

Meeting of senior officials of centres of government on
“The consistency of public action: the role of the centre of government”
Budapest 6-7 October 2000

Address by the President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies

Hon. Luciano Violante

Ladies and gentlemen,

First allow me to thank you for your invitation. It is an honour, and I will do my utmost to live up to the task with which I have been entrusted.

Parliaments and governments in every country are experiencing a phase of far-reaching change in their functions, in their mutual relations and in their contacts with society at large.

Parliaments have lost their monopoly position in representing society. NGOs, trade unions and industry associations, pressure groups and the media give public voice to broad or narrow interests with apparently much greater effectiveness than parliamentary bodies.

At the same time, governments have lost their monopoly on decision-making. Non-elected public powers such as independent regulatory authorities and the judiciary or private powers such as large national and multinational firms, banks and financial companies seem capable of much more rapid and effective action than governments.

These new powers appear to be more effective because they can concentrate their energies on single objectives. They can tap the expertise of adroit technocrats and are linked by effective international networks. Nor do they have to cope with the problem of reconciling majority and opposition views, a typical feature of democratic parliaments, or juggling the demands of the various components of the majority, a typical feature of coalition governments.

Let us summarise the most obvious effects of these developments:

- a) nearly all nation-states are struggling to cope with the changes;
- b) in many cases politics risks being sidestepped by the economy;
- c) national rules risk being swept away by transnational economic and financial processes.

These trends threaten to shunt parliaments to the margins, leaving them responsible for residual tasks.

On their part, governments may well remain at the centre of these new decision-making processes, but they run the risk of not living up to their ultimate responsibility of developing an overall strategy.

What is more, governments try to simplify decision-making by avoiding any real parliamentary debate, while parliaments often create needless complications, encroaching upon the sphere of responsibility that rightly belongs to governments.

Therefore the role of the Parliament-Government pair should be recast because it is often strained by the fact that each of them tries to do without

the other. This conflict between Parliaments and Governments can be extremely detrimental to democracy because what is at **stake** is the primacy of politics over powers without democratic legitimisation, such as economic, bureaucratic and technocratic powerhouses.

I believe, however, that the executive branch can rediscover parliaments as a powerful force for creating a common ground for diverse political views and players as well as a global vision of the major strategic issues on the basis of the political consensus that emerges from the dialectic between different opinions. This is, after all, democracy's greatest resource.

The essential goals towards which parliaments must work seem to me to be the following:

- *the critical examination, legitimisation and monitoring of the key political decisions taken by governments on the basis of their electoral mandate.*

Experience shows that these decisions have a better chance of being implemented only if they pass through the mediation of parliaments because it is the mediation of Parliaments that makes it possible to overcome the resistance of those whose interests would be harmed.

- *governing ever more complex and polycentric regulatory systems.*

If we accept the fact that it is impossible to restore a sort of nineteenth-century legislative simplicity, parliaments must not waste their energies on microlegislation. Instead, they must establish fundamental guidelines for running, controlling and legitimising the many centres of regulatory production in the light of the fundamental principles of democratic legality.

- *controlling the global and final effects of laws and government policies from the citizen's point of view.*

These objectives will become an increasingly integral part of parliamentary responsibilities, and they can be achieved without erasing the distinctions between our institutions or weakening the dialectic between parliamentary majorities and minorities.

- The *instruments* for achieving these aims are *flexible parliamentary procedures, high-quality information flows between parliaments and governments, links with civil society.*

Let us take a look at

- *flexible parliamentary procedures.*

Precisely because they have centuries of experience behind them, parliamentary procedures are an extremely flexible instrument of “democratic technique” for organising public debate on major political issues. Governments can exploit this resource to develop new forms of political discourse to address new problems, to focus on major issues and to establish an ongoing linkage with the various decision-making centres.

Now let us look at

- *high-quality information flows between parliaments and governments.*

The institutional “performance” of a parliament largely depends on the quality of information it receives from the government. In a decision-making environment dominated by “information overload”, parliaments and governments must agree on high quality standards with respect to the information accompanying government proposals, progress reports on the implementation of laws and impact assessments. This information should be synthetic and to the point.

Finally we have

- *links with civil society.*

Parliaments offer the greatest guarantees of transparency and disclosure in the consultative process between governments and the members of civil society, trade or employers' associations and user associations. This parliamentary filter can be an effective tool for defining a "charter" of public citizenship for organisations that often operate, as Dahrendorf has remarked, as if they were taking the place of the government or parliament as the expression of the public will.

These are the conclusions reached recently by a working group on the problems of the quality of legislation and the role of parliaments, set up within the framework of the Conference of EU Speakers.

During our work, we asked the OECD to assist with a survey of the most innovative procedures adopted by the parliaments of its member countries, with specific reference to the essential goals mentioned above. This initiative culminated in the report submitted for your attention, a report that I feel will be extremely useful in addressing the issues that we are examining here.

I believe that this is the first time such a detailed picture of procedures for relations between parliaments, governments and civil society in 24 mature democracies has ever been assembled.

It is my job to initiate a discussion of this report and gather suggestions for subsequent initiatives. The OECD's fresh attention towards parliaments merits further development with the support of the representatives of the governments in which each of you is a key element.

The basic goal is to "rediscover" the pair Parliament/Government as the keystone of the legitimisation of politics in contemporary democracies, based on the freely-expressed consensus of the citizenry and on the democracy and controllability of the procedures they adopt. The OECD has traditionally maintained contacts with governments alone. Its new and constructive interest in developing a relationship with parliaments appears to confirm the need to involve both parliaments and governments in order to ensure full and democratic governance of the complexities of the modern world.

I am sure that all of us are aware of the need to learn from each other and to enhance our understanding of the innovations and best practices adopted in our countries.