

# PARLIAMENTS IN THE INFORMATION AGE

GENEVA – 24/5/2007

## *Outcome of the International Conference “The policymaking role of Parliaments in the development of the Information Society”*

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Last year, during the multistakeholders meeting on Parliaments and the Information Society organized here by the *Global Centre for ICT in Parliament*, I reported (on behalf of the Chamber of Deputies) on the preparation of an international conference – which was to be held in Rome - having as its main theme legal frameworks conducive to the IS development.

The Conference, originally planned on October 2006, was being organized under the framework of the *Global Centre for ICT in Parliament* and was to represent its first important international event.

The background of this project was the idea that - in the global process opened up by the Summit for Information Society in order to make the IS development more inclusive - the potential role of Parliaments risked being underestimated.

But, at the same time, our experience as staff members in a national parliament, shows us that this role is probably underestimated also by the Parliaments, and by the MPs themselves. Very often we realize that in this field the intervention of the Parliament, both as legislator and as a body responsible for oversight functions, should be more proactive and better-timed.

There are many reasons for this. Probably one of the most important regards the technical complexity of the issues involved and the hectic pace of technological change.

Notwithstanding the role of Parliament appears irreplaceable because the IC technologies are penetrating in many areas of present social life profoundly transforming them and only the active role of elected parliaments can guarantee that the transformation of the society is – to some extent – a democratic process.

During the preparation of the Conference with our friends from UNDESA we focussed on the themes that could better provide top politicians from different countries a common platform of political (and not merely technical) issues combining technological development, Information Society and parliamentary activity.

We prepared a two-day Conference – to be held in March 2007 – divided into 6 Sessions each of which centred on a theme of great political impact:

- Policymaking and the Information Society
- International Cooperation, Democracy and the Information Society
- Setting priorities for the Information Society from a development perspective
- Governing the Information Society: effectiveness of institutional architectures
- The Information Society and the Economy: constraints and opportunities
- The Protection of Rights in the Information Society

The themes of the Conference were summarized in an extremely interesting opening keynote speech by the distinguished Professor Stefano Rodotà. You can find the text of this intervention on the websites of the Chamber of Deputies and of the Global Centre.

Each of the 6 sessions had a highly-qualified panel of keynote speakers and a President of a Parliamentary Assembly as Chair person (the first session was chaired by Fausto Bertinotti, President of the CoD of Italy, the second by Pierferdinando Casini, President of the IPU, the third by Edmundo Novillo Aguillar, President of the CoD of Bolivia, the fourth by Gennady Novitsky, President of the National Assembly of Belarus, the fifth by Mahmood Al-Mishhadani, Speaker of the Council of Representatives of Iraq and the sixth session was chaired by Vital Kamerhe, President of the National Assembly of the Democratic Republic of the Congo).

The Conference, held on the floor of the Chamber of Deputies, was attended by more than 350 participants, We had the honour to host the delegations of 68 Parliamentary Assemblies, 16 of which were led by the Speaker, while non-parliamentary representatives of other 8 countries together with the United Nations and other major national and international organisations and institutions also took part in the event.

We had 42 Rapporteurs and many MPs taking part in the debate that followed each session.

The Rome Conference provided a platform for an inter-parliamentary dialogue on a range of crucial issues and truly represented a high-level forum where parliamentarians, members of international organizations and experts – from all over the world – were able to exchange their ideas and share their experiences.

One of the objectives of the initiative was to gather inputs and elements for a document (a **Conference Presidency's summary**) containing a set of recommendations on how national and regional assemblies can best address and concretely contribute to the effective implementation of the Information Society. Also in this regard we can affirm that the Conference was a successful event. In fact, Hon. Fausto Bertinotti, in his final remarks, was able to read a document in which the results of the Conference are summed up in "*six points to strengthen the role of Parliaments in the development of the Information Society*".

These six points are aimed at providing useful inputs for drafting a Charter on the role which is incumbent upon the Parliaments as guarantors in the development of the Information Society. In particular, the Inter-Parliamentary Union seems to be the most appropriate representative forum where such a Charter can be drafted.

It is also stated in the Summary that "*the Charter on Parliaments and the Information Society, together with the future work of the Global Centre for ICT in Parliament can advance a specific and substantive parliamentary dimension in the pursuit of the policies that emerged from the work of the World Summit*" and that "*such a parliamentary dimension should place special emphasis on the social and political implications of the dissemination of ICT in the contemporary world and also contribute to targeted forms of international cooperation in this field, particularly for the benefit of the social and civil development of emerging democracies*".

The six points – respectively - envisage the role of Parliament:

- *as a political guarantor against the technocratic risks of the Information Society;*
- *as a guarantor to protect socially weaker groups;*
- *as the main actor in protecting fundamental rights, both at legislative and constitutional level;*

- *as an institution proactive in combating the risk of cultural and linguistic standardisation and the marginalisation of the weaker sectors of society;*
- *as an institutional guarantor, able to advance institutional transparency and accountability at all levels, to make a diffused control of government action possible, and to combat corruption;*
- *as an active promoter of initiatives of international co-operation for the benefit of the emerging democracies.*

You can find the full text of the document on the Website of the Conference and on the Website of the Global Centre.

President Bertinotti, President Casini and Under-Secretary General of the UN, José Antonio Ocampo, in their final remarks expressed their full appreciation and satisfaction for the successful initiative.

This Conference has enriched the background of the *Global Centre for ICT in Parliament*, that – among its goals – has the enhancement of the active role of Parliaments on policies for developing the Information Society.

I am sure that the Proceedings of the Conference, that are soon to be published by the Chamber of Deputies, will offer – in the future – a very useful repository of ideas and experiences.