
The Use of Technology in the Alberta Legislative Assembly

by Carol Haley, MLA

One topic on the agenda of the 40th Canadian Regional Conference of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association was the impact of technology on the legislature. This article looks at changes in the Alberta Legislative Assembly over the last decade.

While staff in the building and in the constituency offices have been going high tech ever since 1988, for members of the legislative assembly it was a much slower process. There was a perception that members did not need a computer because we have staff to type letters and answer the phones. No one could really see the need or the possibilities.

After many disagreements in our Members Services Committee about whether or not MLAs could even have a laptop computer, it was finally agreed that if we insisted on this insanity we would have to pay for them out of our constituency budgets. They would not be supplied as part of the MLA package. This should not come as a surprise to us because fax machines were considered an extra until about five years ago.

In 1996 the then Speaker of our Assembly, Stan Schumacher, reluctantly agreed to do some wiring in the chamber and we rebels were allowed to bring our laptops into the chamber as long as we followed some pretty strict rules on when they were to be turned on and to obey the no noise rules.

In 1996 there were five of us, in 1997 ten were on line and by 1998 we were up to 35 members. By the year 2000 there were 55 MLAs using laptops in the chamber.

In the fall of 2000 under the guidance of our current Speaker we made some great strides forward and arranged through Member Services to supply as part of the

MLA package a Compaq Armada laptop, a small laser printer, and a docking station in everyone's office if they chose to have one.

Part of the reason for the model choice was to ensure that servicing would be a lot easier. Compatibility and service would be major issues if we were all buying different models and expecting a small but dedicated staff to help us learn. We have also arranged for a two-year turn around on upgrades just to try and keep everyone current with recent technology.

Our chamber is wired so we can all access the outside world, as well as our GroupWise email system. I will not tell you that every MLA is enjoying this experience and some, in fact, want no part of it. Personally, I cannot imagine not being on line. I do a lot of research and the internet has become an endless source of information for me.

MLAs are learning to adapt and change with technological advancements. Five years ago who knew what the internet was? What is an information highway? What was email? Well you know now.

Email is both a gift and a curse. It is a very immediate form of communication. I can be sitting in the chamber and get an email from a constituent, lean over ask the minister a question, get an answer, email the answer back in just a few minutes. Even if the answer is no! My options are to send it on to my staff, or deal with it directly at that moment.

As the Whip for my government it is also an amazing tool when it comes to tracking down MLAs who are absent. I just email my staff and say find him or her and a

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few minutes later ... like magic, they are back in the chamber, usually frowning at me.

By the way, you can get into trouble with email because it is so fast you do not have time for that sober second thought. My mother used to tell me to write a letter, but not to mail it till the next day. That way if you want to change it you can. With email, you can type away, hit send and it is there already. There should be a warning bell somewhere that says "Do not send this email, until you are rational!"

The true downside of email is the lobby groups who send out a broadcast email to all 83 MLAs and get their 1000 members or more to do the same. It is frustrating to get 100 emails that all say the same thing from people who may or may not live in your constituency. It is time-consuming to deal with but the delete button is becoming my best friend.

A recent study suggested that if you are getting 50 or more emails a day, you are not able to do anything else. I get 20 to 30 per day which are just one-line information statements and others are more complex. I am learning to do a lot more forwarding to my staff, so that it is handled just like a regular letter or constituent phone call.

A Virtual Assembly?

Having said all that about where we have been and where we are now in our Assembly I would like to spend a few minutes addressing some of the more radical proposals that would use technology to create a "virtual assembly".

Honestly we are not ready for that step and in my heart I have to say I hope we never are. Just because you can do something, does not mean you should. Technology is a tool, and if used wisely it will enhance communication with our electorate. Anything you can do with technology can be hacked into. I believe security has come a long way, but even Microsoft was hacked into a few months ago. I am not willing to risk votes on budgets, or legislation being tampered with.

We have a parliamentary system that has evolved over 800 years. We use rules that are based on that system.

People met in the village square, the problems were local and they were solved locally. I am sure it was not that difficult to get to know your 15 or 20 neighbours.

Today it is not possible to know personally 45,000 or 100,000 constituents, their family history, their children's names, and how many cows they have. Unlike even 100

years ago, people today have phones, faxes and instantaneous global television coverage.

The whole world is moving faster and faster, but there are still only so many hours in a day. Everything has changed, the way we speak, think, dress but for hundreds of years one thing has remained relatively constant and this is face-to-face discussions in a chamber. Having missed out on the village square meetings I see this as democracy. It is a visible sign to all who care to see it, that there is government and it is here.

I worry about the term direct democracy, it sounds so perfect. What could be wrong with having referendums on everything? Nothing at all as long as everyone takes it seriously – does all the background work, understands the pros and cons of the issue and reads endless mounds of paper. Then by all means let us have direct democracy.

*There is so much information now.
Government is big business.
Knowledge is doubling every 18
months. How is the average person
supposed to keep up with that so they
can vote on everything?*

I have access to massive amounts of information, a research branch, department heads, executive assistants, ministers, and staff that help me sort through all of it, in the sincere hope that I will learn enough, understand enough – to make informed decisions on the issues.

Once I have done that work, it is my responsibility to use that knowledge to the best advantage for my constituents and my province. I believe that is why I was elected. I do my work both in my constituency and at the legislature I cannot imagine doing it all from home, where I would not get to know my colleagues, develop personal relationships with them, fight with them, and work with them.

While technology is an important tool, it cannot replace the human contact. The most powerful tool of direct democracy is one we have had for centuries. It only requires a small piece of paper and a pencil. It is called a ballot and if I mess up, and my electors see me as not representing them, they will let me know. It won't be virtual it will be real and immediate.