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**MODERATION**

**by**

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**of the General Debate on**

**“The renewal of representative democracies in a time of crisis: challenges and opportunities?”**

**Luanda Session**

**October 2023**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

dear Colleagues,

The world is changing. Whether politically, geopolitically or socially, the 21st century has already presented us with numerous global challenges: economic and financial crises, a migration crisis, global pandemic, climate change, war in many places around the world – to name just a few of the biggest issues our societies are facing and for which our democratic institutions need to find solutions. More than ever they are called upon to provide answers to questions that on their own, namely at national level, they would struggle to provide.

In addition to these external challenges, for several years now we have seen a growing dissatisfaction and scepticism towards the traditional model of representative democracy. Our democracies must also prove themselves at home and keep demonstrating that this form of government remains the best for the benefit of all citizens. In some countries, this “internal crisis of democracy” manifests itself in falling voter turnout, dwindling trust in political institutions, stakeholders and procedures, the loss of party-political allegiance and at the same time growing extra-parliamentary protests. Around the world, autocratic and sometimes anti-democratic tendencies seem to be on the rise, on the streets, in parliaments – and sometimes also at the top of government.

The reasons why people turn their backs on established political procedures and stakeholders, as well as the challenges that representative democracy faces at home, are multi-layered and often both interdependent and overlapping. I would like to briefly outline four of these points that I have noticed with regard to Germany and that are being discussed in Germany.

(1)

On the one hand, an alienation between those in power and the population is often identified when there is talk about the “establishment”, “rule of the elites” or “those at the top”. Citizens often no longer feel part of the system, but consider themselves to be mere observers. There is a perception that, ultimately, only certain groups can influence political decisions through the parliament elected by all citizens. Those who can make their voices heard through interest groups, NGOs or lobbyists get their demands accepted, others fall by the wayside. This dissatisfaction feeds the demand for less representation and more direct participation of citizens in political decisions. A demand, however, that calls into question the very principle of representative democracy.

(2)

In addition – as has already been touched upon at the beginning – politics and society are facing numerous challenges that can no longer be adequately addressed at the national level alone. Phenomena such as climate change or global environmental problems need a concerted approach – political decisions that inevitably require intergovernmental cooperation, perhaps also in consultation with international bodies. This poses a challenge to representative democracy as national parliaments tend to lose influence in favour of the executive, leading to less transparent decision-making and the dilution of responsibilities.

(3)

In terms of decision-making, representative democracy is also often accused of having inefficient decision-making processes and of not addressing urgent problems quickly enough. Democracy thrives on discourse and requires not only majority decisions but also the effective protection of minorities, for example the broadest possible involvement of all affected stakeholders in transparent procedures. At times, these procedures can be very time-consuming. Moreover, in recent years, the fragmentation of the political landscape and the majorities in many parliaments have not made it easier to find compromises in some countries.

(4)

Finally, it has to be noted that a large part of the political discourse nowadays is conducted outside of parliament. While social media offers broader participation opportunities for citizens, it has also created new risks. Misinformation, filter bubbles or the targeted manipulation of public opinion through the use of artificial intelligence are increasingly noticeable phenomena and have a considerable influence on the democratic discourse. They lead to uncertainty and further undermine the already reduced trust of citizens in political institutions and representative democracy.

And using social media as a communication channel is extremely easy, while at the same time having an enormous impact. Moreover, the potential for anonymity of the internet means that people can publicise vitriolic appeals and opinions without having to take any responsibility for them. These facts are also used by the enemies of democracy and by extremists who purport to have simple solutions for complex problems. They polarise the political landscape with their messages, making it difficult to have a genuine debate on political issues in democratic society.

Dear Colleagues,

I think we should, we *must* take these challenges seriously and face them, and we must try to provide answers. I look forward to our discussion and, in addition to my introductory remarks for the debate, I would like to leave you with the following questions that we should take into consideration in our efforts to find answers:

* What do you see as the biggest challenge for representative democracy?
* Do we actually need a renewal of representative democracy in the sense of a change, or is it perhaps enough to adapt certain procedures and practices?
* Is representative democracy still in keeping with the times or is there a need for more direct citizen participation through referendums, citizens’ councils and citizens’ committees?
* Do the internet and social media offer opportunities for more participation, for an increased exchange between representatives and the sovereign?
* How can we make our parliaments more resilient against the enemies of democracy? And
* What can we do as parliamentary administrations to strengthen representative democracy?

Dear Colleagues, I would hereby like to open the debate – and I hope there will be lively contributions, compelling ideas and a productive discussion!

*[Mögliche Zusammenführung der Diskussion und Schlussworte:]*

I would like to thank you for your participation and interesting contributions. We have seen that representative democracy is facing similar challenges everywhere and, in many places, is struggling with a loss of trust in political institutions, actors and procedures. However, representative democracy by its very nature thrives on trust, on the trust that citizens put in their representatives for a certain period of time.

We can therefore agree, I hope, that it is a particular responsibility of parliaments to critically question the reasons for this loss of trust and to explore how they can better reach the people again. There are no hard and fast answers. However, suggestions have come out of our debate today that are well worth thinking about further.

In order for parliaments to also be able to respond better to global challenges, we should consider how best to adapt our procedures. Supranational solutions also need parliamentary support. This requires an earlier involvement and closer coordination with the respective national government representatives, but also closer and more focused cooperation between parliaments.

We should also ensure that political decisions are explained well and that procedures and decision-making processes are transparent. This requires freedom of information on the one hand and accountability on the other. There is a famous German Martin Luther quote “*dem Volk aufs Maul schauen*”, which literally translates as “looking at the mouth of the people”. It can indeed be helpful to listen to the people – not to pander to them, but to better understand what is on people’s minds. Citizens’ councils providing advice to parliament – as is currently practised by the German Bundestag – certainly also has a role to play. The direct involvement of citizens in decision-making processes in the form of referendums can return some decision-making power and thus also responsibility to the sovereign. However, in my opinion, this scratches at the foundation of representative democracy, which by its very nature is designed for decisions to be made by elected representatives of the people. And it is also clear that even these forms of direct democracy do not relieve political actors of their duty to explain their decisions.

In our role as the parliamentary administration, we can play a part in providing such explanations in the context of our public relations work. I also see our responsibility within the context of democratic education. A well-informed and politically educated population is better able to understand and assess political decisions. We should therefore invest even more resources in political education and open our houses to people of all ages.

We must take decisive action by means of criminal sanctions against hate speech, deliberate misinformation and threats to elected officials in both the virtual and the real world. However, the way parliamentary administrations deal with such statements on the internet is a topic of its own.

It goes without saying that these points are not exhaustive, and please forgive me if I have not revisited every argument you have mentioned.

“The renewal of representative democracies in a time of crisis: challenges and opportunities?” – that was the initial question on which our discussion was based.

By way of conclusion, I would like to state the following: crises are always opportunities, opportunities to make something good even better. And allow me to end with Winston Churchill, according to whom democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.