SECTORAL PARLIAMENTS FOR YOUTH, WOMEN AND RURAL SOUTH AFRICANS

To involve the public in their governance, Parliament introduced “sectoral Parliaments” for those who ordinarily would not be able to access Parliament – young people, women and residents of small, more remote communities. The Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly writes that these events promote involvement in the parliamentary process and keep alive South Africa’s long tradition of grassroots mass movements.

Hon. Nomaintdy Mfeketo, MP, in Cape Town.

Ms Mfeketo has been the Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly of South Africa since 2009. She chaired the African National Congress (ANC) Caucus in 2008. She became the first female Executive Mayor of a major South African city in 2003 when she became Mayor of Cape Town. She has also served as a Political Advisor to the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

South Africa’s sectoral Parliaments, which take various forms and are held in various places, were introduced so that all members of society, such as people living in rural areas or the country’s youth or women, could be involved in the working of Parliament. They generally consist of, but are not limited to, three types of institutional events: a Women’s Parliament, a Youth Parliament and a People’s Assembly.

These sectoral events play an important role in the efforts of Parliament to extend participation in its workings to all parts of the population, irrespective of age, class, creed, gender, race or religion. It is the embodiment of parliamentary democracy as set out in the founding document, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, which constitutes rule “of, by, for and through the people”.

In February 2005, Parliament adopted its vision to “build a people’s Parliament that is responsive to the needs of all the people of South Africa”. Through this vision it strives to create a transformed, democratic and open society that improves the quality of life of all South Africans, ensures meaningful and active public participation that educates and informs people and provides access to Parliament. This vision is closely linked to one of Parliament’s core objectives – to “facilitate public participation and involvement”.

Public participation and involvement form an integral part of the business of Parliament, and public participation initiatives such as sectoral Parliaments were established to give expression to the vision and core objectives outlined above. Moreover, Sections 59 and 72 of the constitution provide for the National Assembly and the National Council of Provinces to facilitate public involvement in legislative and other processes. Initiatives such as the Youth Parliament are aimed at giving expression to these constitutional provisions.

Sectoral Parliaments serve as platforms for Members of Parliament to interact with the public as the electorate. Although they have developed their own momentum, they spring from and are linked to seminal events in South Africa’s young democratic history.

The young continue to speak out

A Youth Parliament is held every year to mark 16 June 1976, when thousands of students from high schools in Soweto protested against Bantu education and apartheid. The disparity in the government school subsidy at that time was telling: R644 was spent on each white child, but only R42 on each black child in the Bantu education system. The pupils succeeded by and large in keeping secret their arrangements for that day, the day
that would change South Africa forever. En route to Orlando Stadium they were ordered to disperse by armed police in anti-riot vehicles. They did not disperse and responded to the police teargas with stones. Live ammunition was fired killing 12-year-old Hector Pieterson. The photograph of his body being carried by Mbuyisa Makhubo was seen around the world and heralded the beginning of the end of apartheid.

Countrywide protests followed. Hundreds died, thousands were arrested and jailed in the weeks and months that followed. But the effects were immediate as well as long term: principals were allowed to choose their medium of instruction and urban black people were given permanent status as city dwellers.

The Youth Parliament acknowledges and commemorates the contribution of the youth to the
liberation of South Africa, as well as bringing attention to the challenges still faced by youth. In South Africa, 70 per cent of the unemployed are young people between the ages of 18 and 35. In their lively and far-ranging debates, the young people who attend the Youth Parliament each year still display the revolutionary spirit that inspired their parents’ generation in the 1970s and 1980s.

The Youth Parliament inevitably reflects the exuberance of young people voicing their ideas and displaying their talent and resilience. They often express reservations about their future because they are the most exposed part of society: exposed to crime, drugs, gang cultures, joblessness and lack of educational opportunity.

They also express optimism because they have been born in a free democracy and are determined to achieve all that they can.

**Women’s Parliaments to fight for gender equality**

The Women’s Parliament takes place in August each year to mark the march to Pretoria on 9 August 1956 when 20,000 women protested to then Prime Minister J.G. Strijdom against the carrying of passes by black women.

The march led by Helen Joseph, Rahima Moosa, Lilian Ngoyi and Sophie Williams became a catalyst for subsequent mass struggles of women from all walks of life, in their own organizations as well as in broad liberation and labour movements.

The day was marked and celebrated during the struggle against apartheid oppression, even when liberation movements were banned, and it was deemed illegal by the then apartheid regime. It soon became an important mobilizing day against oppression.

Women’s Day in South Africa represents an affirmation of the contributions women have made in the struggle against colonial and apartheid oppression. It is a recognition and acceptance by the nation that the country’s attainment of political freedom and democracy in 1994 was also as a result of heroic struggles waged by women. But it is much more. The day also symbolizes a commitment to continue the struggle against patriarchy and the achievement of a non-sexist society as the ultimate goal.

The history of participation by women is long and is intertwined not only with powerful anti-patriarchal lobbies, but also with the early anti-colonial resistance struggles in South Africa, taking different forms at different times. The first recorded organized form of struggle goes back to 1913 when black women in the Free State protested against having to carry a “pass” identity document. A formalized women’s organization, the Bantu Women’s League, was established in 1918 led by Charlotte Maxeke to focus resistance against pass laws.

Women were active participants in most of the passive resistance campaigns, mass protests and demonstrations that took place in the 1930s and 1940s, led by the African National Congress.

This led to formal membership for women in 1943, followed by the formation of the ANC Women’s League in 1948, with Ida Mtwana as its first president.

**Women leading the struggle**

As the struggles against the imposition of apartheid intensified in the 1950s, the struggles of women also became more organized. The Defiance Campaign in 1952 saw thousands of black, coloured and Indian women actively resisting apartheid laws. This groundswell culminated in the formation of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW) in 1954. It brought together women from the African National Congress, the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), trade unions and self-help groups for the first time, and led to the development of a Women’s Charter calling for an end to discriminatory laws.

The women’s march to Pretoria to present a petition to Prime Minister Strijdom against the carrying of passes by women became an important day for mobilizing all South Africans against oppression. In short, Women’s Day is politically significant for Parliament in the context of the overall achievement of the principles enshrined our country’s Constitution, as well as within its constitutional role of facilitating public participation and oversight.

The inclusion of gender equality and the establishment of the Commission for Gender Equality in our constitution as an institution supporting constitutional democracy was an outcome of the struggles waged by women and is symbolized by the recognition of Women’s Day. Parliament recognizes the day in the form of a Women’s Parliament.
deliberate on topics that have a direct bearing on their lives.

The theme of the Women’s Parliament in 2012 was “Working Together to Enhance Women’s Economic Empowerment through Skills Development and Sustainable Job Creation”. The Women’s Parliament in 2012 marked the move away from an annual two- or three-day commemoration of Women’s Day, and the beginning of an extended programme which will continue until the fifth national Parliament is elected in 2014.

A true People’s Assembly
The People’s Assembly was a bold initiative by the third democratic Parliament (2004-2009). It is a concept whose genesis goes back to the Congress of the People of 1955 – a coalition of voices that expressed a common yearning for a people-centred state.

These days, Parliament broadens opportunities for public participation by people in far-flung communities by sitting outside the parliamentary precinct in Cape Town.

A People’s Assembly takes a cross-section of the MPs to a community that will mostly never have the opportunity to travel to Parliament. For two or three days, the local community can engage with Members of Parliament and take part in a “session”. Apart from it being an exhilarating experience to rub shoulders with those chosen in elections to represent the country, the People’s Assembly is also intended to generate interest in how laws are made, what they try to achieve and how they do this.

Referring to the origins of this sectoral Parliament, the Chairperson of the National Council of Provinces, Hon. Mfinwa Johannes Mahlangu, MP, described it as the culmination of the most democratic process South Africa had ever witnessed. “The People’s Assembly is derived from the aspirations, the tireless work and the determination of the participants of the Congress of the People, which expressed more profoundly and authentically than any single event before it, the common aspirations of the overwhelming majority of South Africans to shape its future and share its fruits,” he said.

In 2008, the People’s Assembly of the third Parliament focused on the socio-economic challenge posed by poverty eradication. In an effort to fulfil its vision of a people’s Parliament, the People’s Assembly was held at Bushbuckridge in Mpumalanga. In 2011, the fourth Parliament held its People’s Assembly in Mangaung in the Free State.