

6th EPRI INTER-PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE

- Berlin 7-8 October 2003 -

**THE USE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES AT THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES:
EXPERIENCES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS**

(Report from Italy's Chamber of deputies)

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1. EXPERIENCES USING INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES IN THE CHAMBER OF DEPUTIES

Information and communication technologies (ICT) use is a priority in the organisation of the work of the Italian Chamber of Deputies.

The three main uses of these technologies are:

a) the use of ICT for the Deputies, by providing each Deputy with a PC workstation connected to the Chamber network;

b) the use of ICT to develop information and communications between the Parliament and the general public, with particular reference to the development of the Internet site and televising proceedings in the House;

c) the use of ICT for the administrative structures at the service of the Parliamentary organs (the House, the Committees, the Office of the Speaker, etc.) and the Deputies with, for example, the installation of information networks, developing the system of computerised mail registration, the use of e-mail as a priority system for internal communications, etc.

The three main areas which this paper will address for ease of consultation are, as one would expect, closely related.

Implementing information systems which increase the range of different types of information and documents in the computer network to support the organs of the Chamber and the Deputies, for example, not only provides parliamentarians with the information they need for the adequate scrutiny of draft legislation and to enable them to take informed decisions, but also constitutes one of the essential tools for the consultancy and documentation work performed by the parliamentary offices, and for providing information to the general public when these instruments are made public on the Chamber websites.

The three areas of action I have just mentioned for the use of the new technologies at the Chamber of Deputies therefore form part of one single unitary organisational plan. The development of technological innovation projects relates to all the areas of the Parliamentary Administration, making it possible to introduce new working procedures and adopt forms of "open-ended communication" in the sense that

they are designed to make the information system of the Chamber of Deputies available for consultation on the Internet by the general public.

The Office of the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies emphasised these principles in 2000 when adopting the reform of the organisational structure of the Administration, which made provision for the adoption of flexible organisational modules that would make full functional integration possible between the offices, and improve the co-ordination of complex activities. The ICT technologies, in this regard, are an essential tool for the implementation of the reform because the new working procedures, with their high level of innovation, link different administrative offices and provide new services to the parliamentary organs, the Deputies and the general public.

1.1. The use of ICT for Deputies

During the past few years the Chamber of Deputies has achieved its target of giving each of the 630 Deputies a set of basic computer equipment (PCs, printers, software, access to the Internet, etc.) for the performance of parliamentary business, and a link to the Chamber's network. The file server centralised memory has been expanded, in addition to the memory in the workstations allocated to each of the Deputies.

Deputies can also establish a linkage with the Chamber network from outside, through a private link via modem (the *Arcipelago network*) so that they can work from a distance in their home constituencies, for example.

Each Deputy also has his/her own e-mail address on the site, to which the public can send messages; each Deputy or Parliamentary Group can publish individual web pages on the Chamber Internet site, governed by the rules set down in a set of regulations approved by the Office of the Speaker.

One of the computerised facilities designed to improve the work of the Deputies is the "single card" which enables Deputies to vote in the House and can also be used to pay for in-house services or outside contractual services (for issuing travel documents, etc.). The voting data using the electronic system is memorised in a databank, which provides the Presidents of the Parliamentary Groups with monthly summaries and statistical tables on voting trends.

1.2. The use of ICT for developing relations between Parliament and the public

a) The Internet site

The Chamber of Deputies' institutional communications have increased enormously thanks to the Internet site (www.camera.it). The number of hits recorded at

the site has grown enormously: there were an average of 9,361 daily visits to the site in 2001, rising to 10,443 in 2002, and 11,881 in 2003 (the annual projection calculated on the basis of the figures available for the first half of 2003); the total number of annual hits was 3,427,977 in 2001, 3,811,775 in 2002; there have been 2,168,310 visits in the first half of 2003. The site comprises more than 340,000 web pages.

Since 1996 the site - which is also in English, French, German, Spanish and Arabic, and with versions in a format that is accessible to the disabled - has been structured as an information tool covering the whole area of the institutional work of the Chamber.

The recent new version of the site has paid particular attention to the sorting, ordering and classification of the materials on the site, in order to make it increasingly easier to access and retrieve the vast amount of documents and information available online, and to facilitate access to it. The Internet site is an online permanent digital archive in the full sense of the term, updated in real time, on which data is also available on previous Parliaments. The aim is not only to cater for "specialist" users (businesses, universities, schools, etc.) but also non-specialists.

One outstanding feature is the promptness with which the site is updated. The reports of debates on the floor of the House, for example, are provisionally posted on the site almost in real time, as the deliberations proceed (every section of a parliamentary session is made available on the site about one hour afterwards); the final proceedings and most of the documents are posted at 9:00 a.m. the following day, when the proceedings are classified in the archives in printed format. All the documents discussed and voted on in the House and in the Committees are also posted.

It therefore contains seven thematic sections (Deputies, Parliamentary Organs, Documents, Rules, Europe/Foreign, Administration, Citizens' Services), each of which is broken down into items and sub-items that can be consulted immediately. The documentary part is very full, and all the current parliamentary proceedings dating back to 1996 are computerised: all the parliamentary proceedings are organised in specific databanks (bills, amendments, order papers, policy and scrutiny documents, House and Committee proceedings, reports submitted to Parliament by the Government and other constitutional bodies, etc.) which are always available and are updated in real time. Electoral data, the archives of regional legislation, Constitutional Laws and all other Statutes dating back to 1996 are also available, together with the catalogues of the books in the Chamber of Deputies Library. Through the site, access is also available to a number of leading legal databanks, information databanks and press agencies.

The information section is also very wide-ranging. It is managed by the Chamber of Deputies' Press Office, and there is also a newsletter service with at least one publication daily, summarising all the main events on the floor of the House and in Committee, as well as events and ceremonies at the Chamber of Deputies.

The following are also available: comprehensive information on the work of each

Deputy, with specific pages illustrating the individual work performed by each Deputy (Bills tabled, speeches, personal biographical data, etc.); information on the finances of the Chamber, with the publication in full of its annual financial statements, and all the information relating to the legal and economic position of each of the Deputies; information on inter-institutional and inter-parliamentary relations both at the European and the international level (for example all the proceedings and texts of the work of the European Convention are available in the special section entitled *Forum per l'Europa* (Forum for Europe); multimedia pages or materials (video, digital versions of texts, etc.) are available on events for the general public, such as ceremonies, conferences, conventions, exhibitions and miscellaneous events. The site also publishes invitations to tender, notices of competitive entrance examinations, the main internal rules and regulations, and documents detailing the administrative structure of the Chamber.

The online publication of parliamentary documents now complements the traditional printed versions of parliamentary proceedings and business, and is therefore making the general public much more familiar with the work of the Chamber. Anyone may print or copy parliamentary documents obtained through the Internet without payment, because the Chamber claims no copyright over the documents hosted on its site.

b) Other communication tools

Other multimedia communication tools have also been created to broaden the information offering available to the public: the proceedings of the Chamber are broadcast live on radio and TV and on the Internet, and are also available free of charge through satellite television (both the Chamber and the Senate have their own satellite channel), as are some sessions of the Standing Committees.

Another information tool is Televideo: the Chamber has seven teletext pages posted on the State television network, which receives information from the Press Office and provides information on the timetable of business of the Chamber, order papers, daily summaries updated live of the debates and the proceedings on the floor of the House, the issues being examined by the Standing Committees, as well as the services open to the public (guided visits, access to the Library, the historical Archives and the Book Shop).

A toll-free number is also available for citizens wishing to make inquiries.

At the present time a multimedia publication is being planned on a CD-ROM illustrating the work of Parliament, primarily designed for students on school visits to the House.

c) The development of the information services

As far as information on parliamentary issues is concerned, a number of major projects have been instituted to make more parliamentary documents available on the Internet, and to bring new databanks on-stream.

A joint Chamber/Senate programme is being implemented to computerise all the historical collections of parliamentary proceedings prior to 1996 (dating back to 1948) and on Library accessions and the historical Parliamentary Archives, in order to give citizens free access through the Internet to a vast amount of valuable documentation that is currently only available to the Deputies and the offices on the parliamentary premises.

The purpose of this is to create a "Digital Parliamentary Library" which, once incorporated into the new Parliamentary Information Centre, can become a technologically advanced centre for relations with the public, without charge, able to provide a large number of important services (such as a bibliographic database on Parliamentary Studies; the Italian version of the Parliamentary Regulations and Rules of Procedure in force in France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Spain; the Legislation Manual, a databank incorporated into the Internet site containing all the rules for the production of laws and other statutory texts; the Institutional Manual containing all the legislation governing the exercise of parliamentary functions and relations between Parliament and other institutions, including an Electoral Code).

The use of the technologies has also been identified by the Legislation Committee as an essential tool for improving the quality of legislation and familiarity with it. This is why a joint project is being implemented by the Chamber of Deputies, the Senate and the Office of the Prime Minister (the so-called "Statutes Online" Project) to create a national databank which will provide free access through the Internet to all the statutes currently in force in Italy.

1.3. The use of ICT for the administrative structures serving the parliamentary organs and the Deputies

As part of the gradual phasing-in of documentary management systems and the computerisation of the parliamentary proceedings and documents, one particularly important development has been the construction of the Computerised Chamber Register, which was completed during 2001.

This system, which comprises a central register and a variety of decentralised registers linked to each Service in the Administration and connected by one single network, records and acquires the images of all the documents received or transmitted by the Chamber, and all the internal documents exchanged between the offices. This makes it possible to use the computer to retrieve all registered documents using special descriptors of the document contents, at all levels, and to transmit them through the Web. In order to post them on the Internet, it has been made possible to send the image and the outgoing and incoming registration of documents taken from the various decentralised registers.

This means that communications can be effected between the offices of the Chamber by computer, doing away with the need to forward the originals in printed format between one office and another. This system, which is not available outside the Parliament and is therefore guaranteed a high level of security, has accelerated the speed of internal communications and innovated the system for conserving and archiving documents.

Other working procedures have been changed using the new technologies.

Statistics on legislation have also been organised by putting statistics on the network covering all parliamentary activities (the work of the organs of the Chamber, the Floor of the House, the Committees, the Bureaux, the Bicameral Commissions, legislative and statutory instruments, policy and scrutiny instruments, and the typological analysis of legislation). The statistics are collected weekly or monthly and tabulated in over 150 tables. This is done directly by the individual offices responsible in the secretariats of the parliamentary organs (the House Service, the Committees' Department, the Research Department, etc.) without having to publish them in printed format.

Another important point is the daily development of other forms of internal communication throughout the system using the intranet site, which has an electronic notice board, where the internal documents of the Administration are posted, and the widespread use of e-mail as the main instrument for exchanging official and informal documents between the offices or in the process of preparing formal documents for outside consumption.

In the past two years specific databanks have been established, both documentary and management bases, which are not only digital archives of texts but are also tools for recording information. A number of traditional manual procedures for numbering and classifying documents have therefore been replaced by this system. Systems such as the "Computerised file of policy and scrutiny documents", the databank containing personal particulars regarding the Deputies and the members of the Government, and a number of specific applications for administrative purposes, enable documents to be processed and consulted by computer as well as information relating to working procedures, by connecting all the offices concerned into the network. The "Computerised file of scrutiny and policy ", for example, is largely built up automatically, drawing the data directly from the verbatim reports in electronic format by electronic text marking.

2. FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR DEVELOPING THE USE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES

Prospects for the use of new technologies in parliamentary work are many and varied. In addition to what has already been mentioned (the use of ICT for Deputies, for relations between the Chamber and the general public, and for the Administration) there is also another major area of computer co-operation between the European Parliaments, which is developing inter-parliamentary relations and is linked to the enlargement of the

European Union.

In the area of possible operations to further improve the daily working conditions of Deputies and the administrative structures, one potential objective is to have available all the documentation needed for parliamentary work and make it available on the Net and on every workstation

Such schemes include the ongoing measures being adopted in the Chamber to create a system for visualising documents under debate using specific monitors or screens, set up in the Standing Committee rooms, and then in the House itself, and the development of a wireless network in the Chamber to guarantee access to the Internet and to the Chamber's networks. Other initiatives could relate to the use of SMSs to perform administrative functions (for example, for convening Committee meetings) or for disseminating information.

In order to implement the use of the computerised tools already available to the Deputies, there should be a discussion on the possibility of introducing regulations by the Office of the Speaker which will make it necessary and sufficient for Deputies to directly submit parliamentary documents in electronic format (for example, amendments, parliamentary questions, private members' Bills, also using digital signature systems), or give them legal status as a means of convening meetings of Commissions by e-mail (instead of the traditional fax, telegram, etc. systems).

These are sensitive issues because they influence the exercise of parliamentary privileges and the exercise of the parliamentary mandate itself, and organisational measures certainly cannot be permitted to restrict the exercise of these rights. What is needed is to find a way of properly reconciling these rights with the need to improve and streamline the organisation, by using these technologies.

As far as the administrative structures are concerned, one very important future prospect is the further upgrading of the intranet, as an essential tool that can possibly replace the traditional means of communicating within the Chamber, and for keeping Deputies briefed.

From the point of view of developing the documentary offering on the Internet site, it is also possible to envisage incorporating into the network the huge amount of documentation (the so-called grey literature) produced by the Documentation departments. As a general rule, it will be necessary to see whether all the publications of the Chamber must also be produced in digital format in order to be able to put them on the Net or to distribute them in multimedia format. One way of improving the understanding of the general public of parliamentary work could be not only the acquisition of original documents and seeing the sessions in progress, as already exists today, but also by enabling the public to consult materials which are at the present time only available to Deputies.

It is also necessary to think in terms of developing television. Television is ideal to

get across to the broad public and show in detail the substance and the actual proceedings of parliamentary work. Initiatives are currently being examined to create a fully fledged satellite TV programme for the Chamber of Deputies, developing programmes for debate and for news, by repeating the broadcast of important parliamentary sessions, including the work of the Parliamentary Committees.

When examining the possible developments in relations between Parliament and the public, particular attention should also be paid to the possibility of "two-way" communications, in order not only to communicate and provide information from Parliament but also directly take on board opinions, ideas, documents and engage in other participatory relations with the general public, using what are now common techniques (opinion polls, questionnaires, chat rooms with Deputies and the public, etc.). These prospects and issues relating to eDemocracy in relation to parliamentary institutions must be very carefully examined because they could have a direct effect on the forms of representation and the exercise of the parliamentary mandate in the forms governed by the Constitution and Parliamentary Regulations.

One final point that should be mentioned is the development of links between all Europe's parliaments.

The further development of inter-parliamentary relations, which have developed enormously in recent years, can also be fostered by adopting networking systems between Parliaments.

There are many constituencies in which this type of co-operation already exists with networks that have been instituted or are developing at the present time. These include the European Parliamentary Technology Assessment (EPTA) network, to which the Scientific and Technology Assessment Committees of different national Parliaments belong (for the Chamber of Deputies the Office of the Presidency VAST Committee); the development of closer co-operation on documentation between European Parliaments within the framework of the ECPRD (European Parliamentary Research and Documentation Centre), initiatives that have begun with the "Science, Technology and Innovation Policy Parliamentary Perspective" Seminar held on 13-14 January 2003 in Helsinki organised by the UNESCO Scientific Department and the Finnish Parliamentary Committee belonging to EPTA on the role of Parliaments in innovation processes and the evaluation of science and technology policies, and during which it was stated that an international Parliamentary network should be established on these issues, by setting up a Permanent International Parliamentary Forum, broadened to members of the scientific community and civil society. The debate on the joint European-level development of new technologies was discussed by the European Conference on eGovernment held at Cernobbio in Italy on 7-8 July 2003.

In all these cases the issues of integration between Parliaments were debated, through the development of common information networks.

It is therefore to be hoped that through such initiatives as EPRI it will be possible

rapidly to reach the implementation and co-ordination phase in the appropriate fora of the possibilities that have been already amply debated regarding inter-parliamentary co-operation using information and communication technologies.