

LIBERTAS

Hemispheric Integration and Democracy in the Americas



TED ANDKILDE

The form of 'globalization' imposed by Western power [in Latin America] has been accompanied by a significant deterioration of macro-economic statistics... Financial liberalization also undermines popular sovereignty, as socio-economic policy falls into the hands of what some economists call a 'virtual parliament' of investors and lenders who can block 'irrational' policies that merely help people, not profits... It should hardly be a great surprise that one hears different voices in the streets and villages, throughout the world, outside these doors as well."

— Noam Chomsky, Hemispheric Integration and Democracy in the Americas, June 4, 2000

This year's OAS General Assembly, held in Windsor, took place in a context which reflected many of the challenges, opportunities and paradoxes

presented by the process of hemispheric integration and economic globalization in the Americas. On one hand, ministers, government representatives and NGOs debated what action, if any, should be taken against Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori, who had been heavily criticized for holding fraudulent and irregular elections. At the same time, hundreds of demonstrators took to the streets and gathered outside the OAS meetings. Some were urging the OAS to support human rights and democracy while others, many of whom felt that the organization promotes inequitable economic growth, wished to see it disbanded completely.

Amid the protests and debates, Rights & Democracy held a three-day symposium which brought together government representatives, trade unionists, NGOs, activists and academics from across the hemisphere to discuss integration, democracy, citizenship and human rights. The symposium, entitled *Hemispheric Integration and Democracy in the Americas*, addressed many of the issues of contention in Windsor and allowed for a thorough exploration of the types of institutions needed to protect human rights and strengthen democracies in a hemisphere where traditional boundaries between states are rapidly transforming.

The first day of the symposium, which consisted of expert panels on democratic governance, human rights, and citizenship and participation, pointed to a need to tackle the "democratic deficit" in political systems while expanding civil society

coalitions so that a more equitable and transparent model of development is fostered.

The second day was a well-attended public event which featured some of the most articulate commentators of the Americas, including acclaimed analyst Noam Chomsky, Peruvian women's rights activist Virginia Vargas, Nicaraguan academic and indigenous leader Myrna Cunningham, the multi-faceted Jamaican artist and intellectual Rex Nettleford, and Nobel Laureate John Polanyi.

Summaries of their extremely engaging speeches are available on our Web site at www.ichrdd.ca

On the final day of the symposium, NGOs were provided an opportunity to exchange information on priorities and activities with respect to the upcoming Summit of the Americas, which will be held in Québec in 2001. Some 40 civil society organizations discussed their work and plans for the future, while officials briefed participants on their priorities.

Ultimately, the dissent on the streets of Windsor and debates within the General Assembly illuminated the scope of the challenges faced by all people of the hemisphere at a time when economic liberalization is contributing to increased impoverishment, human rights violations and democratic deficits. The *Hemispheric Integration and Democracy in the Americas* symposium, however, illustrated the potential of civil society organizations in giving rise to change and creating a new vision of the Americas.



Rights & Democracy

International Centre for Human Rights
and Democratic Development

Rights & Democracy is a Canadian organization with an international mandate. It works with civil society and governments in Canada and abroad to promote human rights and democratic development through dialogue, advocacy, capacity building and public education. It focuses on four themes: democratic development, women's rights, indigenous peoples' rights, and globalization and human rights.