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Short Presentation of the Information and Communication Unit of the Finnish Parliament

Parliament is unicameral from 1906

MPs 200

Staff of Parliament 700

Staff of the Information and Communication Unit 74

Library of Parliament 52

Research Service 9

Parliament Information Office 13

In my presentation I will concentrate on the organisation of information and communication tasks at the Finnish Parliament (Eduskunta). I will present to you the fairly new Information and Communication Unit of Parliament. In particular, I will focus on the co-operation that has arisen when the Unit was set up.

Reorganisation and its background

In the Finnish Parliament, information and communication affairs are organised under the Information and Communication Unit. The Unit has three components: Library of Parliament, Research Service, and Parliament Information Office.

Information and Communication Unit was founded in 2001. The goal was to improve the efficiency of Parliament's information service in line with the Information Strategy drawn up in 1999. As defined in the Strategy, the purpose of information service is both to support citizens' basic right to obtain information about government's decision-making and to promote the parliamentary system.

When the Information and Communication Unit was founded, separate units that were working with information contents, and whose fields were partly overlapping, were brought together. Coordination and vigorous development of information services began at the same time. The division of labour within information services was redefined: Research Service concentrated on giving service to Parliament clients, while the Library of Parliament was responsible for information service provided to clients outside Parliament.

The experiences gained during the past four years show that the right decision was made. Co-operation between units has improved considerably. This is seen as better services and, above all, as increased interaction among people working in the units.

Co-operation and experiences

Web services

Members of Parliament, and especially their assistants, are accustomed to using information sources on the Web. They also require that these sources be available. This has had an impact on information service work and on the way information services function.

In consequence, the Research Service has introduced a new link database intended for Parliament clients. The database contains information sources that are central to parliamentary work. At present, the database contains some 1,400 useful links.

The links have been grouped according to the spheres of activities of Parliament's Committees. In addition, there is a category of general links, such as news services, statistics and reference works.

Parliament Information Office bears the practical responsibility for Parliament's external Web services. Naturally, the entire Parliament participates in the creation of contents for the Web pages. At present, the pages are under revision to make them more user-friendly. The target is to publish the new pages in summer 2006.

The Library of Parliament also produces Web services independently. Revision of the Library's Web pages takes place at the same time as the revision of Parliament's public pages.

Training

At the end of the 1990s, Finnish Members of Parliament were given personal assistants. It was quickly noticed that the assistants need familiarisation with Parliament's work and with information sources. A series of training sessions was created to meet this need. In this series, users are familiarised with various information sources on the Web. The series is repeated each autumn and spring, and it is targeted at everyone in Parliament.

Visitors' Centre and participation in fairs

New forms of communications in the Finnish Parliament include the visitors' information point and participation in fairs. The Visitors' Centre was opened in the new annex to the House of Parliament, which was completed last September. This type of space open to everyone is a new feature in the Finnish Parliament.

Parliament Information Office is responsible for running the Visitors' Centre. However, the employees of both the Parliament Information Office and the Library provide customer service jointly. The Visitors' Centre offers Members of Parliament and citizens a place to meet, gives information about Parliament and EU affairs, and serves as a venue for events of all kinds.

About five years ago, the Finnish Parliament started to participate in various fairs. The experiences gained have been very positive. Visitors to the Parliament's stand can get

information about Parliament and its work, they can meet Members of Parliament and can take a quiz about Parliament.

These have been some examples of co-operation within Parliament's Information and Communication Unit. Next I would like to mention certain important services and functions, where the various segments of the Information and Communication Unit operate more independently.

Research Service

An important element of the information service provided by the Research Service is the work carried out within the system of the European Centre for Parliamentary Research and Documentation, the ECPRD.

To be successful, the information service of the Finnish Parliament, like that of any other Parliament, must get constant information from other countries. The ECPRD is a co-operation network created by European Parliaments, which enables the exchange of information between Parliaments. The ECPRD has a correspondent at each Parliament, and these correspondents can send questions to other member Parliaments. The Research Service has good experiences of this network. The questions concerning other countries that come up in the information service are often best answered by local experts.

Exchange of information between the Nordic countries goes back a long time. The Research Service has regular contacts with the corresponding bodies in the other Nordic countries.

The need to develop mobile services is linked with information sources on the Web, which I already mentioned before. In the coming years, Parliament needs to determine to what extent information will be distributed to mobile equipment.

Needs of this type are particularly common among Members of Parliament. For instance, information about plenary sessions and committee meetings could be transmitted to their mobile equipment. There is also demand for mobile news services.

Library of Parliament

Library of Parliament specialises in jurisprudence, society and in information on Parliament. The Library is public and open to everyone. The Central Archives of Parliament, containing the original documents of Parliament, operate in connection with the library.

The primary function of the Library of Parliament is to give visitors the opportunity to read parliamentary documents, free of charge, both in the public information network and in the library's public premises.

The library's services are widely available through the Web. Apart from information searches, the collection database enables renewal of loans and reservation of material. The library maintains a link database that lists Web services in the areas of law, politics, administration and the EU. Guides for the Web environment have been drawn up and electronic teaching packages are under planning. In addition, the library offers information management training for outside clients as well.

The trend that has recently been visible in the library sector – in other words, a clear drop in the number of loans and in the number of questions presented to information service – has also been seen in the Library of Parliament. On the other hand, the requests for information received by information service have become more complex. The emphasis is now more on guiding people how to use information sources on the net.

Library of Parliament takes part in co-operation within the Finnish library network. For instance, the Library of Parliament contributes to the “Ask a librarian” service available on libraries.fi. Web services are acquired in co-operation with university libraries and other bodies. The library also has close contacts with the information service units of the Finnish Ministries.

Parliament Information Office

Parliament Information Office is the third sub-unit of Parliament’s Information and Communication Unit. Its main tasks are services to citizens, services on the Web, and media services. During the past couple of years, the Parliament Information Office has actively revised its procedures pertaining to dissemination of information.

