

# Toward Global Political Integration: Time for a World Parliamentary Assembly

Andreas Bummel

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Andreas Bummel is the co-founder and global coordinator of the Campaign for a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly.

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The existing system of international law and intergovernmental institutions is not up to the global-scale decision-making necessary for the shared risks of the twenty-first century. A Great Transition toward a socially just and environmentally sustainable world order will require both revisiting discussions about a federal world government and asserting the necessity of its democratic nature. Only a world parliament can provide the democratic legitimacy and the planetary perspective required for developing world law. The creation of this new institution will depend on a reciprocal relationship between the cultivation of a sense of global citizenship, the spread of democratization at the national level, and bold statements by social movements that the time has come for democratic world government.

**The Planetary Condition | International Law and World Law | The Development of a World Parliament | Elements of a Transitional Scenario | Endnotes**

## **The Planetary Condition**

For the first time in history, a complex, tightening web of interdependence unites all humanity into a single world system. Our collective well-being now depends on the secure provision of public goods and the regulation of systems that are global in scope, such as food, trade, finance, climate stability, disease prevention, and peace and security. At the same time, attaining the necessary funds to meet these goals has become a problem of global scale, exacerbated by the tax avoidance by large companies and high-net-worth individuals through international tax

havens and anonymous shell companies, a phenomenon which itself has fueled the growing gap between the global superrich and the poor.

Humanity, however, is united not only in its challenges but also in its aspirations. In the course of industrialization and modernization, with the attendant rise in living standards and education, emancipative values take root and propel people's desire for self-determination, freedom, tolerance, and democracy. Although still incipient, a cultural trend towards post-materialistic values has been emerging in affluent societies. Interdependence and interconnectedness, along with a growing awareness of common risks, nurture a planetary perspective and a sense of world citizenship and global solidarity.

A planetary civilization is coalescing, but the evolution of the sociopolitical and legal order remains stuck at a pre-planetary level. Based on the paradigm of sovereign territorial states, the existing system of international law and intergovernmental institutions is inherently incapable of decision-making and government at a planetary scale. Overcoming this dangerous discrepancy is a vital part of a Great Transition towards a sustainable, resilient, equitable, and peaceful global order.

## **International Law and World Law**

The Westphalian intergovernmental system based on sovereign states has proven ineffective and dysfunctional in dealing with the most pressing issues of the emerging planetary civilization. In the years after the Second World War, the concept of a federal world government enjoyed considerable public and intellectual support, but vanished from mainstream discussions with the onset of the Cold War. Given the intense global challenges we face, the debate on a framework for global government may be due for a comeback.

The process of world state formation, the development of supranational world governance, and the possible shapes of a world government are indeed complex issues. However, for two reasons, the creation of a global parliamentary body may be the single most important element in any viable attempt to steer such a process. First, a global parliament constitutes an indispensable feature of the institutional architecture of full global political integration. Second, a parliamentary body may also be the key force and cultural innovation required to advance successive political integration.

International law currently lacks a formal legal framework. There is no generally binding system of lawmaking, no obligatory settlement of disputes at courts, and no means of enforcement—the very elements that would characterize world law in contrast to international law. International law is based on intergovernmental treaties that states opt to join, whereas world law would be universally binding on states as well as (in principle) on individuals and corporations. As Grenville Clark pointed out in 1966, the word “law” necessarily implies the law of a world authority which would be uniformly applicable to all nations and all individuals.[1] The design of global decision-making—procedures, participants, scope—will determine the degree of democratic inclusion, accountability, and effectiveness of such an authority. World law requires

a degree of legitimacy that can be achieved only through a legislative body democratically elected by the world's citizens.

World law is rooted in the idea of world citizenship, which implies that all human beings are recognized as equal legal subjects endowed with basic rights and responsibilities. The right to vote in free and fair planetary elections for a global parliament is the defining feature of such a concept and its most emblematic expression. The perspective prevalent in international law is national interests, whereas in world law it is the planetary interest. World law assumes the unity of humanity as a natural collective of all human beings and is concerned not only with individual well-being but also with the well-being and survival of the entire species and its natural habitat. A body of democratically elected world representatives would be a mechanism for ongoing determination of the best interest of humanity as social and ecological conditions evolve.

In consequence, the allocation of seats—and power—in a global parliament would eventually have to take the principle of “one person, one vote” into account, and decisions would have to be based on qualified majorities if they are to be binding as world law. A global legislative system would probably have to rest on two chambers, a citizen-elected parliament and a body representing the states, similar to today's UN General Assembly, both of which would have to concur to global regulations with a two-thirds majority. The threshold may even have to be higher.

Rulemaking in international law, in contrast, is based on consensus and the principle of “one state, one vote.” International treaties are often ineffective because they constitute the lowest common denominator of national interests. Consensus decision-making means that a single party can block an outcome and thus all parties need to be accommodated. Moreover, ratification of international treaties is often slow, and state parties may adopt them with reservations only.

Traces of world law can already be found in the international legal system. These include, for example, the universally binding character of decisions by the UN Security Council; the concept of the common heritage of mankind in the Law of the Sea; the dispute settlement mechanism of the World Trade Organization; the International Criminal Court, which prosecutes individuals for the worst possible crimes; and the emerging principle of the Responsibility to Protect, which provides a framework for the international community to intervene in cases of genocide and other human rights violations.

### **The Development of a World Parliament**

Needless to say, a system of world law and an elected global parliament cannot be achieved overnight. When the idea of a UN Parliamentary Assembly (UNPA) was revived after the end of the Cold War, it was seen not as a final goal but as the first step in a long-term approach to attaining a world parliament.[2] Other approaches outside the UN have been put forward but lack the breadth of support of the UNPA proposal.[3] The international campaign for a UNPA—which encourages an ongoing discussion on possible paths towards a world parliament—has

been endorsed by a broad range of individuals and institutions from more than 150 countries, among them 1,500 sitting and former members of parliament and leading scholars.[4]

A UNPA would be largely a consultative body, initially composed of national parliamentarians. It could be established by the UN General Assembly as a subsidiary body without changing the UN Charter, or be created to address specific issues, such as climate policy under the umbrella of the assembly of state parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Either way, the scope and powers as well as the democratic legitimacy of the assembly would expand over time.

The development of the European Parliament, which originated from the Common Assembly of the European Community on Coal and Steel established in 1952, provides a rich example from which to draw. When the European Atomic Energy Community and the European Economic Community were established five years later, the Common Assembly was transformed into the European Parliament as a shared body of the three European communities, composed of national parliamentarians. However, as the powers of the European communities were expanded, the need to improve their democratic legitimacy grew as well. This was partially addressed by strengthening the European Parliament. In 1975, the European Parliament was vested with the power to determine the Community's budgets. Finally, direct elections were introduced in 1979. Together with the Council, the European Parliament is the EU's legislative body today.

Of course, European integration has not been a linear process. Time and again, crises emerge. The latest setback was the recent "Brexit" referendum, whereby a narrow majority in the United Kingdom (which was skeptical towards closer integration all along) voted to leave the EU. Despite surveys showing that on average 67 percent of Europeans feel that they are citizens of the European Union, trust in the EU as an institution remains an issue. For instance, only 43 percent of Europeans trust the European Parliament. But with an average of only 31 percent, trust in *national* parliaments is even lower.[5] Without the democratic legitimacy offered by the European Parliament, the integration process could not have advanced as much as it has in the past three decades.

At crucial points, the European Parliament helped overcome deadlocks and drive the process toward qualified majority voting. A UNPA may be able to play a similar role in global affairs. As in the European Parliament, the members of the assembly would group around their political views, and not their geographical origins. Having minorities and members of the opposition sitting in the assembly's deliberations would help overcome the criticisms of the democratic deficit in intergovernmental bodies.

The design of a new global architecture of world law will need to be discussed and decided in a democratic, open, and inclusive global forum. The Convention on the Future of Europe, which deliberated publicly on a draft treaty for a Constitution for Europe between 2002 and 2003, may serve as an instructive example. Its membership included not only representatives of governments, but also national and European parliamentarians. At the global scale, a UNPA could be both a driver of such a process and one of its key components.

## Elements of a Transitional Scenario

The creation of institutions and the formation of solidarity and identity are reciprocal processes: neither can develop and thrive without the other. On the one hand, a planetary perspective may be a precondition for the development of a global parliamentary assembly. On the other, such an assembly could become the most important vehicle for advancing a planetary perspective. After all, a UNPA would be the first body in human history called upon to represent the world's citizens as such. An elected world parliament would give tangible reality and meaning to the identity of world citizenship. In an important, if incremental, step, a UNPA could help strengthen a planetary perspective in the world population, which would then create the preconditions to call for a strengthening of the UNPA—and so on.

International surveys seem to indicate that sufficient *popular* support already exists for an initial step, and persists despite the resurgence of xenophobic and nationalist forces on the right. The main obstacles are thrown up by national elites, particularly the bureaucrats of the foreign ministries. Generally, citizens seem to be more progressive on international issues than their own governments. Recent opinion research has shown that majorities in most countries support strong regulation of the arms trade, international responsibility to protect people from severe human rights abuses by their governments, the elimination of nuclear weapons (supported even by the citizens of the nuclear powers), increased government spending to fight world hunger and severe poverty, and heightened climate change mitigation efforts.[6]

In a poll of eighteen countries in 2004/5 that covered 61 percent of the world's population, an average of 63 percent of respondents supported the creation of “a new UN Parliament, made up of representatives directly elected by the citizens, having powers equal to the current UN General Assembly.”[7] A more recent poll indicated that nearly one in two people (49 percent) surveyed across fourteen tracking countries see themselves more as global citizens than as citizens of their own countries.[8]

Democracy theorist Robert Dahl has referred to three big transformations in the history of democracy.[9] The first occurred around 500 BCE when the autocratic city-states in Greece developed into the first political systems that included democratic decision-making. For the next two thousand years, democracy was identified with small city-states and direct participation of citizens. This changed with the second transformation in the eighteenth century. In the course of the American and French revolutions, the principle of democracy was expanded to large territorial states with the idea of democratic representation. Since then, democracy has continued to evolve in that mode.

A third transformation is now stirring. As global interdependence grows, and sovereign states acting alone—or even together—can no longer solve critical issues, the nature of government and rulemaking itself must change. Transnational government networks already fulfill the function, if not the form, of world governance. Now democracy needs to be expanded to the global scale.

The main political impediment to the third transformation lies in the fact that the second transformation is not yet complete. Democratic elections for a world parliament would not be

conceivable in countries that do not even have democratic elections for their own national parliaments. A full-fledged world parliament and a democratic system of world law must await the development of an acceptable level of democratic governance in all major countries.

The establishment of a global parliamentary assembly and a successful transition to a democratic system of world law will depend on a complex interplay of diverse factors at the right moment, such as the rise of a planetary worldview, an increasing importance of post-materialistic values, and the development of a global middle class. Studies have shown that as living standards improve, individuals and societies increasingly turn their attention to emancipative and non-economic values and exhibit greater support for democracy, ecological sustainability, and social justice.[10] In the planetary phase in which we now live, the nation-state alone no longer constitutes an effective framework for the successful pursuit of these goals.

Above all, there must be sustained political advocacy. Governments will be unlikely to back such a proposal unless they see sufficient popular support, in the form of, say, mass petitions addressed to governments and political leaders. The cause of global democratization and a world parliament could be taken up by social movements and play a central role in mass protests and demonstrations. This is not far-fetched. At the protests in Seattle in 1999, one of the slogans used was “No globalization without representation.” Mobilizing popular support and creating mainstream visibility would be a task for a global citizens movement.

Additionally, the development of a world parliament will have to be embraced by enlightened and progressive elements of the global elite. Their motivation may extend beyond self-interest (the desire to avoid a critical disruption of the world system, for example) to reflect a value change at the individual level. Sooner or later, though, parts of the global elite will also embrace a genuinely planetary perspective.

For all this to develop, building the momentum necessary for a historic breakthrough might take a calamitous trigger. It is impossible to know beforehand what this situation will look like: another global financial crisis, unforeseen extreme weather events, a terrorist attack, or a nuclear accident. What matters now is laying the foundation in awareness, values, and politics that will help seize the moment when it arises from whatever coalescence of forces unbalances the status quo.

## **Endnotes**

1. Grenville Clark and Louis Sohn, “Introduction,” in *World Peace Through World Law: Two Alternative Plans*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), xv.
2. Dieter Heinrich, *The Case for a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly* (1992; repr., Berlin: Committee for a Democratic UN, 2010).
3. Richard Falk and Andrew Strauss, for instance, suggested that a world parliament could emerge from a directly elected assembly initially created on the basis of an international treaty by a representative group of thirty or so democratic countries. See their collected works on the subject: *A Global Parliament: Essays and Articles* (Berlin: Committee for a Democratic UN,

2011).

4. See [www.unpacampaign.org](http://www.unpacampaign.org). The campaign was launched in 2007. Institutions that have expressed support include numerous civil society organizations, parliaments, international parliamentary assemblies and party networks. For instance, the Pan-African Parliament, the European Parliament, and the Latin American Parliament have adopted resolution—as have Socialist International, Liberal International, and the Green World Congress. Individual supporters include proponents of alternative approaches like Richard Falk and Andrew Strauss.
5. European Commission, *Standard Barometer 83: European Citizenship* (Brussels: European Commission, 2015), 15; European Commission, *Standard Barometer 83: Public Opinion on the European Union* (Brussels: European Commission, 2015), 66, 103.
6. See Council on Foreign Relations, ed., *Public Opinion on Global Issues: A Web-Based Digest of Polling from Around the World* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2009); Steven Kull, “Listening to the Voice of Humanity,” *Kosmos Journal* (Spring–Summer 2010): 26–29.
7. Council on Foreign Relations, ed., *Public Opinion on Global Issues*, 7.
8. GlobeScan Incorporated, “Global Citizenship A Growing Sentiment Among Citizens Of Emerging Economies: Global Poll,” press release, April 27, 2016, <http://www.globescan.com/news-and-analysis/press-releases/press-releases-2016/383-global-citizenship-a-growing-sentiment-among-citizens-of-emerging-economies-global-poll.html>.
9. Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 311ff.
10. On the “human empowerment process,” based on the results of the World Values Surveys, see Christian Welzel, *Freedom Rising: Human Empowerment and the Quest for Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).