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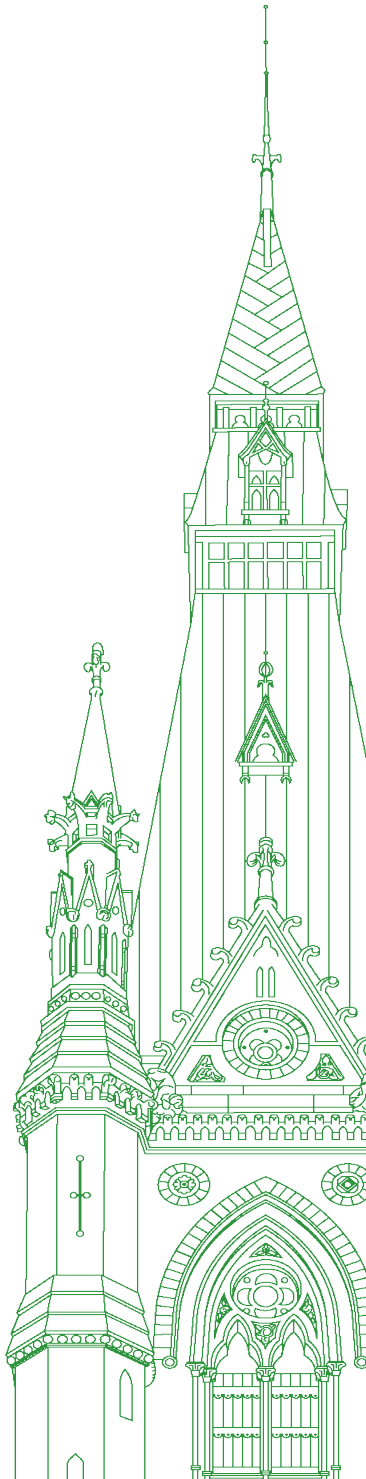

Chair: Mr. Peter Fonseca

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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● (1835)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.)): Welcome back, colleagues. This is the ninth meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. Today we will have a briefing with the Canadian Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, followed by some subcommittee work that will be in camera.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I encourage everybody to have their microphones on mute. When your time comes up for questions, when you have 30 seconds left I'll flash this card so you'll see how much time is remaining. For those who require interpretation, you'll see the globe at the bottom of your screen, which you can click on for English or French.

With no further ado, I'll welcome our witness, somebody who is no stranger to all of us. I'll refer to him as the Honourable David McGuinty, and also as MP or Mr. President of the Canadian Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

Welcome, David. Thank you for joining us here and being able to give us your brief and then take questions.

Your colleague David Cunningham Carter will join us when he can.

You'll have five minutes at this time.

Hon. David McGuinty (Ottawa South, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair; and good evening, colleagues. It's good to see so many of you again.

Thank you very much for your interest in the Inter-Parliamentary Union, IPU, and specifically its committee on the human rights of parliamentarians.

The Parliament of Canada has a long history with the IPU, having formerly joined the organization in 1912 and reconstituting the modern-day Canadian group of the IPU in 1960.

Today, the Canadian group has 68 members of Parliament and 25 senators as members.

I'm here today—hopefully soon—with my colleague, the Right Honourable David Carter, until very recently a member of the New Zealand Parliament, a former speaker and a former very active member of the IPU's committee on the human rights of parliamentarians.

[*Translation*]

The Inter-Parliamentary Union, which celebrated its 130th anniversary in 2019, is a global group that brings together national parliaments from around the world. It is the oldest organization of its kind. It currently brings together 179 national parliaments. It works closely with the United Nations to promote democracy, peace and co-operation among peoples.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union is interested in a multitude of topics, such as tensions in the Middle East, health, sustainable development, violent extremism, international humanitarian missions, and young parliamentarians.

[*English*]

Its Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians is the only international mechanism that seeks to protect and defend legislators experiencing such human rights violations as torture, kidnapping, murder, arbitrary arrest and detention.

This committee, consisting of 10 parliamentarians from around the world, carries out in-country missions and meets in camera several times a year to examine ongoing cases and new complaints. Its most recent report and decisions, released in November 2020, addressed cases involving 160 members of national parliaments from 13 countries, including Venezuela, Belarus, Uganda, the Philippines and Egypt.

These are only a portion of those the committee examined in 2020. They confirm an overall upward trend in violations of parliamentarians' human rights, 85% of which are cases involving opposition members.

The list of alleged human rights violations documented in the 2020 report includes murder, torture and other acts of violence, intimidation, arbitrary arrest and detention, abduction, lack of due process and fair trial proceedings and violations of freedom of opinion and expression.

Generally speaking, the committee's decisions do four things. First, they provide a detailed description of the complaint. Then they express concern for the alleged violation of human rights, followed by an affirmation of the IPU's readiness to support capacity-building within various public institutions. Finally, they encourage parliamentary, governmental and judicial authorities to take the appropriate measures to ensure that the human rights of parliamentarians are in fact protected.

I encourage members here this evening, many of whom are actually members of the IPU but may not know much about the committee for the protection of the human rights of parliamentarians, to ask my esteemed colleague Mr. Carter for more detailed information about the committee's procedures.

The information contained in these reports really serves no purpose, if awareness of them remains limited to those who participate in the IPU. Their value, I feel, and I think our executive committee of the IPU in Canada feels, is magnified when they are broadly promoted and more clearly integrated into the work of national parliaments.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair and colleagues, for your kind attention.

● (1840)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McGuinty.

For the first round, each questioner will have seven minutes.

We are going to start it off with Iqra Khalid from the Liberals for seven minutes.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Mr. McGuinty, for coming before our committee on this really insightful project and initiative. As you said, I had no idea this existed.

Can I you ask you how this originated? I realize you had sent us a draft decision, a report on parliamentarians who have suffered abuse and decisions from the IPU on this. How do you come to a decision? What is the mechanism for coming to it? How do you ensure that there is a balance of world views and a good representation from all of your member states from the IPU when it comes to these decisions?

Hon. David McGuinty: The committee of 10 is selected from different geopolitical groups that comprise the IPU as a whole. They are nominated by those geopolitical groups. They work in camera; therefore, much of the information they obtain is considered confidential. They meet sometimes for full weekends. I know of instances where the committee met and worked, frankly, overnight to deal with the kinds of evidence and information put to the committee.

They have a team of evidentiary experts in Geneva at the IPU head office, so they warrant the information as best they can. They sometimes conduct field visits to countries that are affected, where parliamentarians might be at risk. You can see through the information that would have been distributed to you that there's a generic approach to this: a summary of the case, the facts as presented, and the decision that has been rendered by the committee. These folks on the committee, the 10 of them, are chosen for their human rights expertise.

In the past, we've had Canadians such as Robert Douglas George Stanbury, an MP; and Senator Joan Neiman. The committee was established in 1975, and since then we've had people such as Senator Sharon Carstairs and the Honourable Irwin Cotler serve as its president. There are a number of distinguished human rights experts who have served over the years and who continue to serve on the committee.

● (1845)

Ms. Iqra Khalid: In terms of the repercussions of a parliamentarian being reprimanded through this platform on human rights violations towards their own parliamentarians in their own governments, and so on, what is the impact of that?

I notice that this organization refers a lot of matters to the secretary-general and makes some very marked remarks as to what the implications of the human rights abuses are and lists out the evidence that has been noted, but ultimately, have we seen what the impact of this is within the IPU?

Hon. David McGuinty: In my time working with the IPU for maybe five years now, what I've noticed, perhaps the most powerful thing in terms of issuing the reports....

Here's a practical example. A former member from Venezuela is no longer a member of the committee because of reports that were issued by this human rights of parliamentarians committee.

The power of exposure, the power of the pulpit, the power of distribution of the findings and comments made by the committee in the media, which is then often broadcast in the affected country, is very persuasive. It's delicately exercised by these 10 human rights experts who pore over the evidence and they're very cautious.

There is an ongoing debate. I would be less than fully transparent if I didn't say there's an ongoing debate amongst some members of the IPU about how far the committee can go in interfering, in some people's minds, or examining the conduct of a government in a sovereign state, but the committee seems to have found a way to deal with that in the formatting of its reports and the robustness of the evidence it relies on.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: As a follow-up on evidence, is there a formal data collection mechanism in terms of how many people have been complained against, what the genders of those people are, and what the victims and their genders and their identities are? Is there some type of compilation of evidence through the IPU on those who are victimized a lot more?

Hon. David McGuinty: I think the answer to that is yes. I think what you're asking is, how does this all start? The question really is, who can submit a complaint to the committee?

We know that it's the parliamentarian or the former parliamentarian whose fundamental rights have been violated, or a member of their family or their legal representative. It could be another parliamentarian. It could be a political party or a national or international human rights organization, such as the UN.

All complaints are submitted in writing, with evidentiary backup, to the president of the committee or to the IPU secretary-general. There is a robust collation of evidence. If it's not sufficient, the committee might send executives or analysts back to explore and try to get more information to buttress the case or to make a decision whether to go or not in pursuing the complaint.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you very much, Mr. McGuinty, for all of your hard work and for your representation on the IPU.

Hon. David McGuinty: Thank you.

The Chair: Now we'll move to Mr. Kenny Chiu from the Conservatives for seven minutes.

Mr. Chiu.

● (1850)

Mr. Kenny Chiu (Steveston—Richmond East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. McGuinty for coming and talking to us.

The first question I have is regarding the UIPU selection of these studies. I had a glance at the report and noticed that of the 13 cases you've documented in that report, six are from Africa, two from the Americas, two from Asia, one from Europe and one from the Middle East.

I understand, of course, that different areas of the world have implemented varying levels of democracy and of your focus on how parliamentarians have been treated or their rights been violated. Can you highlight how these cases are being studied and what the selection criteria are?

Hon. David McGuinty: Mr. Chair, in deference to our colleague who has, I think, just joined us from New Zealand.... I'm not avoiding Mr. Chiu's question at all; it's just that the Honourable Speaker Carter is so much better prepared than I am in experience to deal with that question.

I'm in your hands, Mr. Chair. I'm not sure whether you'd like me to proceed or whether you'd like to move sideways, so to speak.

I'm sorry, it was Mr. Chiu's line.

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Mr. Chair, I submit to your decision. I'm okay one way or the other. I notice that our guest is actually in the Zoom call, so if you decide to let him speak first, I'm totally okay.

The Chair: I was just thinking to ask all the members whether we would allow Speaker Carter to give us his opening remarks.

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Welcome, Mr. Carter. We're glad to have you here. Technology is working around the globe.

You are a former parliamentarian and former speaker of the New Zealand House of Representatives. We've heard Mr. McGuinty speak highly of you, so we'd like to hear what you have to say. Then we'll take questions from members.

Thank you very much.

Sir David Cunningham Carter (former Parliamentarian and the former Speaker of the New Zealand House of Representatives, As an Individual): Thank you very much, Peter.

Good evening, members. I apologize for taking some time to connect. We did a test call a couple of hours ago that went without difficulty. We spent the last 40 or 50 minutes, but we're finally there.

I was going to make a few opening comments about my involvement with this committee, and then I will welcome questions. I will try to cover Mr. Chiu's question towards the end of my presentation.

Very briefly, what staggered me as a New Zealand parliamentarian was the extent of abuse that actually occurs in many democracies around the world. We take it for granted down here, and I suspect in Canada you are relatively uninformed, unless you have a special interest in the human rights, of some of the abuses that occur to elected representatives right around the world.

I recall being in Geneva and talking to our embassy there on an IPU visit before I was involved in this committee. Collectively, our staff said that of all the work the IPU does, the most valuable is that of this committee.

Subsequent to that, my first involvement was, as a former speaker, to be asked to join a mission to the Maldives. We travelled there, spent a couple of days there and spoke to opposition MPs. Some of them were imprisoned, incarcerated in awful conditions. There were MPs who were not being advised when Parliament was sitting because they were opposition MPs; others were arrested when they entered the Parliament building, etc.

We concluded our report, we published the report to IPU, and they disseminated it fairly widely. I know it received a lot of local publicity in the Maldives. A subsequent election meant that this regime was thrown out. The last time I was involved, the democracy there was operating significantly better.

I guess my then membership of the committee occurred straight after that. It is a committee of 10 members. They are elected at the plenary sessions. All you have to show is an interest in human rights and human right abuses of members of Parliament. If the plenary elects you, you're on the committee. It's a five-year term.

I will move to Mr. Chiu's point about how we hear about the abuses that are occurring.

We receive complaints. One of the processes we address straight away in the meetings we have is whether the case meets the criteria for us to continue further investigation.

We're dealing with countries such as Venezuela, Turkey, Cambodia, these being some of the obvious ones. My last involvement with this committee before I retired as a member of Parliament was a trip to Turkey, where there were clearly significant abuses occurring to people who had been democratically elected.

They pass the criteria as to whether they are eligible for us to further investigate; we then will meet aggrieved parliamentarians, if they are travelling to these plenary sessions. On the odd occasion, we put together a mission, if we're able to go to these countries, and make the necessary inquiries.

One of the real spotlights of our reports then is our presentation to the plenaries, which used to—prior to COVID—occur every two years. These presentations are a session towards the end of the plenary; they are on day four or day five.

Most delegates who have travelled to those plenaries take a huge amount of interest in the work the committee is doing and therefore become far more well-informed of some of the abuses that occur.

I think that's a very quick rep, because I realize I'm late in getting to the call, but I'm only too happy to take any questions.

● (1855)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Carter. We will do a hand-off back to Mr. Chiu.

You have still at least a good six minutes, Mr. Chiu.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate your not taking the advantage and persecuting the opposition here.

Joking aside, I'm very happy to not be in that report. Canada has a fulsome and comprehensive democracy, which we enjoy.

Let me get back to the question I have. The reason I ask that question—to either of the two witnesses—is that in 2019 and 2020 one thing we have seen is a blossoming democracy in Asia that has been taken in the reverse direction. Many of the people elected—politicians, legislators—have been arbitrarily disqualified. As a result, they were disqualified for life.

Of course, I'm talking about Hong Kong here. I wonder why the committee did not pick that subject up and conduct some study on it.

Sir David Cunningham Carter: Mr. Chair, do you want me to answer that?

The Chair: Yes, please.

Sir David Cunningham Carter: The situation in Hong Kong has occurred more recently, since I am no longer a member of the committee. It may well have received complaints from Hong Kong opposition members of Parliament, and it may well be undertaking some investigation.

To make progress in a situation like Hong Kong—and I suspect it won't be long before we're hearing from members of Parliament in Myanmar, for example—you actually have to get into the country and talk to the people who have been abused. You have to talk to some of the authorities. If you can't get in, it's difficult to do anything more than a superficial investigation.

The best example I can give you on your continent is Venezuela. They keep saying they'll invite this committee there. It has never happened, but we're all well aware of the abuses that are occurring to opposition members of Parliament in Venezuela.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you for your input.

Speaking of Venezuela, we understand that the opposition parliamentarians have been facing threats, suppressions and surveillance—needless to say, intimidation and violence.

Is there any suggestion in the report or in the committee of what parliamentarians around the world could do, including here in Canada—especially SDIR, the international human rights subcommittee here? What could we focus on and perhaps shine some light into or take some action on to help our fellow parliamentarians?

Sir David Cunningham Carter: In the case of Venezuela, we actually have a member of the committee who is from Venezuela. She gives us some heart-rending stories of how she effectively has to escape from the country. She fears she'll be arrested if she leaves Venezuela to go to the plenary sessions we used to hold pre-COVID, and getting back into her country is difficult.

Despite not being able to visit Venezuela, we have done regular reports. I'm trying to think of the number of MPs involved, but I think it would be in excess of 100 members of Parliament who are on the list of the investigation into that specific country.

We do make a substantial report to the plenary session. David McGuinty, correct me—there would be 600, 700 or 800 people who would be at the plenary sessions. They are hearing of the abuses that are occurring, not that it's not public knowledge, but the session that we give to the major plenary session certainly reveals the difficulty that we're having in getting proper information. Furthermore, it shows the difficulty that those opposition MPs are having in a—well, it's no longer a democracy; it's a dictatorship, isn't it?

● (1900)

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have 90 seconds.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: In the remaining 90 seconds, I want to put a focus on Zimbabwe. This committee has also heard about the situation in Zimbabwe with female politicians being abducted, and there are cases of forced disappearances.

I wonder if you could also help us to determine what an advanced democracy like Canada can do in a blossoming democracy like Zimbabwe. Perhaps give more specific suggestions.

Sir David Cunningham Carter: I don't think I'm in a position to advise the Canadian politicians on what they can do in Zimbabwe.

Can I give you a very close example? Fiji is a very close country to New Zealand geographically, a country that wasn't a democracy and became a democracy. When I became Speaker, I actually went and spent two or three days with parliamentarians, particularly with their Speaker, with members of Parliament and with opposition members of Parliament, trying to do what we could as a larger country close by, doing everything we could to help a struggling democracy.

I think the developments in Fiji would mean that they are developing a democracy that's true and relevant. Countries have to decide how they're going to help these countries with weaker democracies, but you make very little progress unless the weaker democracy is prepared to co-operate and realize that it needs assistance.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Carter.

We're going to be moving now to MP Brunelle-Duceppe from the Bloc.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the two witnesses who are with us tonight. Everything we're learning is really fantastic, and it's really interesting.

But there are still some questions that bother me.

I wonder, in particular, if there are sometimes disagreements within the Inter-Parliamentary Union. The example that comes to mind is that of the Catalan parliamentarians imprisoned by the Spanish government. When this happened, I imagine that there must have been friction within the Inter-Parliamentary Union. What happens in such cases?

[*English*]

Sir David Cunningham Carter: When we have these plenary sessions and there are visiting members of Parliament and there is conflict between two countries, we often have some very heated discussions. I think of the situation and the relationship, or lack of relationship, between Palestine and Israel.

If you go back to Venezuela, they try to send non-elected people—the person who was declared to be elected—instead of genuine, elected members of Parliament. There is thus conflict that will occur on the floor in the plenary of these sessions; it can't be avoided.

I think it is a demonstration then, to the balance of members attending IPU plenaries, of the problems and the angst and arguments that are occurring between countries and even within countries.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Did the Inter-Parliamentary Union receive a complaint when the Catalan parliamentarians were imprisoned?

[*English*]

Sir David Cunningham Carter: I don't recall any case that was lodged before the committee whilst I was a member in respect of Catalonia, no. I haven't been involved now for the last 12 or 18 months, so something may have developed since then.

● (1905)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So you confirm that nothing happened.

I don't know if this is part of your discussions or if it worries you, but there is a growing sense, even in the west, of a rise in the promoters of conspiracy theories, such as the QAnon group, which was a marginal phenomenon in the beginning. Of course, the situation does not compare to that of some developing countries or, for example, what is currently happening in Burma. Nevertheless, we see citizens in America who arrest parliamentarians outright and incite their fellow citizens to do the same. We saw this right here, just last fall, when citizens arrested parliamentarians on Parliament Hill.

Do you think the situation is worrying or do you think things will settle down and the phenomenon will remain marginal?

Hon. David McGuinty: Perhaps I can answer the question...

I think one of the things...

[*English*]

Sir David Cunningham Carter: I'm sorry, I'm not aware of the situation you're referring to, an arrest of MPs within Canada. If an MP breaches our law and is under suspicion for our law, then perhaps that person should be arrested. What we're talking about is genuinely elected representatives in these other democracies who are then denied their right to participate in democracy.

The point I made in my opening remarks is that Canada and New Zealand live in very benign democracies: they work; we have elections. Sometimes we don't like the result, but we all accept the result. We move on and we wait for the next election.

That does not happen in many democracies around the world. The extent to which abuse was occurring was an eye-opener to me. I think at the moment, the committee I'm referring to is investigating about 500 or 600 MPs who have been abused and whose human rights are being denied in a total of 42 countries. It's a widespread problem.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. McGuinty, did you want to answer the question?

Hon. David McGuinty: I just wanted to add that perhaps one of the most important things about the Inter-Parliamentary Union, or IPU, is that it is a gathering place. Mr. Carter talked about our plenary assemblies. We usually have between 1,000 and 1,400 legislators. Between 40% and 50 % of delegations are led by speakers of Parliament. That's a fairly important group internationally.

When we are there as a delegation, as Canadian legislators, we often meet with people in bilateral meetings. So we can really communicate our concerns about what's happening in Zimbabwe or Venezuela, for example.

With respect to capacity building, Canada was already supporting the IPU with a $2.5 million program to support the training and launching of women in politics. We are very committed to providing technical assistance in several countries, including Zimbabwe. On page 21 of the French version of the report, you can read the story of Ms. Joana Mamombe from Zimbabwe.

In today's world, the IPU is important because it can bring together countries from all over the world. The only country we are trying to bring back into the IPU is the United States. The United States has not been part of the Union since 1994, but with the change in government and the change in president, we may have an opportunity to work with them.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: We hope so. What you are telling me is that the IPU is a place of exchange where we can create links to make things move forward later on.

Thank you very much, gentlemen.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We're going to move now to our next questioner. That will be, from the NDP, Ms. Heather McPherson, for seven minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, both of you gentlemen, for your testimony tonight; it's very interesting.

One area that I've done a bit of work in and am quite interested in concerns electoral observation: ensuring that the actual process of getting parliamentarians into the position is fair and equitable. Is that something that is part of the mandate of your group? Is it something you look at—the fairness by which parliamentarians become parliamentarians around the world?

● (1910)

Sir David Cunningham Carter: The short answer there is no; we accept the democratic regime that has been determined by each country. The cases we are dealing with are of people who have been justifiably and legally elected under their own jurisdictions but then subsequently denied the ability to do their work.

Hon. David McGuinty: Let me add to that, if I may, Ms. McPherson.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Of course, please do.

Hon. David McGuinty: I have the privilege of sitting on the executive committee of the organization worldwide. I represent 47 parliaments on that executive committee, including New Zealand's, and it's a debate that's ongoing: is it of comparative advantage for the IPU to pronounce on the freeness and the fairness of elections, so to speak?

The decision has been taken at the executive committee level to hold back on that front, because there are other groups that appear to be very expert in this kind of thing. It relies more on the United Nations and other groups that track elections and on election observation missions.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Let's look, for example, at Belarus, where there was not a fair, transparent, free election and the winner is not recognized. You would not recognize that Parliament; therefore, you would not examine.... If anything were brought up about that Parliament, it would not be recognized by your group, then?

Sir David Cunningham Carter: When I was involved on the committee, there were, going from memory, two or three cases from Belarus, so the short answer is, provided they've been duly elected and can prove to us that they are duly elected members of Parliament and then they suffer abuse, that case is eligible for us to do further work on.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

Moving on, one thing that I find we really struggle with in this subcommittee is that there are a number of human rights abuses happening around the world. It's very troublesome and difficult to determine how to triage or prioritize the varying issues that we want to study.

I'm wondering how this group, for the IPU, determines the priority. How do you triage what I can only imagine is quite a significant number of reports that you have to look into?

Sir David Cunningham Carter: I don't think that's a difficult one. Some abuses are so blatant and so horrific that they get put at the top of the pile almost immediately. It depends on the circumstances.

Tanzania was one that we dealt with towards the end of my time on the committee. It was a horrific situation, where a leader of the opposition was almost assassinated. I think he was shot 32 times and still managed to survive, escaped the country and started looking for assistance to go back into the country for their recent elections, where I do know that he was unsuccessful. The triaging becomes fairly obvious.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Mr. McGuinty, is there anything you'd like to add to that?

Hon. David McGuinty: Sometimes the egregious nature of the specific cases that are brought to the committee actually ends up being brought back into a plenary session with 1,200 or 1,500 legislators and can often form the subject of an emergency debate. All legislators will be brought up to speed on the nature of this wrongdoing or challenge, and it's a very high exposure setting with lots of global media. There are newscasts, online feeds, Twitter feeds and of course 1,200 to 1,500 front-line legislators. Oftentimes, if it's egregious enough, it simply migrates into the assembly and is dealt with there.

Ms. Heather McPherson: That's one piece of this. I was sort of thinking of that connection between the international human rights subcommittee and the work that you're doing. One of the things that I'm wondering about is the possibility for the IPU to feed in or to recommend studies for the committee. Are there ways for us to benefit from the research that you've done, the lessons that you're learning or recommendations that are coming from you? Has there been a relationship between this subcommittee and the IPU in the past? Is that a potential?

● (1915)

Sir David Cunningham Carter: There's a very strong relationship between the committee and the other delegates, many of whom are regular attendees at IPU plenaries. The way it was working prior to COVID was an opportunity for us to get together over four or five days, twice a year and share concerns. It was the way by which the members of the committee—because there are only 10—were involved with discussions with the other 1,400 or 1,500 attendees. Many of them were able to give us good information, perhaps on a neighbouring country that we were investigating. The benefit of us getting together at these forums to discuss these issues is immense.

Hon. David McGuinty: If I could add to that, I think the possibility for co-operation between this subcommittee and the work of the IPU and human rights is certain. This is one of the first times I can recall—and the House of Commons staff tell me it could be one of the first times in over a decade—where we've come to present the findings of this particular committee. We're really trying to have a rapprochement between the work of the IPU through its constituent parts.

Absolutely, Ms. McPherson. The best way to proceed is to try to get engaged, become a member and meet regularly, perhaps with the chair's help. There may be issues that simply deserve to be tabled in a domestic setting. That's what we're trying to do; take the international resolutions, debate and discussions, and operationalize them at a domestic level.

Sir David Cunningham Carter: I'll just very quickly add my congratulations to Mr. McGuinty for organizing this particular meeting because one of the problems is.... For instance, in New Zealand, we take three members of Parliament to such a committee meeting. I'm the only New Zealander who's ever sat on this committee. We come back into the Parliament of 120. How do we actually tell them what we've been doing and the abuse that's occurring? There is a definite relationship between any specific subcommittee or a committee in any Parliament focused on human rights then, working far more closely with the human rights of parliamentarians committee.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I very much hope we get to work with you in the future.

Thank you very much, both of you.

The Chair: Yes, thank you.

Members, we're moving into the second round now. In this round, it will be five minutes of time for questions. We'll start with Anita Vandenbeld, Liberal member.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Again, I would like to echo the thanks to both of our witnesses for your testimony this evening. I think we're all learning a lot about the work that IPU does. I think a lot of us felt we were familiar with it but weren't necessarily aware of this particular aspect of it.

My specific question follows up on something that Mr. McGuinty said, which I think is very powerful. He mentioned the power of exposure. We know that there are other groups of legislators globally that are working in this avenue, for instance, Parliamentarians for Global Action. I'm involved with something called PARRT, which is the Parliamentary Rapid Response Team. It sounds like it operates similarly with a small group of parliamentarians, but it works very quickly. Within 24 hours of something happening, there will be a tweet, there will be a statement issued, and then some statements in national parliaments.

I know that Irwin Cotler is also involved with the Raoul Wallenberg Institute, where they have the Mandela project, where they link MPs from certain countries with human rights defenders, where they become paired. They would raise issues in their own Parliament.

How would you see the work that IPU is doing as able to inform some of those other activities? To what extent are you already co-operating with other groups of legislators who are trying to do the same thing, where it's about exposure and raising awareness?

Sir David Cunningham Carter: I think that's more a question for Mr. McGuinty, being on the executive, to answer. I actually think the IPU can do more to respond more rapidly to situations than it does. Because it's a multi-international fora, it probably needs time to get its ducks in a row, so to speak. Many times if IPU were a bit quicker on the response—for instance, on Myanmar over the last three or four days—I think that would give a better profile to the work of IPU.

I'll let David settle this all.

Hon. David McGuinty: That's a really good question, Ms. Vandenbeld.

The IPU is just launching into a new five-year phase. I'd like to take that suggestion about rapprochement, and more coordination and quick response capacity back to the executive committee. I think we're meeting this week, tomorrow or Friday, and again next week. It's thinking through what this next five-year plan should look like, what it should be doing to become relevant and helpful.

I know that there is co-operation that goes on with some of these different initiatives. The IPU, if there's anything Mr. Carter can speak to better than I, having sat on the committee...it's making sure, making really sure that when reports are issued they're robust, that they're evidence-based and that they're waterproof, so that when you come out of a gate and you say something as a group as big as the IPU is with 179 parliaments, it's irrefutable. I think that's what the real focus has been on.

● (1920)

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld: I do think the work that you're describing is vitally important. I've often felt that if we look at who the front line of democracy is, it is legislators. It is elected members of various parliaments. We know that authoritarian forces are working globally. If we, as legislators, as the front line, aren't working globally, then we won't be able to proceed, so I think this is very important.

My second question, if I have time, Mr. Chair, is about gender. I've done a lot of work, before politics, internationally on women in politics. We know that women, especially women who are legislators, face different kinds of attacks. They face sexual violence, attacks on their families. Do you find in your reports—I noted that you divide them by gender—that the nature of the threats and the nature of the human rights abuses that female parliamentarians are facing are different from men? How are you tracking that?

Sir David Cunningham Carter: In the cases I can quickly recall, the short answer to that question is no. The abuses that were occurring to duly elected members of Parliament were across the board. There was no difference in the abuse occurring, be it male or female.

I think the issue you raise is actually a bigger issue. It's been one that's been a focus in the last couple of years in a country like New Zealand, where the women parliamentarians here have actually acknowledged that they face pressures that their male colleagues don't. That's now been brought to light, and it may be the same in the Canadian House of Commons. Now that it's been brought to light, it must be addressed.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll move over to the Conservatives and Mr. Scott Reid for five minutes.

Mr. Scott Reid (Lanark—Frontenac—Kingston, CPC): Thank you.

I'm trying to get my head around which kinds of countries are the ones that are most likely to be responsive to pressure. Abuse having occurred in the country as your starting point, which countries are likely to be responsive?

I noticed, Mr. Cunningham, that the two countries you cited as having had success were the Maldives and Fiji, both of which are quite small countries. As a starting point, is it the case that you find that smaller jurisdictions are more likely to be responsive to pressure and very large countries to be less so?

Sir David Cunningham Carter: I think the criteria for a satisfactory response is a genuine will: that they will respond and want to respond. Of the two cases I give you, but particularly Fiji.... Fiji came out of a long period of military control. I think they genuinely wanted democracy. I think they've made good and substantial progress towards that democracy.

There are other countries.... With Venezuela, it wouldn't matter what report was written and presented to the plenary. There's no will to change in that country.

I don't think size is important. It's the willingness, the desire, to have a functioning, true and constructive democracy. If that's not there because there's a dictatorship at the top, our reports probably won't receive much positive feedback.

Mr. Scott Reid: What about the distinction between.... Fundamentally, if we leave the Swiss aside, there are two kinds of democracy, I think. There are Westminster-style parliamentary democracies with responsible governments, and there are countries on the congressional model, of which the Americans are the most prominent. Venezuela would be in this category, too, where there's a distinction, and the executive functions separately from whether or not it has the confidence of the legislative branch.

Does that make a difference, first of all, as to how responsive they are, and secondly, as to the appropriate kinds of tactics to use in order to achieve a response?

● (1925)

Sir David Cunningham Carter: I'm of course familiar with the Westminster system, and I think there the response is probably more immediate. In a country with a system like the American system, a response does occur, but it probably takes longer to occur and only occurs at an election.

Mr. Scott Reid: Okay.

On the kinds of acts that occur and to which you try to respond, we're not talking about the worst offender countries, countries that are, as in the case of Venezuela...I know you tried to work in Venezuela but with limited success, as it has slid so far out of democracy. It suggests to me that even those who are engaged in inappropriate acts, or at least some elements of the governing party, have a desire to make the country more democratic than it is.

I suppose what I'm asking is whether it is the case that you require a certain degree of goodwill or guilty conscience on the part of the perpetrators or some part of that organization, party or whatever that is conducting the abuses.

Sir David Cunningham Carter: I'm going to use as an example Mongolia. We've done quite a lot of work in a mission to Mongolia. The original so-called father of democracy, Mr. Zorig, was assassinated in I think the late eighties or early nineties. No one was ever held accountable. The suspicion was that those people then proceeded to the highest of levels of both their government and their civil service. More recently, they actually did charge three people with that murder and convicted them and jailed them.

Only after that—this is from memory, because I haven't read the report recently—10 years later, it became apparent that those people never committed the murder—jacked-up crimes and imprisoned.... That is a case that's ongoing. We have never gotten to the bottom of it. It was done because the surviving family of Mr. Zorig, again, deserved justice, and it was a case where it was abuse of an elected representative. It needed tidying up.

Mr. Scott Reid: I'm sorry. I'm actually confused. I'll use the few seconds I have left to ask for clarification. Are you saying that in the case of Mongolia, after the assassination occurred, there were then, at some remove of time, charges laid against individuals who ought not to have been charged, and that these were trumped-up charges against them?

Sir David Cunningham Carter: That's exactly how it turned out. It's like reading a novel. Look at the last report. It will be online, I'm sure, from the IPU.

These people were jailed and spent considerable time in jail, and then it became evident.... There was a video that was released that showed these people being tortured to plead guilty. They were never guilty of the crime, and we've never gotten accountability for the murder of Mr. Zorig.

Mr. Scott Reid: Thank you.

The Chair: We will move now to the Bloc and Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As this is my last opportunity to address the witnesses, I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their presence this evening.

There is one thing that is very close to my heart, and that is young parliamentarians. They represent the next generation, and the choices we make today will affect their future. So we need to increase their participation, in meetings of the Inter-Parliamentary Union among others. This is not only important, it is paramount.

I would like to have your comments on this. Is there a group of young parliamentarians within the Inter-Parliamentary Union?

Hon. David McGuinty: If I may, I will answer Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Three years ago, the Canadian Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union invited nearly 130 young parliamentarians to Ottawa for four days of meetings. Every two years, there is a meeting of young parliamentarians. That was before COVID-19, of course.

In addition, there is a committee that focuses on youth participation. Just recently, following discussions in the executive committee and as part of the IPU's new five-year plan, I proposed that young parliamentarians—some 15 or 20—meet virtually with the new president elected a few months ago in Portugal, Mr. Duarte Pacheco, to talk to him about their vision for the IPU and the role it could play in the future.

Young people are already present, virtually or in person through travel. We therefore rely more and more on the good advice of young people.

● (1930)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Are they involved in these activities a lot? Are many members of the union young?

Hon. David McGuinty: Yes, delegations normally have quotas for men and women, but also for young people.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I see.

Earlier, you made me curious when you talked about the new Biden administration in the United States. You said that the election of Mr. Biden was perhaps the right time to...

[*English*]

The Chair: One moment, please. I think we've lost...

Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You were telling us that the Biden administration may be the perfect opportunity to bring Americans back into the fold.

Has a strategy been developed? Can you share it with us, if so?

Hon. David McGuinty: Yes, absolutely. The Americans were absent from the IPU between 1990 and 1993. The executive committee decided, not more than two weeks ago, to send a letter to the speakers of both Houses of the U.S. Congress, that is, to Senator Leahy and Ms. Pelosi. I suggested not only that the letter be sent by the new Portuguese president, but also that it be signed by the 18 members of the executive committee, including representatives from China and other countries, in order to encourage Americans to join the community of parliamentarians and participate fully in its activities.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: As my favourite speaker tells me I'm running out of time, I thank you once again, and I wish you godspeed in whatever you do next.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll move over to Ms. McPherson, from the NDP, for five minutes.

Ms. McPherson, you'll be our last questioner.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I get that role every single time, which I guess is my luck.

Gentlemen, one of the things I was looking at is, on the IPU website, the interactive map of the latest cases of MPs in danger.

It brought to mind for me that there are regions of the world that we already know would be high risk for parliamentarians, to participate, to be safe, especially [*Technical difficulty—Editor*], of course.

I just wonder what role the IPU sees for themselves or if you have a role in terms of preventative actions, ways to prevent things happening to parliamentarians before they happen. Do you have any role with that, or is that outside your scope?

Sir David Cunningham Carter: I think it's really a question for David McGuinty to answer. He's on the executive. He's the one who develops the wider scope of IPU. I think it could do more, but really it's an executive question.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Mr. McGuinty.

Hon. David McGuinty: One of the interesting things about the IPU, Mr. Chair and Ms. McPherson, is that the tag line, the slogan, is “For democracy. For everyone.” There's a view amongst the executive committee that that's the core business of the IPU. Increasingly, as I mentioned earlier, Canada has been supportive of additional programmatic support to help strengthen the participation of women in elected public life.

There's yet another request from the IPU to the government today for another program, very similar. The Swedish government and other governments provide programmatic support to do just that—to build capacity, to build an understanding of the rule of law and good governance and institutional strengthening. There are best practices that are being shared on a regular basis. There's a new task force committee on anti-terrorism, given some of the fundamental questions that we're all facing in that area. There is a strengthening role, hopefully amplified throughout the whole community, but there's more to be done, and we need as many young dynamic and not-so-young dynamic parliamentarians as possible to join us on this journey. Mr. Chair, through you, everyone is invited to join and hopefully help participate and get the message out.

● (1935)

Ms. Heather McPherson: That's wonderful.

I will finish my intervention today by asking each of you to share one of your stories of success—one of the ones that have really shown that the IPU has been able to make a big impact in protecting our parliamentarians and in doing work that the IPU has undertaken.

Sir David Cunningham Carter: For me, without a doubt, it would be the Maldives. It was a privilege to travel there and to then watch the subsequent election, and as I said the last time, I had a look and they are a well-functioning democracy. For me that was the ideal.

I think the frustration is that according to many of the reports you produce and table to the IPU plenary, you don't see enough change. Take Turkey, for example. There are regular reports on the situation in Turkey, and progress is slow.

Can I just conclude, because I may not get another chance, Mr. Chair, by making three quick points?

First of all, from my point of view and I think for many of you, the amount of abuse of elected representatives around the world is far higher than I ever imagined possible.

Second, this committee's work makes a difference. I am convinced of that. Sometimes it's frustratingly slow, but we get there.

Finally, I had a look, and there are at least two vacancies on this committee at the moment, and I think somebody from Canada would be an ideal person to go onto this committee. We currently have representatives from Uganda and from Venezuela. Listen, they don't come with the backing that you come with from your Canadian democratic system, which is well recognized throughout the world. In my closing address, my challenge to you is to talk to Mr. McGuinty. Find out what the process is now for replacing at least two of those members. I look forward to seeing at least one of you there as quickly as possible.

Thank you very much for having me today.

The Chair: Thank you. That's terrific.

First, just on behalf of our committee and our colleagues, let me say a big thank you to you, David McGuinty, our colleague and friend, for reaching out to us, for being here before us and also for bringing your Kiwi down under friend Speaker Carter. It was great to hear what you've had to say about your experience and your history. Thank you so much for joining us. It's been a real privilege, and we thank you both.

Hon. David McGuinty: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, colleagues.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now, to the members, we're going to suspending and then come back in camera.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]