary diplomacy and the rather arduous discussion about rationalizing inter-parliamentary cooperation,⁴ which focuses on increasing the effectiveness of and reducing overlap in the work of the growing number of organizations in which parliamentarians discuss international issues.

In a few decades, perhaps, the term 'parliamentary diplomacy' will have become as widely known as the concept of governmental diplomacy is today. It remains to be seen. In any case, however, study and reflection alone will not result in public attention for, or recognition of, its relevance. The challenge is thus twofold. First, international parliamentary organizations must be made to function more effectively and prove themselves to be transparent and real democratic institutions. Perhaps declarations need not always be adopted by consensus, perhaps a majority for and some clear statements against would come across as much stronger and realistic. Second, individual members of parliament must be prepared, on a national level, to explain the relevance of their international work. Better procedures must be put in place to translate foreign to domestic policy. And parliamentarians need to look beyond borders and realize that the outside world is already inside.

Frans W. Weisglas was the first elected Speaker of the Dutch House of Representatives, chosen in May 2002 from among three candidates. He was re-elected in 2003 and remained Speaker until his retirement from politics in November 2006. A former diplomat and foreign affairs' spokesperson for the liberal party VVD, he invested much time and effort in international contacts and actively promoted the concept of parliamentary diplomacy, both at home and abroad.

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⁴) Discussion initiated at the EU Conference of Speakers in The Hague in July 2004.