

Paper Prepared by Andrew Strauss¹ in Anticipation of the Helsinki Conference 2002:

A Practical Proposal for a Creating a Global Parliament

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As international organizations necessarily take on new responsibilities in response to globalization they are under growing citizen challenge because of their lack of consistency with democratic procedures, what is sometimes called the democratic deficit. Richard Falk and I have been arguing that it is time to respond to the crisis of democratic legitimacy with the creation of a Global Parliamentary Assembly, a popularly elected world parliamentary body modeled on the European Parliament. The key to our proposal for a global parliament is that it is at once potentially transformative of the global system, while also being politically realistic. It is potentially transformative in that it envisions as its eventual goal a world body with limited but important legislative powers enfranchising the whole of the world's citizenry over a certain age. It is politically realistic in that we suggest an incremental process for bringing this vision to fruition. We propose that it start as a stand alone organization composed of internationally progressive democratic countries that might be willing to be pioneers. Even twenty to thirty geographically and economically diverse countries could be enough to launch the project. To start, so as not to be too threatening to existing national leaders, its powers could be largely advisory. If a well organized cadre of civil society organizations were to get behind this project, as with the landmines treaty or the International Criminal Court, we believe the successful initiation of those projects could likely be repeated.

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The last half of the twentieth century taught us that grand plans to instantly transform global governance were doomed to failure. Perhaps most well-known, the world peace through world law proposal to create world government fathered by Louis Sohn and Grenville Clark never came close to getting off the ground. But what did work was the incrementalism of the project that is now known as the European Union. Though its architects such as Jean Monnet envisioned a comprehensive European system from the beginning, it started with only six countries as the very limited European Coal and Steel Community. And the directly elected European Parliament itself, that now has veto power over approximately 80% of European Union legislation, began life as a largely advisory body.

Though the future can never be predicted with any degree of certainty, there is reason to believe that once in place a global parliament would likely grow in influence and stature. The election process would give it a visibility unique among global institutions, and as the only such institution with any claim to popular legitimacy, citizen groups seeking to promote their causes would likely petition the parliament to pass supportive resolutions. Those opposed to the policy preferences of these citizen groups, whether they be industrial lobbies, states or other citizen groups, would not likely willingly cede the legitimacy of the only popularly elected global body to their policy opponents. Instead, playing out the familiar process of parliamentary politics writ large, they would likely come to participate as well. The parliament's arena could grow as a much needed venue where the various global interest could directly interact to promote their positions and resolve differences without having to rely on their respective governments to be intermediaries.

Once functional, citizen groups from countries the world over could petition their governments to join the assembly, and once a critical mass of membership was reached even authoritarian governments would find it increasingly difficult politically to deny their citizens the right to be represented through free and fair elections in the one globally

democratic institution. At some point in its evolution the Parliament's formal legal powers, as well as its relationship with the United Nations, would have to be worked out. Perhaps it could, along with the General Assembly, be a part of a bicameral global legislative system.

Though this evolutionary process would take time, the Parliament could exert a moral influence at least equal to, if not, exceeding, that of existing non-governmental watchdogs from its inception. By holding hearings, issuing reports, and passing resolutions, it could introduce some element of popular accountability to existing global institutions.

The current system based on state sovereignty is becoming increasingly authoritarian, tends toward recurrent war, and facilitates the ability of countries to disregard international norms that are in the common interest. The hope would be that a global parliamentary assembly could lead the way to an international system where social questions might one day come to be settled in as peaceful and fair a way as is the case within some of the world's more successful democratic societies.