PARLINFO: Electronic Access to Canada's Parliamentary Heritage

by Talia Chung and Claude Brind'Amour

Bringing a piece of Canada's history into the electronic age, that is how some may refer to the Library of Parliament's PARLINFO project. The pairing of historical content and electronic medium: Canadian history meets Internet technology. Result: a new way of making parliamentary information available and a flexible new tool for locating information about parliamentarians. And like many of today's electronic resources, it had its genesis in a book published decades before.
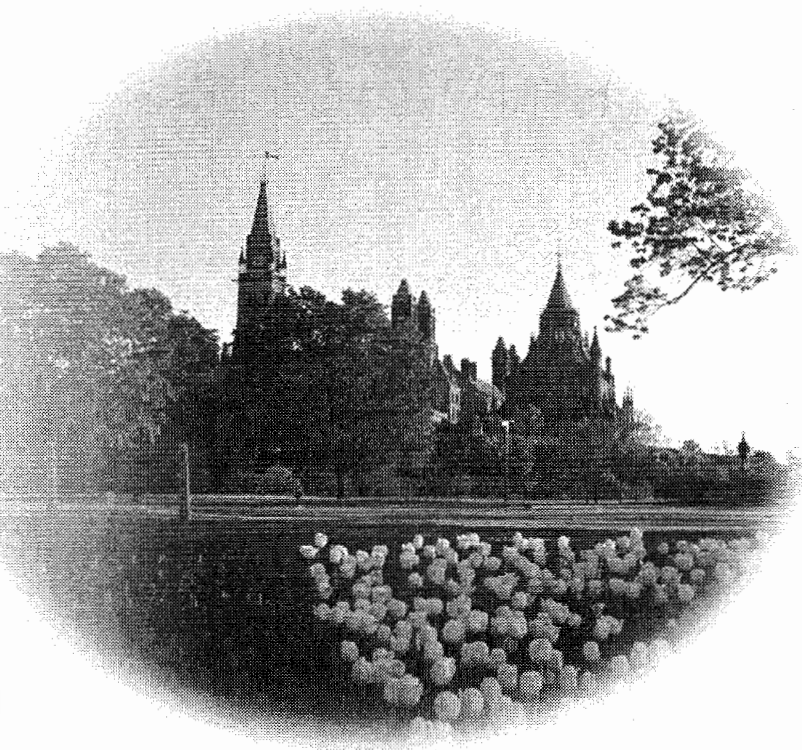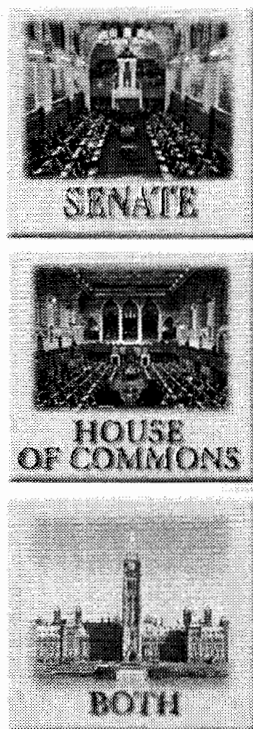
In 1964, a special project was initiated by the staff of the Publications Section of the Public Archives (now National Archives) of Canada. To commemorate Canada's centennial, a unique work was produced which gathered together over 3165 biographies of parliamentarians who had held office in Canada from Confederation up to July 1st, 1967. Under the direction of J. Keith Johnson, *The Canadian Directory of Parliament: 1867-1967* was published. The biographical sketches detailed the parliamentary careers of the men and women who had held office in the Senate or House of Commons. It included dates of parliamentary service, offices held, and constituencies represented. This source soon became an indispensable reference work for anyone interested in Canada's parliamentarians.

It took over four years to complete *The Canadian Directory of Parliament*. The Public Archives staff combed through diverse sources to ensure that the entries were as complete and as accurate as possible. Sources from which this information was derived included historical

Claude Brind'Amour is Chief, Dissemination Section at the Library of Parliament. With Mike Graham, he co-ordinated the first part of the Parlinfo project (1966-today) and will be co-ordinating the second part (1867-1965) in forthcoming years. Talia Chung is a reference librarian with the Library of Parliament.

editions of *The Parliamentary Guide*, family histories, biographies, newspapers, parliamentary journals and debates, local and regional histories, official records, as well as, private papers. In spite of an intention to revise and update the data with supplements and new editions, this did not happen.

At the Library of Parliament, *The Canadian Directory of Parliament* had quickly become an invaluable source of information. Since formal updates were not forthcoming, William Stiles, assisted by Lucienne Eshelman, initiated in 1981, an informal system of collecting and updating biographical information on parliamentarians. The Library used its wealth of information resources to ensure that these biographical sketches remained accurate and up-to-date. These resources included newspaper clippings, official publications as well as information collected from the parliamentarians themselves, in-house special compilations on parliamentarians, as well as the *History of the Federal Electoral Ridings, 1867-1992*, a reference work produced by the Library with the assistance of the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer. Legislators from both chambers were extremely co-operative in providing the Library with information on themselves and their careers. Over time this wealth of data, not available or consolidated in any published source, grew into a casual collection of information that acted as a corporate / parliamentary memory. The Library began to

consider making this information available to a wider audience.

The Birth of PARLINFO

In 1994, under the guidance of Michael Graham and Marguerite Campbell, the update to *The Canadian Directory of Parliament* began to take shape. The information contained in the biographies from 1967 onwards, was checked and then entered into a word processing program using a layout similar to those found in the *Canadian Directory of Parliament*. The original intent was to publish a bilingual print publication, but in 1996, the inauguration of a new visitors' reception area in the Center Block of Parliament led to creation of a completely different product.

Within the confines of the Visitors' Welcome Center, new bronze plaques engraved with the names of every Senator or Member of Parliament, that had represented Canadians since the birth of Canada in 1867, are prominently displayed. The Speaker of the House of Commons, Gilbert Parent, wished that visitors to Parliament Hill could access biographical information on any or all of the parliamentarians listed on the plaques, and leave with a printed document containing that biographical information. With the approval and co-operation of the Speaker of the Senate, Gildas Molgat, as well as the Speaker of the House of Commons, and the full support and encouragement of the Parliamentary Librarian, Richard Paré and the Director General of the Information and Documentation Branch, François LeMay, the Library undertook the formidable task of transforming an unilingual English print publication into a bilingual (English/French) electronic tool available to the public.

The work was assigned to Michael Graham and Claude Brind'Amour, and they immediately agreed with the suggestion from the House of Commons Information System that the publication must be available as a Web-based interactive kiosk. A partnership was formed between the Library of Parliament, supported by the House of Commons Information Systems Directorate, and a private-sector company specialising in information technology by the name of Systemscope. Together they produced PARLINFO. The Library retains full control of the content of PARLINFO, while having available to them the expertise of Systemscope in the more technical aspects of the design of the system. This included the structure of the database, as well as, the search interface of the system.

Decisions on the database, such as the structure, the fields to be used, the relationships between fields, the or-

der in which these fields should appear, the protocols to be followed, and many other details, had to be made promptly and judiciously. There was meticulous checking and re-checking of the information in order to produce a reference tool as accurate as possible. Hélène Platt and Denise Ledoux did much of the verification of the data and of the links to the digitised photographs. On the technical side, Denis Fournier provided suggestions to Systemscope on several database issues that needed to be resolved. These were only a few of the many who made a contribution to the PARLINFO project.

What is PARLINFO?

PARLINFO is an interactive touch-screen kiosk, specifically designed for visitors to Parliament Hill who are interested in obtaining information on Parliament and Parliamentarians. It is primarily an electronic directory of Canada's parliamentarians as it contains biographical data on members of the Senate and House of Commons from 1966 to present. The Library originally coined the name PARLINFO in 1981 to represent, in electronic format, the sum of the Library's information products on Parliamentarians and Parliament.
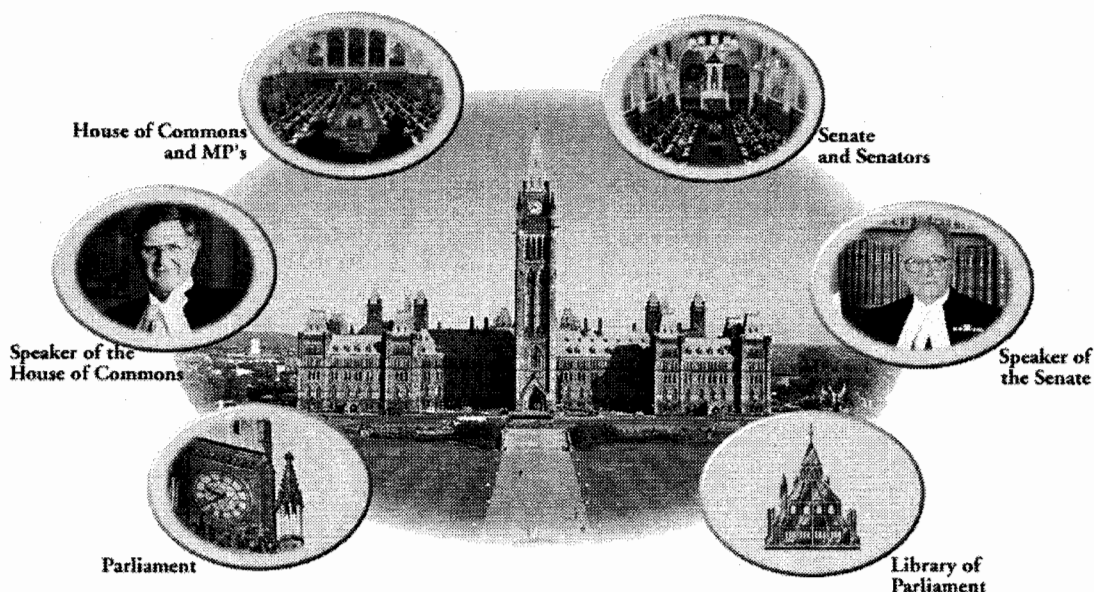
Getting from a static, page-based publication to a full interactive Web-based electronic product in a year and a half required a Herculean effort on the part of all those involved.

PARLINFO presently consists of a specifically configured SQL database containing over 1500 biographies and a custom designed Web front-end. The front-end, or search interface, displays Web pages in a controlled fashion and requires the user to interact with the system by pressing buttons on a touch-screen. The system is presently a stand-alone kiosk, but it has been designed in anticipation of making it available to the public via the Internet and the Parliamentary precinct via the Intranet. The kiosk, as well as the Web site, will be updated automatically from the master database.

Focus group testing on the beta version of PARLINFO was conducted to determine whether the front-end design was successful, and to collect comments and sugges-

FAQ's

Frequently Asked Questions about Canada's Parliament

House of Commons and MP's

Senate and Senators

Speaker of the House of Commons

Speaker of the Senate

Parliament

Library of Parliament

tions on the type of content users may wish to find on a system such as this. Results from the tests allowed the Library and Systemscope to refine the front-end design. Testing also revealed that visitors to Parliament Hill were interested in general information about Parliament, including information on the duties of the Prime Minister, the history of the Senate and the House of Commons, and the role of the Governor General. These suggestions were gathered and applied to a subsequent version of PARLINFO. Heeding feedback from members of its target audience required that the Library add two new components to PARLINFO: a section on the office of the Governor General and a FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) section about Parliament, containing general information on the Senate and Senators, on the House of Commons and MPs, and on the Library of Parliament.

PARLINFO consists of two types of data: static and dynamic. The general information on the Governor General and Parliament are static, text-based Web pages that cannot be queried, and the biographical sketches are dynamic, database elements that can be queried in a variety of ways. The biographical sketches are composed of numerous fields, which contain specific types of information (e.g. name, date of birth, date of public service, party affiliation, etc.). Because the information is organised in a database, each of the main fields can be used as a key for looking up information. For example, a typical visitor from Ontario by the name of MacDougall can search the database not only for parliamentarians who have represented Ontario in the past, but also for any MacDougall who may have held office in the Senate or House of Commons since 1966. The database has the flexibility to allow users to search the list of MPs representing regions in all provinces, therefore a visitor from New Brunswick, who may not remember the name of his/her MP can browse through a list of MPs representing the province to locate the member .

The search interface is organised into three levels: The first level asks users whether they are searching for information on a Senator, a member of the House of Commons, or both. The second level narrows the time focus to the current parliament or to previous parliaments. The last level allows users to further narrow the focus to a specific individual by providing searches by name, by province, or by party affiliation.

An additional feature has been designed to allow for bulk printing of biographies on special Senate and House of Commons parchment letterhead. These high quality documents will soon be available for purchase at the Souvenir Boutique on Parliament Hill, and will provide visitors with an attractive, official souvenir.

PARLINFO is currently available as a stand-alone kiosk for visitors to Parliament Hill, as well as, on the Library's Intranet site. It currently provides over 1500 biographical sketches from 1966 to the present. Digitised photos accompany most biographies (less than 200 are missing, and work is in progress to obtain the rest). Current plans for PARLINFO include making it available on the desktops of parliamentarians via the Intranet on Parliament Hill, and modifying its appearance slightly in order to make it available on the Internet. Long term plans will focus on completing the database by including all parliamentarians since Confederation.

PARLINFO's development required the capabilities and talents of many people. Its success is a monument to the efforts and diverse skills of its many contributors. It is a model for inter-organisational co-operation and exemplifies the productivity that can be fostered between public and private sectors.

Contributors to PARLINFO:

Office of the Governor General

Additional research: Kate McGregor

Senate

France Bélisle, Hélène Bouchard, Colette O'Brien, Dianne Salt

House of Commons

ISSI: Michel Roy, Soufiane Ben Moussa, Mathieu Beauregard

Photos from the Curator's Office: Steve Delroy, Andy Shott, Paul Roberston

Research support from the House of Commons: José Semrau, Éliane Comtois, Gaston Massé, Yves Rouillard, Ginette Hupé

Systemscope (www.systemscope.com)

Development and programming: Larry Duff, Denis Barbeau (barbeau@systemscope.com), Niranjan Cheliah, Wojciech Peszko (peszko@systemscope.com)

Leonard & Littlemore

Graphic Design: Tom Littlemore (toml@smt.net)

Jin Chen Photography

Photos digitization: Jin Chen (hb_@cyberus.ca)

National Archives of Canada

Additional research: Jean-Pierre Wallot

Office of the Chief Electoral Officer

Additional research: Betty Léger

Library of Parliament

Management of project: Michael Graham, Lynn Brodie, Claude Brind'Amour

Research: Hélène Platt, Denise Ledoux

Technical assistance: Denis Fournier

Focus group testing: Talia Chung