

Canadian Group
Inter-Parliamentary Union



Groupe canadien
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General Debate
**“Contemporary challenges to democracy:
Overcoming division and building community”**

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Inter-Parliamentary Union**

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CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY: OVERCOMING DIVISION AND BUILDING COMMUNITY

Dear colleagues,

Today, I want to challenge you and the Inter-Parliamentary Union. I want to challenge you to acknowledge and start a discussion on one of the biggest contemporary threats to democracies and democratic values worldwide, which is the threat brought about by the ever-increasing pace of technological change.

When I speak of democratic values, I am referring to free and fair elections, the rule of law, human rights and freedom of assembly, among others. Digital technologies (such as computers, the Internet, artificial intelligence, and algorithms) are double-edged swords. They have enabled our world to become more interconnected than ever before. They have opened up and accelerated communication and engagement between parliamentarians and the public in an unprecedented manner. They are also enabling businesses and services to become more efficient than in the past. And they are unlocking the full potential of the world's creative and innovative minds. But like all tools, in the hands of ill-intentioned actors, they can be used to wreak havoc.

For instance, the Internet and social media platforms have been a breeding ground for hate, misinformation, disinformation, extremism, and a wide array of illicit activities, all of which are incompatible with the democratic values I outlined. Indeed, these activities and behaviours can endanger democratic dialogue and truthfulness, and, ultimately, threaten democracy itself.

Our constituents are getting information that is deliberately false and misleading, as indeed are we, as parliamentarians. If, as a society, we cannot always discern the accuracy of the information we receive, how, then, can we expect voters and their elected representatives to make informed decisions?

The threat posed by such challenges recognizes no borders. Whether we are talking about mature or nascent democracies, technological changes are outpacing democratic systems and leaving them behind. The electorate and their representatives are being targeted by actors seeking to destabilize, undermine and subvert democratic processes for their own benefit.

An example of such subversion is foreign interference. In Canada, we define foreign interference as "foreign influenced activities within or relating to Canada that are detrimental to the interests of Canada and are clandestine or deceptive or involve a threat to any person." Attempts by foreign actors to covertly influence, manipulate or interfere with elections or democratic processes are a form of foreign interference.

In Canada, we believe this to be such a threat to our values that, in 2019, our federal government developed the *Critical Election Incident Public Protocol* and tasked a panel of five senior public servants "with informing Canadians of any incidents or threats to the 2019 federal election that



were deemed to be severe enough to undermine the integrity of the election or to impair Canadians' ability to have a free and fair election.”¹

In July 2021, our national intelligence agency, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), reported that “although Canada’s electoral system is strong, foreign interference can erode trust and threaten the integrity of our democratic institutions, political system, fundamental rights and freedoms, and ultimately, our sovereignty.”² CSIS also indicated that, “Given the nature of today’s geopolitical environment, these activities will almost certainly intensify.”

The general population, public officials, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, and the media are all potential targets. I believe it is incumbent upon the IPU to start talking about these issues if we are to ever address them properly.

Let’s start thinking about ways to mitigate the risks associated with digital technologies. As Joe Clark, former Prime Minister of Canada, and Anne McLellan, former deputy Prime Minister, recently wrote: “Democracy is not inherently brittle, but neither is it simple, and certainly it is not effortless. Contemporary democracy is both complex and under stress.”³

As the world’s foremost parliamentary organization, the IPU is best placed to encourage collective efforts to ensure that we find ways to release the stress placed on democracies worldwide. Let’s stop taking democracy for granted. Let’s remember our motto: For democracy. For everyone.

Thank you. *Merci. Gracias.*

¹ Government of Canada, [Report on the assessment of the Critical Election Incident Public Protocol](#).

² Canadian Security Intelligence Service, [Foreign Interference: Threats to Canada's Democratic Process](#), July 2021.

³ Joe Clark and Anne McLellan, [“Canadians must debate how to renew democracy at home and abroad,”](#) *iPolitics*, 21 September 2021.