
2016 ANNUAL SESSION OF THE
PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE ON THE WTO

What future for the WTO?

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Geneva, 13 June 2016

Honourable parliamentarians,
Distinguished representatives of governments and international organizations,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the Annual Session of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO.

It is my great pleasure to greet you on behalf of the world organization of parliaments, the Inter-Parliamentary Union. Bringing together legislators from 170 countries, the IPU takes pride in embracing the full spectrum of geographical, political, cultural and ethnic diversity that makes up the richness of today's global parliamentary community.

The IPU is headquartered in Geneva. We share this city with dozens of other international organizations, one of which stands out due to its unique combination of powers and functions.

Indeed, the World Trade Organization is vested with binding rule-making and adjudication powers and is equipped with an effective dispute settlement mechanism. WTO rules and agreements extend far beyond the traditional domain of tariffs and trade in goods. They also reach deep into domestic and regional affairs. It is important to remember, however, that the main purpose of the WTO is to uphold the rule of law in international trade and thus help reduce poverty and create prosperity by lowering the barriers to trade worldwide.

This is why, more than a decade ago, the IPU and the European Parliament jointly decided to establish a mechanism of parliamentary oversight of the WTO. We were convinced that trade between nations was one of the cornerstones of the edifice of international peace and cooperation. In an interconnected and interdependent world, questions of international trade are so important that they cannot be left to governments alone.

We have conceived the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO as a platform for dialogue between legislators specializing in matters of international trade and development, and government negotiators directly involved in WTO talks. Over the years, such dialogue and interaction have largely proven their worth.

For parliamentarians, it is an effective tool for scrutinizing the work of government officials involved in multilateral trade negotiations. For diplomats and trade experts, it is an opportunity to expound to legislators the challenges of the negotiating process and the technical subtleties of compromise formulas. This information will be indispensable for the subsequent ratification of agreements by parliaments, which are entitled to ratify in full knowledge of what happened during negotiations. Unless transposed into national legislation and followed by robust oversight, trade agreements will be neither credible nor effective.

We are thankful to the WTO for having opened its doors to parliamentarians once again. Already for the fourth time, our session is taking place in Centre William Rappard, the premises of the WTO. The political importance of this fact is hard to overlook. We all share responsibility for making the multilateral trading system work in the interests of the people – those men and women whom we represent.

Alongside the annual Public Forum of the WTO, the Parliamentary Conference has become a vivid proof that external transparency of the WTO is a reality.

I would like to avail myself of this opportunity to extend our appreciation to the Chairman of the WTO General Council, Ambassador Harald Neple, who will address our Conference in a few moments. Together with the WTO Director-General, he has been very supportive of the idea of maintaining a meaningful dialogue with parliamentarians, so as to bring their unique perspective to the WTO. Our sincere thanks also go to colleagues at the WTO Secretariat for their assistance and exemplary cooperation in the preparation of this event.

The theme that we have chosen for this year's session reflects our growing preoccupation with the lack of tangible progress in WTO talks. Perturbed by reports about persistent and fundamental divisions between WTO Members, we are not the only ones to be asking that crucial question: "What future for the WTO?"

A former US Congressman and Chairman of the WTO Appellate Body, Mr. James Bacchus, recently reminded us that the multilateral trading system was established after World War II to help prevent World War III. Indeed, the rule of law is the only antidote to the rule of power. The WTO is meant to secure world peace by setting universal rules and promoting the peaceful resolution of international trade disputes.

Alas, when the WTO came into being twenty-one years ago, hardly anyone could foresee that the road ahead would be so long and winding. The WTO is often considered to be a laboratory of multilateralism. If so, it is worrying to see that countless stoppages continue to block progress in that laboratory, casting doubt on the ability of the Organization to move forward. Launched nearly 15 years ago, the Doha Round is the longest ever. This alone adds grist to the mill of those who question the enduring value of multilateralism.

The programme of our session includes an interactive panel with a number of Ambassadors who follow the work of the WTO on a daily basis. They bear the bulk of the responsibility for moving the negotiations forward or – let's be frank – for making consensus a little harder to achieve. They are also best placed to tell us the true story of ongoing negotiations.

The subject of today's interactive panel with Ambassadors could not be more topical: WTO in the era of mega-regional trade agreements. At a time when the WTO is facing existential challenges, the issue of bilateral and regional trade pacts is on everybody's lips. Needless to say, the matter is of direct concern to parliaments as well. One only needs to look at the ongoing – rather hot – debate in the parliaments of some of the countries that have signed the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement.

I am sure you will have many questions for the distinguished Ambassadors – both those who will be on the podium and those who will remain in the room. I am told that there are many of them with us today. I take this opportunity to thank them all for having honoured us with their presence.

Right after the opening session, we shall listen to a series of presentations on the main substantive theme, which deals with the all-important issue of the centrality of development in the WTO's work. Trade policies must reflect broader development objectives and be used as a driver of prosperity. The 10th WTO Ministerial Conference, held in Nairobi last December, achieved a number of important outcomes going in that direction, especially as regards the least developed countries. Were they sufficient? And what are the priority tasks for parliaments in their implementation?

Our debate on the main theme will continue tomorrow. We shall listen to the views of parliamentary delegates from developed and developing countries and also benefit from the expertise of internationally renowned experts.

During the afternoon session tomorrow, we shall hold a panel discussion on a subject that is particularly close to the hearts of IPU Members. For many years, the IPU has been playing a pioneering role in mainstreaming gender-related issues into all aspects of parliamentary life. It was therefore with great enthusiasm that we supported the proposal of one of the members of the European Parliament to have a special event that considered gender in relation to trade as a vehicle of social progress.

That panel is a first-ever for our Conference - and a long-overdue one, I should add. Social and economic opportunities created by trade are spread unequally and the benefits are still not sufficiently inclusive. We hope that the interactive panel will help us identify concrete ways of dealing with these challenges.

As part of the programme, we also have two important briefings by the WTO Secretariat. The first one deals with the ratification of the Trade Facilitation Agreement concluded by the WTO in 2013. The Agreement is expected to benefit the global economy by hundreds of millions of dollars per year. To become legally binding, it should be ratified by two-thirds of WTO Members. Nearly 80 countries have ratified thus far, but this is not enough. The role of parliaments in this process is simply indispensable.

The second briefing will be focused on the functioning of the WTO's dispute settlement system. This unique mechanism, often referred to as the legal guardian of the WTO, is at the heart of the entire operation. This is why it is important for legislators not only to understand how the WTO dispute settlement system works, but also to see its ramifications for our own domestic processes.

At the concluding sitting, we are expected to adopt an outcome document. The draft has been prepared by the delegation of the European Parliament. Parliaments had until 15 May to submit their amendments. Tonight, the Conference Steering Committee will conclude its consideration of the amendments received and will develop a revised draft, which will be made available to all delegates tomorrow morning. It is my hope that we shall be able to adopt it by consensus.

The IPU and the European Parliament, as the Conference co-organizers, have invested much time and energy into the preparation of this session. I wish to pay tribute to the leadership and staff of the European Parliament - our partner in this exercise - for everything they have done to facilitate the process.

We look forward to a rich and constructive debate, in the true parliamentary tradition.

With these words, let me officially declare the annual session of the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO open.