THE OSCE PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY
THE ACTIVITIES OF THE OSCE PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

Context

The Parliamentary Assembly (PA) of the OSCE is the parliamentary dimension of the 55-nation Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

The primary task of the 317 member Assembly is to facilitate inter-parliamentary dialogue an important aspect of the overall effort to meet the challenges of democracy throughout the OSCE area.

Originally established by the 1990 Paris Summit to promote greater involvement in the OSCE by national Parliaments, the Parliamentary Assembly has grown into a very active member of the OSCE family.

A dialogue aimed at further strengthening ties and co-operation between the inter-governmental and parliamentary OSCE branches has been positive and productive. The President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has continued to participate regularly at the political level in the OSCE, including Ministerial Troika meetings and the Ministerial Council. The Secretary General of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the staff of the Assembly's International Secretariat, located in Copenhagen, work closely with the OSCE Secretariat and with the other OSCE Institutions.

The OSCE Parliamentary Assembly has a unique structure. The President of the Assembly is elected each year by majority vote of the Assembly, presides over Assembly meetings and acts as the High Representative of the Assembly. The Secretary General is elected every five years by approximate consensus or majority vote of the Standing Committee of Heads of Delegations from all OSCE member parliaments. The President is assisted by nine elected Vice-Presidents and an elected Treasurer. The Secretary General manages the day-to-day affairs of the Assembly and is responsible for the International Secretariat and, with the Treasurer, oversees financial management.

Ministerial Council Meeting, Maastricht, December 2003

Calls for flexibility in consensus rule

In their respective addresses to the 11th Ministerial Council in Maastricht, both the Chairman-in-Office and the President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly raised questions about the current OSCE consensus rule, advocating recommendations for flexibility.

In his address to the Ministerial Council, PA President Bruce George pointed out that although NATO has a consensus rule like the OSCE, it has evolved different ways of being flexible so as not to allow a paralysis of decision-making. "Consensus has its price. If that price is the absence of taking the right and necessary decision or to postpone the right decision, or to dilute the decisions, one may wonder if the price to be paid is too high. Perhaps you may look again at the Assembly's principle of occasionally using approximate consensus."

The Assembly has been recommending a change in the consensus rule for more than ten years.
Annual Session, Rotterdam, July 2003

Role of OSCE in New Architecture of Europe
At its 12th Annual Session in Rotterdam, the Assembly focused on The Role of the OSCE in the New Architecture of Europe. Nearly 300 parliamentarians adopted the Rotterdam Declaration, covering a wide range of political, economic and human rights aspects of the main theme.

Several additional documents were also adopted, including those on:
- resolutions on welcoming Afghanistan as a new partner for cooperation
- renewing the OSCE partnership
- parliamentary follow-up of OSCE activities at the national level
- OSCE peacekeeping operations
- the OSCE Mediterranean Dimension
- combating trafficking and exploitation of children
- the role of the OSCE towards the greater Europe
- combating anti-Semitism in the 21st century
- the International Criminal Court and on the prisoners detained by the United States at the Guantanamo Base
- Moldova
- Belarus.

In keeping with established practice, the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, along with the OSCE Secretary General and the Heads of Institutions, addressed the Annual Session in Rotterdam and answered questions from the floor.

A special meeting of women parliamentarians was dedicated to the 2003 OSCE PA Gender Report. On the final day of the Annual Session, the Assembly unanimously re-elected Bruce George, the Chair of the Defence Committee of the British House of Commons, as its President for a second one-year term and Treasurer Jerry Grafstein (Canada) for a second two-year term.

The Assembly elected four new Vice Presidents: Nino Burjanadze (Georgia), Giovanni Kessler (Italy), Tone Tingsgaard (Sweden), and Nevzat Yalcintas (Turkey). Vice President Tone Tingsgaard was appointed by President Bruce George as the new OSCE PA Special Representative on the Gender Issue.

Winter Meeting, Vienna, February 2003

The Iraq Crisis Debate
One of the main highlights of the Second Winter Meeting in Vienna was a special debate on the situation in Iraq. It was the first of its kind on any specific subject related to a current international crisis.

The Winter Meeting also followed up on the previous year’s Declaration, prepared for the forthcoming Annual Session, and heard reports from leading OSCE officials, including Chairman-in-Office, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, who urged OSCE parliamentarians to use their influence to help reinforce democratic structures and institutions throughout the OSCE region.

Election Monitoring Leadership
Throughout 2003, the Parliamentary Assembly has continued to play a key part in the monitoring of elections, particularly parliamentary elections, in the OSCE area.

Monitoring activities
In 2003 the Chairman-in-Office appointed:
- OSCE PA President Bruce George as his Special Coordinator for the elections in Georgia (November) and the Russian Federation (December)
- Vice President Giovanni Kessler as Special Coordinator for the elections in Armenia (May) and Azerbaijan (October)
- Vice President Ihor Ostash as Special Coordinator for the elections in Serbia & Montenegro (December).

These Election Monitoring Missions were conducted in close cooperation with the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and the European Parliament. They involved several hundreds parliamentarians from throughout the OSCE area.

Parliamentary Field Visits
The OSCE PA has organised regular parliamentary visits to OSCE Field Offices and Missions to enable parliamentarians to observe the activities of the OSCE in the field and to support the important work of the missions.

In 2003, visits have been organised to the OSCE field presences in Croatia, Albania and the FYR of Macedonia.

Ad Hoc Committees
The OSCE PA Ad Hoc Committees - which have been established to address specific issues or areas that may benefit from parliamentary attention - continued to make a positive contribution to the work of the OSCE.

Further initiatives for transparency and accountability
As a direct result of the Ad Hoc Committee on Transparency and Accountability’s initiative, the OSCE Secretary General briefed parliamentarians, for the second time, on the proposed OSCE budget for the following year. At their October Meeting in Rome, members of the Standing Committee discussed the proposed 2004 OSCE Budget and put questions to the Secretary General.
After the debate it was agreed that the OSCE PA would forward the Assembly’s comments and recommendations to the Chairmanship and Secretary General in November. The presidential letter to that effect emphasises that adequate resources are needed to match the OSCE’s increased attention to combat trafficking in human beings, specifically to develop police capabilities and effective border controls; to strengthen the economic dimension of the OSCE; and to enhance efforts to improve gender balance, particularly in high level OSCE positions.

Facilitating dialogue in Belarus

During three visits to Minsk, the Ad Hoc Working Group on Belarus continued to pursue its aim of facilitating dialogue between political forces in the country, in particular regard to the forthcoming parliamentary elections tentatively scheduled for October 2004.

The Working Group also organised a round table on the Belarusian electoral code on the sidelines of the Rotterdam Annual Session and the Working Group Chair initiated a resolution on Belarus which was passed by the Assembly in Rotterdam.

Resolving the status of Transdniestria

In pursuit of its particular priority, the Parliamentary Team on Moldova organised, in close co-operation with the OSCE Mission, two Parliamentary Seminars on Federalism in May and September in Moldova. The purpose of the Seminars was to further promote the ongoing negotiations between Moldova and the Transdnistrian region, on a new constitution for Moldova.

Meetings, Conferences & Seminars

Sharpened focus on Central Asia

The Trans-Asian Dimension of the OSCE: A Vital Security Link was the main theme of the Trans-Asian Parliamentary Forum, organised by the OSCE PA in Almaty, Kazakhstan in June.

The Forum gathered more than 90 parliamentarians from 30 OSCE participating States and its main goal was to raise awareness and increase parliamentary dialogue on issues of security in the Trans-Asian dimension of the OSCE.

Promoting SMEs in the OSCE area

In May, in Bern, parliamentarians from more than 30 OSCE participating States agreed on the Bern Declaration on Promoting Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) in the OSCE area. The Declaration calls upon participating States to create legal and regulatory environments favourable to the development of SMEs, along with attractive taxation systems and guaranteed access to various infrastructures.

The Conference in Bern was the third conference organised by the OSCE PA in the field of sub-regional economic co-operation, and followed those held in Monaco (1997) and Nantes (1999). The next conference will be held in Norway in 2005.

Oversight of Armed Forces

The OSCE Conflict Prevention Centre and the OSCE PA held a second joint seminar in June, in Kiev. It promoted awareness of the parliamentary responsibilities outlined in the Code of Conduct on Politico-Military Aspects of Security and fostered dialogue between senior military personnel and parliamentarians involved in oversight of the armed forces.

Fall Meetings: Religious Freedom and the Mediterranean Forum

More than 160 parliamentarians from 49 participating States and partners took part in the 2003 OSCE PA Fall Meetings, which were held in October in Rome. The Conference focused on the law and politics of religious freedom; religious tolerance in pluralistic societies; and religious freedom and democracy; and was followed by a Papal audience. The subsequent Parliamentary Forum on the Mediterranean focused on strengthening security in that area and developing the OSCE Mediterranean dimension.

The PA and ODIHR: ‘working practices more streamlined’

President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Bruce George (right) meeting with ODIHR Director Christian Strohal during a working visit to Warsaw on 8 September.
Other Activities

PA Leadership Meetings
Regular meetings of the leadership of the Parliamentary Assembly have taken place in Vienna (Standing Committee), Copenhagen (Expanded Bureau), Rotterdam (Bureau, Standing Committee), Rome (Standing Committee) and Maastricht (Bureau).

Presidential activities
Throughout 2003 President George has been very active as the High Representative of the Assembly. Apart from presiding over all statutory meetings of the Assembly during the year, Mr. George travelled widely in the OSCE area representing the Assembly.

He has visited several OSCE participating States including the USA, the Russian Federation, Italy, Bulgaria, Poland, the Netherlands, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

President George also paid an official visit to Algeria, one of the OSCE’s Mediterranean Partners for Co-operation.

He actively participated in other OSCE PA events, including the Trans-Asian Parliamentary Forum in June and the Assembly’s Sub-Regional Economic Conference in Bern.

I think it has been a very good year for the Assembly. We have become more coherent, are functioning better in relation to the OSCE, and I believe have a dynamism to capitalise upon.

The work we have done with the ODIHR in monitoring elections has been of a high order. We have a very good relationship to be built upon. We’ve done a lot of good work while going out and visiting the field missions.

I think the strength of the OSCE is the field presence where grassroots work is been done. Parliamentarians are given advice on how to work a committee system better, and judges and border guards are trained. But we can continue to do a better job, and it is within our collective hands to do it.

The PA and ODIHR have got their working practices more streamlined - that process of binding together was really evident throughout the series of Georgian elections, the Russian Parliamentary elections, and the Serb election. What better testimony can you have than members of the Assembly and ODIHR, and the men and women who went out from the capitals of many, many countries, who went to observe elections in the middle of winter, between Christmas and New Year? They showed their real commitment. I think it was these factors which helped make an even better relationship between the Institutions.

We (the PA and the ODIHR) both have a well-established commitment to monitor and encourage countries with a young or recent tradition of democracy who are aspiring to meet their commitments. The PA and ODIHR’s expertise, with the rest of the OSCE working with us, is the way in which we have been activated.

I’m very proud of the fact that the Assembly has encouraged the OSCE to deepen its Mediterranean commitments. We have Mediterranean Partners and I believe we are well on the way to more fully involving them in the process.

So, when you add up those factors of good relationship with the OSCE and its Institutions, and the Mediterranean dialogue, I’m happy with the way things are going.

Bruce George, President of the Parliamentary Assembly

President George also addressed the Plenary of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in January, and the Plenary of the NATO PA in Orlando in November.

He led an OSCE PA Delegation on the first PA official visit to the UN in November, and also participated in OSCE conferences including the Anti-Terrorism Conference in Lisbon, the Conference on Preventing Xenophobia in Vienna, and the OSCE Mediterranean Seminar held in Aqaba, Jordan.

PA Liaison Office Vienna
In January the OSCE PA opened a Liaison Office in Vienna, headed by Ambassador Andreas Nethelle, who, in July, briefed the Permanent Council on the outcomes of the Rotterdam Annual Session.

Journalism Award
The PA awarded the eighth OSCE Prize for Journalism and Democracy to Anna Politkovskaya, during its February 2003 Winter Meeting. The winner is a journalist with the independent Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta who gained international recognition for her extensive and balanced reporting in Chechnya, which drew attention to human rights abuses in the region.