

World Forum on Democracy
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Chairman's Remarks

Federalism, Multi-Ethnic Society and Democracy

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We call our organization the *Forum of Federations*. And exploring the notion of *federalism as a crucial area of common interest* is what we are all about.

Our mission is to bring together people from all over the world who share this interest in federalism, an interest that could be academic or theoretical, or entirely practical. In fact we place our greatest emphasis on the practical side and on the people we call the *practitioners* of federal governance. That, of course, includes many of us here today. Our goal is to make it possible for *practitioners* to share and learn from each other's experiences. We want to give people who daily confront all the challenges and problems of governing in a federal context, an opportunity to learn from and share ideas with others.

The 20th century could be viewed in many respects as a struggle between various forms of tyranny and democracy. In the last century, this country where we now meet lived through almost every imaginable form of undemocratic government: monarchical absolutism; military dictatorship; nazism; communism.

Today Poland finally has democracy again...as do so many countries that suffered so grievously in the course of this violent century.

But around the world people in emerging democracies are discovering that a system of representative democracy that guarantees basic human rights is not often of itself sufficient to meet all the tasks of governance...and this is especially true in large and diverse countries with many different ethnic communities. In cases such as those what is often called for is a good dose of federalism, if not in name, in methodology.

Indeed, if supplanting tyranny with democracy has been the main task of the 20th century - a task that is still far from complete - making democracy work in many complex circumstances could be the task of the 21st century. Federalism is an old idea - not quite as old as democracy perhaps - but it is an idea that seems to have fresh life in it in the year 2000.

Just ask the British who are using the tools of federalism to bring autonomy to Wales and Scotland...or the Spanish who, since the restoration of democracy, have developed a mode of what we sometimes call asymmetrical federalism, with particular arrangements tailored to the requirements of individual regions...or the Brazilians who are working hard to strengthen state governments and establish the rules for fiscal co-operation...or Canada by creating a new territory to respond to the desire of the people of Nunavut for greater autonomy.

As we move from one century to the next the challenge is perhaps more subtle and less brutal than the struggle against tyrannies and dictatorships that characterized the 20th century. It might be saying too much to argue that as the 20th century was a struggle for democracy, the 21st century will be a calm and deliberate effort to apply methods such as federalism to bring democracies closer to their citizens....

It may be saying a bit much...but as we **celebrate** the triumph of democracy in so many places maybe we should think in a sober fashion of how in an era of globalization and an increasing complex world we're going to make democracy an effective form of government. Today we will look at how the principles and experiences of federalism can help. I think we can all agree that federalism is not always the simplest and most elegant way to govern. I'm sure we've all had the feeling that it would be so much easier if all power and all decisions were concentrated in one place. We would never have to worry about confusion or over-lap of roles, never become frustrated by the seeming inefficiency of getting different levels of government to reach some consensus as to their objectives and the means of achieving them.

It might *seem* that it would be so much easier and simpler. But what is most easy or elegant or simple is not always what is most just or fair or equitable. When you are dealing with the challenge of democratically governing in countries as vast and diverse as Canada, the United States, India, or Brazil some kind of federal system seems almost ordained by nature.

It is hard to imagine genuine federalism without democracy.

One of the essential aspects of federalism is a sort of creative tension between the center and the constituent units.

A viable federal system affords all its different states or provinces the opportunity to stand up for their own interests and to form alliances with others who have shared or complementary interests. At the same time it gives a significant role to a central government that has the job of identifying common goals for the whole country. It is in the interaction of the various levels of government, from which sound policies should emerge.

But to have this creative tension – this productive interaction – the states or provinces cannot be mere creatures of the central government. They have to have independent legitimacy.

And there is no better way of according legitimacy to a government than through the willing consent of the governed.

But if federalism is an old and enduring concept it is not a static one. As the world changes and evolves different styles and models of federalism emerge. And today we are also faced with additional models that include supra-national federalism, asymmetrical federalism, and incipient or near-federalism.

There are some people for whom the word federalism evokes images of instability and fragmentation. That's exactly the opposite of what we believe federalism to imply. The world needs cultural diversity just as the planet needs *biodiversity*. What federalism offers is the means to maintain and foster that vital human diversity without endless political fragmentation.

And whatever name you want to give it, the world is seeking more of the *skills* and *knowledge* that we choose to call *federalism*. As democracy spreads, as diverse cultural groups seek to affirm themselves everywhere, federal solutions become inevitable. Federalism is not a religion. It is not an ideology. It is perhaps nothing more than a method, a way of doing things.

But in a world as a complex and diverse as ours federalism also represents hope–

...hope that people can work out their differences according to constitutionally determined rules;

...hope that groups and regions can co-operate without losing their individual character;

...and hope that as new democracies emerge the world doesn't fragment into hundreds of new so-called sovereign (but nevertheless essentially powerless) states.

Today's speakers will, based on their diverse experiences, address how we can use federalism to enhance our democracy.

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