

# **Towards a World Parliament: A Summary of the Debate and a Proposal for an Electronic World Parliament on the Internet organized by Civil Society**

Paper presented to the First Virtual Congress of the Community of World Citizens, July 2006, by Dr. Rasmus Tenbergen<sup>1</sup>

## **1. Introduction**

It has often been claimed that current world order should be democratized and that a World Parliament would be a necessary and desirable element of such a democratic world order (Held 1995: 273, Patomäki/Teivainen 2004: 139). There is, however, no detailed and systematic general analysis of the potential creation of a World Parliament, which includes an overview of the different possible models and an investigation of their advantages and disadvantages. Such a general analysis could help to investigate whether and how a World Parliament would contribute to the solution of the problem of the so-called “democratic deficit” in the international system.

The following paper tries to accomplish a first step in this direction. It summarizes the current debate on a World Parliament and develops theses regarding the potential creation of a World Parliament. This introduction (1.) is followed by a summary of the debates on the global democratic deficit (2.), the desirability of a World Parliament (3.) and concrete proposals for a World Parliament (4.). A separate section discusses the scenario of elections for a World Parliament organized by civil society on the internet (5.). The conclusion (6.) summarizes the findings of this paper in ten theses. This paper is not a value-free description of different positions, it is trying to argue in favor of a World Parliament in general and a special approach in particular. It is therefore an invitation to debate the findings in the conclusion.

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## 2. The Global Democratic Deficit

The analysis of past research on global democracy and a World Parliament shows an interesting ambiguity: on the one hand, the whole spectrum of global governance, global democracy, and global democratization is subject of many scientific publications (among many others are Drydyk /Penz 1997, Holden 2000, Scholte 2000, Patomäki/Teivainen/Ronkko 2002, Slaughter 2002, Zürn/Zangl 2004) and almost a fashion trend, because there seems to be a consensus that the democratic deficit (i.e. the insufficient legitimization of important international institutions) is one of the main problems of international relations (Crawford/Marks 1998 and Nye et al. 2003); on the other hand, concrete proposals how to solve this problem are very rare.

There are many contributions to special aspects of this problem: to the reform of the United Nations (Boutros-Ghali 1993b, Ruggie 2002, Patomäki/Teivainen 2004: 17) and the European Union (for example the articles of Greven, Offe, Zürn and Grande in Greven/Pauly 2000: 35), to the necessity of more accountability (Held 2004a: 264), to the role of civil society (Florini 2003: 219), and to the change in economic institutions such as World Trade Organization, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank (Stiglitz 2002:214). These contributions are helpful for a discussion on good global governance, but they do not offer coherent solutions for the democracy deficit problem.

Proposals to reform the United Nations must manage the dilemma, that they either do not go far enough to create significant change or go too far to be acceptable for current decision-makers. The analysis of the European Union as a case study must address the question of whether Europe can serve as a role model for other regions or even for the world as a whole (Greven/Pauly 2000). This applies in particular to the role of the European Parliament as a potential model for a World Parliament (Falk/Strauss 2001) both in terms of the history and the structure of this institution (Levi 2001).

Some contributions to the reform of the economic institutions, for example on the parliamentary control of the World Trade Organization, are concrete in so far as they offer specific proposals for the institutional design (Mann 2004, Shaffer 2004, Skaggs 2004). They are, however, limited to the political control of economic processes and exclude other political aspects like security policy. In contrast, investigations of the role of civil society often deal with many different political areas, but on a rather abstract level when it comes to

concrete proposals. The lowest common denominator seems to be the claim for more transparency and accountability (Kovach/Neligan/Burall 2003).

This applies also to theoretical works in this context. There are abstract hints on a “coming democracy” (Florini 2003) and even the broadly discussed and far-reaching theory of a “cosmopolitanism” by David Held (Held 1995, Held 1996, Held/McGrew 2002, Held/König-Archibugi 2003, Held 2003, Held 2004b, Archibugi 2002), but even in this most innovative concept the focus seems to be more on theory-building than on concrete proposals for detailed change in old or for new institutions.

### **3. The Debate on a World Parliament**

The proposal to create a World Parliament has already generated important support in the political arena, for example Olivier Giscard d’Estaing’s “Committee for a World Parliament“ lists as members of the honorary boards names such as Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Nelson Mandela, Sonia Gandhi, Shimon Peres and Jacques Delors. Many academics, however, remain sceptical regarding the possible creation of a World Parliament.

The most important and most concrete contribution to the discussion is the debate between Joseph Nye and Richard Falk and Andrew Strauss in “Foreign Affairs“ and in “World Link” on the desirability of a World Parliament (Falk/Strauss 2001, Falk/Strauss 2002, Nye 2001, Nye 2002b). A “World Parliament” shall be defined for the following as “a global assembly where representatives are selected on the basis of one person, one vote” (Patomäki/Teivainen 2004: 139).

Falk and Strauss argue that the creation of a global parliament would be the natural and logical way to overcome the global democratic deficit (Falk/Strauss 2001). For Falk and Strauss the European Parliament serves as a role model: similar to the European Parliament, the World Parliament should start with only advisory powers and be founded by only twenty to thirty avant-garde states which are economically and geographically diverse. They hope that as time progresses it would gain more legitimacy and formal competencies (Falk/Strauss 2001).

The proposal of Falk and Strauss has received some attention and has been discussed in many contributions (Archibugi 2002, Monbiot 2003, Bummel 2005). This applies, however, more to smaller and more specialized publications like “The Federalist Debate” (compare for

example Levi 2001, Cocciolo 2004 and Vallinoto 2004). The proposal has not led to a paradigm shift and has not been supported by mainstream academia. It has for example been rejected by Joseph Nye because Nye does not see the necessary condition of a strong sense of global community realized and he assumes that citizens of many states are not willing to be constantly outvoted by one billion Chinese and one billion Indians (Nye 2002b).

This argument is attacked by Falk/Strauss and others (Monbiot 2003: 119) with the hint that empirical evidence shows, that multi-national parliaments vote according to issues rather than according to ethnic aspects (Falk/Strauss 2002). This trend could even be strengthened through a World Parliament and lead to “a political culture less beholden to nationalism and more engaged in promoting human security” (Falk/Strauss 2002: 3).

Nye’s criticism that popular elections “might well produce an undemocratic body that would interfere with the delegated accountability that now links institutions to democracy” (Nye 2002b: 5) is rejected by Falk and Strauss. They argue that a democratically elected body cannot interfere with global democracy, that “far too many national leaders are not democratically elected” and that even democratically elected representatives should not decide on international questions without control (Falk/Strauss 2002: 2). The core of their disagreement with Nye is according to Falk and Strauss a dispute on the nature of the international system: Falk and Strauss do not accept state sovereignty as the leading principle of the international system, they would rather like to see this replaced by citizen democracy (Falk/Strauss 2002: 3).

#### **4. Concrete Proposals for a World Parliament**

There are not many concrete proposals for a World Parliament in the academic discussion. Such proposals can be found on the internet (Alliance 21 2003, Johansen 2003) or in publications which are of a more political than scientific nature (some references of this kind are in the footnotes of Monbiot 2003 and Patomäki/Teivainen 2004). Monbiot offers a proposal with arguments similar to Falk and Strauss. He tries to develop a simple model based on the principle of “one person, one vote” and approximately six hundred multinational electoral districts (Monbiot 2003: 99). Monbiot focuses, like many other authors, more on the general argument than on concrete details of the organization of elections to a World Parliament. The main difference of his model to Falk and Strauss is that his main actor is not the national state, but civil society, which can elect a World Parliament “without permission” of the national states (Monbiot 2003: 101).

Bummel refers in his strategy paper for the “Committee for a Democratic UN“ to the proposal of Childers and Urquhart (Childers/Urquhart 1994) and others to “create a Parliamentary Assembly at the United Nations as new institution which is established as consultative, semi-autonomous subsidiary body to the UN General Assembly through a vote of the General Assembly under Article 22 of the UN charter” (Bummel 2005: 109) and lists thirteen concrete proposals on details of this institution (Bummel 2005: 108).

A detailed summary of both, the general discussion on democratic transformation of global institutions and special aspects of a potential World Parliament, is offered in the work of Patomäki and Teivainen (Patomäki/Teivainen 2004). The authors refer not only to the main debates but also to critics like Bello and Wahl who fear too much centralization if a World Parliament is established (Walker 1993, Bello 2002, Teivainen 2003a, Patomäki 2002a). After a critical analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of a World Parliament Patomäki and Teivainen regard the organization of a global referendum “based on a statistically drawn representative sample of voters in different countries” as a meaningful first step towards a World Parliament (Patomäki/Teivainen 2004: 146).

A short pamphlet by Andrew Strauss offers a comparative overview on different models of a World Parliament or a “Global Parliamentary Assembly“ (Strauss 2005). After a summary of his arguments for a World Parliament from other texts he distinguishes between four models:

1. an amendment of the UN Charter according to articles 108 and 109
2. the creation by the UN General Assembly as a Subsidiary Organ
3. Civil society organized elections
4. an interstate treaty process

Strauss calls the UN Charter reform model the „classical“ model (compare Sohn/Clark 1958) and the one with the best legitimacy from the perspective of world public opinion, but he expects strong resistance against this plan because it requires the consent of two thirds of the UN General Assembly plus all permanent members of the Security Council. The problem of veto powers disappears in the second model, Article 22 of the UN charter requires only a two thirds majority of the UN General Assembly. In addition to legal doubts whether a parliament could in principle be called a “subsidiary organ” of the UN General Assembly, Strauss believes that this model would create political compromises. One example is the recommendation of Bummel and others (Bummel 2005: 110) that “in the first development stage, the delegates of the Parliamentary Assembly at the United Nations are uniformly

elected from the midst of the parliaments of the participating countries” (Bummel 2005: 110). Strauss fears that the special loyalties of national parliamentarians could endanger the success of the project.

Compromises of this kind would be unnecessary if the elections for a World Parliament would be organized by civil society. Even though Strauss preferred this model in the beginning (Falk/Strauss 2000) and even outlined a model for its implementation (Strauss 2005: 8), he mentioned tremendous difficulties to organize and finance such a civil society process. This problem would be far less important in the last model of a treaty between avant-garde states which already have the financial and organizational resources for complex elections. In addition to the arguments mentioned above (Falk/Strauss 2001), Strauss highlights that this model gives the power to organize the parliament to the participating states, which possess an interest in the success of the project (Strauss 2005: 10).

## **5. Elections organized by Civil Society: A provisional electronic World Parliament on the Internet**

If the thesis is accepted that the creation of a World Parliament would be a positive development, all four models described by Strauss seem to be desirable. There is, however, no consensus even among supporters of a World Parliament on the question, which of these models is the most feasible and should be followed to implement the idea. This paper claims that all four models would constitute a positive development on the international system, but that elections organized by civil society pose the best chance of an implementation. This applies even more, if in the beginning provisional electronic versions of a World Parliament are created on the internet.

Pilot projects of this kind do already exist. Out of the many initiatives in this direction, only the most radical example should be mentioned: the “World Parliament Experiment“ on <http://www.world-parliament.org>. It would go beyond the framework of this paper to describe this project and its aspects in detail, only a few basic aspects should be mentioned.

Based on the thesis that the creation of a World Parliament is the more likely the more world citizens support it, individuals are invited to support the establishment of a provisional World Parliament through their vote. They participate in a decision-making process with only one ground rule which cannot be changed: that all aspects of the project (content, procedures,

and representatives) can be changed at any time though proposals of anybody, if there is enough support based on “one person, one vote”. This is not a decision for direct and against representative democracy, this experiment tries to combine the advantages of both models by enabling the delegation of votes for smaller or larger parts of the project (the main parliament, special sub-institutions or even single issues). It is the task of elected representatives to present the results of the opinion-building process as claims to real life decision-makers. Both, the legitimacy and power of these campaigns will increase with growing numbers of participants. After a critical mass has been reached, it should be possible to transform this provisional electronic parliament with only moral and advisory powers to an institution that exercises a significant influence on actual political processes.

It seems to be important for the success of this project that its ambition is neither overestimated nor underestimated. On the one hand, it seems to be crucial in the beginning phase to keep the claim of a model for a global institution against accusations of naivety, on the other hand, it should be clear in every phase of the project that representation and legitimacy in a narrow sense can only be claimed for the participants of the project.

If elections organized by civil society include electronic parliaments, some objections against this model lose their importance, for example the financial and organizational difficulties mentioned by Strauss (2005: 8) are reduced dramatically. Monbiot (2003: 104) mentions the possibility of a cheap electronic assembly, but regards it as an insufficient replacement of face-to-face meetings. He does not even consider the possibility of a combination of both formats, which could begin with electronic meetings that lead to non-virtual gatherings in a later phase.

The strongest argument for elections organized by civil society and against the other three models seems to be that measurement of success is much easier in this plan. While it is difficult to see how far away the United Nations are from significant reform steps or how close avant-garde states are to signing a treaty on a World Parliament, a civil society campaign for a World Parliament gains legitimacy and chances of success with every single individual supporting it. This argument can also be used to work against wide-spread pessimism of global democracy activists. The collection of enough individual supporters is difficult enough, however, it is already a sufficient condition for the realization of the project and is therefore a concrete and realistic program of implementation.

## 6. Conclusion

The main results of this paper are summarized in the following theses:

1. The global democratic deficit is one of the main problems of international politics;
2. The creation of a World Parliament would be an important step to solve this problem;
3. The four scenarios of Strauss (2005) to create a World Parliament (amendment of the UN Charter, a subsidiary organ of the UN General Assembly, elections organized by civil society, and an interstate treaty process) are all desirable;
4. Elections organized by civil society possess the best possibility of success;
5. This possibility of success can be additionally increased if the process starts with a provisional electronic parliament on the internet;
6. A provisional electronic World Parliament on the internet should give its electors the possibility to change any aspect (content, procedures, representatives) at any time, if there is enough support for a proposal based on "one person, one vote";
7. A provisional electronic World Parliament on the internet should give its electors the possibility to decide on how far they want to influence the decision-making process directly and in how far they want to delegate their vote to representatives;
8. A provisional electronic World Parliament on the internet should from the very beginning, even with little support, claim to be a model for a global institution, but it should be clear in every phase of the project that representation and legitimacy in a narrow sense can only be claimed for the participants of the project;
9. A provisional electronic World Parliament on the internet should from the very beginning, even with little support, try to influence real political processes;
10. The campaign for the creation of a World Parliament depends to a large degree on the number of individual supporters. It should therefore put a main focus on this aspect.

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