

Contribution of the President of the Senate
of the Netherlands,
Mrs Yvonne E.M.A. Timmerman-Buck
at the occasion of the
Conference of European Senates – Vienna 18 April 2008
*"The contribution of the information and communication
technologies to the legislative process"*

Dear Presidents, Dear Colleagues,
Verehrter Präsident, Verehrter Kollege,

Recht herzlich möchte Ich Sie danken für Ihre Gastfreundlichkeit. Wie jedes Jahr ist es eine besondere Ehre inmitten dieser erlesenen Gesellschaft zu sein.

As every year, it is an honour to be present in this select company. Today is the International Day for Monuments and Sites. What better way to spend this day than in the beautiful city of Vienna with its historical monuments. Even though monuments bring us much enjoyment today, they were built in the past. The topic of today's conference – information and communication technologies – should guide us into our future.

I would like to take today's opportunity to share some of the best practices of the Dutch Senate in using information and communication technologies (in short: ICT) for the benefit of our parliamentary work.

Better ICT in general is not an objective in itself. It is a powerful instrument that can help improve many aspects of our international, European and national economies, societies and cultures. We need however to also be aware that dangers and risks are part in parcel of the ICT-development.

I want to give you one recent example of legislative activity in my Senate in which ICT-development was questioned on many different arguments. When a draft bill in my country is rejected by the Senate, it is totally removed from the parliamentary agenda. Only recently the Senate rejected – with a very narrow majority - a bill to allow a pilot of three years for legalised gambling on the internet. Currently, gambling on the internet is illegal in the Netherlands with many negative side-effects. The government proposed this pilot to see if those negative side-effects might diminish, if a legal platform was created.

At this moment it is of no particular interest to go into the different arguments of the political parties on this issue. I just want to pin point the fact that the development of ICT not only provides us with many opportunities, it also forces us to make new and sometimes difficult choices, also in politics. For this reason too, we – as institutes of democracy, representatives of our people – are very much involved in the ICT phenomenon.

In 2005 the European Parliament Research Initiative, EPRI, conducted a research on "*Learning to live with the internet. How European Parliamentarians are adapting to the digital age*". Their analysis presented a tri-partite model of parliamentarians: the Representative, the Party Actor, and the Legislator, each role making use of ICT in a different way. A parliamentarian in his role of Representative uses ICT to establish democratic connections. A parliamentarian in his role of Party Actor uses ICT as a communications and marketing tool. And last, the parliamentarian in his role as Legislator uses ICT to improve the efficiency of his activities.

Reasoning from this tri-partite model, I will give you some examples to visualise the three different purposes of ICT in combination with the three different roles of parliamentarians, as can be applied to the Dutch Senate. This might

give you an inside into the way, we, in the Netherlands, use ICT.

1. Senators as representatives of the people

First of all our task as Representatives of the people. As the Senate in the Netherlands we are a 'chambre de réflexion'. The interaction and communication with the citizens, civil society and other organisations is a crucial and important element of our democratic process. In the Senate, we indeed use ICT to let our democracy prosper.

The main ICT-instruments we use in this context, are our four websites. Our main website is the general site of the Senate where everyone can find all sorts of information. News-items, the history of the Senate and of our historical building, information on our Senators and of course on the weekly business. Our website – and I am proud to say so – has been nominated for several awards and even won some.

On our second website we register the results of our activities, such as: what have we accomplished in clarifying the way in which the law should be interpreted?; what promises has the government made concerning the way in which a law will be implemented? This enables not only ourselves, but also the citizens and civil society to monitor closely if the government meets its promises and is carrying out the law as it is intended. Of course precise clarification of the law is very helpful to legal courts.

Our third website is completely dedicated to the European activities of the Senate. Again you can find news-items, agenda's of the EU-involved committees, documents of different EU-councils and a separate dossier on every European proposal. We also use this website to regularly ask citizens and interest groups to comment on European proposals. Every year, right after the presentation of the annual legislative and working program of the European

Commission, we make an appeal to everyone interested to let the Senate know which future European proposals should deserve our specific attention. On the basis of those replies, we make a list of proposals that should take priority. Using our website for the purpose of interactive communication with society, is a very helpful method of not only enhancing our democracy, but especially of engaging civil society. We created the opportunity for everyone to give input which is relevant to the parliamentary decision-making process.

Our last, the fourth website is also a very special one which we use to interact with and involve the young generation. It is a joint website with the Dutch House of Representatives, called the Third Chamber. It has been set up to inform children on activities of Dutch Parliament and of course engage them in politics.

2. Senators as party actors

The second element of the tri-partite model is the way a parliamentarian in his role of Party Actor uses ICT as a communications and marketing tool. The political groups do play a key role in shaping the policies and politics disseminated by their representatives. We recognise the importance of also providing the political parties with their own platform in order for them to communicate and market the activities of the Senate from their political perspective. Therefore, we set up special websites for all the parties represented in the Senate. The content of the party-sites is of course the responsibility of the political parties and not of the Senate itself.

3. Senators as legislators

The third and last element of the tri-partite model is our role as Legislator in which we use ICT to improve the efficiency of our activities. We also use the websites to inform our members on the agenda's of our plenary meeting and the meetings of the different committees. As an additional

tool, our Senators can log on to the websites to find certain pieces of confidential information, such as drafts of contributions to questions to the government. Almost all information needed to prepare for a day in the Dutch Senate can be found on the internet. It is efficient and effective, and above this: it environmentally friendly.

I can add to this that the Dutch government administers a website ('overheid.(dot)nl') which contains all parliamentary documents that relate to legislative projects. All the existing laws of the land, and all draft-laws, questions and answers, and readings of the plenary meetings, produced during the legislative process are instantly accessible to the public.

In the Dutch Senate we are in the process of reducing the amounts of printed paper by tuning the printed paper provided to the senators better to their personal needs, which are related to their specialty fields, their specific interests and their expertise. So far we have succeeded in organizing 16 separate information flows corresponding with the 16 main policy areas we distinguish. But we want to make the supply of documents for our members even more flexible. We want to minimalise the work that senators have to do themselves to get the documents they want. In short: we are working on an ICT-tool that provides every one of the 75 Senators with their own personalized file of documents.

Very soon we will start with a pilot in the Dutch Senate to do a trial run with this new ICT-tool. Our members will be informed by e-mail on new documentation in line with their personal preferences. They can subsequently choose whether to read the documents online or actually get them in print. If the trial run is a success, we can implement the system and in the nearby future become a truly paper poor parliament.

Dear Colleagues, finally I would like to make a suggestion concerning the website of our Association, the Association of European Senates. Should not we make an effort to really turn this website into the central communications instrument for European Senates? We could bring together information which is useful for all of us, such as a short overview on the different Senates, relevant names and contact data, the documents concerning the annual meetings of the Association, including all reports and presentations made through the years. I would like to propose that we work out this idea.

Thank you/Vielen Dank.