

3. First Draft Report of Mr Ian HARRIS, Secretary General of the House of Representatives of Australia on Promoting the Work of Parliament

Mrs Adelina SÁ CARVALHO, President, invited Mr Ian Harris, Secretary General of the House of Representatives of Australia, to present his draft report.

Mr Ian HARRIS gave the following presentation:

"I am delighted to report to you the preliminary results from the questionnaire on Promoting the Work of Parliament which was circulated late last year.

You may recall that a draft version of the questionnaire was discussed at our meeting in Havana in April 2001. The discussion at that meeting led to a number of improvements in the questionnaire, for which I am grateful. The final version was distributed to all Secretaries General in October 2001 with a request that responses be provided by 14 December.

While many of you were able to provide responses by this date (thank you to those who did), some, quite understandably, were not able to meet the deadline. Indeed, I was still receiving responses as recently as last week. Please do not worry if you have not yet responded - there is still time to do so.

Today I intend to give you an overview of the responses received so far and, before our next meeting to provide you with a more complete analysis.

Included in the meeting papers is a table which summarises each of the questions in the questionnaire and tallies the responses that have been received so far in percentage form. I would like now to step through the main elements of this table.

The first section of the questionnaire deals with responsibility for public information.

The key findings in this area are that:

- 77% of those parliaments that responded have a public information or public affairs office, with the vast majority of these offices (that is, 87%) being distinct units within the parliamentary administration;
- most bicameral parliaments operate separate public information units, with only 20% reporting that they share such resources; and
- the staffing arrangements for these offices vary considerably, some having small offices of between 1 and 4 staff and some having large offices of more than 20 staff. The most common office size is between 5 and 9 staff (which 29% of parliaments report).

It is clear that public information offices are engaged in a very wide range of activities:

- from media liaison and support, to answering questions from the general public;
- from publishing information brochures and audio-visual material, to supporting educational seminars and guided tours; and
- from receiving public petitions, to preparing daily or sessional reports of activities.

It is important to note that a very large proportion (over 80%) of those parliaments without a separate public information office nevertheless provide public information services. In these instances, the services are provided by units with other, broader responsibilities.

It is interesting, however, that so many parliaments have chosen to establish separate public information offices. It does suggest a widely held view that there is value in co-locating such activities and allowing staff to focus on this set of responsibilities alone.

The next section of the questionnaire (comprising eleven questions) deals with providing public information.

The key findings here are that:

- most parliaments (64% of those that responded) do not provide information on the work of individual parliamentarians - an even greater proportion (80% of respondents) do not provide information on political parties;
- almost all parliaments produce public information documents, with 57% reporting that they produce a wide range of information about the role and history of parliament, about parliamentary practices and procedure, and about current activities and issues;
- there is a slight tendency not to charge for such publications, with 41% reporting they do not charge for any publications and 34% charging for all or some publications;
- about 1/3 of respondents conduct seminars or exhibitions to publicise the work of parliament - the topics for which vary widely, from seminars on basic parliamentary procedures and current public policy issues, to major exhibitions on the history of parliament; and
- almost all parliaments provide information services for visitors - including information brochures, guided tours and, in some parliaments, multi-media information displays.

Two general themes emerge from this section of the questionnaire:

- first, that the extent to which parliaments provide public information is influenced very directly by the resources available to support such activities; and
- second, that parliamentary web sites now play a central role in the distribution of information about parliaments.

There is little doubt that everyone recognises the value of publishing information documents and conducting seminars, exhibitions and visitor programs. What distinguishes those parliaments that provide extensive information services from those with more modest programs is not the value they attach to the services, but simply the financial resources at their disposal.

A good number of parliaments report that they would like to develop more extensive public information programs (and indeed, in some cases, have made plans to do so), but find themselves hampered by a lack of money.

There is also little doubt that parliaments have been quick to recognise the value of establishing and maintaining parliamentary web sites. For almost all countries, especially those with a large landmass and geographically dispersed population centres, the Internet has become an important adjunct to more traditional means of encouraging community awareness of parliament.

Media relations and publicising committees were the next two issues canvassed in the questionnaire.

The key results in this area are that:

- not surprisingly, nearly all parliaments (93%) use the media to publicise their work ;

- most parliaments (that is, more than 85%) use what you might call conventional means to do so (advertisements, press releases and press briefings), while some others also:
 - publish magazines or sessional reports of activities,
 - publish advice on the Internet,
 - provide broadcast services, including cable television channels, and
 - interestingly, publish advice on the national broadcaster's teletext service; and
- fewer than half of all parliaments (41%) have an identified media spokesman or liaison officer:
 - of these, 61% report that a parliamentary official performs this role, and 46% report that either the Presiding Officer or the Secretary General perform the role.

Two of the questions in this area sought to explore possible tensions between parliament and the media: question 15, asked whether the media was offended by the publicity work of parliament; and question 16, asked whether there had been a deliberate decision to bypass the mainstream media.

Judging by the responses, there has been little or no tension between parliaments and the media - indeed, quite the opposite: with a number of respondents indicating that the media greatly values the information services provided by parliaments.

There was considerable diversity of experience revealed in the next two sections of the questionnaire, dealing with the delivery of parliamentary proceedings by radio, television and the Internet.

- 86% of respondents report that parliamentary proceedings are broadcast on radio or television; and
- there is a fairly even split between those countries in which the media is compelled to broadcast proceedings (45% of responses) and those countries with radio and television stations dedicated to the broadcast of proceedings (51%).

The range of experience is exemplified by the fact that in some countries the national broadcaster covers proceedings (either in full or in part); in some countries proceedings are (or at least were) available on privately operated cable or satellite services; and in others, the parliament itself operates (or plans to operate) its own broadcasting services.

As indicated earlier, an overwhelming majority of respondents (96%) have established parliamentary web sites, almost all of which are managed and maintained by parliamentary staff and which provide access to a comprehensive range of information - including, in some instances, searchable databases.

A surprising 64% of parliaments report that they 'deliver proceedings via the Internet'. I

suspect that, in truth, this figure is somewhat inflated and includes not only the 'live web-cast' of proceedings, but also the publication of transcripts on the Internet.

Nevertheless, it is clear that many parliaments are actively exploring the potential of the Internet:

- 15% of those who reported they deliver proceedings via the Internet note that, as well as providing live coverage of current proceedings, 'video on demand' coverage of past proceedings is available; and
- 19% of all respondents report they provide interactive communication services, such as electronic opinion polls and on-line discussion groups.

There is no doubt we can expect further developments in this area.

The comment I made earlier about the impact of limited resources is particularly evident in the provision of computer-based communication services. A number of parliaments frankly admit that if more resources were available, more extensive (and experimental) use would be made of interactive communication services.

The last sections of the questionnaire to which I would like to draw your attention are those dealing with education services, other promotional activities and involving parliamentarians. The responses here also revealed some innovative approaches.

Almost 70% of parliaments provide educational services for young people and 1/3 of those that do not currently provide such services have plans to do so within the next twelve months. The services are many and varied, including:

- tours and subsidised school visits;
- teacher training programs and the production of curriculum kits;
- youth parliaments;
- publications aimed at young people, such as posters and comics; and
- interactive Internet sites.

The range of other promotional activities undertaken, which in some cases involve parliamentarians, includes:

- open days;
- participation in community and trade fairs;
- touring exhibitions on the work of parliament; and

- regional sittings of parliament.

My observation of many of the responses is that question 5 could have been better phrased. The question sought information on whether the interests of Members were defined and monitored. With the benefit of hindsight, I now see that many of the returns related to pecuniary interests and codes of conduct.

I conclude with two general observations.

First, it is clear from the responses received so far that many of us believe promoting the work of parliament should be one of our core objectives as parliamentary administrators.

If our systems of government are to be respected and sustained, they first need to be widely understood. In this regard, it is very heartening to see such widespread commitment to the task of promoting the work of parliaments.

Secondly, as we often remark at these meetings, there is an extraordinary degree of commonality in the issues being addressed by parliamentary administrations around the world. We should draw considerable comfort from this. It means that not only can we talk about common problems, we can discuss common solutions. The capacity to bring our collective experience to bear is one of the great values of this Association.

There is no doubt that we can learn much from each other when it comes to promoting better understanding of our parliaments.

In this preliminary analysis, I have sketched some of the general approaches that are being taken in this area. In my final analysis, to be circulated in the near future, I will fully report the views of those who have responded to the questionnaire, and also identify more specifically some of the ideas that have been implemented."

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Mrs Adelina SÁ CARVALHO, President, thanked Mr HARRIS and invited questions from the floor.

Miss Stavroula YASSILOUNI (Greece) congratulated Mr HARRIS for having selected this particular subject and asked whether more details might be included on educational steps and relations with the media.

Mr Ian HARRIS acknowledged this point.

Mr Anders FORSBERG (Sweden) thanked Mr HARRIS and asked whether limits were placed on parliamentary administration in respect of its activities in this field. He noted that apart from general information there were more demands from parliamentarians for support for their own websites and he noted that there was a problem about the limits of responsibility for parliamentary administrations in this field.

Mr Xavier Roques (France) thanked Mr HARRIS for having embarked on this considerable task. He thought that promoting the work of parliament was a fundamental issue. There was a deep lack of understanding on the part of the public about the work of parliament. The media often published stories which were very partial in their viewpoint and it was useful to have a means of responding. He asked about the separation between promoting parliament as an institution and promoting the work of the majority party in parliament.

Sir Michael DAVIES (United Kingdom) thanked Mr HARRIS and agreed that promotion of parliament should not be political in any way. He noted that limited resources meant that recourse had to be had to the website as much as possible. The House of Lords in the United Kingdom had produced give-away stickers and bookmarks which had their website address on. The Committee Office of the House of Lords had its own media person. He noted that the previous Wednesday the House of Lords had had a very good debate on promoting the work of parliament and a distinguished list of speakers had taken part in the debate. He asked whether a distinction might be made between those respondents who had a Freedom of Information Act. In the United Kingdom, such an Act would come into force in full in 2005 although public institutions had to be registered to comply with it by the end of 2002 and publish their plans for so doing.

Mr Horst RISSE (Germany) thanked Mr HARRIS and said he hoped the report would summarise the results of the questionnaire in its final version and thus create an ideal set of arrangements which could set a benchmark for comparing work done in individual parliaments.