Comparing Legislative Internet Sites

by Maureen Martyn

Over the past few years, federal, provincial and territorial governments have begun publishing their legislative documents on the World Wide Web. Today, concerned constituents can follow government proceedings from their home, office or public library. This article looks at a number of issues related to this aspect of the information revolution. Only those sites open to the general public have been included in this survey. Intranet sites where information is limited only to persons within the institutions have not been considered. The article is based on the state of these sites at the end of August 1997. It tries to make some constructive suggestions for the future development of these sites and also points out some broader considerations that have to be kept in mind when dealing with parliamentary information.

The decision to go digital is economically driven. Most modern legislative publications start out in digitalform. The real costs are printing, storage and distribution. With web publishing, costs for printing are downloaded to the end user.

Web publishing can also increase availability since web sites are open for business 24 hours a day. Unfortunately, availability is often confused with accessibility. With paper publishing, legislative documents are available through any depository library. Furthermore, Hansard, journals and committee proceedings include indexes which allow users to browse these documents by subject. Some of these features have been lost in the move to the web. The task of finding some documents has become considerably more difficult.

The following pages look at the content of each legislative sites in Canada, their accessibility and design. Often secondary information, such as workings of the legislature or tourist information, is included on these sites and these elements are also compared.

Maureen Martyn is Internet Librarian with the Library of Parliament in Ottawa.

The Parliamentary Internet (http://www.parl.gc.ca)

What's available: The Parliamentary Internet publishes parliamentary proceedings of both the Senate of Canada and the House of Commons. Debates, journals, and committee proceedings for most of the 35th Parliament (1993-1997) are available for both chambers in English and French. The Senate offers photos, addresses and biographies of members, whereas the House of Commons has several listings but no addresses. Perhaps this will be added with the new parliament.

For the virtual visitor, an online tour is available including interesting details about each chamber and the Library of Parliament. For those who wish to visit in real time, visitor information is available.

What's accessible: The sheer size and number of documents available can be overwhelming. Navigation tools, including icons, differ for the House and the Senate as well as between documentss. This can be disorienting.

A powerful and user friendly search engine helps bypass some of these difficulties. Search options include individual publications as well as a key word search of all publications. A search of all publications for gun control yielded dozens of documents — no number count, with a Senator's biography deemed the most relevant. Hansard indexes for both chambers are also

available through this search engine and yield more accurate hits.

Worth Noting: The Parliamentary Internet has extensive content but navigation requires some work. Tighter, centrally controlled publication groupings would ease access for the hundreds who visit this site for daily updates. Finally, much concern was raised when certain sections of the 35th Parliament's proceedings were removed from the web site with no forwarding address. Although they have been restored, hopefully, future archival attempts will be well notified in advance to allow libraries and researchers to provide access to these important documents.

Quebec (http://www.assnat.qc.ca)

What's Available: All major parliamentary publications are there, including the debates —first the hour by hour transcripts and final versions. This process is repeated for committees. Significant reports are listed separately. Bills, both private and public are listed in the Table of Contents, but few are actually available through this web site.

Biographies and portraits of all members are available and indexed both by name and riding. There is limited information available about the history of the National Assembly and the role of the legislature.

What's Accessible: Each publication is searchable by key word and yields fast yet imprecise results. A key word search of the debates for 'tabac' yielded dozens of documents with no clear winner for context.

The bill listing is a bit confusing. One version is available in HTML by clicking on the title. Another version is available in Portable Document Format (PDF) by clicking on the number of the bill. The official version is only available through Publications Quebec. In any case, there were not enough bills listed to make this reliable or useful to legislative trackers.

Worth Noting: The biggest downfall of this otherwise logically constructed site is the home page. This page, when it finally is loaded, contains a stunning photo image of the National Assembly. Unfortunately, the wait can be excruciatingly long and some browsers are incapable of displaying such an elaborate page. Considering the cleanness and clarity of the other pages on this site, it is a deterrent to users.

Ontario (http://www.ontla.on.ca)

What's available: Hansard, committee proceedings, status of bills, votes and proceedings, order papers, status of business and others.

Information about members of the legislative assembly is user friendly. Searchers can access information, including photos and a biography, several different ways. Keyword searching is also available. The Services and Information section contains a variety of information including parliamentary tradition in Ontario, the role of the legislature and information about the gift shop.

What's accessible: There is no easy way to search for materials. There appears to be no index for the debates or committees documents. Documents are listed chronologically. For daily monitoring of the proceedings of government, this is fine. A quick search by subject is, however, impossible.

Most disappointing, was the main index link. It includes links to other files on the site, including Hansard and various committee documents but does not actually include an index to the documents themselves. As an Internet researcher, I found this use of the term "Index" quite misleading.

Worth Noting: Files, such as the role of the legislature, were incomplete or contained Hyper Text Mark-up Language (HTML) errors. The Services and Information section includes links to all three external caucus sites. Although they are external links, this is not clearly indicated or included in the section labeled — Links to External Sites.

British Columbia (http://www.legis.gov.bc.ca)

What's Available: Immediate options include versatile keyword searching of debates, bills or information about MLAs. Documents included from the table of contents are for the present session only but previous sessions are still available and searchable at the site. Included from the Table of Contents are orders of the day, progress of bills, votes and proceedings, Hansard and selected committee proceedings.

Information about MLAs is listed alphabetically and by riding. This include photos and short bios as well as contact information. Although this site does not contain extensive information about the history of the legislative assembly or the role of parliament, neither does it claim to offer such information. A message from the speaker clearly indicates the role of the site is to 'to make available, in a timely fashion, the legislative papers of the Assembly.'

What's accessible: Frequent visitors have fast easy access to recent votes and even the Hansard blues. Researchers requiring more in-depth analysis can use the search engine to find documents by subject or by document type for all sessions. Brief explanations of documents, legislative procedures and other important information (including copyright) are easily accessible for novice users but not obtrusive for the seasoned

visitor. In addition, the site's simple text-based design is easy to load and easy to follow. A text-only version of the home page only is available for the visually impaired and users of text browsers.

Worth Noting: Well done. Brilliantly simple layout with no fuss.

Alberta
(http://www.assembly.ab.ca/)

What's available: Hansard, status of bills, an MLA directory which includes portfolios, bios and photos. This site has included an extensive Citizen's Guide with lots of educational information about the legislative process in Alberta. Special programs for students, tours and special events are also published here. Press releases, located at the Government of Alberta site list committee meetings.

What's accessible: As one of the Canadian pioneers of legislative information on the Internet, Alberta demonstrates an easy, amicable way to search through almost five years of Hansard and other documents. This site contains extensive search options, from MLA listings to all Hansard or only one session. Status of bills are included but full text of legislation is not on this site.

Worth Noting: The site contains medium-scale graphics which are bearable because the content is so rich.

Saskatchewan
(http://www.legassembly.sk.ca/)

What's Available. Hansard debates and bills are listed by date in an "Index". Committee proceedings and other committee information are listed separately. This site includes separate links for both visitor information and educational information.

What's Accessible: Hansard, committee proceedings, journals and bills can all be searched individually or simultaneously with a versatile key word search engine. The no nonsense approach made for very successful surfing. One small complaint is the Index to the Site. This page lists available Hansard files and bills and links to the Library's Index. Once again, the use of index is a bit misleading.

Manitoba
(http://www.gov.mb.ca/leg-asmb/index1.html

What's available: If you can wait for the interesting yet huge graphic to download on the home page, you will find a partial listing of legislative documents. Hansard is there — divided each day by summary index, which allows a search of, for example, only oral questions. Committee meeting notices are included under

legislative assembly information. Secondary information about members, caucus membership and the speaker's office is also included.

What's accessible: There is not an index for Hansard nor is there a global search function. Subject searching is next to impossible. Essentially this is a document storage site — not a document collection.

Worth noting: Manitoba was a pioneer in mounting Hansard on the web. Unfortunately, they have missed the opportunity to improve with time.

New Brunswick
(http://www.gov.nb.ca/legis/index.htm)

What's available: This global reaching site, (links to New Brunswick and Canada appear in the main table of contents area) actually provides varied content. The legislative documents available here include journals, status of legislation, committee membership and throne and budget speeches. Some committee discussion papers are also available.

This bilingual site also provides information about the legislative process in New Brunswick and press releases. The information about members includes party standings, members alphabetically by riding or alphabetically by party. Biographies are included for cabinet members only. The hypertext links for members by party is an e-mail link.

What accessible: The search function searches all documents of the Government of New Brunswick server. Surfers eager to follow verbatim debates on the web are out of luck.

Worth noting: Top marks for layout and design but overall, content poor. Bills and debates would be a great addition to this site.

Nova Scotia
(http://www.gov.ns.ca/leg/index.htm)

What's available: This site includes Hansard, committee membership and schedule of meetings, committee proceedings where available and an extensive directory of members.

Legislation is also provided, including an index by name or number and status of legislation. The statutes are also included here. Interestingly, Nova Scotia provides hard copy subscription information for each document type. Visitor information, a history of Province House and an explanation of the legislative process are also available.

What accessible: Nova Scotia has done a good job of providing a simple table of contents to publications available. Information about the documents is handy, but again, not obtrusive for the seasoned surfer. Once again,

a focused attempt to provide content but little or no attempt to ease access by providing useful indexes or search engines. For a daily user, this straightforward document delivery system works great. As a document collection, there are too few points of access to make subject searching possible.

Prince Edward Island
http://www.gov.pe.ca/leg/index.asp

What's available: PEI is one of the few legislative sites to take advantage of the multimedia features of the web. From the home page, a well-equipped user can view the assembly in real time or hear the proceedings in real time. The audio proceedings are archived for those who missed it the first time.

What's accessible: Hansard is available in text format with a superior search engine. A link to progress of bills is on the home page, but the document returned no data at last attempt. Included in a nice, easy loading side bar are links to both the PEI government telephone directory and visitor information. The visitor guide provided is for all of PEI and does not easily link to information about visiting the legislature.

Information about members is included in the Table of Contents. The members list is by constituency and numbered but it is not alphabetical by riding or name. Luckily a global search function will ferret out details in any of the documents on the legislative web site.

Worth Noting: Real-time audio and video is an excellent use of the power of the web. The visitor guide link and contents link take the user out of the PEI legislative site and on to more general PEI information pages. From a contents page, unless otherwise stated, all links should drill down. This helps the user, who obviously chose the site to find the necessary files.

Newfoundland and Labrador
http://www.gov.nf.ca/house/hoa_ovr.htm

What's available: Included here are a members directory, committee information and information about the speaker. Membership information is included in these documents but there are no photos or biographies.

Verbatim proceedings of the standing committee on public accounts are available in full text under a separate link from the home page. Information about party standings and the current parliamentary session are listed prominently on the home page.

What's accessible: Committee information is arranged by date — not committee. A surfer must choose the year, then scroll through a chronological listing to find the appropriate information. Unfortunately, the committee meetings hypertext links are only to the meeting notifications.

Worth Noting: A very large graphic of the chamber takes up most of the home page. Links to the documents themselves are almost buried in the bottom right hand corner.

North West Territories
http://www.gov.nt.ca/hansard/index.html

What's available: Legislative documents are available at the Government of the North West Territories Home Page under Politics. E-mail links to members are also included in the general government phone directory. An introductory paragraph informs visitors of the nature of the legislative process in NWT.

What's accessible: A search engine is provided for Hansard. There is also a copy of Hansard available in WordPerfect. The entire site is also searchable, including the government phone directory.

Worth Noting: Although legislative information appears here, this is not a site dedicated to the legislative process. Excellent graphic design for a general information site.

Yukon Territory
http://www.gov.yk.ca/legassem.htm

What's available: Hansard, the Hansard Blues and the order paper are available at the Legislative Assembly site. Members office numbers and phone numbers are available through the general government phone directory. Information about Cabinet is also available here. The legislation page is under construction. The Government Leader page is also under construction.

What's accessible: Hansard is equipped with a chronological listing and a robust global search engine. As expected the order paper and blues are available only for the present day (when sitting.) The Table of Contents is a bit confusing with Legislative Assembly appearing as a sub-category of Government.

Worth Noting: It is very disconcerting to have Table of Contents links (government leader, legislation) with no content. Links to expanded information should be made available when the information is present — not before.

Conclusion

Funky graphics are fun, but most visitors to legislative sites only want one thing: information. At present, most frustrated web searchers can contact the nearest depository library for the hard copy of Hansard or committee reports. Granted, print sources are not as timely but for all governments — with the exception of the federal government — they are still available.

Government document specialists in libraries anticipate a gradual move to ceasing depository distribution of Hansard and other legislative documents in the years to come. Hopefully, these legislatures will then be prepared to provide clear and precise access to these document collections on the web.

> *Will we still be surfing the web in the year 2000? Ask the inventors of gopher technology, hailed as a revolution seven years ago, and now virtually disappeared from the Internet!*

Access concerns do not stop with a good search engine. Access may be denied to those without Internet. Some sites are not accessible to text-based browsers, or browsers for the visually impaired. Canada's attempts to provide access to legislative documents is spotty historically. Eventually, all governments realized the value of publishing parliamentary business and providing proper access to these collections. These instruments of democracy are migrating to the web. The principle of access to fair and just reporting of government business must not be forgotten.

Despite great leaps in the technological revolution, every archivist knows that the most reliable storage medium is still paper. Ceasing paper publication of these important historical and cultural documents may jeopardize their accessibility in the future.

Editor's Note: A table linking legislative documents available at each of the provincial legislative Web Sites has been prepared by Maureen Martyn and is available at the *Canadian Parliamentary Review* site.

http://www.parl.gc.ca/infoparl