

Step by Step: Andreas Bummel on the Campaign for a UN Parliamentary Assembly

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The Campaign for a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly (CUNPA) has gained remarkable support since its launch in 2007. It has been formally endorsed by more than 750 sitting parliamentarians, along with hundreds of former ones and nearly 400 nongovernmental organizations. The campaign, which seeks to create a consultative UN second chamber which could gradually evolve into a strongly empowered parliamentary body alongside the General Assembly, has staged five international conferences, most recently in 2013 at the European Parliament in Brussels. In this interview, WGRN's Luis Cabrera speaks with Andreas Bummel, head of the Campaign's Berlin-based secretariat.

What would you say are the strongest reasons to advocate the creation of a UN Parliamentary Assembly?

I would say that the strongest reason to support the creation of a UN Parliamentary Assembly is the expectation that the assembly would be a door opener for a comprehensive reform of the UN and the international system. The goal would not only be to make the system more democratic but also to make it more effective. These are two sides of the same coin. The system can only be strengthened in a significant way if its democratic legitimacy is increased at the same time. It is by now commonly accepted that global governance isn't delivering the required results quickly enough. This concerns a plethora of issues, for example climate change mitigation, nuclear disarmament, or global inequality. In a nutshell one could say that the management of global public goods and the implementation of global policy isn't working under the present circumstances. One of the root causes is the fact that it is national interests that govern the international system. The UN and most institutions of global governance are by definition intergovernmental. But global policy and decision-making can no longer be in the purview of national governments alone. Their perspective is too narrow. The common denominator of national interests as it is negotiated in intergovernmental fora is not equivalent to the common interest of humanity as a whole. For the first time in human history, a UN Parliamentary Assembly would be a body called upon to represent the world's citizens as such and to determine their common interest from a planetary perspective. The assembly would also be a first pragmatic step into the direction of a democratic global legislative system.

The Campaign for a UNPA follows some earlier efforts, notably the International Network for a UN Second Assembly (INFUSA, 1988-95), which joined with other organizations in 1989 under the umbrella Campaign for a Democratic United Nations (CAMDUN). That group staged major conferences in New York, Vienna and San Francisco, and at its height comprised a coalition of more than 100 national and international non-governmental organizations, though it gradually became inactive. What do you see as the key differences between your Campaign and the earlier efforts, or should CUNPA be viewed as something of a revival of the effort?

Yes, sure. The Campaign for a UNPA stands in the tradition of these and other earlier initiatives. The proposal for a UN Parliamentary Assembly isn't new and the underlying vision of a democratically elected world parliament was first expressed during the French Revolution in the 18th century. When the campaign was launched in 2007, the idea was to bring together the scattered efforts for a UNPA around the world behind a common policy and strategy. This was largely successful. INFUSA and CAMDUN were carried out before my time. As far as I can tell, the key difference may be that today's campaign is clearly focused on the establishment of a parliamentary assembly. By contrast, INFUSA's second chamber proposal was more open and also included the option that NGOs would elect delegates. In practical terms, another difference may be that INFUSA was an NGO initiative while the UNPA campaign in addition also strongly builds on the political support by members of parliament. The CAMDUN conferences in turn dealt with a wide range of proposals for democratizing the UN, not only better representation of the peoples.

How are Campaign decisions made about strategic aims, and what have been your primary strategies to try to generate support for the campaign? Of those, which have been the most successful (and what do you see as your biggest milestones to date)?

The campaign's strategy and policy are discussed at the international meetings on a UNPA. To date, we've organized five such meetings. The most recent one was held two years ago, in 2013, in the European Parliament in Brussels. It was hosted by members of the four largest groups in the parliament and adopted a final declaration. Our primary strategy to generate political support for the campaign is to promote individual and institutional endorsements of the international appeal for a UN Parliamentary Assembly. We work with the signatories to translate this into political leverage at different levels. As I said, our main target groups so far are members of parliament, especially such who are members of one or more of the numerous international parliamentary institutions that already exist. In the course of the campaign so far we managed to get the support from more than 1,400 members of parliament, 750 of which are still in office today.

The key goal of the campaign is to mobilize government support for the creation of a UNPA. The idea is that parliamentarians can help to achieve support by parliaments which in turn will help to convince governments to embrace the project. In addition to this, we advocate the proposal within civil society in order to gain support from NGOs as well. To reach the public, the campaign employs a variety of strategies, including the use of support by well-known and distinguished personalities and supportive grass-roots initiatives. One such effort is the Global Week of Action for a World Parliament that was celebrated for the first time in 2013.

I would say that the biggest milestones to date consist in the support achieved by the European Parliament, the Pan-African Parliament, and the Latin-American Parliament. More recently, important achievements are the support expressed by the UN's own independent expert on the promotion of a democratic and equitable international order and the recommendation included in the report of the Commission on Global Justice, Security, and Governance that a UN Parliamentary Network should be established.

Richard Falk and Andrew Strauss have offered several versions of an argument for a world parliament which would begin with a treaty among perhaps 20-30 current liberal democracies. Would the CUNPA support such an effort? Why or why not?

The campaign's focus is the establishment of a UNPA. By definition, this is a UN body. Whether it is established with a treaty or by a decision of the UN General Assembly can be considered secondary as long as it is assured that this body is an integral part of the UN system and in consequence open to the participation of all UN member states. The campaign does not support the creation of an international parliamentary body that has no formal tie to the UN. The assembly is supposed to be vested with rights of information, participation, and oversight vis-à-vis the UN and the organizations of the UN system and it is hard to imagine how this could happen otherwise. In addition, only a universal body can legitimately claim to represent the voice of humanity. One of the issues that the proposal of Falk and Strauss tried to solve was that not all UN member states can be considered democratic. What they suggested, in effect, is a parliament of democracies that over time would gain universal membership as countries democratize and join. This in itself raises a lot of issues and reminds of the proposal for a league of democracies. I doubt that such a body would be able to exercise much influence, especially during its initial phase. Eventually it would have to be connected to the system of international institutions as well. The UNPA proposal is more pragmatic and aims at an immediate impact on the existing system of global governance. It should always be noted that despite their own particular proposals both, Richard Falk and Andrew Strauss, are also on record as supporters of the campaign for a UNPA. Andy Strauss is a senior advisor to the campaign and has contributed a lot.