Governing Council	CL/195/10(c)-R.1
Item 10	25 September 2014

Reports on recent IPU specialized meetings

(c)   World-e Parliament Conference 2014

Seoul (Republic of Korea), 8-10 May 2014

> *The World e-Parliament Conference 2014 was jointly organized by the IPU and the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea. It took place in Seoul (Republic of Korea) from 8 to 10 May 2014. This was the sixth World e-Parliament Conference to take place since 2007. A total of 69 national parliaments and two regional parliaments sent delegations to the Conference, for a total of 278 participants, of whom 95 were parliamentarians.*
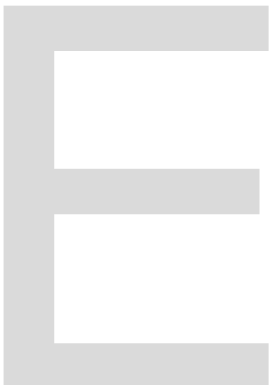>
> *Data from participants' evaluation of the Conference indicated that 100% of respondents would recommend future World e-Parliament Conferences to colleagues. The average evaluation of the Conference's relevance was 3.6 out of a maximum 4 points; and scores were also high for learning (3.2); making new contacts (3.3); and motivating participants to take action (3.5).*
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> *The concluding remarks of the Conference, delivered by Secretary General-elect Martin Chungong, provide a summary of the main points of discussion, and are reproduced below.*

Some salient issues have been highlighted during these past three days. Firstly, some trends have come through strongly since the last e-parliament conference in 2012.

·   One is a growing political commitment to openness. It is becoming increasingly politically important to demonstrate that parliament is an open and transparent institution. More and more parliaments are implementing this commitment, by making parliamentary documentation available online, by adopting policies and practices on open data, by using open standards such as XML. This experience should encourage those parliaments that are still hesitating to be bolder about giving their data away, so that it can be reused freely by citizens.

·   Another trend is the shift towards a paperless environment. I have been struck by the number of parliaments that said they have abandoned paper, or are planning to. This is being driven by the need to make savings on the cost of printing documents. There are obvious environmental benefits in using less paper. But a greater emphasis on electronic documents also brings other benefits, in terms of the speed with which information can be made available to members and the public.

·   A third trend is greater use of technology to abolish the barriers of distance and geography, for example thanks to video conferencing facilities. I was very impressed by the presentation from Ecuador which showed how members who are working in parliament hold video conferences with citizens in their constituencies, or even abroad. This can help to resolve one of the conundrums of political life, of needing to work simultaneously at the national and the local level.

·   The mobile applications that allow members and citizens to access data wherever they are also increasing in number and quality. An even more innovative example came from Spain, and the system that enables parliamentarians to vote from a distance when they are unable to be present physically in parliament. Certainly there is a need for safeguards against any unintended consequences of such a system, but it is something that I think will have caught the attention of many of you here.

·   Let me also mention the issue of security of parliamentary data, which is particularly sensitive in the political environment. This morning's debate underlined the need to invest in protecting parliamentary ICT systems. Some have also cautioned about the amount of data parliamentarians put into the public domain about themselves, and the debate highlighted a number of good practices in this area. As a speaker said this afternoon, we need to balance the desire to engage, to communicate, with the risk of leaving a permanent digital footprint.

My second point is about citizens, and in particular the efforts you are making to make it easier for citizens to access the work of parliament. We have heard of many technology solutions to provide easy access to parliamentary information, such as better systems for capturing and publishing proceedings, and more attention to the usability of parliamentary web sites.

But many people also pointed out that citizens should be able to *understand* easily what is going on in parliament. You know, better than anyone else, how complex an institution parliament is, and how complex the law-making process can be. We need to simplify access to the law. Parliaments should be bolder in making available their data in open formats so that the public can reuse it freely, and not fear breaking with tradition. Technology can help, for example by linking together all the different elements of a legislative file, from the draft legislation itself, to the amendments, the records of committee debates, the bill summaries and all the other documents. The demonstration this morning in the Korean plenary chamber was a fine example of how the process can be managed efficiently using new technologies.

This raises a question which goes beyond technology, which touches on the law and the law-making process itself. I believe that parliaments need to make greater efforts to ensure that parliamentary information is not just available, but available in a way that can be easily understood by the ordinary citizen. Plain language summaries of legislation are just one way, but I think that parliaments can and should be doing more in this area.

In the opposite direction, parliamentarians need information in what a delegate called "bite sizes". Indeed, the ubiquity of information risks overwhelming parliament and members.

Thirdly, much of the discussion has focused on the use of social media networks. It is increasingly understood that parliaments need to be where the people are, and not just wait for the people to come to them. And today, the people are on social networks. We have heard from parliamentarians who use social media as their primary channel for reaching out to voters, and for maintaining links with citizens once they have been elected. We have heard how parliaments are using this networked approach even in countries where internet use is low, but where most people have a mobile phone.

But there are clearly many challenges associated with the use of social media networks. Parliamentarians have talked about the time that is required to sustain an interactive conversation, and the way social media can be used in negative and abusive ways. I think that we are still learning, individually and collectively, about how to use social media effectively in the political arena, and the impact that social media has on citizen's political participation. I am sure that this is a question that we will need to come back to in the future.

There is another challenge: does digital democracy foster direct democracy at the expense of representative democracy? I think that you are agreed that the answer is no. Speaker John Bercow of the UK House of Commons argued today that parliament retains discretion and judgment in the decision-making process. Instead of competition, there needs to be healthy collaboration and partnership. Some have stated that ICT is more suited to oversight of implementation than to decision-making in the legislative process itself.

Finally, we must acknowledge that there remains a huge gap in the capacity of parliaments to make effective use of technology. While many parliaments have become leaders among the public administrations in their countries, other parliaments still face huge challenges with infrastructure, human resources and financial difficulties. This is restricting their ability to make the best use of ICT to make parliament more effective.

It is not a new situation. The gap has been documented in the World e-Parliament Report since 2008. And it is certainly not a completely negative picture. We have heard many examples of innovation from parliaments in Africa and elsewhere which have limited resources. Nevertheless, while we celebrate the progress that is being made, we must remain aware that not all parliaments are able to progress in the same way or at the same speed.

There is a clear need for a higher level of inter-parliamentary cooperation so that this gap can be reduced. The IPU can play a role in facilitating this cooperation, including through its capacity building programmes. Many parliaments have stressed the need for the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament to be able to resume the good work that it was doing to support parliaments in this area. There is a need for stronger partnerships among parliaments and organizations that work with them to build their capacity. We need more coordination of ICT-related support. Parliaments themselves have to provide strategic direction, and take the lead in their own ICT strategic planning. The Commission on Digital Democracy established by Speaker Bercow in the UK is an eye-opener in this regard.

We count on all of you, as individuals and as institutions, to continue to remain engaged. By your participation here, you have demonstrated a commitment to sharing experience with other parliaments. There is a sense of the community that has developed since the first e-parliament conference in 2007, of both members and staff of parliaments, who believe that it is important for democracy to make not only efficient but, more importantly, effective use of ICT in parliament. It is important to sustain this momentum.