
International Meeting of Parliamentarians Against Corruption

by John Williams, MP

The inaugural meeting of a Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC) will be held in Ottawa from October 13 to 16, 2002. It is being hosted by the Parliament of Canada with Speaker Dan Hays of the Senate and Speaker Peter Milliken of the House of Commons acting as co-hosts. Between 100 to 200 parliamentarians from around the world are expected to attend this conference. This article outlines the background leading to this event.



The institution of Parliament has a special role in a well-functioning democracy. Many confuse Parliament with government, but they are distinct and independent institutions. Government has a mandate to run the country, however we know far too well that unless it is held accountable, leaders with too much power tend to use it for

their own ends and their own objectives.

At the worst end of the spectrum, we have a Parliament in Zimbabwe which was elected by the people a year ago, but it is more than obvious from the media that President Mugabe can do what he wants, when he wants, wherever he wants, including throwing the farmers off their land and letting the population whom he should be serving starve in the street.

There is something dramatically wrong in Zimbabwe and the simple answer is that Mr. Mugabe is not held ac-

countable for his actions and his decisions. And who has that responsibility to hold Mr. Mugabe and his government accountable? It is of course, the parliament and the elected members who have that responsibility and the Members of Parliament in turn should be held accountable for their performance by ensuring that there is an educated and informed public who can make a rational choice at election time based on competent candidates, political parties with integrity and an electoral system that is fair and open.

Parliament has four separate and distinct responsibilities regarding its accountability over government:

- It approves legislative requests from government – when government wants to introduce or amend a program to serve society it must request approval from parliament. Hence, Parliament debates the design and merits of such programs and policies of the government and may grant approval with or without amendment;
- The government has to seek authority from Parliament (ways and means) for its policies on taxation in order to raise the funds necessary for government. Any changes to the taxation rules must be brought to Parliament for its concurrence;
- The government must seek approval from Parliament for spending authority (the Estimates process) before it can expend funds on behalf of its citizens; and

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- Government is required to report to Parliament and table in the House a myriad of reports on its performance.

When parliament fails to exercise its oversight on government, the accountability of government is weakened and it gets lax and inefficient. Unless that oversight is improved, governments will degenerate into dictatorships and in some cases, be accused of participating in murder (e.g. Peru, Ukraine, etc., all of which profess to have democracies).

With this weakness prevalent but not fully recognized, the idea of forming a membership-based organization of parliamentarians started to grow. There are parliamentarians in some parts of the world who have put their lives on the line while standing up and speaking out against their own government. Such a concept is so far removed from the Canadian experience that we find it difficult to believe that a parliamentarian's life can be threatened by speaking out, but it has been an unfortunate reality elsewhere.

The GOPAC Conference

Parliamentarians, knowing that accountability promotes transparency and good governance, are now coming together to found an organization to combat and speak out against corrupt activities. The organization, to be known as the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC) should come into being at a conference in Ottawa from October 13 to 16, 2002. This will be an umbrella organization to motivate, support, and organize regional chapters around the world such as North American Parliamentarians Against Corruption (NAPAC), Latin American Parliamentarians Against Corruption (LAPAC) Southeast Asian Parliamentarians Against Corruption (SEAPAC), and the African Parliamentarians Network Against Corruption (APNAC), etc. We have also been recently advised that a chapter has been formed in the Russian Federation.

Unlike most conferences, which are a single event, this conference will create an organization that will have the capacity to develop momentum and continuity.

The organization is aligned along regional lines to facilitate the development of an organization that can be effective. Regional organizations are more likely to have a common language, and corruption often manifests itself on a cultural basis, which is more easily understood

within a region. Parliamentarians who are able to provide peer support to their neighbours being dominated by its executive will be more inclined to be heard and of course, the objective of GOPAC is to enhance the effectiveness of Parliaments and parliamentarians, not on worldwide travel to global conferences.

The organization will not be a vehicle for the developed world to provide its answers to the developing world but will be a recognition that corruption grows whenever accountability is weak. Clearly, we are not immune to corruption in our part of the world. We need only look at the celebrated cases of Enron and WorldCom that have cost investors billions of dollars and has caused the government (especially in the United States) to sit up, take notice and request approval for tougher legislation from Congress in order to prosecute offenders who think that publicly traded companies are their own little fiefdoms.

In addition to these types of cases, it is often pointed out that the proceeds of drug trafficking and corruption on a grand scale by dictators ends up in the banks and financial institutions of the developed world to fuel the economies of the prosperous without so much as a murmur of dissent from us. In the meantime, the economies of the countries where corruption is rife or out of control are left in ruins and the population destitute or on their way to becoming so.

It is fundamental to democracy that parliamentarians pick up the challenge to fight corruption. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society groups often complain about corruption and call upon Parliament to legislate controls. We must, however, recognize that Parliament and parliamentarians have the responsibility for enacting legislation. Credit must be given to our development agency, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), as well as the World Bank Institute who have recognized the importance of GOPAC and its chapters and have been generous in their assistance. Other development agencies and international financial institutions are starting to recognize the role of parliamentarians in fighting corruption and are willing to look at funding an organization to motivate parliamentarians to exercise more accountability over government.

There is a wealth of research already available through Transparency International (TI), the OECD, the Council of Europe, and international financial institutions, who have studied and analyzed the levels of corruption around the world. That research needs a voice in order to implement recommendations. Who is it that has the mandate to do that? It is the parliamentarians. Here in Canada there have been calls for codes of conduct for parliamentarians and Cabinet Ministers. Much work has

already been done on codes of conducts for parliamentarians around the world. Let us bring the best of that thinking to the forefront in order that every Parliament can speak with integrity by saying it has a code of conduct that is strong enough and clear enough to be effective in ensuring that parliamentarians and Cabinet Ministers work on behalf of society rather than filling their pockets from society.

When it comes to corruption, GOPAC must be above reproach and demonstrate that it is competent, capable and organized. For this reason, GOPAC and its chapters will each be aligned with an NGO dedicated to improving governance. This will provide access to a professional secretariat, but more importantly that money will be handled by professionals and not by politicians. For the conference a non governmental organization, the Parliamentary Centre, an NGO located in Ottawa with many years of experience in good governance issues, will act as the global secretariat.

Parliamentarians today carry on their shoulders the mantle of protecting democracy that they have inherited from their predecessors. In order for them to fulfill that responsibility, parliamentarians should know and understand the roles of various institutions that support a democratic environment. It is not enough anymore to say "I support the government," or "I oppose the government", Parliament as an institution is there to supervise government.

The concept of GOPAC has caught the imagination of individual parliamentarians who are committed to standing up around the world to improve the integrity of their organization and thereby enhance the prosperity of their society. For us in Canada, these stark realities are seldom at the forefront but they are truly life and death to some. We as parliamentarians in this bountiful land owe our support to our colleagues around the world who only seek for their society what has been available in this country since its inception.