



An opening address
by
the President of Iceland
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at

PARLIAMENTARIANS FOR GLOBAL ACTION
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Distinguished Parliamentarians

Dear friends

What a different world it was! The Cold War had frozen all dialogue and the nuclear confrontation fuelled a dramatic arms race. The international community was the battleground where hostile ideological camps tested their strength. Armageddon seemed to loom on the horizon and the destruction of the planet was the fate envisioned by the military planners. The superpowers saw other nations primarily either as friends or as foes and whole continents were dominated by the resulting tension.

Into this arena stepped a small group of elected representatives, members of different political parties, conservatives and liberals, socialists and centrists, and decided to adopt a vision of a better world, to work together for a different agenda, to challenge the prevailing principles of political action, to demonstrate that results could be achieved by other methods.

The ideals which inspired the foundation of Parliamentarians for Global Action were indeed shared by many all over the world but they had not led to successful results. The premise of the new organisation was to change the basic rules of political discourse and create action in the international arena by bringing the democratic skills of the elected representatives to the most burning issues of those times – to nuclear confrontation, to the arms race, to the fight against hunger and poverty, to the problems faced by the poor and the malnourished – and to show how to bring development and progress to billions of people all over the world, how to fight for justice and human rights, for the reform of the United Nations and for the advancement of democracy and global order.

It was indeed and still is an ambitious agenda but our optimism was inspired by the determination to change the nature of the international dialogue, to adopt new ways of political cooperation, to demonstrate that as parliamentarians we were no longer hindered by the old rules of diplomatic discourse, the rules which defined who could speak to whom and how the seats at the table were arranged.

The established protocol was that only governments were represented in the international arena, only presidents, prime ministers and foreign ministers spoke on behalf of their nations, and in their absence the ambassadors took over.

We refused to be restricted by such a system and were determined to follow a more democratic path, to allow those elected by the people to speak directly on their behalf, to establish the freedom to address anyone anywhere, to present proposals to presidents and prime ministers alike, to pressure ambassadors and the heads of international organisations, to seek support from distinguished experts and opinion leaders, to embrace a broad dialogue with public movements and citizens' organisations, to bring the skills honed in national campaigns into the international arena, to build bridges across ideological boundaries, across racial and religious divides, to invite anyone who cared to become a partner.

The core of our efforts was political creativity – the boldness to act in a new way, to employ any democratic method that worked, to dare to go where no one had trodden before.

The results proved that despite the confrontational atmosphere of those times parliamentarians could, through their democratic skills, produce remarkable change.

The creation of the so-called Group of Six – presidents and prime ministers from Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America who agreed to campaign together for a new dialogue between the Soviet Union and the United States, to build confidence and reduce the nuclear threat – was a dramatic innovation in the diplomatic world. Never before had such a working alliance from different continents been created and during the 1980s it succeeded in significant ways, as indicated at three summits in India, Sweden and Mexico. It is with profound respect that we remember those leaders here today, especially the three of the six who lost their lives by assassination: Indira Gandhi, Olof Palme and Rajiv Gandhi.

It was interesting evidence of the willingness of these leaders to share in our political creativity that representatives of Parliamentarians for Global Action sat throughout the lifespan of this initiative on the core organisational committee alongside the chiefs of staffs and other top advisers of the prime ministers and the presidents.

The proposal to call together an Amendment Conference of the Partial Test Ban Treaty when the nuclear powers were not willing to negotiate a complete test ban was another example of innovative thinking, and when the Conference was opened in the General Assembly Hall at

the United Nations it showed that a small group of parliamentarians could indeed bring nations together where others had failed.

The process here on Capitol Hill, to use Congress to stop the US nuclear testing programme by cutting the funding, was also an interesting example not only of how to employ parliaments to deliver results when international negotiations did not succeed but also of how parliamentarians from other countries could create working alliances within the most powerful legislative assembly in the world.

Sometimes our willingness to be innovative got a little out of hand and even had a comic side to it, such as when four of us agreed to enter the hall when the President of Brazil was addressing a joint session of Congress here in Washington and we were invited to fill some seats left empty by absent senators. I can still see the perplexed look on the face of the Icelandic ambassador, who was sitting across the hall, because he clearly thought he was going crazy when he saw me sitting where a distinguished southern senator ought to be.

Parliamentarians for Global Action also brought a democratic spirit to the United Nations and annually invited leading representatives in New York, heads of UN Agencies and renowned international experts to debate new ways to encourage economic development, especially among the poorer nations, how to deal with hunger and the spread of diseases, how to bring about global reforms for the benefit of all mankind.

By inviting parliamentarians from Asia and Africa, from Europe and the Americas into the heart of the United Nations, Parliamentarians for Global Action regularly reminded the leaders of the organisation that the democratic voices of the people must be heard.

We sent delegations to present ideas and proposals to prominent global players and I fondly remember here today how I had the good fortune to join senators Tom Harkin and James Jeffords in meeting Gorbachev in Moscow to urge him to accept visits by international inspectors to the Soviet nuclear sites – ideas worth recalling now when the role of international inspectors has again become critical at the outset of our new century.

I think it shows how we benefited from the political training provided by participation in Parliamentarians for Global Action that both senators Harkin and Jeffords and myself still hold political offices whereas Gorbachev, who never was fortunate enough to become a fully fledged PGA member, has been out of power for more than a decade.

What are the lessons we have learned? How can the experience from 25 years of political creativity be relevant in today's world, when we face the challenges of a new century, when we try to bring positive change to a global community which is becoming ever more complex and interrelated?

My conclusion is in fact very simple: Political creativity is the key and parliamentarians are uniquely endowed to be the most effective pioneers. They are democratically empowered to speak out and to act. They have a freedom which is denied to others.

In order to succeed, however, parliamentarians must rely above all on themselves, must speak directly, cut through the layers of bureaucracy which increasingly characterises the organisation of parliaments worldwide. Yes, good staff are certainly essential, but they can never replace the elected representatives, never be the true voices of those the people have elected.

At these cross-roads I salute all who have contributed to the success of Parliamentarians for Global Action. I salute those who often endured sacrifices and suffered attacks when devoting their time and efforts to international parliamentary cooperation.

I also salute those who are willing to support the organisation, provide funding and demonstrate their trust in numerous ways.

I am deeply grateful for the opportunities which Parliamentarians for Global Action gave me, how it enabled me to gain valuable experience, to grow, to develop a broad awareness, to learn and witness the fate of others, deeply grateful for the friendships which it brought me and how it allowed me to enjoy the partnership of distinguished parliamentary colleagues.

In my duties as President of Iceland I have drawn extensively on the experience I gained through my involvement with Parliamentarians for Global Action and on this festive occasion I express my deep and sincere gratitude for the vision it gave me.

The world today does indeed need that vision and I am sure that your successful efforts will bring hope and progress to people all over the globe. That is the true spirit of Parliamentarians for Global Action, the spirit which has indeed inspired us all.