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Opening Speech at the EPRI Conference, 27 October 2004

Dear colleagues,
Distinguished guests,

Let me start by wishing you a warm welcome to Stockholm and to the Swedish Parliament. We are pleased that so many of you have accepted the invitation to this conference on whether modern technology can help bridge the gap between voters and politicians.

Decreasing participation in elections, fewer citizens that are willing to undertake voluntary political appointments and a diminishing trust in politicians are tendencies shared by many countries. At the same time, statistics show that public interest in politics is high, especially among young people.

Can information technology open new roads to participation for our political parties and new ways of involving citizens in political decisions? Yes, I think it can, but we must bear in mind that 'e-democracy' is always linked to our ordinary democratic process.

Nor is there only one given concept of democracy. In reality we are speaking of many different political systems. All democracies are shaped by their own history, traditions and social experience.

The main categories of IT democracy can be been characterised as ‘rapid democracy’, ‘strong democracy’, and ‘distant democracy’.

Rapid democracy focuses on *direct participation* by citizens in decision-making. Information technology could be used as a means for participating in direct democracy. It can, in any case, become a means of supporting the representative political system by making public opinion clearly visible. This will revitalise the democratic process. Recurrent Gallup polls are one possible method.

‘Push-button’-techniques exist for the electronic counting of votes, but unsolved problems remain, for instance, regarding security and guarantees for voter anonymity, both in connection with elections and other voting procedures.

The second category is ***strong democracy***, which stresses *political dialogue* as a tool. Through public debate, dialogue and analysis, the best arguments are found for choices and decisions that need to be made. In this perspective, information technology becomes a tool to create arenas for public debate. Through those arenas citizens can influence the political agenda. To a much higher degree than traditional arenas, such as newspapers and established media, they become a place for open two-way communication. Here we find ‘community networks’ as a form of IT-based communication.

The third category is ***distant democracy***. This concept is built on the belief that ‘election’ is more important than ‘participation’. The basic understanding is that political parties are competing with one another for the votes of the electorate. Elections legitimate the political parties and their programmes. Between elections, parties are given a broad freedom of movement in political decision

making and its implementation. Accountability is imposed at the next election.

In this category of democracy, the political parties may use the Internet to spread information on various issues of concern, which enables them to rapidly reach out to their key public groups. But citizens are really not expected to participate in the political process. They are primarily seen as consumers of public service. Therefore, supply and access to administrative and service information becomes central. Citizens are invited, through information technology, to participate by commenting upon public services – and not much more than that.

In Sweden, I think it is fair to say that information technology has primarily been used to supply services along these lines of ‘distant democracy’. On the other hand, we have made considerable progress in this field. Access to information is very high, and public ability to utilise these services is also high. The tools – computers and their search programmes - are becoming increasingly sophisticated, widespread and frequently used by citizens.

It is up to each single member state of the European Union to decide what kind of democracy it should develop, and how modern technology should be used to support that development. I hope that this conference can inspire thoughts in this regard, through a vivid exchange of experiences and ideas.

As parliamentarians, we must face the urgent need for our institutions to adapt to the new reality that our knowledge intensive society has brought upon us.

Several of our daily net-based newspapers provide their readers with an opportunity to vote yes or no on day-to-day issues. Our television programmes offer opportunities to the viewers to vote on different subjects, and they even present the results of their polls before the programmes are over. There are ample and growing opportunities for our citizens to interact with what they read, hear and see.

But in this sea of opportunities we as Parliamentarians still often have to debate sensitive issues within closed committee doors. A Parliament can take months to come to a decision, while a newspaper or a radio station only requires a few minutes. This is a major challenge for the Parliaments. In order to reach out to the citizens, and increase transparency, we sometimes need to adapt our procedures to the conditions of the media. At the same time, we cannot compromise on the need for thorough deliberations.

Action groups and political movements concentrating on one or two issues demand quick results. But perhaps their impatience can be somewhat appeased if we can better communicate to them what we are doing, what time frames we are working within, and what considerations we have to take. Efficiency is not only about speed.

Compromise is not something pressure groups are striving for, but compromise, in one way or another, is the most common form of decision-making we have in our Parliaments and governments.

Parliaments need to use the opportunities the IT-revolution gives us in quickly explaining why we sometimes have to be slow. We have to compete with newspapers, radio stations and television channels in providing opportunities for the citizens to make their

voices heard. At the same time we have to distance ourselves from the need to present a new front page every day.

The Internet gives us an opportunity to make our decisions and committee reports immediately available. E-mails often increase the burden for the individual politician, but the question for us to solve is not how to lower the volume of e-messages, but how we better can understand the thoughts that are behind those messages.

We will almost certainly see more of ‘e-democracy’ in the future, in the sense that more and more activities on the Internet will be connected to the democratic process.

I think we should have realistic expectations when it comes to electronic voting, electronic consultations, and electronic elections.

Cyberspace democracy will come – but maybe not so fast.

Ladies and gentleman, colleagues and friends,

With these introductory remarks I welcome you all most cordially to the conference here in the premises of the Swedish Parliament. I wish you a fruitful and productive meeting. Hopefully it will resound appropriately in future work, both nationally and internationally.

Thank you.