European Parliament

New technologies and their contribution to facilitating the work of the European Parliament

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Final Report (provisional)

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1 – INTRODUCTION

1.1 – AIM OF THE STUDY

Over the last five years there has been an explosion in new information and communication technologies. This development often means that internal computer strategies and the use of computerised tools must be refocused and adapted.

Various measures have already been taken at the European Parliament:
- the whole EP document production cycle has been computerised and a considerable reduction in transmission times has been achieved;
- by decision of 17 June 1996 Parliament's Bureau decided to equip all Members in their places of work in Brussels, and subsequently Strasbourg, with a computer connected to the internal network;
- on 26 June 1996 Parliament adopted a resolution setting the aims and outlining directives relating to information technologies.

The Committee on the Rules of Procedures now wishes the other possibilities offered by information and communication technologies and the practical or psychological problems which their implementation could pose to be examined. It is likely, for example, that electronic access to texts on which MEPs have to give their opinion could improve the effectiveness of Parliament's work.

Such technologies are used to good effect by other parliaments and an assessment of the possibilities offered by these technologies would assist the European Parliament in its decision-making. The study should provide the opportunity to consider how the European Parliament could be served by information and communication technologies and, more specifically, to identify some key characteristics of the technical equipment to be installed to facilitate the work of members and also any practical constraints.

In a way, the aim is to suggest ideas for using information and communication technologies and to develop arguments for their implementation within Parliament.

Four main lines of investigation were highlighted when the study was started:

- the development of the work station, communication with other Members, with their assistants, with officials or with citizens or access to reference material;
- the circulation of documents, the exchange of comments or amendments, proposals, etc., using 'workflow' type techniques in particular;
- the Intranet and electronic data repositories : procedure servers, document servers;
- keeping track of an action and managing the collective 'memory' of Parliament.

The main task was to conduct an inquiry in several fairly innovative parliaments and to look in detail at certain cases likely to support the arguments for the computerisation proposals, in particular in relation to:

- the work station in the Member's office,
- the work station in committee meetings,
- the work station in the Chamber.

The discussions during the planning meeting held in Strasbourg on 10 February 1999 showed that the aim of, or at least the procedure concerning, the study needed to be shifted to achieve the desired aims, while at the same time keeping the overall focus for the study.
Specifically, the focus was to be on the first two areas referred to above and in particular the study was to concentrate on the **legislative process**, moving away from the area of communication with the citizen.
The current area of concern in parliamentary activity basically relates to the legislative process and in particular:

- the difficulty of following the stages: selective and rapid access to the document (original text, text submitted at first reading, individual amendments) with original text for comparison;
- the difficulty of consulting documents and amendments during the actual vote (at present only the Chair has an overview of 'what is being voted on').

Production on paper is considerable because of the 11 working languages and the range of subjects dealt with during each part-session. As the life span of the documents is short, a large proportion of them are thrown away after use. It is therefore of interest to examine whether this documentation would better be made available in electronic form, including in the Chamber.

Can a 'paperless' Parliament be envisaged? What would be the cost? There is the question of technical feasibility but also the more psychological question of Members accepting an instrument-based interface (how far should it go? what are the requirements in terms of user-friendliness?).

This last aspect presupposes a detailed analysis of the process of drawing up texts and amended versions and an inquiry (or at least a poll) to be conducted among Members to discover their expectations or reactions with regard to a computerised system in connection with the voting stage.

Another aspect to be taken into account as far as the Member's work station is concerned is the role played by the Member's assistant. What aspects of his or her work could be computerised (in particular in relation to document management)? Can there be a move towards computerised management of a 'knowledge base'?

Lastly, an aspect that would be interesting to study is the use of smart cards. At present magnetic identification cards are used for electronic voting (and for the telephone), but other applications could be envisaged.

Finally, it should be noted that the study does not seek to take into account any specific needs of the political groups and associated consultants' offices (basically expressed in terms of interpersonal communications and access to documents).

1.2 – METHODOLOGY

In carrying out this study the Van Dijk consultancy undertook various types of investigation:

1) Review of the existing situation

The Van Dijk consultancy investigated the legislative process in the European Parliament, observing the situation during plenary sittings, analysing the Rules of Procedure and

interviewing representatives of the Sittings Service and those responsible for computerised applications or projects.

It also looked at the tools available to Members on the Intranet and the reports on the various projects being carried out in the European Parliament.

2) Investigation of the use of new technologies in various parliaments

The Van Dijk consultancy took note of studies carried out in 1998 by the computer services of various parliaments throughout the world (study by CERDP and study carried out by the Flemish parliament in Belgium).

It sent a questionnaire to a selection of 45 national parliaments (basically of European countries, including those outside the European Union), regional parliaments (regional councils in France, Land governments in Germany) and major cities (Paris municipal council) with a view to identifying some parliaments which are more innovatory than others and drawing up case studies to illustrate what could be undertaken at the European Parliament. To date, 14 replies have been received and used (see list in Annex).

Some direct contacts have also taken place with the Secretaries-general or those responsible for the information systems of several parliaments, and visits have been made to see installations (Finnish parliament, Estonian parliament, French Senate, French national assembly, Flemish parliament in Belgium, Paris municipal council, etc.).

3) Consultation of some MEPs

A questionnaire was drawn up to be distributed to selected MEPs at the beginning of April 1999. Five replies have been received by the Van Dijk consultancy.

Several face-to-face interviews were held with MEPs to gather their opinions on the development of new technologies to facilitate their work.

The list of people interviewed and documents considered appears in the Annex.

2 – CURRENT SITUATION IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

2.1 – WORK OF A MEMBER OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Without going into details about work or procedures or into the various permutations (depending on the level of responsibility of the Member, the type of procedure, etc.), the main areas of work are as follows:

- consideration of proposals for legislation and representation of the electorate
  - obtaining information,
  - creation of files,
  - interaction with citizens,
  - interaction with the political group or its officials,
  - interaction with members of the committee and other institutions,
  - drafting reports,
  - drafting amendments,

motions for resolutions,
drafting position papers for the political group,

▪ participation in meetings (select committees, subcommittees, political group, working party),

▪ participation in the part-sessions (sittings),
consultation of the calendar of part-sessions,
monitoring the agenda,
presentation of the report (if rapporteur),
debates (spokesman),
consultation of text put to the vote,
vote on amendments
whole text
resolution,

▪ written or oral questions to members of the Council and Commission,

▪ relations with national or associated parliaments and international organisations,

▪ justification of activities to the electorate.

To help him carry out these various tasks or functions an MEP currently has access to several 'tools' or information systems.

2.2. THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT'S INFORMATION SYSTEMS

A summary follows of the systems containing information and documents relating to parliamentary activities

2.2.1. Europarl.eu.int

This is the European Parliament's home page, accessible to the public via the Internet. A series of headings relate to Parliament's activities and give access to information and official documents: agendas for part-sessions and committee meetings, reports, verbatim reports of proceedings, minutes, etc.

Limitations:
- the links between document sequences have not been fully implemented, in particular for texts relating to future work,

- response times were observed to be mediocre at present.

2.2.2. Epades

The system was originally conceived as a means of exchanging and storing documents handled by Parliament's services, in particular DG 7. This first version, Epades 1, is a document server with an interface organised in directories and subdirectories like the Windows interface. Technically this part is a 'repository'.

Next a service for monitoring procedures was established, known as Epades 2. Technically, this is a workflow management tool, also intended for Parliament's services. This system, based on in-house development, will soon be replaced by a solution based on a software package, the project being known as Epades 3.

Limitations:

- limited functionality and ergonomics,
- no search engine.

2.2.3. Epoque

This is a database containing the bibliographic references of documents published by the European Parliament and the catalogue of Parliament's library. A reworking of this database is under consideration.

2.2.4. Celex

Celex is a documentary system which has been available from the OOPEC for many years. It gives access to all published official documents (legislation in force, consolidated texts, treaties, case law). It is a professional system and users must pay to access it.

2.2.5. EUR-Lex

This public system offers access to documents published in the Official Journal (full text for the last 45 days) in HTML or PDF format. The system is accessible free on the Internet. It covers part of the material in the Celex database.

Limitations:

- OJ only for the last 45 days
- limited search functions

2.2.6. Eudor

Paying documentation system managed by the OOPEC containing the Official Journals and the preparatory working documents based on page logic rather than document logic. The documents are available in picture mode (OJ from 1978 onwards, material being added going back to 1952) in SGML or PDF format. Technically it is a 'repository' (file storage system).

Limitations:

- page logic
- picture mode is preferred to guarantee the accurate reproduction of original documents.

Note: a review being undertaken at the request of the OOPEC is examining improved integration of the three last systems: Celex, Eudor and EUR-Lex.

2.2.7. The MEP's working environment

Since December 1997 (date of the move into the new building in Brussels) the MEP (or his assistant) has had access to an individual work station comprising a PC equipped with a multilingual keyboard, a central processor and a connection to the local network, a laser printer,

a multimedia kit and a range of software: word processor, a spreadsheet programme, fax manager, e-mail system, diary function, Internet navigator, software for access to data bases, application for the tabling of amendments or written questions. The same equipment will also soon be available in Strasbourg.

From this work station the MEP can have access to:

his personal data (Documents and Files)
the common data of a political group
Epades (EP working documents at various stages)
'technical support' information (LSUMEP) (manuals, guides, training course dates, etc.)
the EP Intranet site (linked to the various sites of the EP's directorates general)
the databases of the European institutions (database of reports, etc.)
the Internet
a wide range of resources.

He can have remote access to most of these resources through the 'MEP Site' web site: e-mail, Documents and Files (personal files), Guides and Info (computer help files), Epades, Europa (EU public web site), Europarl.eu.int (EP public web site), Celex (EU legal database) etc.

For access to documents linked to the legislative process, the MEP has the choice at any stage of consulting them on screen via Epades or obtaining the paper version from the sittings service, except in the following situations:

- the electronic tabling of an amendment must be confirmed by the dispatch of a paper version with the original signature,
- the same applies for written questions,
- in the Chamber, only the paper versions of documents can be consulted (unless there is an ad hoc installation for the electronic version).

2.2.8. Studies in progress

Recent contacts with the DIT (Roland Thorpe) and the publications service (DG7, Jacques Raybaut) have shown that three studies are currently being undertaken. These technical studies are seeking firstly, to facilitate the exchange of data between the EP's services and secondly, to improve the efficiency of searches for and access to legal texts. These studies will help to improve the current systems, in particular by eliminating the partitioning which has existed since these tools were first established. These developments will allow the service to various users to be improved, but it will not specifically meet the requirements of the MEPs which we have established. A brief survey of these studies is given below.

1. Review group on the identification of document files and ways of facilitating exchanges between Parliament's services. The review group is chaired by Mr Pappamikail who was entrusted with this task by the Secretary-General in May 1999.

2. Interinstitutional task force on the integrated system for legal texts. The aim of this review, for the OOPEC is to achieve better harmonisation of the EUR-Lex, Celex and Eudor databases. An initial report is being drawn up and should be finalised at the end of June 1999.

3. Feasibility study for a search engine for all the websites (**eu.int**) of the European institutions. This DocEx study was started by DG III. The aim is to offer users a single search method allowing them to access information on all the sites by means of a single request. In a way it is the Yahoo of the future for the European institutions. This study was undertaken by Logica which submitted its report in March 1999.

2.3. COMPUTERISATION OF THE LEGISLATIVE DOCUMENT CIRCUIT

2.3.1. parliamentary committees

The draft report and the amendments give rise to a vote, the final version is then drawn up and, checked for admissibility and conformity, the report is sent to translation and then forwarded to the sittings service. This circuit is subject to computerised follow-up using Epades.

There are several variants in the treatment of documents depending on the committees; in some cases the amendments are presented opposite the sections of text to which they relate, which assists reading and thus also the vote.

It is envisaged that the arrangements used by the Committee on Budgets (the most advanced from the point of view of computerisation) will be extended to the other committees (as part of creating uniform procedures).

2.3.2 – plenary

Several documents are prepared by the sittings service and made available to Members:

agenda for the part-session
agenda for the sitting, indicating the deadline for tabling amendments
reports
collection of amendments (numbered on the basis of the order in which they arrive)
the voting list

All these documents can be consulted using Epades and they are also available on paper (placed in the Member's pigeonhole and supplied on request).

Epades ensures follow-up of the circuit stages (workflow function: Epades 2).

For the time being these documents are juxtaposed and there are no links, thus no interactivity, between the items appearing on the agenda and the relevant documents. However this possibility is envisaged under the agenda project (global Agenda application).

In the new chamber in Strasbourg there are plans to include individual display screens; they will be small display screens and will allow in particular the agenda item and the name of the speaker to be posted.

The Minutes, drawn up at the end of the sitting, comprise two parts : the results of the vote and the amended text. This text, after approval, is published in the Official Journal of the European Communities. The minutes are also accessible on Epades. At this stage too documents are processed by computer so that no retyping is involved.

The verbatim report of proceedings containing the text of the speeches is also processed by computer.

2.3.3. – political groups

The political groups are involved in the preparation of the parliamentary debates and the vote. In this process they use the voting list prepared by the sittings service and add comments for their members.

In overall terms, the Epades computerised system has made it possible to reduce the volume of documents distributed on paper and has significantly improved access to information.

2.3.4. – Information on the progress of sittings

To manage their use of time most efficiently, Members need to have the most precise information possible on the planning for the day, i.e. on the list of speakers and the length of the speeches during the sitting. At present the daily timetable is not known until about 9.30 a.m. because certain speakers are only entered on the list at a late stage. For the time being this information is not available on line.

2.4. MEMBERS' EXPECTATIONS

2.4.1. Assessment of what is currently available

- Practical use made of tools available to MEPs.

  In the majority of cases the Member's assistant is the main user of the tools for access to and processing of information.

  The replies to the questionnaire indicate that the most used applications are as follows (in descending order):

  - Internet (5)
  - e-mail (4)
  - Europarl website headings (3)
  - personal files (2)
  - Epades (2)
  - access to European databases (2)
  - access to group information (2)
  - DG websites

  No reference was made to tabling amendments or questions.

- Assessments

  The interviews dealt with the problems encountered by the Members in their parliamentary work; these related to the following areas:

  - excessive numbers of 'requests', contacts (unsolicited, or provoked by them), post, messages, calls, etc.,

- increasing diversity and complexity of the subjects considered, requiring multiple information gathering,
- excessive amounts of documentation, reports in all the varying stages of completion,
- the rapid pace of work, flow of meetings, part-sessions, agenda items.

Swamped by the mass of documents, the Member still feels that he does not have access to essential information, that certain documents are missing.

It is these aspects associated with daily 'life' which provide the criteria by which MEPs assess the possible contribution which computerised tools can make.

The replies to the questionnaire show contrasting reactions, but dissatisfaction with the current applications predominates. Although one respondent is quite satisfied with the current applications, another thinks that connection is difficult and three others think that these applications are not sufficiently user friendly, and find it complicated to search for information.

2.4.2 Wishes

It is always difficult for future users to comment on equipment with which they are unfamiliar, and where they cannot even imagine the use to which it could be put. At the very most they can express their views on what they are familiar with (assessment of the technical or organisational facilities available), on improvements to be made in relation to tasks considered to be tiresome, irrelevant or time-consuming or to describe applications they have seen 'elsewhere'. It is also necessary to be able to distinguish between what is generally desirable and what they accept as applicable for the individual (not always ready to alter a habit or to accept certain consequences).

Consultation of Members is also subject to these limitations. Nonetheless, it allows certain types of concern or expectation to be identified which must be dealt with by the technicians or the administration.

The questionnaire shows that the following wishes take priority:

electronic access to be possible during committee meetings (3) and during plenary sittings (3)
teleworking to be facilitated (2)
Epades to be made more user-friendly (1)
availability of management tools for personal documentation or the preparation of files (1)
general use of the identification card (1)

Access to amendments files and the use of videoconferencing were not included among the priorities for the respondents.

The expectations expressed in the various interviews conducted can be summarised as follows:

- **need to save time**

This (pronounced) need calls for rapid and easy access to documents which are useful for parliamentary business at various stages (to avoid having to go in search of documents and being dependent on the opening hours of offices or persons being on call, etc.), the possibility of carrying out simple procedures (tabling amendments, questions, motions for resolutions etc.); but

it also calls for a reduction in the time required for certain administrative operations to be dealt with or changes in the procedures developed initially for exchange of information using paper.

• need for consistency and integration of information systems

As the Member's time is divided between work in Europe and in his local constituency, there is a need for consistency, or integration, between the EP's information system and the local information system.

However there is also a need for integration with regard to the various applications in use within the EP. Connections and navigation must be simplified (consistency in the logic and presentation of the various applications or databases) and the telecommunications tools must be integrated.

Some members would thus like to see a 'one stop shop', known by others as 'a unified management environment for all legislative data'.

• need for tools for teleworking

The aim is not to be physically dependent on offices in Brussels or Strasbourg between part-sessions : to be able to have remote access to all the documentation and tools required for work (consultation of texts, reports, observations drafted by other Members, draft amendments, etc., possibility to draft and send notes, amendments, etc., to communicate with members of a committee, etc.). At present it appears that there is no remote access to some of these specialist resources.

With regard to possible direct electronic access to all useful documents, from the committee room or the chamber, opinions are divided: some (2) considered it would avoid shuffling papers while others felt that browsing on screen would be difficult and it would not replace paper. Another wished to 'view' the system before giving a verdict.

It is true that paper is a medium that is easy to read, to transport and to annotate. It can form evidence.

3 – USE OF NEW COMPUTERISED INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES IN OTHER PARLIAMENTS

3.1 – APPLICATIONS IDENTIFIED

Various electronic services or computerised applications have been developed in the parliaments which replied to this inquiry:

- **Basic equipment for members of parliament**

In most parliaments which replied to the inquiry, the member (or his assistant) has a work station comprising a PC equipped with office software, a connection to the local network, a messaging service, a database consultation tool and access to the Internet.

- **Assistance in the drafting of texts**

Apart from office tools (word processing) there are no specific tools to facilitate the formalising of texts. Few parliaments offer structured electronic forms for tabling amendments or questions (French Senate).

Some parliaments offer a text drafting system integrated into the production management system (Austrian Parliament; Chamber of Representatives, Belgium; Senate, Italy; Riigikogu, Estonia, Hungarian National Assembly).

- **Tools for monitoring work flow and production management system**

Several parliaments have established a system for monitoring the progress of legislative activities, either using just the management data (initiator of the draft or the proposal, date of tabling, date declared admissible, date of publication of the opinion, date of consideration in committee, date of consideration in plenary, target date for tabling amendments, result of the vote, date of promulgation) or by also making the texts accessible at the various stages (Austrian Parliament; Senate, Italy; Riigikogu, Estonia; Hungarian National Assembly) by means of an 'integrated' system;

The type of technical tool used varies from one parliament to another.

- **Possibility for electronic tabling of amendments**

As yet this possibility is available only in a few parliaments (Hungarian National Assembly, German Bundestag, Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine)

- **Computerised system for the management of parliamentary questions and answers**

Several parliaments have a tool for following up questions (oral and/or written) and answers/questions: content, date, etc. (Austrian Parliament, House of Commons, National Assembly, France, Chamber of Representatives, Belgium; Hungarian National Assembly, Stortinget, Norway, Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine).

This allows material to be fed into a database, facilitating research on questions asked at an earlier stage.

- **Computerised management and information system on the activities of the assembly**

This system covers a range of information:

- agenda of future activities (assembly, committees)
  (Austrian Parliament, House of Commons, National Assembly, France, Chamber of Representatives, Belgium, Senate, Italy; Riigikogu, Estonia, Hungarian National Assembly, German Bundestag, Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine)

- agendas for committee meetings, part-sessions, sittings
  (Austrian Parliament, National Assembly, France, Chamber of Representatives, Belgium, Riigikogu, Estonia, Hungarian National Assembly, German Bundestag, Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine)

- integrated electronic vote

(Austrian Parliament, Riigikogu, Estonia, Chamber of Representatives, Belgium, Senate, Italy)

- minutes and report of proceedings
  (Austrian Parliament, House of Commons, Chamber of Representatives, Belgium, Riigikogu, Estonia, Hungarian National Assembly, Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine)

- **Information system during the sitting** (progress of the agenda, documents and amendments being discussed or put to the vote, etc.)

The member has an individual display screen in the chamber enabling him to follow the progress of the sitting (Finnish Parliament, Riigikogu, Estonia).

- **Access to an Intranet, containing the various applications**

Most parliaments which replied had established an Intranet offering a common interface to the various information services available. Nevertheless, few permit remote access outside Parliament to all the information (but a large proportion of the information published via the Internet is also of interest to members). It should also be noted that most of these Intranets are only a regrouping of sometimes heterogeneous applications under a joint home page.

- **Tools for remote participation in committee or political group meetings**

Apart from the occasional use of videoconferencing by one of the committee's of the Finnish parliament (basically for hearing foreign experts) and the use of a forum in the Ukrainian Parliament, such applications were not referred to in the replies received.

- **Identification and authentication cards**

In several cases the members have an identification card (Italian Senate, Riigikogu, Estonia; Hungarian National Assembly, Verkhovna Rada, Ukraine). The card is used primarily for electronic voting and in some cases to table an amendment (Hungary), for access to the network (Ukraine), access to the building (Estonia, Norway) or to the member's office (Norway). Often there is a separate card for each function.

3.2. MOST USEFUL APPLICATIONS

Computerised or telecommunications applications that have produced the greatest benefits or advantages for parliamentary work (in terms of efficiency, time gained, etc.) were considered to be as follows:

- Intranet site (Bremen city parliament, Austrian Parliament, House of Commons, Italian Senate, Swiss Assembly)
- Messaging system (House of Commons, Italian Senate, German Bundestag, Norwegian Stortinget)
- Management of speaking time (Austrian Parliament)
- Workflow and groupware system (House of Commons, Hungarian Assembly)
- Integrated system for the production and management of working documents (Riigikogu, Estonia)
- Legislative databases or databases on questions (French National Assembly, Belgian Chamber of Representatives, German Bundestag)

3.3 OTHER ASPECTS RAISED

- **Driving force for modernisation**

Various forces may be behind the introduction of new technologies within a parliament:

- the president of the assembly (1)
- the political groups (1)
- the administrative services (6)
- the computer service (11)

- **Motivation for computerisation**

The most frequently quoted reason is to enable members to find the documents and information useful to them more accurately and quickly (12).

The following reasons are also given (in order of frequency):

- to improve the quality of members' work (8)
- to improve internal productivity (8)
- to improve exchanges between members (4)
- to improve transparency and information for citizens (4)
- to demonstrate that the institution is up-to-date (3)
- to reduce the parliament's operating costs (3) and in particular to reduce the costs of reproducing documents (1)
- to save members' time (3)
- to reduce members' administrative tasks (3)
- to display the texts to be put to the vote more easily (1)
- to provide a technological showcase to promote information technology (1)

No-one gave the following reasons which were suggested: to reduce the numbers of officials; to improve relations between members and officials, to encourage teleworking.

- **Existence of a specific working party on the development of new technologies**

Several parliaments (10) have set up a specific group to examine the introduction or development of new technologies

- **Constraints or obstacles encountered**

The constraints can be very varied:

- Difficulties in altering old buildings
- Insufficient resources
- Data protection
- Complexity or inappropriateness of legislative procedures
- Insufficient standardisation

- **Psychological resistance to change on the part of members**

Resistance had been experienced specifically in three parliaments.

- **Disappointments encountered** (by comparison with the potential or hopes)

The use of electronic dictation seemed to have been a failure in the Italian Senate.

- **Mistakes to be avoided**

The respondents drew attention to four risks to be avoided:
allocating insufficient resources to the project,
under-estimating the time required to reach the operation stage,
insufficient standardisation of the work process, document presentation, software, etc.
insufficient involvement of users.

3.4 – INDIVIDUAL CASE STUDIES

We attach to this study some examples of the implementation of new technologies in a parliamentary context:

- a display screen for each member in the chamber

The Eduskunta (Finland) is one of the rare parliaments to have installed a display screen at each member's seat in the chamber and has thus offered electronic access during the sitting to the agenda and to the references to documents being debated or put to the vote.

- move towards integrated applications

The Estonian parliament (Riigikogu) has several computerised systems which are in the process of being integrated so as to offer unified and intercommunicating access

- an integrated information system

The Belgian Senate has an integrated information system which covers both procedural systems (legislative activities, internal activities, oral and written questions, etc.) and documentary systems.

- the paperless legislative circuit

At the Paris municipal council the process of drawing up, amending and publishing the 'debates' takes place entirely in electronic form, involving a considerable cut in the amount of paper used.

- a virtual parliament

As part of an activity to promote the Internet the French branch of the Internet Society organised the 'virtual' vote on a law in March 1999, with the agreement of the French Senate.

4. SUGGESTIONS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE EP'S INFORMATION SYSTEM

4.1. SUMMARY OF THE EXISTING SITUATION

The present system with regard to the EP's documentation system is characterised by two basic difficulties:

- juxtaposition of independent document systems which were planned for different requirements and using logic which, by definition, makes them inaccessible to the majority of MEPs: Epades, Celex, Europarl, EUR-Lex have a common content.

- the system for consultation of agendas for plenary sittings and committee meetings does not give access to all the documents relating to the parliamentary procedures. It is difficult for the MEP to consult these documents if they are already 'official' (i.e. being dealt with by EP services) and very difficult or impossible to consult then when they have not yet been made 'official' (but have already entered the administrative process).

4.2. SUMMARY OF EXPECTATIONS

Analysis of the current situation, as described in the preceding sections, highlights the following important factors:

- the purpose of the current study is to propose developments to facilitate the work of members. Some of these improvements could result in greater efficiency in Parliament's services, but that is not the primary aim of the study.

- members are hoping to see progress as regards easier access to information and documents relating to the sittings. The solutions expected should not be bound by location (communication with information systems from external sites) or time (possibility of accessing material outside the working hours of the services).

- the systems currently available lack coherence and above all, in our view, integration. Members wish to see simplified access, some even going so far as to want a 'one stop shop' (and not just a common home page).

4.3. POSSIBLE GUIDELINES

We shall first **consider the services to be provided** before discussing the technical solutions which might be used for making these services available.

4.3.1. Services to be created

We recommend that two systems should be developed, or more precisely a single system offering two complementary functions. This system seeks primarily to facilitate access by members to all documents and current information on a permanent basis.

<u>Information system on work relating to plenary sittings</u>

We consider that this service should alleviate the lack of integration of the current systems. The aim would be to offer, through a single interface, several complementary functions relating to parliamentary work:
- possibility of consulting the planned agenda of work, either in plenary or in committee,

- direct consultation of official documents directly associated with these activities: draft texts, committee reports, amendments already tabled, reports of debates on a draft text,

- direct tabling of a new amendment to a draft text selected from the agenda,

- direct access to questions (oral and written) and to answers.

The system recommended, which could be known as **electronic management of parliamentary activities (EMPA)**, should use the agenda of Parliament's activities as the key to providing easy access for consulting documents being considered and for making official interventions. This system should offer at any time a comprehensive and up-to-date real time picture of the agenda of activities and of all the official documents associated therewith. The member and his assistant should be able to access the system with a PC wherever they are, provided they have a telephone line or a local network connection.

System for filing and sharing information and documents

This service relates to the management of documents and information of use to members. The items being managed will not necessarily be linked directly to the parliamentary process. However, some contributions to parliamentary activities may pass through this management system before being transferred (or made accessible) to EMPA. This would be the case, for example, for a committee report while it is being drawn up by the working party preparing it. The system should allow the storage of several types of documents: automated files (word processed reports, visual presentations, spreadsheets, etc.), electronic messages, HTML pages found during searches on the web, documents digitised using a scanner, etc.

The system recommended should be partitioned. Each members would have a *personal domain* accessible to his or her assistant. Parliamentary groups and committees would have *collective domains*. This partitioning, virtual of course, will be guaranteed by identification techniques, which are considered below.

In operational terms, this service is an **electronic document management (EDM)** system which, like the EMPA, should be accessible everywhere and at all times.

NB. The MEP Site project offers some of the recommended functions. It would be sufficient to improve it and implement it fully.

Automatic notification of new documents

Supplementing easier direct access to documents and information, the notification service would involve using e-mail to alert interested parties to the existence of new documents. This service would offer the following functions:

- voluntary registration of those interested on distribution lists defined on the basis of topics and/or bodies within Parliament or other institutions: the environment, the committee on foreign affairs, DG XIII of the Commission, etc.

- the automatic creation and distribution of messages indicating the entry into the EDM system of documents which correspond to the stated profiles, with each message containing a link to the document being notified which is thus accessible without any further formality.

4.3.2. Technical solutions

In technical terms, the services recommended above must be based on three technical pillars: the electronic management of documents and groupware, the management of structured documents, techniques for rendering exchanges secure. At the lower level, these provisions will use adapted network solutions: local networks (LAN) extended networks between EP sites (WAN), secure access from and to the outside world, high speed links, etc. These techniques are simply noted for information and are not developed further in this report.

Electronic management of documents and groupware

The techniques are known and already used in Parliament. The main problem is to integrate the various existing systems and to facilitate access to them and the Intranet techniques offer very interesting possibilities in this area. This need for integration applies primarily to the various stages of the Epades system.

This move towards integration should lead to the concept of the **MEP's electronic office**[1], accessible from any location at any moment. As soon as the PC is connected to Parliament's information system the Member will access his or her personal information area organised to suit his or her needs. This area provides immediate access to the partitioned EMPA and EDM systems. The MEP Site described above is a prototype of the service to be achieved.

The key points in this approach to be dealt with are as follows, but there are solutions available:

- rendering access secure: encryption, smart cards for authentication and certification, etc.
- installation of a work station in the chambers,
- remote access to the EP networks.

Management of structured documents and information

With a view to making documents which enter the information system immediately available it is essential to avoid re-entering information. To this end the system must integrate interfaces which make it easier for the MEP or his/her assistant to enter material directly. The EMPA should therefore offer forms for assisted entry of data for the main interventions possible. For example, while reading a proposal for a directive (or a draft amendment) on screen the MEP should be able to enter a proposal for an amendment directly linked to an article or a subparagraph of an article. This entry will integrate a copy-paste function from other documents accessible from the electronic office. The form, comparable to that used for entering messages, will allow information to be organised directly so that it can be monitored and integrated directly into the EMPA and thus be made available immediately to all those involved in the process (MEP, EP officials). Conventional word processing will, of course, remain the usual tool for creating large documents which could be registered in the information system and made available to all parties concerned.

Further, the manipulation of structured documents will allow their automatic conversion to SGML/XML codes which are used by the departments working alongside or downstream of the parliamentary process. Although increased productivity is not the main objective of the current

[1] This concept was proposed by DEC five years ago under the designation LinkWork

study, it should be stressed that the proposed approach would enable subsequent processing of the information to be speeded up and facilitated translation, publication by the specialist departments and the OOPEC. This approach could thus improve the overall efficiency of the institution.

Implementation of this solution presents two problems:

- direct entry of information by the MEP would 'short circuit' the tasks of certain departments; developing this option would imply changes to certain administrative procedures and a reliable identification of individuals,
- the MEP certainly does not want to take the place of those currently responsible for inputting texts in other departments, but the possibility of entering documents and making them available to all, even on a provisional basis would doubtless be a gain that would be appreciated.

Voice data entry

This technique seeks to replace keyboard data entry by electronic dictation. It would supplement structured data entry in cases where the text to be entered is long and has little structure.

This could pave the way for progress when it comes of age. At present debates are taken down in shorthand in most national or regional parliaments in addition to traditional audio recording; the Italian Senate has apparently tried out new technologies, but has taken no further action. The Ukrainian parliament was using a system for the automatic input of speeches (made in two languages).

There is still a problem with the reliability of technical tools (problem of recognising the words of various speakers, terms which are virtually homophones, no account being taken of gestures, etc). This problem is even more complicated in a multilingual context.

Filtering and assisted filing of messages

The rapid development of the use of e-mail poses the problem of sorting the incoming messages. Certain specialised applications now allow an initial sort to be made on the basis of certain attributes in the header (sender, subject, priority level, address of the body, etc.). There are now also systems capable of automatically saving and filing messages sent and received. This type of solution is being used in the American Congress.

Rendering exchanges secure

It is clear that implementing computerised systems which can replace paper-based exchanges of information will immediately give rise to questions concerning the security of such exchanges.

Current techniques allow two basic functions to be offered for extensive use : the identification of individuals and the authentication of a transaction.

In the first case it is simply a question of guaranteeing the identity of the operator. Current techniques offer several solutions: keying in a secret password, scanning a written characteristic on a physical medium (magnetic card, smart card). In future it will be possible to exploit other distinctive characteristics, for example fingerprint scanning or the shape of the iris.

Authentication involves guaranteeing the origin of a transaction (or a document) by adding identification data to the data which make up the transaction as such.

Whatever the technique used, identification allows the various applications to be controlled:

- access authorisation (to a machine, to personal files on a server, to certain shared electronic files, to certain databases, but also right of access to the Member's office, to certain parts of a building, a car park, etc.)

- budget assignment (analytical accounting by individual or group)

- authentication of the action taken by the member (presence at a sitting, tabling of an amendment, voting, tabling of a parliamentary motion, a written question, etc.). In part this covers the problem of the electronic signature, a problem which is being studied at present in the context of the European interinstitutional project, Eurolook.

- areas relating to electronic money and transactions involving financial movements: payment for services to internal Parliament departments (purchase of extracts from video recordings, paying access to certain documentary resources, etc.), payment for external services (telephone, cafeteria, news-stand, cigarettes, etc.).

The use of an electronic identification tool is a key factor in moving from paper to a totally electronic approach and reducing the time involved in certain cases. However, a technical solution must be found, which is easy to use and, above all, reliable, eliminating all possibilities of fraud or abuse of confidence on the part of the holder or to the detriment of another Member.

The use of an identity card is already in force at the European Parliament for the electronic vote, as is the case in other parliaments, and the extension to other functions could be feasible once the technical difficulties have been solved.

Rather than reaching a stage in the future where a Member has a considerable number of cards for specific purposes (including bank cards which are already in use) it could be preferable to use a multifunction identity card which could be used for various applications. However, how many applications should be covered?

Another difficulty arises because there is no standardisation at European or world level of this type of tool.

Lastly, the case could arise of a Member who has forgotten or lost his card (how could he table an amendment in such circumstances, or how could he vote? Should a duplicate be provided? By whom?).

Videoconferencing

This technology exists and can be used in two forms: via the Internet and a connected PC (not very easy for group discussion) or via a specially equipped studio. Such a technical tool would allow meetings to be held without the member having to travel. Nevertheless, this equipment is not suited to groups involving large numbers of participants, does not lend itself to changes to the timetable, does not really allow discussions 'in the corridor' and other ‘adjournments’ of meetings.

Until now few parliaments have envisaged using this type of technology in the immediate future, apart from the hearings of external experts within certain committees (for example, the Finnish parliament's 'committee for the future').

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

In concluding this study, we should like to make three recommendations relating to different areas:

Creation of a global development plan for new technologies

Given the diversity of the existing applications and the projects being developed in the EP it would be valuable to draw up a global plan for the EP's 'information system' so that applications and projects could be seen in relation to each other and consistency of the whole system could be guaranteed for the future.

Similarly, it would be useful if when applications are planned or are re-engineered greater attention could be paid to the point of view of the final user (in terms of the ergonomics of navigation and the coherence with the work process).

Creation of a one-stop shop

Another way of improving the existing situation would be to integrate the existing information systems so as to offer a coherent set of services, based around the needs of the MEPs, a true virtual 'one stop shop' which would be permanently accessible from any location. This would make use of known and largely proven technologies.

Creation of new services

A third line would be to introduce technical solutions, for the most part proven, which would allow progress to be made in terms of comfort and efficiency for the MEP's individual work (personal system for the electronic management of documents and knowledge), or in terms of the overall efficiency of the institution (direct entry of forwarded data without delay, for example).

The obstacles to be overcome

- To ensure that the use of new technologies for parliamentary work becomes widespread and commonplace there is a need to remove various types of obstacles:
- the heterogeneous nature of the computer culture or the lack of mastery of technical tools by certain Members : while the PC is a very normal tool for the majority of Members, it remains an obstacle for some of them, at least for certain operations. There will in any case still be requirements with regard to user-friendly interfaces and ease of navigation.
- the cost of access to certain external resources useful for preparatory work (data bases for which a fee is payable).
- the problem of the range of working languages is probably the one which most influences the cost of technical solutions to be implemented. It is already the case with the difficulty of taking account in the e-mail system of certain letters of the alphabet (Scandinavian alphabet, for example).
- the lack of standardisation: this already applies when sending documents attached to e-mail,

but it also applies when exchanging documents within a heterogeneous system (between several applications of the same Parliament or between Parliament and its external partners: other public bodies, publishers, etc.).

- security of data, the identification and authentication of the caller (preserving the confidentiality of data and avoiding infiltration by opponents). This obstacle is stressed by several parliaments that have developed an Intranet but do not allow remote access because of unresolved security problems and problems relating to the authentication of data moving on the networks.
- if certain actions are made too easy (tabling amendments, for example) it could lead to abuses for the purposes of obstruction. An excess of messages (accentuated by the harassment of active minorities, blocking petitions, etc.) could lead to a situation where the tool is rejected or it could involve the implementation of technical filtering tools.

CASE STUDIES

The Finnish Parliament's information system

For the member of parliament, three technologies help to improve his productivity:

- the **mobile phone** (able to make and receive calls anywhere, including when travelling)
- **e-mail** (able to exchange mail with various partners, with the facility for forwarding it or sending proposals for amendments, recovery of texts for inclusion in documents, etc.)
- **word processing**.

In addition **the possibility of having remote access to all documentation for work** should be mentioned (there are also plans for the use of a smart card to identify the caller).

This involves an integration of all the information systems through an **Intranet** (easy to use, possibility of having access to information in real time, security, reduction in the use of paper, information can easily be updated).

In the chamber three interdependent systems have been in use since 1992:
- the electronic voting system

This system allows recording of the results of the vote in the minutes of the sitting. It also records the record of attendance. The results of the vote are posted in the chamber. They are also published on paper and recorded in a database.
- the information system

Each seat in the chamber is equipped with a **display screen (small format)** enabling the following data to be read:
- agenda of the sitting
- details of what is being discussed (references of documents under consideration)
- decisions taken
- Members intending to speak
- general announcements.

Function keys allow the screen content to be manipulated.
However, alongside the screen, the member has to have the documents on paper to read the contents.
- sound recording system and video recording

With regard to document production, improvement of productivity is based on use of **SGML format** for texts, with the aim of feeding text databases and facilitating exchanges with partner institutions (in the case of legislative texts and questions forwarded to government departments).
The advantages put forward are:
- improvement of document quality
- harmonisation of the structure and presentation of documents
- ease of distribution by electronic means
- reduction of printing costs
- (rapid and reliable) exchange possible between institutions
- easier archiving.

The Finnish parliament is involved in the EULEGIS project (common interface for the various legislative and regulatory databases).

The Estonian Parliament

The information system and technologies department of the Estonian Parliament (Riigikogu) in Tallinn is currently working on the integrated development of electronic tools which were installed when the institution was modernised.

At present the systems are as follows:

- a voting system comprising various functions: monitoring the presence and movements of members; management of votes; publication of results in various forms; recording of speeches and debates; interconnection with the television cable network.

Each seat is equipped with a display screen which can show 16 lines of 40 characters, with 10 buttons and a smart card reader. A member can thus obtain information on the agenda, the titles of the texts under discussion and to be voted on, the speakers, etc.

- a video circuit allowing the retransmission of debates externally in real time, including via the internet.

- a document information system relating to the work in progress (draft texts at various stages, amendments, reports, etc.), accessible on the intranet and on the parliament's internet site.

- a web site bringing together all the information relating to parliamentary work: calendar of sittings and agenda, document information system, text of debates and results of votes, procedures, list of members and their CVs, parliamentary groups, meetings and committee decisions, statistics (numbers of texts proposed or adopted by group, by sitting, etc.), a range of practical information.

- messaging service, with different distribution lists.

The current developments relate firstly to the possibility for members to have secure remote access (outside Tallinn) to all data which could be useful to them for their parliamentary work and secondly to the integration of the various computerised tools (simplification of access interfaces, hypertext links between data, possibility for individuals to make annotations).

There are plans, for example, to give access on the screen in front of the member's seat to the texts of draft laws and the associated amendments, in a way which is linked to the agenda items for the sitting.

The Paris Municipal Council

An example of paperless production of legislation:

The computerised system that has been set up is concerned with the preparation and adoption of the Municipal Council's decisions (600 to 700 per year); although the input of the texts uses classic word processing software (Word), the management of the procedure is of the Workflow type (specific software for management of different stages and authorisations); publication on paper is optional and is undertaken only at the voluntary request of the user.

The electronic document circuit is as follows:

- input of the 'discussion draft' by a municipal service (for example the roads department); document drawn up on the initiative of the service or on the instructions of an elected representative; the document is drawn up in accordance with a structured format (explanatory statement, tender, annexes, etc.)
- forwarding (electronically) to the head of the office, who approves it or returns it with comments (requests for clarification, suggestions for modifications, etc.)
- if approved, forwarding to the next level of the hierarchy (finance directorate) which approves it or returns it with comments
- if approved, forwarding to the secretary-general for approval as a 'project for submission'
- if approved, the document is forwarded, depending on the type of procedure, either to the mayor of the district (or several mayors if several are affected by the topic) or to the elected representative responsible for funding (simple supply contracts)
- forwarding to the mayor's office, for reading
- forwarding to the political groups
- consideration in committees; possible written questions to city officials and replies; possible amendment of the text of the draft decision (it should be noted that the number of amendments is generally low because of the technical nature of numerous texts)
- distribution to members of the Municipal Council for voting
- adoption by vote or following amendments made in meetings
- forwarding by the sittings secretariat of the decision adopted to the Préfecture for checks on legal correctness (in addition to electronic transmission, a paper version is also forwarded to receive the seals and the signature serving as proof)
- reformatting of text for simultaneous publication in the Official Municipal Bulletin (paper) and on the web site.

All the services and the elected representatives have a PC connected to the network. The security of the equipment is assured using classic authorisation methods (login and password), which entitles the individual either to read-only access or read and write access, etc.).

Experience of 'virtual' adoption of a law

In March 1999 the French Branch of the Internet Society, in the interests of promoting the Internet, organised with the agreement of the French Senate a vote on a law (the 'Internet Law'), exclusively using the Internet. The whole parliamentary process was simulated completely using electronic means.

The 'parliamentary site' allowed the following to be consulted:

- the text of the draft Internet law
- the committee report explaining the draft law
- a presentation of the composition of the four virtual parliamentary groups (with actual members), their office and their political programme (position on the information society)
- a forum allowing citizens to express their views
- documentary resources relating to each article of the draft law (texts of various types illustrating or justifying the terms of the article)
- an application form for inclusion on the electoral register (to participate in the vote, planned for 20 March)
- the voting procedure
- the draft resolutions, article by article
- an application form for attending the debates in the Senate chamber
- the timetable for the sitting (covering two days: 19 and 20 March), with the meetings of parliamentary groups, the opening speeches of the plenary sitting, the speeches of those taking part in the debate, the vote on the preliminary question, the debate on each article, the explanations of vote, the vote.
- direct video retransmission of the debates
- the adopted text of the law

(source: www.loi-internet.org)

Belgian Senate

European Parliament

New technologies and their contribution to facilitating the work of the European Parliament

EP/IV/B/STOA/98/1801/01

ANNEXES

ACC 887 drawn up by Eric Sutter
June 1999

1 – PEOPLE INTERVIEWED

- **European Parliament**

Administration
- Sittings Service: Mr Dunstan
- Mr Guillen Zanon
-DIT: Mr François Naegel (Local Support Unit of the Members); Mr Roland Thorpe (Epades)
- DG7: Mr Jacques Raybaut
Elected Members (MEP)
- Mr Bertel Haarder, Danish, Vice-President of the European Parliament
- Mr Olli Korhonen, Finnish

- **Flemish Parliament (Belgium):**
- Mr Robby Deboelpaep, responsible for the information system

- **Croatian National Parliament (Croatia)**
- Mr Berislav Zivkovic, secretary-general

- **Eduskunta/Parliament (Finland)**
- Paula Tiihonen, Chairman of the Committee on the Future
- Ulrica Gabrielsson, subcommittee on technology assessment
- Mr Keijo Koivukangas, Director of Legislation (Head of central office)
- Ari Apilo, responsible for computer applications

- **Bundestag/Parliament (Germany)**
- Mr H. P. Neumann, On-line Services, Parliamentary television

- **Riigikogu/Parliament (Estonia)**
- Mr Erkki Leego
- Mr Raul Volter

- **National Assembly (France)**
- Mr Yves de Lestang, Director of the information systems service
- Mr Eric Szij, administrator

- **Senate (France)**
- Mrs Vugt-Pion, Informatics and New Technologies Service

- **Paris Municipal Council**
- Mr Le Troquère, responsible for informatics, DSIT

2 – DOCUMENTS CONSULTED
- European Parliament: Rules of Procedure, 1st edition, 1998
- CERDP : 1998 directory
- Examples of documents discussed in plenary in the EP
- Communications to the second Internet and Politics congress, 6-9 January 1999
- Results of the survey made in 1998 by the Flemish Parliament consulting the informatics services of various parliaments throughout the world
- EP provisional internal reports

3 – ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONNAIRES TO PARLIAMENTS
(in addition to or complementing interviews)

- Austria: Nationalrat and Bundesrat
- Belgium: house of representatives
- Belgium: Senate
- Estonia: Riigikogu
- Finland: Eduskunta
- France: National Assembly
- Germany: German Bundestag
- Germany: Free Hanseatic City of Bremen (Bremen City Parliament)
- Hungary: National Assembly
- Italy: Senate
- Norway: Stortinget
- Switzerland: Federal Assembly
- Ukraine: Verkhovna Rada
- United Kingdom: House of Commons

European Parliament

New technologies and their contribution to facilitating the work of the European Parliament

EP/IV/B/STOA/98/1801/01

OPTIONS

ACC 887
June 1999

drawn up by Eric Sutter

Parliamentary work involves, briefly, tasks of research and consultation of documents, exchange of information and production of texts and decision-making. The implementation of new information and communication technologies can facilitate the achievement of some of these tasks and make the work of members of parliament more efficient. The European Parliament already offers members and officials a whole range of computerised tools, but further progress could be made to satisfy expectations to a greater extent and to benefit from the possibilities offered by the most up-to-date technologies. On the basis of examples from other parliaments, suggestions are made to facilitate work within the European Parliament.

Firstly the services to be provided are considered and then the technical solutions which might be used to establish services and to develop a single system offering two complementary functions:

- An information service on legislative work based on the electronic management of parliamentary activities (EMPA).

- A system for filing and sharing information and documents: each member would have a *personal domain*, accessible to his or her assistant. Parliamentary groups and committees would have *collective domains*.

This move towards integration should lead to the concept of the MEP's electronic office[2].

Other technologies are also described:

Automatic notification of new documents
Supplementing easier direct access to documents and information, the notification service would involve using e-mail to alert interested parties to the existence of new documents.

Voice data entry
This technology seeks to replace keyboard data entry by electronic dictation. It would supplement structured data entry in cases where the text to be entered is long and has little structure.

Filtering and assisted filing of messages
The rapid development of the use of e-mail poses the problem of sorting the incoming messages. Certain specialised applications now allow an initial sort to be made on the basis of certain attributes in the header.

Rendering exchanges secure
It is clear that implementing computerised systems which can replace paper-based exchanges of information will immediately give rise to questions concerning the security of such exchanges. Current techniques allow two basic functions to be offered for extensive use: the identification of individuals and the authentication of a transaction.

Videoconferencing
This technology exists and can be used in two forms: via the Internet and a connected PC (not very easy for group discussion) or via a specially equipped studio. Such a technical tool would allow meetings to be held without the member having to travel.

[2] This concept was proposed by DEC five years ago under the designation LinkWork

The author of this study considers that three recommendations relating to different areas should be made:

Creation of a global development plan for new technologies

Given the diversity of the existing applications and the projects being developed in the EP it would be valuable to draw up a global plan for the EP's 'information system' so that applications and projects could be seen in relation to each other and consistency of the whole system could be guaranteed for the future.

Similarly, it would be useful if when applications are planned or are re-engineered greater attention could be paid to the point of view of the final user (in terms of the ergonomics of navigation and the coherence with the work process).

Creation of a one-stop shop

Another way of improving the existing situation would be to integrate the existing information systems so as to offer a coherent set of services, based around the needs of the MEPs, a true virtual 'one stop shop' which would be permanently accessible from any location. This would make use of known and largely proven technologies.

Creation of new services

A third line would be to introduce technical solutions, for the most part proven, which would allow progress to be made in terms of comfort and efficiency for the MEP's individual work (personal system for the electronic management of documents and knowledge), or in terms of the overall efficiency of the institution (direct entry of forwarded data without delay, for example).

To ensure that the use of new technologies for parliamentary work becomes widespread and commonplace there is a need to remove various types of obstacles such as:
- the heterogeneous nature of the computer culture or the lack of mastery of technical tools by certain members,
- the problem of the range of working languages is probably the one which most influences the cost of technical solutions to be implemented,
- the lack of standardisation,
- abuses for the purposes of obstruction.

European Parliament

New technologies and their contribution to facilitating the work of the European Parliament

EP/IV/B/STOA/98/1801/01

ABSTRACT

Parliamentary work involves, briefly, tasks of research and consultation of documents, exchange of information and production of texts and decision-making. The implementation of new information and communication technologies can facilitate the achievement of some of these tasks and make the work of members of parliament more efficient.

The European Parliament already offers members and officials a whole range of computerised tools, but further progress could be made to satisfy to a greater extent the expectations and to benefit from the possibilities offered by the most up-to-date technologies. On the basis of examples from other parliaments, suggestions are made to facilitate work within the European Parliament. Following a survey conducted among MEPs, to find out their expectations, and among the most modern national or regional parliaments, a certain number of examples, some of which are described in the form of case studies, are put forward together with suggestions for improving the internal provisions of the European Parliament. In particular a recommendation is made for development of the concept of the electronic office, greater integration of current applications and improved 'ergonomics' for consultation purposes and the use of electronic signature technologies.

European Parliament

New technologies and their contribution to facilitating the work of the European Parliament

EP/IV/B/STOA/98/1801/01

SUMMARY NOTE

ACC 887 drawn up by Eric Sutter
June 1999

Parliamentary work involves, briefly, tasks of research and consultation of documents, exchange of information and production of texts and decision-making. The implementation of new information and communication technologies can facilitate the achievement of some of these tasks and make the work of members of parliament more efficient. Production on paper is considerable because of the 11 working languages and the range of subjects dealt with during each part-session. Can a 'paperless' Parliament be envisaged?

The European Parliament already offers members and officials a whole range of computerised tools, often with remote access to most of these resources through the web site 'MEP Site' : e-mail, documents and files (personal files), Guides and Info (computer help files), Epades, Europa (public web site of the EU), Europarl.eu.int (EP public web site), Celex (legal database of the EU) etc.: but further progress could be made to satisfy to a greater extent the expectations and to benefit from the possibilities offered by the most up-to-date technologies.

A survey was conducted involving some MEPs to understand how they assessed the current electronic services available and their expectations. The following aspects emerged:

- need to save time

This (pronounced) need calls for rapid and easy access to documents which are useful for parliamentary business at various stages (to avoid having to go in search of documents and being dependent on the opening hours of offices or persons being on call, etc.), the possibility of carrying out simple procedures (tabling amendments, questions, motions for resolutions etc.); but it also calls for a reduction in the time required for certain administrative operations.

- need for consistency and integration of information systems

Connections and navigation must be simplified (consistency in the logic and presentation of the various applications or databases) and the telecommunications tools must be integrated. Some members would thus like to see a 'one stop shop', known by others as 'a unified management environment for all legislative data'.

- need for tools for teleworking

The aim is not to be physically dependent on offices in Brussels or Strasbourg between part-sessions : to be able to have remote access to all the documentation and tools required for work (consultation of texts, reports, observations drafted by other Members, draft amendments, etc., possibility to draft and send notes, amendments, etc., to communicate with members of a committee, etc.).

The new technologies have been usefully implemented by other parliaments and assessment of the possibilities offered by these technologies should assist the European institution in its decisions.

The results of the inquiry are presented and a certain number of implemented examples or current projects are highlighted. Case studies illustrate the use made of these technologies:

- a display screen for each member in the chamber

The Eduskunta (Finland) has installed a display screen at each member's seat in the chamber and has thus offered electronic access during the sitting to the agenda and to the references to documents being debated or put to the vote.

- an integrated information system

The Belgian Senate has an integrated information system which covers both procedural systems (legislative activities, internal activities, oral and written questions, etc.) and documentary systems.

- the paperless legislative circuit

At the Paris municipal council the process of drawing up, amending, publishing and debating documents takes place entirely in electronic form, involving a considerable cut in the amount of paper used.

- a virtual parliament

As part of an activity to promote the Internet the French branch of the Internet Society organised the 'virtual' vote on a law in March 1999, with the agreement of the French Senate.

For the European Parliament the study considers the services to be provided before discussing the technical solutions which might be used to implement these services:

This service should alleviate the lack of integration of the current systems. The aim would be to offer, through a single interface, several complementary functions relating to parliamentary work (electronic management of parliamentary activities).

The items being managed will not necessarily be linked directly to the parliamentary process. However, some contributions to parliamentary activities may pass through this management system before being transferred (or made accessible) to EMPA. Each member would have a *personal domain*, accessible to his or her assistant. Parliamentary groups and committees would have *collective domains*.The MEP Site project offers some of the recommended functions. It would be sufficient to improve it and implement it fully.

Supplementing easier direct access to documents and information, the notification service would involve using e-mail to alert interested parties to the existence of new documents.

In technical terms, the services recommended above must be based on *three technical pillars*: the electronic management of documents and groupware, the management of structured documents, techniques for rendering exchanges secure. This move towards integration should lead to the concept of an MEP's electronic office, accessible from any location at any moment.

Other technologies are also described:

Voice data entry
This technology seeks to replace keyboard data entry by electronic dictation. It would supplement structured data entry in cases where the text to be entered is long and has little structure.

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The rapid development of the use of e-mail poses the problem of sorting the incoming messages. Certain specialised applications now allow an initial sort to be made on the basis of certain attributes in the header.

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It is clear that implementing computerised systems which can replace paper-based exchanges of information will immediately give rise to questions concerning the security of such exchanges. Current techniques allow two basic functions to be offered for extensive use: the identification of individuals and the authentication of a transaction.

The use of an electronic identification tool is a key factor in moving from paper to a totally electronic approach and reducing the time involved in certain cases. However, a technical solution must be found, which is easy to use and, above all, reliable, eliminating all possibilities of fraud or abuse of confidence on the part of the holder or to the detriment of another Member.

Videoconferencing
This technology exists and can be used in two forms: via the Internet and a connected PC (not very easy for group discussion) or via a specially equipped studio. Such a technical tool would allow meetings to be held without the member having to travel.

Recommendations

These recommendations deal with various aspects:

1. Creation of a global framework

Given the diversity of the existing applications and the projects being developed in the EP it would be valuable to draw up a global plan for the EP's 'information system' so that applications and projects could be seen in relation to each other and consistency of the whole system could be guaranteed for the future.

Similarly, it would be useful if when applications are planned or are re-engineered greater attention could be paid to the point of view of the final user (in terms of the ergonomics of navigation and the coherence with the work process).

Creation of a coherent set of services

Another way of improving the existing situation would be to integrate the existing information systems so as to offer a coherent virtual system, based around requirements. This would make use of known and largely proven technologies.

Creation of new services

A third line would be to introduce technical solutions, for the most part proven, which would allow progress to be made in terms of comfort and efficiency for the MEP's individual work (personal system for the electronic management of documents and knowledge), or in terms of the overall efficiency of the institution (direct entry of forwarded data without delay, for example).

To ensure that the use of new technologies for parliamentary work becomes widespread and commonplace there is a need to remove various types of obstacles such as:
- the heterogeneous nature of the computer culture or the lack of mastery of technical tools by certain members,
- the problem of the range of working languages is probably the one which most influences the cost of technical solutions to be implemented,
- the lack of standardisation,
- the security of data,
- abuses for the purposes of obstruction.