

Rep. David Price
20th Anniversary of the Frost-Solomon Task Force
Welcoming Remarks
Warsaw, June 7, 2010

Honorable Marshals, Fellow Parliamentarians Current and Former, Ambassadors, Secretaries-General, Staff, and Distinguished Guests:

It is a great pleasure and a distinct honor to be here today on behalf of the United States Congress. I carry with me the regards of our own Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, and of the many sons and daughters and other friends of Poland who serve in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate.

I am honored to join you as an official representative, but this occasion is also one of personal significance for me. I first traveled to Central and Eastern Europe in 1968 with my wife Lisa, who is here today, on our wedding trip to Budapest, Prague and Ljubljana. It was the height of the Prague Spring, and the air was full of yearning for greater freedom and self-determination – until a week after we left, when the Soviet tanks brought a crushing end to the nascent political opening in the former Czechoslovakia.

Lisa and I have felt a special kinship with Central and Eastern Europe ever since, and along with millions of Americans, we rejoiced 20 years later when you emerged from behind the Iron Curtain to enter the community of democracies. At the time, I was a relatively junior member of the U.S. House who did not have much in the way of a foreign affairs portfolio. But like many of my colleagues, I recognized that the momentous events of the late 1980s and early 1990s presented an historic opportunity for the United States to engage with the newly emerging democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, to build lasting bonds of friendship and cooperation that would define a new era of transatlantic relations. Fortunately, my good friend and colleague Martin Frost had the vision and leadership to turn this recognition into a reality, and in 1990 the U.S. House established the Task Force on the Development of Parliamentary Institutions in Eastern Europe – widely known as the Frost-Solomon Task Force.

For six years, under the leadership of Congressman Frost and the late Gerry Solomon, the Task Force worked with the parliaments of 10 Central and Eastern European nations to lay the basic foundations of legislative governance: transparency, accountability, independence, responsiveness to the concerns of the people and competence in legislating and conducting oversight. Our work would not have been possible without the contributions of the U.S. Library of Congress and its Congressional Research Service, which is represented here today by its longtime director, Dan Mulhollan, and several veteran researchers.

I am pleased that we were able to contribute meaningfully to the development of stronger, more effective legislatures in your region. But I assure you that we received far more than we gave, in the inspiration you provided and in the perspective you gave us on the strengths – and weaknesses – of our own institutions.

As the democratic legislatures of the region matured and the political winds in Washington shifted, the Task Force met an untimely end in 1996. But the wave of democratic change that had swept through Europe did not, as nations around the world continued to aspire to greater freedom and self-determination.

Several of us who had worked with Frost-Solomon recognized that our work was not finished, and after nearly a decade of trying, we finally succeeded in establishing a new commission which we now call the House Democracy Partnership. Our founding chairman and current Ranking Republican Member, Congressman David Dreier of California, could not be here today, but I am pleased to represent him and the other 18 members of our bipartisan commission.

I will discuss the full range of the House Democracy Partnership's activities during our panel discussions, but the basic idea is the same as it was 20 years ago: we work on a peer-to-peer basis to strengthen the fundamental building blocks of legislative governance. The main difference is one of scope: while we still work in Central and Eastern Europe, we now have 15 partner countries spread across five continents, with diverse constitutional systems and at various stages of political development. We also have the advantage of working with world-class organizations such as the National Democratic Institute, which has done an exceptional job organizing this conference on behalf of the Polish parliament and the U.S. House of Representatives.

In light of this common lineage, I was delighted when the leadership of the Polish parliament invited the House Democracy Partnership to organize a training program for research staff from our current partner countries to coincide with this 20th anniversary commemoration of the Frost-Solomon Task Force. For as I look across this room, I am struck with a sense of history coming full circle. I see old friends who worked hand-in-hand 20 years ago to strengthen their democracies. And I see new friends – including 22 staff members from 11 current House Democracy Partnership countries – who are working to do the same today. What better way to impart the lessons learned than to have the men and women who developed new research services 20 years ago share their experience and knowledge with those who face the same challenges today?

I am hopeful that you all will benefit from the program this week by sharing your common experiences and aspirations, by teaching and allowing yourself to be taught in return. For while we come from different cultural and political traditions, we are all united by our common calling to build – and constantly strive to improve – what President Abraham Lincoln called a government “of the people, by the people and for the people.”

I would like to close with an observation that has become somewhat of a mission statement for the House Democracy Partnership. We often say that, while elections are a critical part of the democratic process, what happens between elections is equally important.

The true triumph of the people of Central and Eastern Europe is not merely how you cast off the tyranny of Communism 20 years ago, nor is it merely the many free and fair elections you have held since. It is the way in which you have built free and prosperous democratic societies and effective, responsive institutions in the ensuing two decades – societies and institutions that can withstand the winds of political and economic change. Such societies can also persevere through times of national tragedy, and I speak on behalf of my entire country when I say that our concern and sympathy have been with the Polish people as you have sought to recover from the loss of April 10, a loss we cannot begin to comprehend. We are particularly mindful of the toll this tragedy took on your parliament. Just as we were inspired by the Solidarity you showed as you struggled for greater freedoms twenty years ago, so too are we inspired by the solidarity you have shown today as you bring your country back together after this tremendous loss.

We also mourn those who have lost their lives in the recent flooding and our hearts are with all of you as you respond to this natural disaster even as the wounds of April 10 are still fresh. In trying times such as these, it is all the more important to ensure that the government is capable of meeting the needs of the people, and we admire your courage and perseverance in convening this conference even as you confront much larger challenges.

Thank you again for inviting me here, and I look forward to getting to know all of you throughout the course of the program.

Rep. David Price
20th Anniversary of the Frost-Solomon Task Force
“Lessons Learned from the Central and Eastern European Experience”
Warsaw, June 7, 2010

Thank you, Mr. Czapla, and thank you again for inviting me to participate in this conference on behalf of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Twenty years ago, when the U.S. House inaugurated a Task Force to assist the parliaments of Central and Eastern Europe, I think it's safe to say that no one foresaw the role that legislative assistance would play in strengthening democracies around the world.

The struggle for democracy that Poland and Central Europe embraced two decades ago has been emulated around the world, in other former Communist countries and in those that rejected their own forms of authoritarian rule. Likewise, the field of legislative strengthening, fledgling at the time, has matured and grown into a multifaceted international effort assisting dozens of parliaments in Europe, Asia, Africa, Oceania and the Americas. Bilateral development agencies, multilateral institutions such as the United Nations Development Program and Inter-Parliamentary Union, and non-governmental organizations such as the National Democratic Institute, International Republican Institute, and State University of New York are all working to strengthen parliaments across the world, from Haiti to Timor-Leste and everywhere in between.

Within this broader field of legislative strengthening, the work of the Frost-Solomon Task Force two decades ago and the House Democracy Partnership today is both modest and uniquely powerful. It is modest in that it cannot turn a dictatorship into a democracy overnight – nor does it seek to. Our experience over the last decade has demonstrated clearly that democracy cannot be imposed from without but must grow from within, organically and at its own pace. And our experience over the last 235 years has demonstrated clearly that democracy is, and will always be, a work in progress. Where democratic governance has taken root, however – where elected leaders are already working to reform and strengthen their institutions – then commissions such as ours can provide an added boost by sharing our own experiences, good and bad.

And this is why such commissions can be uniquely powerful. Because when we speak, we speak as peers, as fellow elected officials and professional staff members who are driven by many of the same motivations and ideals. We also have firsthand knowledge of the things that make our own legislature more effective, and can bring that knowledge to bear in targeted ways.

While our work has evolved considerably since the first Frost-Solomon delegations 20 years ago, one constant remains at its core: the importance of a legislative research service to an independent legislature, for policymaking is often a battle of ideas, and ideas must be supported by facts. And unless

the legislature has at its disposal an independent and objective source of research and analysis, then it will always be dependent on others for its facts, whether Executive Branch agencies or outside academics and experts.

Fortunately, this is one area in which the early experience of Frost-Solomon has proved critical to our work today, thanks to the exceptional work of the Congressional Research Service, or CRS. Just as we relied on CRS to help develop research services in 10 Central European parliaments in the early 1990s, today we ask CRS to advise and train research services in our current partners.

My friends Dan Mulhollan, the director of CRS, and Bill Robinson, the retired deputy director of CRS, will talk in more detail about applying the lessons learned from the 1990s to develop research services today. I know that Jacek Michałowski also has some considerable expertise to share.

What I would like to do is to take a minute to mention some highlights of the work of the House Democracy Partnership in developing research services, which has given us an interesting comparative perspective on the role that researchers play in supporting the work of the parliament.

Of the 15 countries in which our commission works, nearly all have some sort of research department, but the size, structure and mission of those research departments vary widely. One of our partner countries has but a single researcher, while another has a robust, established service with 40 experts. Some countries treat the research department as a regular part of the secretariat, others as part of the library, and one country has located its research service several kilometers from the parliament building – which is great for its independence but not so good for being accessible and useful to members.

A core aspect of HDP's work has been to organize seminars for researchers to bring them together with their counterparts from CRS. In 2007 and again in 2009, we worked with CRS to organize two-week seminars for researchers, focusing on how to undertake research, perform analysis, and write reports that are timely, concise and useful to members and staff. Those of you remaining in Warsaw for the week will be participating in a similar, if somewhat unique, program.

In addition to our work in Washington, HDP has facilitated travel by current and former CRS staff to our partner countries to provide technical assistance and training to their research departments.

Perhaps the greatest impact that HDP has had on research services is simply to expose hundreds of members of parliament and legislative staff to the Congressional Research Service. During every seminar we conduct in Washington, be it on committee operations, budget analysis or parliamentary administration, we bring MPs and staff to CRS. While a seemingly small part of these programs, these hour-long briefings have had a disproportionate impact.

Perhaps the most visible result came in Timor-Leste. When HDP first visited Timor-Leste in 2005, three years after independence, the parliamentary library consisted of five bookshelves in the plenary chamber. HDP decided to help fund a parliamentary library and to train the staff, in cooperation with

the Library of Congress. In December 2007, shortly before the library opened, the chief of staff for the Timorese speaker was in Washington for an HDP seminar on administration, which ran concurrently with a program on parliamentary research. After hearing a presentation on CRS, he began to attend the research sessions. At the end of the program, he told us that now that his parliament had a library, the next step was to create a research service to utilize the library and provide information and analysis directly to members. And sure enough, the Timorese parliament, inspired by CRS, created a new research service.

This is not an isolated case. Since HDP began in 2005, no fewer than six of our partner countries have established new research services. Like CRS, the research services of Central Europe and of HDP partner parliaments play an important role in ensuring that the people's representatives have the information and analysis they need to make laws effectively and oversee their implementation.

Today, we celebrate not only the work of two decades ago, but the ongoing efforts to strengthening parliamentary democracy around the world. And perhaps tomorrow, our partner legislatures, in turn, will share the lessons that they learn with colleagues who themselves will build the new democracies of the future. Thank you again, and I look forward to hearing from our other panelists.