



Hon. David Kilgour

Encouraging multi-party democracy internationally

A niche role for former Canadian parliamentarians?

By Hon. David Kilgour



West German citizens gather at a newly created opening in the Berlin Wall at Potsdamer Platz in November 1989. Photo credit: U.S. Department of Defense.

In 1989, as the Berlin Wall came down, it appeared that totalitarian governance was mercifully gone and a peaceful and rule of law world was finally attainable. Government of, by and for citizens was thought to have won the great ideological battle of the 20th century.

Unfortunately, it is democratic governance that is today under attack in many of the world's almost 200 independent nations. According to the Freedom in the World report recently published by the United States-based non-governmental organization, Freedom House, democracy faced its most serious crisis in decades during 2017. Seventy-one countries suffered net declines in political rights and civil liberties, with only 35 showing gains.

Since 2006, 113 nations have experienced a net decline, and only 62 have seen an overall improvement.

Troubling trends

Nations that a decade ago were democratic success stories – Turkey and the Philippines, for example – today face authoritarian if not totalitarian misrule. Some long-established democracies are also mired in seemingly intractable problems at home, including rapidly widening economic disparities, cynicism among citizens and terrorist attacks.

Populist leaders who appeal to xenophobia and offer short shrift to civil and political liberties gained votes and parliamentary seats in France, the Netherlands, Germany and Austria during 2017. They were kept out

of government in all but Austria, but their success at the polls helped to weaken established parties from across the political spectrum. Centrist newcomer Emmanuel Macron handily won the French presidency, but in Germany and the Netherlands, mainstream parties struggled to create stable governing coalitions.

Basic human rights are also reported to have been diminished in almost two-thirds of the 113 countries surveyed for the 2018 Rule of Law Index. There continues to be widespread concern that there is a rise of authoritarian nationalism and a failure of governments to meet international legal obligations. Venezuela is last on the list and the Philippines fell 18 places to 88th.

Non-discrimination, freedom of expression and religion, the right to privacy and workers' rights were all examined when calculating the index. The respondents' belief in the protections afforded by such rights dropped in 71 of the 113 countries measured.

Exporting anti-democracy

Not coincidentally, the world's largest dictatorships, China and Russia, have not only increased domestic repression, but have exported their practices. Beijing recently proclaimed that it is "blazing a new trail" for developing countries to follow; one that in practice would not provide rule of law, free and fair multi-party elections, gender equality or social inclusion, while fostering crony capitalism, official corruption and state violence against disfavoured communities.

Carl Gershman of the U.S.-based National Endowment for Democracy noted: "Russia, China, and other authoritarian countries are using sophisticated soft power techniques and multilateral coalitions like the Shanghai Co-operation Organization to subvert the global norms contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to replace them with the norm of unlimited state sovereignty." He added, "They're using trackers, trolls and other instruments to subvert the integrity of the media space in Europe and elsewhere to spread confusion and divisions and to undermine the institutions of the West."

The spread of anti-democratic practices internationally also poses economic and security risks. When more nations are free, all countries are safer and more prosperous. When more are autocratic and repressive, treaties and alliances weaken, nations and regions become unstable, and violent extremists have increased room to operate.

Worrisome, too, is that some young people, who have little memory of the long struggles against totalitarianism in various forms, might be losing faith in democratic governance. A determined struggle to rebuild it must begin immediately.

Canada's role

Canada, as an internationally respected parliamentary democracy, is not carrying its weight in encouraging multi-party democracy. It has been estimated that our government allocates a mere 1.4 per cent of its international assis-



At the Initiative for Parliamentary and Diplomatic Engagement panel on Tuesday February 6, 2018, the all-party Democracy Caucus introduce themselves and explain their motivations for forming it. From left to right are vice-chair Kennedy Stewart, MP Burnaby South, chair; Anita Vandenbeld, MP Ottawa West-Nepean; director Randy Hoback, MP Prince Albert; and vice-chair Elizabeth May, MP Saanich-Gulf Islands. Photo by Justin Tang.

tance project budget to strengthening parliaments and political parties.

Among the issues raised at a February 2018 joint event of the House of Commons' all-party Democracy Caucus and the Carleton Initiative for Parliamentary and Diplomatic Engagement:

- Canada as a respected nation is well placed to "up its game" significantly in helping to strengthen parliamentary democracies and civil societies around the Commonwealth and in other nations, with significant help coming from former MPs and senators. One expert told those present at the event that Canadians working internationally on governance issues for Canadian NGOs are virtually non-existent.

- Globally, political participation remains the sphere where the least progress has been made in closing the equality gap between women and men. Women are especially effective at negotiating security and social issues. Jacqueline O'Neill, president of Inclusive Security, a Washington-based group that works to increase the number of women in peace and security activities internationally, noted that currently only around 24 per cent of parliamentarians globally are female (around the same percentage as in our House of

Commons). Only around 14 heads of state are women. How can parliaments and political parties make measurable progress for greater participation of women in politics?

- Parliamentary and election support initiatives are cost-effective "force multipliers", in the sense that those involved interact daily with MPs, programs and the executive branch of governments. Parliaments of other major nations are able work directly with legislators abroad.

- Francis Le Blanc, executive director of the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians, noted that as part of offering "more Canada" to strengthen democracy elsewhere, our ex-MPs, having been in Parliament, are now available to programs expanding across the globe.

In short, if ever there was a good time for Canada to do significantly more in this area of international cooperation, it is on democratic governance, and now.

The Hon. David Kilgour was a member of Parliament for 27 years (1979-2006), on two occasions serving as a secretary of state. He served under the Progressive Conservative Party and the Liberal Party, and sat as an independent.

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