

Self-assessment Toolkit for Parliaments

Inter-Parliamentary Union

It gives me great pleasure to introduce the Inter-Parliamentary Union's instrument for the self-assessment of parliaments and legislatures, entitled *Evaluating Parliament*, at this important meeting. It is available in four languages, English, French, Arabic and Spanish. You will all have a copy, and it is also on the IPU website. As its sub-title suggests, its basic premise is that the most important people to be assessing the quality of a parliament are in the first instance the parliamentarians themselves. Of course others can also make use of it – civil society organisations, academics, interested citizens of the country, indeed all who have a stake in the performance of this central institution of democracy. Yet just as in any aspect of life, we expect to be self-reflective and self-critical about what we do, not least because this is the only way we can learn how to do things better, so this is true of parliaments and their members. The purpose of this instrument or toolkit is to help parliamentarians engage in this self-reflective work more systematically, whether for the purpose of identifying aspects which are most in need of improvement, for designing a reform programme, or for monitoring the effectiveness of reforms already set in train. In other words, the context for the use of this toolkit is an impetus for change that has already come from parliamentarians themselves, and which has some firm institutional location within the parliamentary process.

The origin of this toolkit lay in a much larger project which the IPU undertook in 2004-6, to identify the criteria for a democratic parliament. What is it that makes a parliament *democratic*, both in terms of its distinctive role within a democratic system of government, and in terms of the democratic norms and values by which it itself operates? Rather than setting out a prescriptive list of criteria for this, we invited all member parliaments of the IPU to send in examples of their own practice which they considered to be democratic, and which they thought worth sharing with others. We edited these contributions under a set of headings – parliament's representativeness, transparency, accessibility, accountability to the electorate, and of course effectiveness in its key democratic roles of legislation and oversight – and published the resulting book under the title *Parliament and Democracy in the Twenty-first Century: A Guide to Good Practice*. The definition of 'good practice' here was not what we decided, but what the member parliaments had shown they already did and which was workable.

The origin of this toolkit, then, was in a very parliament-centred and initiated process of identifying good practice, and it is the same philosophy that we have carried into this instrument for self-assessment as a logical spin-off from that earlier work. How can parliaments most effectively assess themselves in the context of an institutionally driven desire for improvement? Some critics argue that parliamentarians have an interest in presenting themselves in the best light, and that self-assessment will only lead to uncritical evaluations. Our answer is that the process only makes sense where there is already a determination for improvement, and processes for achieving it; and that in such a context there is every incentive to be fully rigorous in using the toolkit. This is especially so where the group or committee engaged in the process is

representative of all sections of a parliament, opposition as well as the majority, women's and minority caucuses included.

I turn now to explain what the toolkit involves. It comprises a series of questions grouped into six thematic sections: the representativeness of parliament; parliamentary oversight over the executive; parliament's legislative capacity; the transparency and accessibility of parliament; the accountability of parliament; parliament's involvement in international policy. The questions are all framed in a comparative mode – how adequate? how effective? how far? etc. – and are to be answered on a five point scale, from very high to very low. Three further questions conclude each section, to identify the biggest recent improvement in the respective area, the most serious ongoing deficiency, and the measures needed to improve this. Space is also available for an additional question to be added where it is felt to be appropriate.

Two clarifications are worth making at once about this framework of questions:

1. This is not a standard *questionnaire*, to be filled in and sent or handed to an assessor. It is intended to be completed by individual parliamentarians working in a group context; its purpose is to provoke discussion, identify differences of perception, and attempt to explain and resolve these as part of a discursive process which is qualitative rather than quantitative.
2. A question that is frequently asked is 'what counts as a good standard against which we should be assessing ourselves?' This itself is also a matter for debate. It may involve a comparison with 'good practice', with neighbouring or peer parliaments, with the parliament's past, or between the different aspects being self-assessed. Discussion will often reveal the necessity for 'trade-offs' – that all good things cannot be maximised simultaneously. Yet key deficiencies will eventually become clear from this process.

If any of you have an idle moment in this conference, which heaven forbid, then I invite you to take the questions from any one section of the toolkit and answer them for your own parliament. You may find the process raises as many questions as it answers, but that is of the essence of an effectively open-ended and discursive process, such as parliaments themselves embody.

I come now to a final question: where has the toolkit been tried out or used? Two examples, from Pakistan and Rwanda, you will hear about in a session tomorrow. They show widely varying ways in which the toolkit can be used, as well as differences in outcome. Other parliaments which have used the toolkit, either as it stands or as a guide to constructing their own assessment framework, are Sierra Leone, Cambodia, Australia and South Africa; and plans for using it are being developed in Ireland and Ethiopia. I should add from my own work of assessing the quality of democracy more widely, that the starting point for the development of International IDEA's democracy assessment framework, on which the IPU toolkit questions are modelled, was in assessing my own country, the United Kingdom. From this I gained the conviction that the long-established democracies and parliaments are as much in need of these evaluations as those more recently established. The popular disillusion with democracy in practice that has accompanied its apparent global

triumph is common almost everywhere, and no more so than with parliaments themselves, as the recent travails at Westminster demonstrate only too clearly.

In conclusion, we have made a modest beginning with our toolkit and the framework of self-assessment questions that it comprises. It is work in progress, both in terms of the *product* and in terms of the *process* by which it might be used by a parliament. And of course the IPU would welcome an approach from any parliament represented here or more widely that might wish to use the toolkit. Experienced facilitators are available to provide guidance in its use and to assist in its implementation.

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