



Parliamentary Centre

Helping Legislatures Better Serve Their People

Necessary Parliament - Parliament and Democracy in the 21st Century (El Parlamento necesario - Parlamento y democracia en el siglo XXI) by José Tudela Aranda

***A Book Review by Jean-Paul Ruszkowski,
President and CEO of the Parliamentary Centre***

José Tudela's book "***El Parlamento necesario - Parlamento y democracia en el siglo XXI***" (*Necessary Parliament - Parliament and Democracy in the 21st Century - in Spanish only*) is an important contribution in helping parliamentarians, leading executives of parliaments and all of those for whom democracy matters, to better understand potential threats to representative democracy. The recently retired author shares his experience as a Clerk of the Parliament of Aragon in Spain (where Parliament is called Cortes). He examines and gives considerable thought to the role of Parliament from a practitioner's perspective as well as from his personal journey as a Spanish citizen.

He identifies himself as a great believer of representation as an essential role for Parliament. Since he belongs to the generation of Spaniards who lived the transition from a corporatist dictatorship to a parliamentary democracy his views carry considerable weight among emerging democracies.

Jose Tudela reminds us that Parliament was born out of faith, faith in the goodness of free people, faith in progress, faith in reason, faith in justice, faith in the rule of law. Parliament is the reflection of human intelligence, it is where the strength of words are measured, it is also where great ideas are debated and become laws meant to help our society achieve greatness. Parliament is where political and societal changes take place.

Tudela underlines the very essence of the oversight role of parliament. His observations about weaknesses of parliament in exercising the oversight function makes it easier for public opinion to develop feelings of frustration towards parliamentarians and a growing cynicism about their relevance.

Few may question the reasons why parliaments exist; unfortunately there is enough evidence for the average citizen to question and doubt the quality of its representation in parliament.

For example, instances of misconduct, excessive polarization between political parties on issues of national interest and in extreme cases, create the perception that parliament is a world market where deals are made with total disregard for the needs of the people. The ambivalence between the way parliament is meant to be and the way parliaments may be perceived, invites the following question: ***Can Parliament adapt and meet Citizens' Expectations in the 21st Century?***

Tudela outlines ways on how best answer that question.

What do political parties want from their parliamentarians?

In several countries political parties demand a high degree of party discipline from their parliamentarians. It has been said that parliamentarians no longer speak on the basis of the wishes of their electorate nor their personal views. The argument is they have become spokespersons for their political party leading to an impression among citizens that their voices are not being heard. In other instances where parliamentarians have no party discipline, the electorate wonders if parliamentarians are only representing certain particular interests rather than representing them.

What do people want from their parliamentarians?

Individual citizens have the power to vote. They can also become members of a political party which they find attractive or they can support organizations that want to insure that the country benefits from good governance.

Power is not only in the hands of governments. Power is shared by corporations, unions, universities, interest groups, multinational NGOs and the media. In all these sources of power there are people.

Tudela talks about a political culture that is present in every society. If the people want to have good governance, if they want to enjoy their freedoms, if they want a fair and accessible justice system they must engage and participate in one way or another in the political process.

Today citizens have become a lot more politically savvy than they used to be, and they are now able to make use of social media tools to express their frustration, and/or disapproval of Parliamentarians and more easily hold the latter accountable. .

Are parliaments communicating?

Jeremy Bentham in the 19th Century (1839) already addressed the issue of the legislative assembly's responsibility to public opinion. At that time he mentioned all the tools such as Hansard of debates, ads in the newspaper that could be used to insure that as many citizens would be informed of the deliberations in parliament.

According to Jose Tudela it seems that parliaments are still communicating today as they were at the time that Jeremy Bentham wrote his work. It is true that many parliaments have a website but very few parliaments in the world have given themselves a strategy to communicate and influence public opinion by using all tools available to keep citizens informed of major political issues and debate taking place in parliament. The absence of pro-active efforts by parliaments to communicate, to reach out in order to connect with its citizens is leaving a big white page in the script of political life.

I invite all who can read Spanish to read this book and I hope that there will be soon an English version of this important contribution to discussions on parliamentary democracy.