

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2348
March 18, 2009

Why the United States Should Not Join the Inter-Parliamentary Union

Ted R. Bromund, Ph.D.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), founded in 1888 by Frédéric Passy of France and William Randal Cremer of Great Britain, originally sought to promote peace by encouraging regular contacts between parliamentarians from established democracies. The IPU also supported free trade and arbitration, on the basis of respect for national sovereignty, between nation states. In short, the IPU was a manifestation of late 19th-century liberal internationalism.

The IPU of today bears no resemblance to the organization founded by Passy and Cremer. It is an unhappy reminder of how institutions that were devised by liberal internationalists have been captured and perverted by autocracies and anti-sovereignty activists. The IPU now:

- has no standards for membership and is therefore dominated by repressive and illiberal regimes;
- serves no serious purpose but by providing these regimes with a recognized forum enhances the perception that they are legitimate and responsible;
- is an active proponent of measures that would limit the sovereignty of democracies and restrict their freedom of speech.

The United States is not now, and should not become, a member of the IPU.

The IPU as It Was Founded. The IPU originally sought to increase cooperation between sovereign democracies—nations that would not wish to fight their fellow democracies and would therefore desire

to settle disputes through diplomacy and arbitration. There was no place in this vision for dictatorships: At the second meeting of the IPU, in 1889, the only states represented were Britain, France, Italy, Spain, Denmark, Hungary, the U.S., and Liberia.¹ The founders of the IPU sought a world in which inter-state relations would look like they do today between Britain and the U.S., a world in which war would be unthinkable and disagreements would be settled peaceably.

The Modern IPU. Sadly, the IPU of today bears no relation to the organization founded in 1888: It has no standards for membership and, as such, provides token legitimacy to many of the world's worst dictatorships. The widely respected Freedom House annually ranks the political and economic freedom of all the world's nations. Of its "Worst of the Worst," four—Libya, North Korea, Somalia, and Sudan—are members of the IPU.² So are dictatorships or autocracies such as Belarus, Cuba, Iran, Laos, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe. Other deeply illiberal IPU members include Angola, Burundi, the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Togo, Ukraine, and Venezuela.³

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/InternationalOrganizations/wm2348.cfm

Produced by The Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

The mere fact that North Korea, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe are members in good standing of an organization supposedly dedicated to “the firm establishment of representative democracy” is enough to condemn the IPU.⁴ But the broader membership of the IPU is also suspect. The organization does contain states—such as all 26 of America’s allies in NATO—that are democratic and respectable. But these are the old members, the ones present at the IPU’s creation. The original members are now completely outnumbered by the newer members, such as the 88 members of the Non-Aligned Movement, and by the 49 members of the Organization of Islamic Countries. Between these two organizations, states with weak or no commitment to liberal and democratic values control 94 of the 154 seats in the IPU.⁵

Illiberal Policies The policies the IPU endorses reflect the illiberalism of its members. The IPU no longer mentions free trade, as it once did. Instead, the organization is in favor of “fair” trade—by which it means systematic discrimination in trade that favors the developing world—and the creation of global institutions that would reduce the sover-

eignty of democratic states. It no longer argues that free trade reduces the power of autocratic states. Instead, the IPU urges states to regulate and structure every aspect of economic life, a call that gives unlimited license to its dictatorial members to justify their intrusive tyranny.⁶

Instead of recognizing that arbitration requires two willing partners, the IPU makes token representations against Palestinian terrorism while condemning Israel at great length for exercising its right of self-defense.⁷ Instead of defending the international state system on which it was founded by decisively condemning terrorism, the organization emphasizes “the need to distinguish between terrorism and the struggles of peoples to liberate their land and regain their legitimate rights.”⁸ And instead of defending the great liberal principle of free speech, IPU delegates refer to the need to control “defamation of religions,” a code word for censorship of speech that is critical of Islamic radicalism.⁹

IPU Hypocrisy. The hypocrisy of many of the IPU’s delegates, and of the IPU itself, is breathtaking. In October 2008, during a discussion of “free-

1. Inter-Parliamentary Union, “Historical Focus: 1888–89,” at <http://www.ipu.org/strct-e/1889.htm> (March 18, 2009).
2. Freedom House, “Worst of the Worst: The World’s Most Repressive Societies, 2009,” p. 1, at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/WoW09/WOW%202009.pdf> (March 18, 2009).
3. “Illiberal” as defined by the nation’s ranking in the *Index of Economic Freedom*. See, Terry Miller and Kim R. Holmes, 2009 *Index of Economic Freedom: The Link Between Economic Opportunity and Prosperity* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation and *The Wall Street Journal*, 2009), at <http://www.heritage.org/Index/Ranking.aspx>; Inter-Parliamentary Union, “Members of the Union,” at <http://www.ipu.org/english/membshp.htm> (March 18, 2009).
4. Inter-Parliamentary Union, “What Is the IPU?,” at <http://www.ipu.org/english/whatipu.htm> (March 18, 2009).
5. Inter-Parliamentary Union, “Members of the Union.”
6. Inter-Parliamentary Union, “Job Creation and Employment Security in the Era of Globalization,” resolution adopted unanimously by the 116th Assembly, May 4, 2007, at <http://www.ipu.org/conf-e/116/116-2.htm> (March 18, 2009).
7. Inter-Parliamentary Union, “The Role of Parliaments and the Inter-Parliamentary Union in Ensuring an Immediate Halt to the Rapidly Deteriorating Humanitarian Situation in Conflict Areas and Its Environmental Dimension, in Facilitating the Palestinians’ Right to Self-Determination—Particularly by Ending the Blockade in Gaza—and in Accelerating the Creation of a Palestinian State Through Viable Peace Processes,” resolution adopted unanimously by the 118th Assembly, April 18, 2008, at <http://www.ipu.org/conf-e/118/118emrg.htm> (March 18, 2009).
8. Inter-Parliamentary Union, “The Role of Parliaments in Striking a Balance Between National Security, Human Security and Individual Freedoms, and in Averting the Threat to Democracy,” resolution adopted unanimously by the 118th Assembly, April 18, 2008, at <http://www.ipu.org/conf-e/118/118-1.htm> (March 18, 2009).
9. Inter-Parliamentary Union, “Summary Records of the Panel Discussion Held During the 119th Assembly in Geneva (October 2008) on the Subject Item ‘Freedom of Expression and the Right to Information,’” October 14, 2008, p. 10, at <http://www.ipu.org/conf-e/119/sr3.pdf> (March 18, 2009); Steven Groves, “Why the U.S. Should Oppose ‘Defamation of Religions’ Resolutions at the United Nations,” Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2206, November 10, 2008, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/LegalIssues/bg2206.cfm>.

dom of expression and the right to information,” the Chinese delegate claimed that “all Chinese citizens had the right to express themselves freely and could communicate their criticisms to State authorities and public officials.” In reality, and in the words of the executive director of Freedom House, Jennifer Windsor, China operates “an intricate system of restrictions on the free circulation of ideas.”¹⁰

In December 2008, the IPU held a “Conference of Women Parliamentarians and Women in Political Decision-making Positions of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States.” The GCC states include Saudi Arabia, where, as the IPU admits, women are allowed neither to vote nor to hold public office.¹¹ In the eyes of the IPU, that did not disqualify Saudi Arabia from participating in the conference.

The hypocrisy of the IPU does not simply make nonsense of its idealistic words; it tarnishes the honor and impugns the seriousness of the democratic states participating in this farce. Seeking to achieve a consensus through multilateral negotiation about women’s rights with Saudi Arabia, the freedom of the press with China, or the definition of democracy with North Korea is both foolish and dangerous. By pursuing such a consensus, the good states grant legitimacy to the bad ones and imply that they are worthy of being listened to when human liberty is at stake. The autocracies use the process only to confuse and sow self-doubt among the democracies, and they pervert a forum supposedly dedicated to liberty to gain international recognition of their tyrannical regimes. The way to promote the values of freedom is not to negotiate

them on the basis of multilateral consensus with their enemies; it is to demonstrate that the free states esteem these values so highly that they feel no need to lend the dignity of negotiation to dictators.

A Friend of Dictatorships. The fate of the IPU, like the fate of other international organizations that grew out of the liberal internationalism of the late 19th century, is genuinely tragic. From expressing a sincere hope for a better world founded in free trade, democracy, and cooperation on the basis of the sovereign will of the people, they have been led into backing precisely the opposite values.

By admitting states that did not share their founding values as full and equal members, these organizations gave away their birthright. They are now so dominated by these enemies within that they cannot be reformed, because the autocracies can simply vote down any measure that threatens their stranglehold. This is precisely the problem that led the Obama Administration to withdraw from the Durban Review Conference: The IPU is now simply a continuous Durban.¹²

This reality is regrettable, but it must be recognized for what it is. Therefore, the United States should not join the IPU. To do so would imply the IPU is a respectable international organization, not the friend of dictatorships and the enemy of liberal values and democratic sovereignty it has sadly become.

—*Ted R. Bromund, Ph.D., is Senior Research Fellow in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*

10. Press release, “Freedom House: New Report Details China Censorship Mechanisms,” Freedom House, March 9, 2006, at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=70&release=329> (March 18, 2009).

11. Press release, “Building Bridges Between Women MPs, The Media, and NGOs in the GCC States,” Inter-Parliamentary Union, December 16, 2008, at <http://www.ipu.org/press-e/gen318.htm> (March 18, 2009); Inter-Parliamentary Union, “Women’s Suffrage,” at <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/suffrage.htm> (March 18, 2009).

12. Brett D. Schaefer and Steven Groves, “U.S. Boycott of U.N. Durban II Conference on Racism: The Right Decision by the Obama Administration,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2326, March 4, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/InternationalOrganizations/wm2326.cfm>.