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THE KNOWLEDGE-BASED PARLIAMENT: LEARNING ORGANISATIONS

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Your excellencies, fellow participants,

The institution which I have the honour to present here today is grateful to the organisers - the National Assembly and the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the UN - for sponsoring this conference since the issues at stake - the strengthening of democracy and parliamentary governance - do not only concern the African parliaments but are at the core of every parliament.

In a world in which governments increasingly cooperate, either because they belong to the same international organisation at a regional level like the EU, or are part of a global structure like the WTO, they are linked and common positions result which directly affect parliaments. Often parliaments have little influence on their governments in the process of international decision making, let alone a full insight in all that is to be debated. In this ever global world it is essential that parliaments too play their role. They must thus modernise their way of operating, develop their own expertise and knowledge, become actively involved in interparliamentary cooperation projects and become process definers instead of process followers.

A national parliament, elected by fair and open elections in a multi-party system, must be somewhere at the centre of any democratic society. It is a fundamental sign of the authority vested in the people.

A good working parliament is the key to a democratic policy; it provides access to a range of political views which are not merely represented but which lead to argument and debate on a public stage. Parliaments give voice to informed opinion and the discussion of policy; they publicise their political debate. They also give life and authority to law - all of which can be stimulated by knowledge management.

I hope that this conference will offer a platform from which best practices are presented, models debated and solutions analysed. For my part, I will endeavour to outline parliamentary knowledge management, but you should bear in mind that there are many ways of defining knowledge management and mine is only one of them!

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Ladies and gentlemen, Abraham Lincoln once said "*I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts*". He was referring to one of the great challenges which confronts each society and thus each parliament; what are real facts and how do you get to know them?

Over the past few years we have come to understand that knowledge and knowledge-based production constitutes the primary precondition for the future success of our current information-based societies. Unfortunately, too often knowledge is still only associated with technology. Yet, knowledge exploitation of a more general kind should play a major role in political decision making as well. Are our policy decisions based on facts and assessments influenced by knowledge?

The parliament of Finland through the work of its Committee for the Future, has thoroughly examined the concept of knowledge management in a parliamentary environment. My comments and observations have been strongly influenced by their thinking.

So, let me give you a description of how I perceive knowledge management in a modern, open society.

First of all knowledge management means discovery, learning. Knowledge management has been defined as an issue which involves the wise handling and development of knowledge, skills and communication based on a shared vision of the future. Knowledge management is founded on jointly defined values and requires innovative, responsible leadership.
Trust will be a key word.

Innovation is increasingly seen as the crucial success factor for individuals, businesses, communities and societies all confronted with globalisation and the increasing complexity of the problems which we have to resolve. Knowledge management is the prerequisite for innovation, parliaments will need to customise support services to individual needs with simultaneous development and exploitation of mass production processes. One aspect of this is the definition of personal missions and core interest areas.

I will try today to identify the principal issues that knowledge based parliaments have to deal with and how these should be seen in a wider, societal context.

In knowledge management and learning management - in other words the measures that make the creation, distribution and dissemination of knowledge into organisational and societal success factors - it is natural to emphasise human and social capital as the objective and basis for success, well-being and continuous growth. Economic growth can increasingly be explained by competence - human knowledge, skills and social structures. According to World Bank research, human and social capital together are four times more likely to result in growth than that of physical investments.

In the information based societies of today we have to accept that:

- the state has lost its role as the exclusive possessor of strategic knowledge;
- the state has no right to control information or communication;
- knowledge is considered to be the central factor of economic success;
- publicity and openness of information and knowledge have become central values;
- the state is compelled to redefine the basis for its information and knowledge related policies;
- the collection and processing of information into knowledge have become central objects of competition;
- national borders have lost their significance in information transfer.

From a parliamentary point of view, knowledge management is an issue that largely focuses on central tools of power exertion and the opportunities to strengthen parliamentarianism.

Knowledge is not the same as information. "*Information is slavery to other people's thoughts. Knowledge is freedom and the power to think on one's own*" as D.D. Hade once described it. So, with that distinction in mind, the following issues will determine a knowledge management environment:

- knowledge workers are lifelong learners;

- a creative working community will consist of lifelong learners;
- knowledge management presupposes an open atmosphere of trust;
- collective learning and innovative spirit will become reality through joint learning;
- wisdom is produced by thinking, ethical, responsible people;
- values are essential for learning;
- tacit knowledge is in the hand of experts and people have to learn to share it.

It is important to underline that the core premises for knowledge management are values and learning. The importance of mutual trust and the creation of an atmosphere of trust within the entire community cannot be emphasised enough. Without trust, knowledge cannot be passed on or used effectively. Sharing so that everybody can win will increase networking. Doing and learning together will enable the creation of new knowledge and learning from others.

This will require change and change is a difficult issue. It is difficult for individuals and probably even more difficult for organisations and societies. We know only too well that structural systems and bureaucracy are self-preserving by nature. Therefore, change will require open minds, disassembly and unlearning on several levels. Systematic support of change must be shown by senior management at administrative and political level. Change is difficult to impose and account must obviously be taken of existing experience, wisdom

and tacit knowledge. Change will also be met with resistance in the organisation as it competes with other important activities for people's time. How do you prioritise change and how do you allow for enough time to be given to that process? It may be interesting to start the knowledge management process with *communities of practice* who share a problem or an interest and are gathered together to form a development group for the shared topic. Such groups can pool their knowledge and experience of the topic and together develop new structures. And for that you do not always have to bring people to meetings with specific purposes!

Free-flow thinking in a trusted environment can be very conducive in finding creative solutions.

There are, as I mentioned earlier, several approaches to knowledge management; for example, the information technology and behaviour aspect. In general the proponents of the technological approach are experts in information processing or economics, regarding information as identifiable objects that can be processed using IT systems. In place of or alongside an ICT-oriented approach, knowledge management can concentrate on organisations and people. Representatives of this trend have investigated organisational information processes, organisational development, intellectual assets, core competence, knowledge and expertise.

New thinking has introduced the concept of tacit knowledge which highlights the social role and social nature of knowledge, as opposed to explicit knowledge. This to me, appears to be of particular relevance to organisations such as parliaments which embody by their very nature the essence of tacit knowledge. Oral and written knowledge cannot express the ideas and in-depth expertise contained in tacit knowledge. The higher the processing level, the more human thinking, intellectual manipulation and assessment the knowledge in question contains and the less it can be processed or produced in the form of technically detached material.

However, technological developments remain crucial in the knowledge management process but will not lead to the stage of wisdom which is seen as the last step in the knowledge hierarchy. The lower the step on the hierarchy ladder (data-information-knowledge-understanding-wisdom) the greater the role for ICT. Parliaments need wisdom, which some have defined as unified expertise, to do their job well.

Knowledge results from combining expertise from various fields into one, single entity. It is an entity that should be more than the sum total of its parts.

It is this notion which dictates that knowledge management projects in parliaments must be initiated, driven and managed by both the political and administrative leaders of the organisation. Knowledge management processes are management and not technology driven!

Knowledge is always context-specific, dependent on time and place and dynamic in character. Without a context, knowledge remains information. Thus knowledge is relational, which means that truth, goodness or beauty will always be in the eye of the beholder … Isn't that also the essence of politics?

The key questions relating to knowledge in a parliamentary environment are the classic elements of *what, how, why, where and when* and any knowledge management organisational structure must be designed to answer these questions. Sharing the earlier mentioned element of tacit knowledge should be integrated at each step since knowledge is always two-dimensional: the object of knowing (knowledge) and the tacit knowledge constituting the medium for the processing of the object (knowing). These dimensions are mutually complementary and strongly situational. Tacit knowledge is heavily embedded in social reality and the only process for sharing this kind of knowledge is through socialisation.

Individuals involved share with others by exchanging experience, learn from each other by observing others at work and by being and working together. Without shared experience there is no mutual understanding. And being together seems to work more effectively than written manuals or oral messages! It is this combination of tacit and explicit knowledge that you need to achieve.

Yet, as managers of this process, you want to convert tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge in order to structure its use - a process which is also known as externalisation. This means the modelling of knowledge that is still in a pre-explicit form by articulating it through, for example, dialogue. Tacit knowledge is of course a competitive advantage of the individual and you have to make people understand that it is in their own interest to share it with colleagues. This new attitude requires a mental change and should result in a strong reduction of internal competition between the various administrative units -the importance of which is not to be underestimated. Sharing tacit knowledge must be done in an understandable form, for example by dividing the entity into smaller components or, vice-versa, by perceiving the practical entities as a whole. There is no rule book for this.

New explicit knowledge should constantly be brought in from outside by allowing people to attend conferences, go on courses or be

involved in networks - to name but a few possibilities. Converting this new explicit knowledge gathered by individual colleagues into joint knowledge assets, which is tacit knowledge, is a process called internalisation.
Combining the externalisation and internalisation to result in a comprehensive strategy is the object of the exercise.

This will help people to implement new concepts and methods within the organisation's strategy, process and regeneration. It is essential that personnel are trained to perceive the organisation as an entity in which the individual is an integral part and not a group of competing units. This dynamic process where explicit and tacit knowledge convert and transfer between people is essential to foster a genuine climate of cooperation in the organisation and to optimise its capability for extracting and exploiting individual knowledge and expertise.

This not only applies to officials and civil servants but is also directed at MPs. They too have to raise their expertise level, have more opportunities for studying and become engaged in joint actions with ministries during the early bill drafting process. Greater openness in parliamentary work methods, different ways of organising committee meetings by making better use of experts and ICT tools should give them more time to become modern

professionals, more in control and less constrained by agendas set by others. Both MPs and officials have also to learn to cooperate differently - a genuine concern to learn from and listen to each other will raise the quality of the policy contribution, the quality of parliamentary governance.

New technology can aid parliamentarians in this new knowledge environment if they possess a *knowledge toolbox* containing the following:

- easy-to-use links to existing files, organised according to subject matter;
- automatic access to updated key numbers, messages, novelty hints, etc.;
- links to central think tanks and public authorities providing analytic and pre-processed knowledge that the MP has selected for monitoring;
- service pages where various statistics are provided with context, including international comparisons;
- information service organised by subject for use by parliamentary committees, including bill tracking;
- easy-to-use links to databases with a possibility to edit information and knowledge for personal needs such as: country statistics; national link to the Ministry of Finance, Trade, etc.; political research institutes; information services and links

provided by the parliamentary library; archives of newspapers and journals.

- access to service packages at various levels, some with research material, international or just domestic, newspaper cuttings, documentary information, etc.;
- access to the knowledge management system of the parliament with automatic updates, tables and graphs on all relevant issues pertaining to the institution;
- access to a service support facility creating active cooperation between users and information (system) specialists.

Members should accept that interoperability obligations require them to adapt to the network and IT choice of the parliament.

I am fully aware of the practical consequences of such an approach and the creation of its toolbox. Considerable investment in resources (human, financial, IT) will be necessary and in general the working conditions of members and staff must be such that these enable the implementation of such a policy. Obviously, priorities must be defined.

To give you an example, the European Parliament is setting aside 6% of its annual budget for IT excluding the human resource cost.

For some parliaments priorities will be more focused on providing basic needs - say an office for each MP - but those who can consider

embarking on the knowledge management approach should realise from the beginning that it will affect the entire organisation.

So, let me resume what I consider to be the essentials of knowledge management in parliaments.
Knowledge management is about the systematic development and management of knowledge, competence and expertise possessed currently and acquired in the future. Parliaments must be aware of what knowledge it has, where this knowledge resides and how to access it. Practical questions which need to be resolved concern the acquisition, processing, storage and distribution. Increasing the effectiveness of knowledge dissemination and sharing is the only way for a parliament to significantly increase its knowledge. Once in place, knowledge management will enhance the routine work efficiency and the capability to react swiftly to societal changes. The challenge lies in the fact that the most valuable knowledge mainly exists in an undocumented form as tacit knowledge in the minds of individuals. What is required is the creation of a cultural and technological environment in which all members of the organisation, the community of practice, can liberate and exploit this knowledge. What is furthermore required is support systems for learning and personnel management, to encourage individuals and teams to create and disseminate new knowledge. It is the

organisation culture that provides the framework for knowledge management in its entirety.

Technology is just one of several knowledge management sectors. What is equally, if not more important, is leadership, processes, an open organisation culture, open organisational activities, joint objectives and support for learning and networking.

Now, if you manage all that your organisation will truly become a learning organisation! In other words, it will be an organisation with systems, mechanisms and processes that are used to continually enhance its capabilities and those of the people working with and for it, to achieve sustainable objectives for themselves and the communities in which they operate.

Finally, it is to a parliament that people look as the final arbiter of fairness to individual citizens and groups and a good parliament is the measure of the quality of public life. For it also has an exemplary role, ideally sharing a realm of good political practice, a check on corruption and a visible place of political dialogue. What John Stuart Mill once called "*a sounding-board for the nation*". The parliament is the active conscience of the body politic.

But all this must be substantiated by efficiency, effectiveness and scrupulous honesty on the part of parliamentarians. Parliaments have to show this, to publicise their role and what they do. This is hard enough in stable democracies, never mind in new ones.

Knowledge management is at the root of all this and can help reform society, improve governance, instil a sense of innovation and strengthen parliamentarianism as the essential ingredient for a democratic society.

All these requisites might be considered an ideal, but without ideals it is difficult to reach standards. Parliamentary cooperation based on knowledge sharing can be most effective since it is a way of giving societies the means of making informed and open decisions in an increasingly fast-moving and often dangerous world.

Thank you for your attention.