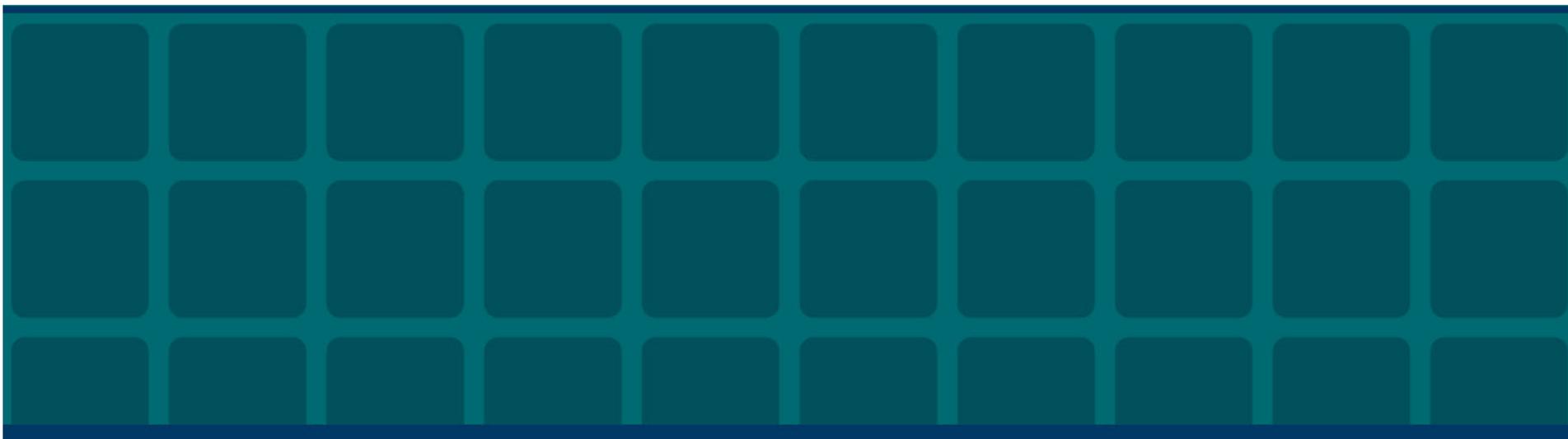Inter-Parliamentary Union
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THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF
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World e-Parliament
Conference 2014

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Access to the law and legislative documents

U.S. House of Representatives

Robert Reeves, Deputy Clerk

Leadership Direction

- At the start of 112th Congress (Jan., 2011), the House adopted a Rules package that identified making electronic documents available to the public as a priority for the U.S. House of Representatives.

Leadership Direction

- Speaker Boehner and Majority Leader Cantor stated that, "The new House Majority is dedicated to changing how our institution operates, with an emphasis on real transparency and greater accountability. Openness, once a proud tradition of the House, is again the standard".

Leadership Direction

- H. Rpt. 112-511 that accompanied H.R. 5882 Legislative Branch Appropriations Act 2013, directed the establishment of the Bulk Data Task Force to examine increased dissemination of congressional information via bulk data download from non-governmental groups supporting openness and transparency in the legislative process.

Bulk Data Task Force

- Bulk Data – allows the public to download in bulk (a significant amount) legislative data, which can consist of bills, votes, etc. The challenge is to provide this data in a structured format for reuse

Bulk Data Task Force

- First Bulk Data Task Force (BDTF) meeting was held on September 27, 2012. A bipartisan group from the following Legislative Branch offices/entities attended: *House Leadership, Clerk's Office, Parliamentarian, GPO, LOC/CRS, Law Revision Counsel, House Legislative Counsel, Senate, House Administration and Appropriations.*

Bulk Data Task Force

- Objectives
  - Increase the amount of data available for bulk data download in open XML standards.
  - Organize legislative information so that it is easily found, available and downloadable.
  - Coordinate Legislative Branch efforts on enhancing Legislative Information and track all related projects.

Bulk Data Task Force

- Deliverables
  - Create a delivery timeline of Legislative Information projects for:
    - The remainder of the 112th Congress
    - First session of the 113th Congress
    - Second session of the 113th Congress
  - Produce a report to the Appropriations Committee by 12/31/2012

Initial meeting with outside group

- On October 17, 2012, representatives from Parliamentary Monitoring Organizations, Universities, American Association of Law Libraries, United Nations Global Centre for Information Communication and Technology and others.

Initial meeting with outside group

- The meeting focused around a discussion of a "Recommendation to the Bulk Data Task Force" document authored by five of the attendees. Although much of the discussion centered around the group's views on bulk data, the topics of open standards documents and transparency were also discussed.

Bulk Data Task Force
Key Findings

- Legislative Branch efforts on providing information and making data available for downloads appeal to a variety of audiences including internal users, the general public, researchers, academics, the international community and third party developers. Bulk data downloads appeal primarily to developers.

Bulk Data Task Force
Key Findings

- Authentication of XML bulk data is not necessary in the same manner as it has been done in PDF documents. It is important to verify the accuracy of bulk data but one does not need to authenticate it. Having an available user guide that contains a question and answer section on "Legal Status & Authenticity" and a Schema Description is acceptable.

Bulk Data Task Force
Key Findings

- A single location for bulk data is not necessary, it is more important to know where to go to get the data.

- Internal groups in the House access third party websites to get bulk data that is created using House information but not yet made available as bulk data.

Bulk Data Task Force
Key Findings

- The predictability and completeness of the data is important to be able to tell the whole story. Third party developers, academics and researchers want structured bulk data in standard open formats with predictable URLs.

Bulk Data Task Force
Key Findings

- It is not necessary to engage in a large development project, it would be better to begin with documents/files that we already create as individual documents/files and expand that to also include those documents/files in bulk. Incremental, consistent progress would be a good future course to follow.

Bulk Data Task Force
Key Findings

- A new issue that was identified was whether or not to continue to move forward with formatting our XML documents using DTDs or should the Legislative Branch transition to the use of Schemas?

Legislative Branch Accomplishments

- New Historian website history.house.gov

- *Bill Text Bulk Data

- Committee Repository www.docs.house.gov

- Congress.gov - replacement for Thomas

- House Modernization Project – US Code available in XML and bulk data

- *Legislative Data Challenge I – Markup of US Legislation in Akoma Ntoso

Legislative Branch Accomplishments

- *Legislative Data Challenge II – Convert US and UK documents to Akoma Ntoso
- *Bill Summary Bulk Data

Legislative Branch
Current Projects

- *Modernize Member and Committee Data
- *Bill Status Bulk Data

Ongoing meetings with outside groups

- In the last 20 months we have met 5 times
  - Last meeting Feb. 24, 2014
  - Next meeting scheduled May 29, 2014
  - Three times a year
  - Participation in meetings organized by outside groups
    - "Lawmaking in the open" 4/4/2014, sponsored by the Congressional Data Coalition, the meeting was held in a House office building

In my view

- Improved communication, respect
- Better understanding of what is wanted and acceptable, perfect is not always necessary
- Better understanding of how the data is being used both internally and externally
- Technology trumps politics in these meetings