

Parliament and Democracy in the 21st Century: The Impact of Information and Communication Technologies

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have affected all aspects of life in the industrialized world. They have changed the ways in which we communicate, the way we create and share knowledge, how we organize ourselves, and most importantly ICTs have profoundly affected the speed at which change occurs. Consider the rate at which we create knowledge.

In the period from 1500BC to 1945AD total world knowledge doubled three times. From 1945 to the present it is estimated to have doubled 14 times. Some of the largest companies in the world today did not exist thirty years ago. Some of the most secure, most dominant companies in existence then, are no longer in business.

It is not surprising that Government and Parliament will be affected by these changes. They are archetypical information organizations, and yet rather than being enhanced by these very dramatic changes they have both been diminished. The major government reform movements of the last thirty years have served to remove services from government. Every time pressure for change has grown in a specific sector, the institutional response has been to "privatize". While this may have met the immediate need it has also allowed government to escape the pressure for true institutional reform.

In Parliament the situation is much the same. As the rate of change increases, the demand for faster responses becomes more intense. Over time the institutional response has been to move authority from the Commons to the Executive. Bills are written with

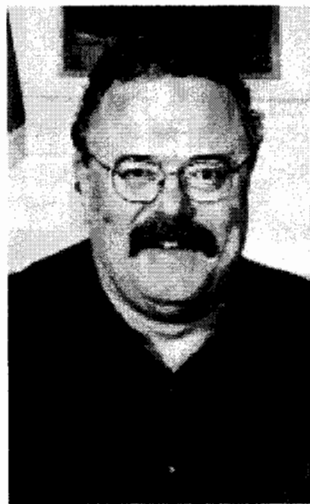
clauses enabling regulation rather than defining action in legislation. Increasingly public services are removed from oversight by Parliament. Process changes are introduced in order to speed things through the House. Time-allocation, a process that did not exist prior to 1972, has become routine. Television, another form of ICT, has shifted public focus off of Parliament and onto Cabinet and ultimately the Leader, off debate and onto conflict with the result that the centre necessarily assumes more control in order to manage a more chaotic environment.

The question that we must now ask is: Do the same tools (ICTs) that created the problems also contain the solution? Much as I believe and would like to proclaim a resounding YES, I am forced by experience to be more cautious. The changes enabled by ICTs are neither linear nor incremental. They are the result of use, examination, modification, more use, more examination, more modification, etc. The concept of the "learning organization" has arisen to describe an

organization that is fast, flexible, and constantly re-examining itself in response to an ever changing environment.

So, the question becomes: Is it possible for a deliberative body such as Parliament to become a learning organization and, if so, should it? To help us decide consider this.

ICTs link two important capabilities. The ability to aggregate and derive information from very large amounts of data and the ability to link that information to a, many-to-many, quadratically scaled network, the Internet. In doing so ICTs break the traditional "monopolies of knowledge" that inevitably arise in large complex organizations.



Reg Alcock, MP

We tend to think of ICTs in terms of communication, the enabling of online services through automation, or broadcasting more information to citizens. The real power however, lies in the potential of ICTs to enable and support a more transparent, accountable and participatory form of government. By providing a structure and a context for public information ICTs allow citizens and their representatives to make informed choices.

From its inception a primary role of Parliament has been to provide oversight on taxation and expenditure, not just to comment but to allow or disallow specific measures. As government has become larger and more complex it has become increasingly difficult for MPs to develop an organization-wide view of government. Information is held in a variety of formats, similar activities in different departments are difficult to relate and all of this takes place in a culture of secrecy that, while it has always existed, has been greatly enhanced by the greater complexity of the information environment.

Parliament, by insisting on greater coherence of the information will enhance both its ability to provide oversight as well as allowing MPs to truly engage citizens in important decisions. However it does not stop there. The relationships between Government, Parliament and Citizens comprise a single system. Changing any part of the system will produce changes in other aspects.

ICTs will enable electronic voting by MPs as well as by citizens. For each, two conditions must be met. There must be a means of authenticating identity and there must be a secure channel for the transmission of the information. Once these conditions are met two important trends are enabled.

First the ability to vote online will dramatically reduce the cost of voting. This in turn will allow more frequent use of referenda and will shift the balance of control from Parliament to citizens. Rather

than voting once every four years, citizens will be able to express opinions more frequently. The impact will be greater accountability.

Second, the ability of MPs to vote electronically raises the question of why, if the MP is engaged in important public work that takes them away from the House, are their constituents deprived of their right to be heard? MPs will no longer have to be present to vote. This in turn will enhance the importance of their individual vote while reducing the importance of the place. The impact will be greater participation.

Beyond online voting is the possibility that debate, deliberation, and decision-making could all take place in cyberspace and in a manner that all citizens could review, comment on and potentially participate in. The impact will be greater transparency.

We are in the very early stages of a truly transformative change. How it will play out will be determined by the debates to come. The genie is out of the bottle. The challenge to MPs is to educate themselves about ICTs in order to play a role in the development of the systems that will determine the future direction of our democracy.

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