



John, Lord Alderdice (born March 28, 1955), Convenor in the House of Lords (UK), was Leader of the cross-community Alliance Party of Northern Ireland 1987-1998, Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly 1998-2004, and since 1996 sits in the House of Lords as a Liberal Democrat. He was Vice-President of the Brussels-based European Liberal Democrats 1999-2003 and President of Liberal International (the world-wide federation of liberal political parties) 2005-2009. On 10 June 2010, he was elected to the new position of Convenor (Chair) of the Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party in the House of Lords (Upper Chamber of the British Parliament). He has extensive experience of speaking and engagement in various regions of the world where there is violent political conflict. He is a medical doctor and psychiatrist by profession.

Legitimately elected parliaments provide a forum for the concerns of diverse societal actors (including women and minority groups) to be aired and incorporated in processes of dialogue, reconstruction and conflict resolution. In your experience, do parliaments play that key role? What are the crucial conditions for a parliamentary institution to perform this function? What attributes must they have, and what criteria must be met, for them to affect any real change?

Parliaments can indeed play such a role, but whether they do or not varies a great deal from place to place and in differing times and circumstances. In the first place the membership of the parliament must be widely representative and regarded as such by the population. Free and fair elections

play a key part in this, but they are not the whole story.

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If a minority feels that despite elections they are not properly represented or their representatives are unable to get a fair and effective hearing in parliament they will have no confidence in its value. Procedures that protect the rights of minorities (and majorities) to be elected, to attend, to speak and to

participate fully are important, but there also needs to be a constructive engagement by both the majority and minorities so that each is prepared to listen and take heed of the other's reasonable concerns.

Effecting change is another matter. Minorities have to recognize that they will not be able to have everything their own way, but majorities must also appreciate that unless minorities are able to bring about some change on behalf of the community they represent the whole democratic process will lose the confidence of those communities in favour of non-parliamentary actions.

Parliaments have crucial responsibilities to play in national and local development policies. Parliamentarians can actively engage in the development and implementation of policies and laws that are pro-poor, minority- and gender-responsive, and environmentally sensitive, all of which broadly reflect efforts to achieve the MDGs.

Moreover, parliaments play key roles in the promotion and defense of human rights. What is your opinion on the view that parliamentary core functions are essentially development tools, enabling them to play crucial roles as strong, constructive and dynamic democratic institutions? What recommendations would you offer your parliamentary colleagues and their parliamentary

institutions with respect to fostering their role in development?

Everyone sees institutions through the lens of their own priorities and experiences. For me the essence of a parliament is that it is an institution that enables us to deal with disagreement, aggression and conflict through talking about problems rather than by resorting to physical violence. This is common to all human societies because it addresses fundamental elements of the human condition.

Parliaments do indeed have a role in policy development though precisely how depends a great deal on the particular constitutional arrangement. In some cases parliamentary committees may be intimately engaged in the policy development, but in the majority of instances their role is to raise issues in questions and debate, hold the executive to account and to accept, amend or reject legislative proposals. This is true of national and local, as well as international development policies, but in each society parliaments also address many other concerns and these are often quite different in developed and relatively well-off societies than in under-developed and developing countries. In some cases the lack of infrastructure may require more direct government intervention and investment while in other cases where society is well capable of providing services itself parliament's role may be to protect the community from excessive government intervention.

Human Rights should not be a partisan issue. Everyone's rights need to be protected or they are not human rights all. For this reason it is best if parliaments can establish cross-party Human Rights Committees and independent Human Rights Commissioners or Ombudsmen to monitor Human Rights concerns in regard to legislation and policy and act as a focus for investigation and enquiry in the particular cases.

It may seem trite but my appeal to parliamentary colleagues is that as public representatives they need to act with integrity in the public interest (as distinct from their own private interests) and that they should always be aware that as public representatives they have responsibilities not only to their own constituency, their own supporters and their

party, but also to the wider community and the wider world, and never to let these broader aspects of their responsibilities be crowded out by the daily pressures of elected public life.

In post-conflict situations, parliamentary institutions often remain weak in relation to the executive, armed groups and other non-state actors. Building effective democratic governance requires a correction of this imbalance. In such cases, what is the most adequate strategy available to the parliament and its partners to strengthen the parliamentary institution?

The honest, transparent, devoted, long-term commitment to the interests of the community as a whole is the strategy that has the best prospect of success, though it cannot be guaranteed. If the population doubts the ethical standards of the parliamentarians, they will have no leverage against any other power bases. If the workings of the parliament and the elected officials are not observable and observed by

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the people they will more likely assume that either nothing or nothing good is being done on their behalf.

The citizenry can be persuaded to place their trust in elected representatives instead of armed groups, or powerful government or other non-governmental figures if over a long period they come to see the political class as public servants. This is the most powerful position from which to strengthen parliament and hold others to account and it is a joint challenge for parliamentarians across the

political divisions. They either sink or swim together on this one.

As the peoples' representatives, parliaments speak and act with unrivalled democratic legitimacy. However, in some places, parliamentarians and parliaments have been losing credibility in the public eye. This situation weakens the parliament's power, in particular its function of executive oversight. How, in your view, could the trust of the population in its representatives be restored?

I am not sure that parliaments have unrivalled democratic legitimacy. Directly elected Presidents have democratic legitimacy, and the people also confer legitimacy on other figures and groups too (such as judges and the courts), but parliaments certainly have a strong claim to public credibility, if they have been elected fairly and if they are seen to have acted with integrity, as a group. Trust is the outcome of undertakings freely given and honestly acted upon. There is no short cut.

In truth I have to say that the population do not always treat their elected officials fairly and a hungry press corps can overnight devour and destroy a decent man's career with no real recourse. Politicians have a responsibility to justify the trust of the people, but the people have to be prepared to allow trust to develop.

For good reasons or ill, there is these days a harsh cynicism of public representatives which politicians may not be able to overcome on their own, even though it is their responsibility to try as best they can.

It is often helpful for politicians to accept some external independent oversight of their parliamentary standards and governance arrangements especially with regard to financial matters since then when accusations are made there is a better chance that they can be addressed to the satisfaction of the citizens.

Political parties and parliamentary groups are widely recognised to be important political actors. Their potential impact on peace-building can be positive, but experience teaches us that it can also be negative. How can political parties and parliamentary groups, with the aim of playing a constructive role in national governance, enhance their internal democratisation and their capacity to define policy platforms? How can parliamentary groups be supported to play a positive role in their parliamentary institution? In your experience, what are the main challenges in achieving these goals?

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It is important that parties continually be aware of their need to develop and refine their internal governance procedures and party policies. This may be best achieved with outside help because others can often see easily what only with difficulty becomes clear to us about ourselves. In addition we can benefit from the experience of others who have been through the same problems before us and have found solutions. In the main however wise, courageous, honest leadership is what is needed. Too many leaders fail to appreciate the contribution that can be made by being a proper parliamentary opposition.

The opposition is not merely a government-in-waiting. It also has an irreplaceable role in facilitating genuine policy debate and holding the government to account. Too many opposition

parties believe it is their job to paint the government in as negative a light as possible however they are acting, rather than trying to make their contribution as opposition to making the governance of their country the best possible.

Politics should not be seen as a dirty game of self-aggrandisement, but a high calling to public service, and using the time of silence, reflection or prayer at the start of a parliamentary day to remind oneself of this, is time well spend.