

2021 Open Parliament Forum
Open Parliament in a Post-COVID Context:
Global Examples of Resilience and Planning for 2022 and Beyond
Keynote Speech

Hon. Valerie Woods, Speaker of House Representatives – Belize
December 2nd 2021
Taipei, R.O.C. (Taiwan)

Diplomatic acknowledgments

Thank you, President You of the Legislative Yuan for the invitation to be a part of this year's Open Parliament Forum. Your hospitality and that of the people of Taiwan has been, as usual, impeccable.

This forum is being held under the theme ***Open Parliament in a Post-Covid Context: Global Examples of Resilience and Planning for 2022 and Beyond***. It comes after Taiwan's first declaration earlier this year of its Open Parliament Action Plan 2021-2024.

I particularly want to express gratitude, on behalf of the Belize Parliament, to President Tsai Ing-Wen who is not only the first female president to be elected in the Republic of China (Taiwan) but has been twice elected! Her management of the Covid 19 pandemic is an outstanding example of the transformative leadership of women. It won her global recognition with the recent statement of support from the Group of Seven for the "Taiwan Can Help Campaign" to share scientific and technical expertise and with their call for Taiwan's inclusion in the World Health Assembly. So, I echo the sentiments "no one is safe from the COVID 19 pandemic until everyone is safe" and Taiwan has much to teach and share with the world.

Th theme of this year's Open Parliament forum speaks to resilience so I hope I do not embarrass my friend President Tsai Ing-wen when I say that Taiwan under her leadership is in fact a global example of resilience. There is no better demonstration of a country's resilience against threats of authoritarianism in the region than Taiwan's against a

Superpower. I endorse the statement in the Foreign Affairs news magazine that Taiwan's success is a testament to what "a determined practitioner of democracy, characterized by good governance and transparency, can achieve".

Ladies and gentlemen, let this be known: Taiwan is an important development partner of Latin America and the Caribbean. This year marks a 32-year history of bilateral relations with Belize and Taiwan and along with that an enduring bond of friendship and respect. Taiwan is one of Belize's main partners in areas of disaster risk management, aquaculture, agriculture, trade and investment, health, education and sustainable development. And with regard to responsible, sustainable development we congratulate the government of Taiwan on its announcement last month of its commitment to "incorporating the target of 2050 Net-Zero Emissions into domestic law". As one of the small developing states in the Caribbean region which is on the front lines of the climate crisis, we welcome this news as it is the type of commitment, adaptation and collaboration needed from global leaders to keep 1.5 alive to stem the tide of climate change.

The people of Taiwan and Belize share the values and principles of freedom, democracy, peace, the respect of human rights, and the rule of law. Therefore, when I became Speaker of Belize's House of Representatives in December of last year, I was pleased to have our parliament engage in the interparliamentary platforms of the Formosa Clubs established in Latin America and the Caribbean. We value Taiwan's contributions to the international community in advancing democratic governance. For this reason, it is a distinct honour for me to be here to provide these remarks at the opening of this year's forum in full support of Taiwan's leadership in advancing legislative openness and creating the spaces for discussion on the Open Government Partnership process outlined in its action plan.

This bringing together of democratic allies, governments, parliaments, and civil society organizations to exchange views on how to enhance openness, its challenges, and its practical applications for the people we serve is another example of Taiwan's global leadership in its unflagging pursuit of democracy.

No wonder then that Taiwan has been invited by the United States to be among the 110 countries to attend the first Summit for Democracy to be hosted by President Biden. This reaffirms Taiwan's contribution to the international community and is a strong recognition of Taiwan's efforts in enhancing the ideals of democracy. As President Biden said in the early days of his administration **"Democracy doesn't happen by accident. We have to defend it, fight for it, strengthen it and renew it"**. Taiwan has proven to be a dogged and determined practitioner of this, and this 2-day forum signifies the unceasing work of the Legislative Yuan in its commitment to its key oversight role of democracy.

With its Action Plan for Open Parliament, Taiwan has shared the process it engaged in, the lessons learnt, and the knowledge gained. Which is why, President You, your words **"We shall walk together on this road to democracy"** resonates and neatly captures the critical need of broad public opinion, bipartisan support and sharing of experiences from other parliaments, governments and civil society organizations. There is much we can learn from each other when we work together.

Now, our parliamentary institutions are starkly different: Taiwan's Legislative Yuan is a unicameral chamber with 113 seats and Belize's National Assembly- bi-cameral with a House of Representatives of 31 seats, and a Senate of 13 seats. Notwithstanding these differences in size, structure and systems, our aspirations for improved democratic governance, legislative openness and increased public engagement are aligned. The Government of Belize in its Plan Belize programme under Prime Minister John Briceno's administration has pledged its commitment to good governance and an improved parliamentary system for Belize. I recognize this is a process and no easy task for a small country with limited resources but as the presiding officer of the Belize House of Representatives I am determined to ensure that our institution moves in this direction. I look forward to the panel discussions as there is much we can take from your experience.

With this two-day forum, Taiwan continues to demonstrate that your country is not only one of the global leaders in health, political liberalization, and information technology but

also in democratic governance. This is why Belize will continue to advocate for Taiwan's participation in international and intergovernmental groupings, including but not limited to the UN system bodies such as the UN General Assembly (UNGA), the World Health Assembly, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

Belize, like Taiwan, will have to rise to the challenge and the demands of its people for more openness from our parliament if we are to meaningfully join this global effort. We have made positive first steps with the provision of the live stream broadcast of House and Senate meetings thanks to the assistance of the Government of Taiwan. This begun with the previous parliament. While it is not a parliamentary tv system it has certainly provided greater access to the wider public of our House and Senate Meetings. Still in its nascent stages, Belize has also established the Joint Public Accounts Committee which was introduced by our new parliament earlier this year. This committee is chaired by a member of the Opposition and with a majority non-government membership component. The National Assembly of Belize also has a website that provides the basic information on which bills, and motions are before the parliament. We are currently working on a code of conduct for our parliamentarians, amending our Standing Orders for the House and the Senate as well as reviewing how we can improve our engagement with the public. This are a direct result of recommended benchmarks for democratic legislatures.

Notwithstanding these initial steps, a significant effort and thrust is needed to embrace the ethos of open parliament for the modern era and the lessons and exchanges over the next two days should prove very useful in this regard. Similar to Taiwan, we recognize the need to bring digital transformation to our parliamentary institution and an improved online system for accessibility by the public who rightfully demand a higher standard from our parliaments. Lest we forget, parliamentarians are elected to serve the people and the decisions taken in parliament ultimately impact their lives. Transparency and openness in the work of parliamentary committees and a change in organizational culture and administration of the parliament are just a few of the other actions we too will need to take if we are to build a stronger institution. Doing this, as is evident through the actions laid out in Taiwan's Open Parliament Action Plan, will better serve the people and embraces

the critical pillars of transparency, accountability, public engagement, inclusiveness and education.

To this end, we are thankful for the bilateral relationship and cooperation with Taiwan. This can help us now to also adopt a robust open parliament process. We can draw from the experiences Taiwan has had in its work across party lines for full support on this journey to a more open parliament and from the best practices in working with civil society organizations for increased public engagement.

In closing, I am pleased to deliver well wishes from Prime Minister John Briceno and his Cabinet, from the National Assembly of Belize and from our nation for the enduring good bilateral relations, cooperation and friendship between our two countries. Best wishes for a productive forum over the next two days and on the continued implementation of Taiwan's Open Parliament Action Plan, another concrete example of Taiwan's democratic governance..

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