



PARLIAMENTARY PANEL ON THE OCCASION OF THE SECOND PHASE OF THE WORLD SUMMIT ON THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

Tunis (Tunisia), 17 November 2005
*Co-organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the
Tunisian Chamber of Deputies, in cooperation with UNESCO*



PROGRAMME

3 p.m.

Opening of the session.

Welcome addresses by the **Mr. Pier Ferdinando Casini**, IPU President, and **Mr. Fouad Mebazaâ**, President of the Tunisian Chamber of Deputies.

Panel discussion

"The role of parliaments in building knowledge-based societies: guaranteeing access to information"

The theme of access to information will be explored from two angles: access to the information parliaments need to do their work, and legislation guaranteeing citizens' right of access to information.

Moderator:

- **Mrs. Isabelle Fila Lemina** (Congo), Member of the National Assembly
- **Mr. Patrice Martin-Lalande** (France), Member of the National Assembly

Panellists:

- **Mr. Javier Corral Jurado** (Mexico), Member of the Senate
- **Mr. Geoffrey Doidge** (South Africa), House Chairperson, National Assembly
- **Mr. Henrikas Iouchkiavitchious** (Lithuania), former Assistant Director-General of UNESCO
- **Mr. Mustapha Masmoudi** (Tunisia), Director-General of the MASSMEDIA Centre, former member of parliament, former Tunisian ambassador to UNESCO, former Secretary of State for Information
- **Mr. Toby Mendel** (Canada), Law Programme Director, Article 19

Following introductory statements by the panellists, the audience will be invited to make comments and observations pertinent to the theme of the Panel and to put direct questions to the panellists.

Part one: access to the information parliaments need to do their work

Parliaments needs large amounts of information in order to be able to carry out their functions effectively. This includes, for example, information about the national budget; international treaties; and governmental negotiating positions in international fora.

In the Information Society, the traditional functions of parliament (voting legislation, voting taxes, overseeing the government, dialogue with citizens) are carried out in conditions that have been profoundly modified.

Information and communication technologies offer parliaments:

- Access to a wider range of information, since each Internet user

- (individuals and organisations) can easily be a producer of information;
- Easier cross-checking of "official" information with other sources of information;
 - Direct access to expertise that was previously only available to the executive;
 - More intense and more efficient exchange of information between members of parliament, notably during the legislative process;
 - Significant increase in opportunities for dialogue with citizens-voters.

However, the emergence of information and communication technologies in parliaments brings a number of difficulties:

- A general problem of "information overload". Information has to be authenticated, filtered, analyzed and put into perspective;
- Difficulty of maintaining an appropriate distance from information received, when a response is expected in real time;
- Risk of increasing the influence of those who control access to certain sources of information: governments, large enterprises or organizations;
- Risk of vulnerability of information systems to a terrorist threat;
- Risk of giving a disproportionate place to the most activist producers of information.

Part two: legislation guaranteeing citizens' right of access to information

In recent years, there has been a surge in legislative activity around the world on citizens' rights to access publicly and privately held information. 'Freedom of Information' laws have now been adopted in more than 50 countries. The Parliamentary Panel will discuss the principles behind such laws, their strengths and shortcomings, and the major issues to be addressed, such as what restrictions on access to information are acceptable, under what circumstances. The debate may cover such topics as:

- Adoption of the appropriate legislative framework to guarantee citizens' right of access to information, and oversight of its implementation;
- Evolution of governmental administrations so that the notion of serving citizens defines the organization and working methods of services of general interest, with information being the first service;
- Ensuring the appropriate balance between the objective of freedom of information and the objectives of security, respect for human dignity, etc;
- Ensuring the appropriate balance between access to information and respect for intellectual property, copyright.

6.30 p.m. Closure of the session, to be followed by an official reception.