



Welcome Remarks

Michael Y.M. Kau
President, Taiwan Foundation for Democracy

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. On behalf of the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy, I would like to welcome all of you here for the International Symposium on Initiatives, Referendums, and Direct Democracy. We are particularly fortunate to have here some of the top specialists from Europe and the United States. And of course, aside from our foreign visitors, we have scholars and specialists from Taiwanese think tanks and various government agencies as well attending the Symposium.

Let me introduce briefly our keynote speakers who are on this stage. On my right, I have Dane Waters, Chair and founder of the IRI-United States. Next is Professor Theo Schiller from Germany, then Adrian Schmid from Switzerland, and on my left is Mr. Bruno Kauffman from Sweden, who is president of IRI-Europe. We also have Mr. Andreas Gross from Switzerland, who has been promoting and teaching direct democracy for some 30 years. Since we have the top specialists from Europe and the United States here, clearly we will gain much information from their experiences and expertise.

Let me emphasize how timely and important this conference is. It is timely, for as you all know, there are lots of discussions going on in the media, in government circles and in the Legislative Yuan on how to organize and conduct referendums in Taiwan, and also because the first referendum will probably be conducted this spring in conjunction with the presidential election. This conference is also important because Taiwan does not have much experience when it comes to this special mechanism of democracy, so we must be careful in instituting it.

In the past we've always considered representative democracy to be the most important, and direct democracy has remained relatively unfamiliar to us. However, if are to deepen our democratization process, it is clear that we must move forward and not limit ourselves to representative democracy; we must overcome obstacles and try to institute direct democracy to supplement and strengthen our democratization process.

There is another important dimension to this Symposium in terms of introducing direct democracy and in particular, referendums, in Taiwan. Our local friends here especially are very much aware that in the period of authoritarianism under the KMT rule, during which martial law was imposed for nearly 40 years, "referendum" was a very dangerous word. Our friends who arrived here in Taipei through the Chiang Kai-shek Airport probably heard the announcement, "Carrying illegal drugs is a serious crime punishable by death." And yesterday, when I was thinking about referendum, or *gongtou* in Mandarin, as a concept or political mechanism in Taiwan, I couldn't help but think about the historical memory. If you talked about direct democracy, *gongtou*, *a decade ago*, it was clearly very dangerous



– you risked ending up in jail, if not losing your life. It was a “serious crime punishable by death” just like drugs. Now as democracy begins to flourish in Taiwan, we must study what’s best for deepening Taiwan’s democratization process, and this particularly in view of overcoming the problems of normal representative democracy that we will discuss today.

When we discuss direct democracy, there are many dimensions, including initiatives, referendums, plebiscites, and so on. There are also many general theoretical questions we must address: For example, what is the difference between representative government versus direct democracy? In terms of pros and cons, what are the strengths and weaknesses of each? If we are going to institute referendums, should they be based on established laws, or conducted by executive directives? Should referendums be legally binding, or simply serve consultative purposes? How do we begin the process of initiatives? What should the threshold percentage of voters be to start an initiative? How do we deal with the conflict between heeding professional expertise versus the will of the people?

In addition to these general questions, there are more specific questions about the institutions and mechanisms we must build. For example, we must clarify the nature of the referendums to be emphasized, and ask ourselves whether referendums should cover a broad range of constitutional issues, or only statutory legislation and policy issues, or specific events. We must consider how to deal with the possible conflicts that may arise between various levels of government, should central regulations clash with local policies. There are indeed many issues for us to discuss before we can implement our referendum policy or legislation in Taiwan.

Without further ado, I sincerely hope that through this kind of intellectual discussion, our efforts to carry out the referendum policy will be enriched, and become more productive and sound. I hope that through this educational endeavor, we can participate in the national discussion even more meaningfully, and I hope that all of us here will learn much through this Symposium. I wish success to this Symposium and express gratitude to our international friends, who have traveled from afar to share their experiences with us. Thank you very much.