

FRIENDSHIP GROUPS

INTRODUCTORY NOTE FOR THE TOPICAL DISCUSSION

Presented by Mr. Paul Amiot,
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As an introduction for the topical discussion this note sets out the arrangements in the French National Assembly for friendship groups.

Friendship groups occupy a focal position in the National Assembly's work in the area of external relations.

A friendship group can be defined as a group of Members of Parliament whose purpose is to establish exchanges with parliamentarians from another country. It is essentially a self-starting body which, to this day, is not even mentioned in the Rules of the National Assembly or in the General Instructions of its Bureau.

The first friendship groups were established 50 years ago, but the institution has really grown only in the last 10 years. At present there are 130 friendship groups in the National Assembly and to these should be added seven international study groups which, as we shall see, can be likened to the friendship groups.

This recent growth has required some regulation which has become much more strict in the current legislature and which has given rise to the need for coordination.

I - THE CONSTITUTION OF FRIENDSHIP GROUPS - THE NEED FOR THE APPROVAL OF THE BUREAU

The initiative for setting up a friendship group comes from one or more Members of Parliament, but its formal establishment requires the approval of the Bureau. In principle its approval is given on three conditions about the proposed partner country:

- the existence of a parliament;
- membership of the United Nations;
- diplomatic relations with France.

On the whole these conditions are interpreted fairly broadly: thus there is a friendship group with Switzerland, which is not a member of the United Nations.

Nonetheless, in certain cases the application of these three conditions or the fact that certain national entities have not yet received international recognition, leaves a gap in the Assembly's external relations which needs to be filled. To do this, international study groups have been created and they operate in a similar way to friendship groups. At present there are seven of these: Afghanistan, Cambodia, North Korea, South Korea, Namibia, Palestine, Western Sahara.

Approval is given by the Bureau following a report from one of its own sub-committees. This body, composed of a Chairman and 4 Members representing each of the political groups, is called "the Delegation responsible for the

requests of study and friendship groups and for the coordination of international activities". In order to prepare its report, the Delegation will, in difficult cases, take evidence from those Members making the proposal and consider, should the occasion arise, the opinion of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

When the Bureau gives its agreement, it says at the same time the political group which should provide a chairman for the friendship group. In effect since 1981, the chairmanship of friendship groups has been distributed proportionally among the political groups and no Member has been allowed to accumulate more than 2 chairmanships.

II - THE WORK OF FRIENDSHIP GROUPS

The approval of the Bureau entitles the friendship group to make use of administrative and financial facilities. A secretary, who has to be one of the permanent officials of the Assembly, is put at the group's disposal. The meetings of the group are announced in the Feuilleton (Order Paper) and its activities are reported in the Bulletin of the National Assembly. Funds can be requested by the Chairman of the group for the organisation of meals, visits abroad and incoming visits.

The activity of friendship groups depends on many different factors, notably political ones, and the issues which arise from time to time. However varied they are, on the whole they consist of receiving information, maintaining relations with the Embassy of the country concerned, following particular cases or issues which have come to the attention of the group, taking part in the activities of the associations which foster relations with the particular country, and arranging exchange visits. These exchange visits constitute an important part of a friendship group's activities and are based on the principle of reciprocity. Visits abroad to the partner country and incoming visits from Members of Parliament from that country to France are arranged alternatively. In any case the exchanges are limited to one dinner for the Ambassador, one visit abroad and one incoming visit in each legislative term (i.e. five years) for each friendship group.

By analogy with the provisions of the Bureau's General Instructions concerning visits abroad by committees, visits by friendship groups are limited to 7 members and one official to destinations in Europe and to 6 members and one official to destinations outside Europe. Besides, the total number of visits abroad by friendship groups is fixed at 12 a year. In other respects the Bureau's General Instructions prohibit these visits abroad during the Assembly's session except with the express permission of the Bureau. Taking account of the constraints imposed by the dates offered by the host country, the Bureau often allows such exceptions.

There is also a limit on the number of incoming visits which are fixed at 6 in one Assembly session, (i.e. 12 in one year). Friendship groups also offer hospitality to Members of Parliament or Ministers from their country of interest who are in Paris on business. Meetings, visits to the National Assembly or a dinner can be arranged on such occasions.

III - COORDINATION OF FRIENDSHIP GROUPS

The activity of friendship groups is part of the general policy of the Assembly on external relations. For this reason some coordination is necessary. In addition

to basic coordination, there are also arrangements to deal with the practical matters of administration and finance.

Basic coordination: role of the Bureau and of the Delegation

Proposals for visits abroad and incoming visits are submitted to the Delegation which meets several times a year and proposes to the Bureau a list and a timetable consistent with the Bureau's general approach to exchanges with foreign parliaments.

In considering both invitations to Paris and visits overseas, the Delegation and the Bureau take account of the activities of other parts of the Assembly — the Bureau itself and the committees. The level of activity of the different friendship groups is also considered. Thus the chairmen of the friendship groups have to keep the President of the Delegation informed of all their proposals.

Administrative and financial coordination

The International Parliamentary Relations and Protocol Service provides a secretariat for the Delegation subcommittee of the Bureau. It receives the annual reports of the friendship groups as well as the reports on visits abroad and incoming visits which are sent to the President of the Delegation. It also examines the requests for funds sent to the Questors by the chairmen of the friendship groups for their expenses on incoming visits and travelling.

**MINUTES, SPRING MEETING 1985
(LOMÉ-TOGO 25th TO 29th MARCH)
EXTRACTS**

Topical discussion on friendship groups

Introduced by Mr. Amiot (France).

The President thanked Mr. Amiot for preparing the introductory note on friendship groups and invited him to introduce the subject.

Mr. Amiot recalled that the Association had decided to hold a topical discussion on this subject at its spring meeting in Geneva in 1984. In fact friendship groups were a matter of continuing interest. In the last few years, friendship groups had increased in number in the French parliament bringing various political, administrative and financial problems which had required fairly strict rules to be introduced. It seemed that some parliaments were more restrained about setting up friendship groups for three major reasons: — (1) duplication with other international bodies, — (2) the difficulty of controlling expenses, and — (3) a drift towards 'parliamentary tourism'. Nonetheless, this subject seemed to be fairly topical in quite a number of countries.

Mr. Jonovski, Secretary General of the Yugoslav parliament, had proposed a questionnaire on bilateral relations between parliaments. Friendship groups could be considered as one particular form of these bilateral relations. Mr. Duarte Secretary of the parliament of Cape Verde had included in his list of subjects of current interest a number of questions on the work of friendship groups.

In general, development of international activities was a characteristic of modern parliaments (e.g. the ratification of treaties, control of foreign policy, voting the budget). The French National Assembly had built up an important range of international activities including: the French delegations to the Council of Europe, the North Atlantic Assembly and to the European Parliament (up to 1979); study mission by committees; parliamentary exchanges; conferences of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Association of French-speaking Parliaments.

Undoubtedly, it was the friendship groups which best illustrated the bilateral exchanges between parliaments. The first had been founded fifty years previously between France and Great Britain. Between 1978 and 1981 there had been some 70 friendship groups but in the seventh parliament there were now 130, not counting the 7 international study groups. The rules governing friendship groups had not been fully codified because they had been progressively worked out by the Bureau of the Assembly and the Questure.

The agreement of the Bureau was required for a friendship group to be set up. This agreement depended on three conditions: — (1) the existence of a parliament in the other country, — (2) membership by the other country of the United Nations, and — (3) the existence of diplomatic relations between France and that country. These conditions could be interpreted fairly broadly: for instance there was a friendship group between France and Quebec even though that province had

no independent international status. The bureau had also for political reasons refused to allow the setting up of a friendship group with South Africa and Chile as well as with Argentina until it returned to a democratic system of government. International study groups had been created in cases where the other country was not recognised internationally. Thus there were such study groups between France and Afghanistan, Cambodia, Korea, Namibia, Palestine and Western Sahara. The difference between these and friendship groups was more formal than real.

When the Bureau gave its approval it would also specify which political group would provide the chairman of the friendship group. Until 1981 all the chairmanships belonged to the majority party; since 1981 the chairmanships had been distributed proportionally among the political groups. The activities of friendship groups were varied. The approval of the Bureau entitled them to make use of administrative facilities such as meeting rooms and information in the Feuilleton of the Assembly (Order Paper), and to financial assistance. In the 1985 budget 2.3 million francs (about \$230,000) were allocated for this purpose, of which 1.4 million was for missions abroad and 900,000 francs (or \$90,000) was for incoming visits. The first task of a friendship group was to make itself known and so it would get in touch with the other country's embassy and inform the other parliament of its existence. Although the main objective was certainly to increase exchanges between Members of Parliament, some friendship groups took part in a wider range of activities. Thus the friendship group with Tanzania had pressed for the completion of the Dar-Es-Salaam airport; the group with Zaire had helped in the freeing of political prisoners; the group with Equatorial Guinea had paved the way for that country to join the franc currency zone; and the group with Zimbabwe had assisted with the re-establishment of air links between the two countries. Some groups had taken part in the sending of medical supplies to help certain institutions and the friendship group with Mali gave specific help to an institute for the blind. Staff from the parliament of the friendly country had attended training courses at the National Assembly.

The principle of reciprocity was applied to missions abroad and incoming visits. Taking account of the costs involved, a friendship group could only undertake one mission abroad or organise one incoming visit from the other parliament in each session. In practice there were 12 such missions and 12 incoming visits each year. Missions overseas were governed by the same rules as those which applied for committees. A maximum of 7 members and 1 official could undertake visits in Europe and 6 members and 1 official could go on visits outside Europe.

The need for some coordination of these activities was immediately felt. It was necessary not to mix up the priorities of the Assembly's external relations policy, to avoid duplication and to limit expenses. Thus the Bureau controlled the timetable and programme of groups, which had to present an annual report on their activities. On the administrative level the international parliamentary relations and protocol office (formed in 1970) dealt with the reports of missions overseas and incoming visits and the annual reports of the friendship groups.

The task of coordination was a delicate one because it was important to preserve the initiative of members of parliament in this area. Mr Amiot concluded by saying that he would be interested to hear the comments or questions of other members of the Association.

The President thanked Mr. Amiot for his clear explanation of the situation in France and invited other Members of the Association to take part in the discussion.

Mr. Charpin (France) said that the friendship groups in the French Senate were organised differently from those in the National Assembly. Nonetheless, the difficulties were similar and the number of friendship groups there had also increased substantially. The level of activity differed from one group to another and relations with some countries were very well established. For instance for a good 40 years there had been regular exchange visits between France and Great Britain, even though Great Britain was now a member of the European Community. Certain other groups had ceased to be active, for instance the France-Belgium friendship group, since the Members of Parliament from two countries had plenty of opportunities for meeting each other within the institutions of the European Community. The proliferation of these groups had led to fairly strict regulation because it was feared that their activities would develop into no more than a series of pleasure trips.

For a friendship group to be set up it had to satisfy the three conditions set out by Mr. Amiot as well as a fourth condition that a minimum number of 10 Senators wished to join it. An annual subscription was compulsory. The group was also required to contribute to expenses because the Senate itself would only cover 75% of the costs. In principle, the chairmen of the bureau of the friendship group were elected each year so any change in the political complexion of the Senate would be reflected in the groups. Each December an annual report had to be submitted, together with a timetable of future activities, to enable the Bureau to coordinate and plan the events of the different groups. In the light of the experience of the last few years one could conclude that friendship groups had firstly enabled Members of Parliament to get to know each other but also made informal steps towards future official decisions. For instance, some friendship groups had prepared for the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

The President asked two questions to Mr. Charpin. First, whether the friendship group between France and Great Britain involved contacts between Senators and just Members of the British House of Lords or Members of the British House of Commons as well. Secondly, whether there was a friendship group between France and the Netherlands and how it worked. Mr. Charpin replied that the Senate friendship group with Great Britain involved Members of both British Houses. There had been a friendship group between France and the Netherlands, but this had fallen into abeyance since the setting up of the European Community.

Mr. Hjortdal (Denmark) said that the French system seemed extremely well polished and that the position in Denmark was at the other end of the scale. In practice, there were no friendship groups in the Danish Parliament. The question had been discussed for many years but the decision had been taken to maintain the status quo. Besides, such a change would have involved considerable administrative problems. Of the 179 Members of Parliament, 50 or 60 were ministers and so few were available for friendship group activities. There were not sufficient staff to meet the needs which would arise and increasing the number of staff was not popular in Denmark. Thus the decision had been taken on the grounds of economy. The figure Mr. Amiot had given for the cost incurred in France had borne

this out. The Danish Parliament did its best to have contacts with European and other parliaments without setting up a particular structure for them. From time to time delegations comprising committees or chairmen or vice-chairmen were sent abroad. There were also a few informal friendship groups run by the Members of Parliament themselves. There were also frequent contacts with embassies. The advantage of a small country was to enable ambassadors from other countries to get in touch easily with Members of Parliament who were interested in their own country. Thus, although bilateral relations were not organised as systematically in Denmark as they were in France, nonetheless, the results were not very different.

Mr. Tumangan (Philippines) said that there were no friendship groups in the Philippines parliament. Some French Members of Parliament from their friendship group with the Philippines had made a visit to his country of 7 to 10 days and had invited Philippine Members of Parliament to go to France, but this mission had not yet been arranged. He was particularly interested in the remarks of Mr. Amiot and Mr. Charpin and wondered whether there were differences in the objectives of friendship groups, namely whether they were commercial, cultural, political etc.

Mr. Duarte (Cape Verde) said that Cape Verde, because it had only recently gained independence, did not have a long parliamentary experience. For that reason he had been particularly interested by the introductory note and the remarks of Mr. Amiot. According to the Standing Orders of the Assembly of Cape Verde, friendship groups could be set up by a resolution of the plenary on a report from a committee, with the agreement of the Bureau. The activities of such groups were built up on the basis of reciprocity.

Mr. Sherbini (Egypt) said that the rules governing friendship groups in Egypt dated from 1981 when they had been made by the President of the Assembly. These rules provided that a friendship group could be established with a friendly country if the circumstances were favourable. The agreement of the Executive Committee of the national group was required in any case. Priority was given to countries in which there already existed a friendship group with Egypt.

According to rule 2 the objective of friendship groups was to establish and reinforce good relations with the parliaments of friendly countries, to encourage exchanges of information on political, economic and social matters and to create a better understanding and better cooperation between parliaments. Every Member of the Egyptian parliament had the right to belong to a friendship group and to do so he applied in writing to the bureau of the Executive Committee (rule 3). The President of the Assembly was responsible for notifying the other parliament of the setting up of a friendship group (rule 4). The bureau of the Executive Committee would nominate the chairman, vice-chairman and secretary of a friendship group (rule 5). The chairman would run the activities of his group in accordance with the directions of the Executive Committee (rule 6). The chairman of the national group could make suggestions to the chairman of the friendship group about its activities (rule 7). A meeting of the friendship group could be called by the chairman of the national group or the chairman of the friendship group (rule 8). If he was present, the chairman of the national group would preside at the meeting (rule 9). The chairman of each friendship group was responsible for submitting a report on its activities in June of each year (rule 10). Invitations to

members of other parliaments were made in the name of the chairman of the national group. The bureau of the assembly was responsible for choosing the composition of delegations from the Egyptian parliament to go abroad (rule 11). The activities of friendship groups were financed by the national group (rule 12). Meetings of friendship groups were held in the Assembly of the People (rule 13). Other questions concerning the groups were governed by the Standing Orders of the Assembly or by law. The national group comprised all Members of the National Assembly and thus included all friendship groups. The new system had not created any difficulties to date but the results were not yet very significant. In reply to the President, Mr. Sherbini concluded that the term 'friendly country' was interpreted very broadly because Egypt was not at war with anyone.

Mr. Lussier (Canada) said that in Canada there was a secretariat of 28 people who dealt with international parliamentary relations (including the North Atlantic Assembly, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Association of French-speaking Parliaments, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association). The larger organisations took up most of the budget. There were only 7 friendship groups, so the Senate had not experienced the same proliferation as the French parliament. Only the previous week a decision had been taken that there should be no ill-considered expansion of the groups because of the major expenses involved. Some groups were particularly active, for instance the Canada-United States group. He wondered whether it was true to say that the French parliament maintained continuous relations with other parliaments because, taking account of the large number of groups, it seemed that each group could only undertake one mission abroad every ten years or so.

Mr. Zunic (Yugoslavia) said that the Yugoslav parliament had not set up any friendship groups but had accepted the formation in other parliaments of friendship groups with Yugoslavia. In general a sub-committee of the Foreign Affairs Committee was responsible for preparing the programme and welcoming visitors from other parliaments.

Mr. Ndiaye (Senegal) said that Senegal was in a position half-way between that of France and Denmark. There were 120 members of parliament and between 20 and 26 friendship groups. There was nothing in the Standing Orders covering the groups. Not many initiatives had been taken but Parliament responded to suggestions from other countries. The friendship groups with France, Korea and Cape Verde were particularly active. He wondered whether the programmes for overseas visits provided sufficient opportunity for the visitors to get to know the problems of the host country. He asked whether it would not be useful to draw up some document governing this type of relations between parliaments.

Mr. Blake (Australia) said that the formation of friendship groups was probably due to the same concerns which gave rise to the Association of Secretaries General of Parliaments. The Australian system of friendship groups was less developed than that in France. There were five at present with Members from both chambers and they operated under the auspices of the Inter-Parliamentary Union comprising a Bureau with chairman, vice-chairman and secretary. Financial support came from the IPU Group. Whenever a delegation from the Australian parliament went abroad they tried to include members of the relevant friendship group. In the same way visitors from abroad to the Australian parlia-

ment were invited to meet members of the friendship group. The secretariat for the groups was provided by the office of the IPU Group.

Mr. Pring (United Kingdom) said that the system in the United Kingdom was close to the French one. The House of Commons had 650 Members and had set up some 104 friendship groups. Unlike in the French National Assembly, however, these groups operated under the auspices of the Inter-Parliamentary Union group and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and their organisation was less formal than in France. All that was needed to set up a group was for 10 Members from either House to show an interest in doing so. The groups operated unofficially and received no public funds or assistance from the parliamentary offices. No rules governed their operation or creation. The only requirement was that they make a report on their activities to the British Group of the IPU or the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association branch.

Mr. Morosetti (Italy) said that in the Italian parliament it was the IPU Group which ran the friendship groups. They were set up at the beginning of each parliament and financed from the total budget for international relations. He estimated that the groups in each of the two chambers received about \$50,000 a year. About 6 visits abroad were authorised each year. The Italian system seemed to be more pragmatic than the French one.

The President said that the Netherlands parliament did not have what could properly be called 'friendship groups'. One standing committee regularly went to the former Dutch colonies. There were also parliamentary delegations to the Council of Europe, the North Atlantic Assembly, the Benelux Parliament, the Western European Union, the United National General Assembly and the Arab-European discussion group.

There was only a relatively small number of Members of the Second Chamber. The IPU group was responsible for maintaining relations with other Parliaments and for hosting delegations from abroad. There were also historic ties between the Foreign Affairs Committee and its counterparts in, for instance, Yugoslavia. The absence of friendship groups was sometimes embarrassing when there was a friendship group with the Netherlands in other parliaments. A parliamentary delegation to Korea had been welcomed with great hospitality and had not been able to return it. He asked Mr. Amiot if the committees of the National Assembly were not irritated by the activities of the friendship groups. In the Netherlands there would be an overlap of responsibility.

Mr. Amiot said that it would be difficult to summarise immediately the wide range of methods of organisation of friendship groups in different parliaments. When he had seen the summary report of the discussion he proposed to compile a fuller note on this subject.

It seemed in any case that all parliaments had a desire to increase international exchanges. The French parliament had arranged many different types of relations: not only friendship groups, but also French delegations to international organisations such as the Western European Union, and traditional exchanges beyond the normal limits like those with Canada. He did not intend to present the situation in the French parliament as a model. In fact the administration had simply responded to the wish of Members in this matter and had been led to introduce regulations in order to avoid the growing problems.

The French Senate had adopted stricter rules. It seemed to them useful to

require a minimum number of participants and a financial contribution from the Members of the friendship group. Not all the 130 groups in the National Assembly were very active or had many Members. Thus the friendship group with the United States had 150 Members but other groups had no more than 10 or so. In fact the level of their activity depended on circumstances, on their bureau etc. He noted that Mr. Lussier had been surprised at the small number of visits abroad authorised in each session. Nonetheless, there were some 60 missions or incoming visits which were authorised each parliament. Otherwise the activity of the groups was not confined to these visits. Meetings with ambassadors were frequent. Members of friendship groups were freer than official representatives and could thus pave the way for important decisions such as the establishment of diplomatic relations between France and China and the Republic of Korea. He noted that certain parliaments, like that of Denmark, had very different arrangements but were none the less effective in their international relations. Others seemed to have even more formal arrangements than those of the National Assembly; in Cape Verde a resolution of the plenary was required to set up a friendship group. He thought there were major similarities between the arrangements in France and in Canada quoted by Mr. Lussier even if their importance was not the same. In practice in the French National Assembly one particular office, that of international parliamentary relations and protocol comprising 10 people, ran the friendship groups, French delegations to international organisations, overseas visits, and study groups. He noted the different arrangements in Yugoslavia where the hospitality for friendship groups was the responsibility of the Committee on Foreign Affairs. The system in Senegal seemed more or less similar to that in France, though the number of groups was smaller, as was the case in the Australian parliament.

He noted on the other hand that in some parliaments, like the United Kingdom and Italy, friendship groups operated under the auspices of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. This was perfectly natural because that organisation had certainly created the first examples of exchanges between parliaments. Some parliaments still preferred to work within the institutional framework. Thus, in the Netherlands, the Foreign Affairs Committee was responsible for dealing with these matters. In reply to the President's question, Mr. Amiot said that there was no conflict of responsibility in the National Assembly between the Foreign Affairs Committee and the friendship groups. Besides, a number of members of the Committee were also members of friendship groups.

The President thanked Mr. Amiot warmly for having introduced the discussion which had proved to be of great interest to a large number of Members.