Technology in the Legislature: A Roundtable

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Ed Buckingham (Newfoundland and Labrador): I came into the House of Assembly with some background in technology but like all new members I quickly found myself suffering from information overload. There were annual reports, strategic plans, business plans, activity plans. Where were these all coming from? It turns out that we have relatively new legislation called the *Transparency and Accountability Act*, the goal of which is "to enhance the transparency and accountability of the government and government entities to the people of the province."

In practice this means we get reports from some 160 bodies including departments, health authorities, school boards, the hydro board, the liquor control board at the higher level, down to all sorts of smaller boards like the one responsible for geographical names. Altogether some 9,000 copies of reports are produced and this mass of paper was starting to accumulate on my shelves. So being a bit of an environmentalist, and, having been a teacher, learning to conserve every resource that you possibly could, I decided to do something about it.

On May 28, 2008, I introduced a private member's resolution asking that the government explore ways to reduce the amount of paper that comes into the Legislature. I wanted to reduce this amount to the bare minimum. Another motivation was that, as a government, we talk about recycling, we talk about energy plans, and we have the legislative authority to act but do we have the moral authority? If we bring in something like this, we can say, "Look: This is what we are doing and here is the example," so we can claim some moral authority.

One of the things we did was make some changes to the way that tabled documents come into the House. Now the new policy requires that any submissions provide 10 paper copies, one for the Clerk to sign off on, maybe one or two for the Legislative Library, one for each of the House leaders. Also, the requirement is that documents be submitted in PDF or some other acceptable electronic format.

What are some of the advantages of this? The first is increased public access. Some jurisdictions provide a list of what has been tabled but no access to the content. By going down this road, we now have, through the Internet, the ability to have the public come in, see what it is we are dealing with every day, and they do not have to come in to the Confederation Building, make a request, wait, have it copied and then bring it home. This has certainly improved public access.

This has led to significant reductions in the amount of paper being used, the amount of postage, the amount of photocopying and printing. Not enough to change the world but we are setting a new standard. From a user's point of view I have found that when I am doing research the ability to cut and paste is very beneficial. Rather than having to photocopy something from one of these reports and have it retyped, I can just cut and paste. It makes my time more efficient.

Now let me say a word about the use of laptops in the House. My constituents think that when the House is in session, the MHAs must be around. This is when the phone calls start to ramp up. What they do not realize is that is that during a session I have the least amount of time to deal with their concerns. We have briefing meetings, caucus meetings and then the Legislature in the afternoon. By the time I get out of the House, officials I want to talk to have already gone home for the day. Could we not reduce the down time while the House is in session by being able to work on our laptops? Last session, the Speaker checked with the House leaders about introducing laptops in the House and got their approval. To my surprise, only three MHAs actually took up the offer. But I suspect as we get a bit more familiar with them people might start to use them a bit more.

Of course, there are protocol issues involved. You cannot read your speeches from your laptop. You cannot use it to download information. It has to be very unobtrusive. We do not have Internet access in our House, mostly because the branch of executive council that manages our information systems has decided that a wireless network is not secure enough. Even though our House was built in 1991, there was never any provision made for hard network cables or extra power. It will take about $160,000 or so to retrofit the House, so it is a just a question of whether we have enough people who actually want it to justify that kind of expense.

One possibility we discussed around laptops was the idea of a managed desktop which means the ability to have everyone see a document at the same time. If you had a House full of laptops, you could create a situation where everyone would have access to the same document at the same time.

A third aspect of technology in the legislature is the way we deal with expenses following recommendations in the 2007 Green report *Rebuilding Confidence*. The idea was that government must become very open, very transparent, and Justice Green was very prescriptive about the ways that we should allow ourselves and our activities to be seen. Obviously the use of the Internet was one way, and probably the most effective way, for people who are interested in seeing exactly how we conduct our business.

Part of this involves putting out expenses online in a very detailed way. In the initial version of the system we just indicated our expenses for a certain date but it did not give much detail. However, with the new system that we have just brought online, we now submit everything in much greater detail. My constituents, or anyone who is interested, will know if I am having lunch meetings at the fish and chips place or if I am eating at the best restaurants.

To maybe even bring that a little further, if you need to get some printing done and you have a printing shop in your district, or, God forbid, you should have two printing shops in your district, or, even worse, your brother-in-law has a printing shop in your district—well you see where this is going. Previously, if Bob's Printing Shop provided your printing, it was just shown simply as "Printing." Now it will be, "You spent $285 at Bob's Printing Shop on this day." So how do you manage that? Well, if Bob keeps coming in at the lowest price, you really do not have a lot of choice in the matter, especially if he provides good service. So if you have a few printing shops in your district, do you have to spread it around? Do you have to be careful if it is one of your relatives? Again, you can see where this could be an issue. So this is one of the concerns.

But to balance off on that, you always have to ask the question, "Do people have a right to know where you're spending your money"? Most of us would say yes right away, but the question becomes, "To what level of detail"? This is not a practical question; this is a political question. We have in many ways, I suppose, opened the envelope in terms of being accountable, in terms of being transparent. We have a lot of jurisdictions that are coming to see what we have done, and we are very open in terms of how we answer. I believe we have had some representation from Westminster already to look at the types of things that we have done, the experiences that we have had.

Warren Michelson MLA (Saskatchewan): I wonder what the rationale would be of not having laptops allowed in the House. If you are saving paper, that would be an ideal way. Why would you not have laptops allowed in the House, or BlackBerrys? I have done member's statements off a laptop.

Russ Hiebert MP (House of Commons): In the House of Commons, we have access to the Internet from our desks. It is a plug option. It is high-speed, and if you have ever had a chance to visit, you will notice that maybe 15% of MPs will be accessing their laptops at any given time. There is no restriction on the use of them as a device for reading a speech. Nor are there constraints in terms of using BlackBerrys. In fact, at any given moment, you might find a third to half of MPs, depending on the situation, who would be accessing their BlackBerrys. I have never heard of a constraint in

terms of giving a speech or answering a question from a BlackBerry and I would be very interested to know why there would be such a constraint. Maybe it has to do with tradition. But I would love to understand the rationale behind that. There are constraints, of course, in using wireless technology, and those are more privacy-related. But it would seem to me that more opportunity to access technology, as long as it augments our ability to do our job, is a good thing.

For many of my colleagues the Blackberry is their office. Because of the limited amount of time they have to access their physical space, this is where they reply to constituents. Thankfully, the House of Commons is very good at providing us with this technology and updating it on a regular basis. So, why, other than tradition, would there be constraints on the use of this kind of technology?

Ken Kowalski MLA (Alberta): The only time that these devices are not to be utilized in the Alberta Legislature is during question period. The reason, the justification I have given for that, is simply rudeness. I expect members to listen to other members. That is just politeness. I can assure you, when I made those statements, there were comments that came in from the virtual world—large numbers of comments. But I think less than 2% of the comments questioned my Neanderthal approach to this. About 98% said Members should be polite enough to listen to other members. Members should not be hunched back over their Blackberry instead of paying attention to one another. It was a politeness issue. Nothing else.

Bill Barisoff MLA (British Columbia): In British Columbia it also has to do with politeness and respect but also the fact that members should not be getting questions fed into their BlackBerrys and ministers should not get the answers shipped in from their offices. So I do not allow these devices during question period or while the Premier is speaking or while the leader of the opposition is speaking. Those are times that BlackBerrys cannot be used in the House.

Ron Schuler MLA (Manitoba): We dealt with the issue of laptops in the Chamber ten years ago when I got elected. BlackBerrys were not prevalent then. Now the discussion in not about laptops because basically you can do almost all your work on your BlackBerry and they are wireless.

I want to deal with the tradition side, because that was one of the debates that we had, certainly, in caucus and in the Legislature. Folks, tradition cannot

be a millstone on democracy. Voter turnout and, more importantly, youth turnout is increasingly decreasing because we are not seen as relevant. We are not reflective of our societies around us. Technology is growing, and the fact that I don't like it doesn't make it wrong.

I would suggest—and it's obviously a passion of mine—we must not be petty about some of these things. You read a speech, and instead of reading it off of a piece of paper, you read it off of a laptop. Does that really matter? Does that somehow change democracy to the point where we are harming our institutions? No. There are traditions of democracy that we have to respect, that are great and that we want to keep. But a lot of opposition is simply because I do not like it or because I do not understand it or because it has gone past me. That is the wrong attitude.

Our kids are way ahead of us. If we cannot keep pace with them, at least let us get somewhere in the ballpark as the next generation. Laptops are almost irrelevant. What is coming now is way more modern than what we are talking about here, and if we want to be relevant to the people out there, we are going to have to have more relevant discussions as parliamentarians.

I will close by saying our Speaker has been incredibly good about allowing us to move our Legislature forward. I would encourage all legislators: Please, let us not become so archaic that we lose relevance to the people who put us here.

Paul Delorey MLA (Northwest Territories): We have been grappling with this issue of Blackberry and laptops in our chamber for some time now. As the Speaker, I consider myself as a servant of the members of the House. I always say that I will allow BlackBerrys and laptops in the chamber when the members agree that is what they want. Every time it has come up for a vote, it has been turned down by members. The majority of members say they think that it shows a lack of respect for the other members and it is a distraction in the House.

We have just lately had a review of this by the rules and procedures committee. They are experimenting with BlackBerrys and laptops during committee of the whole and in committee meetings. So far, in the chamber, we have not made use of them, but it will depend on what the rules committee comes back with.

One of the issues that was brought up here was saving on paper. To the extent that we have gone electronic with a lot of our documentation and tabled documents that come into the House, we estimate that we are

going to be saving somewhere in the neighbourhood of 80% of the paper.

Kyle Fawcett MLA (Alberta): I think we have one of the most progressive Legislatures and, with all due respect to our Speaker, I think technology is a generational and a cultural thing. We talked about not paying attention in question period and yet we are allowed to pass around notes or stick up your hand for a page, I would say Blackberry are probably less distracting. If I wanted to talk to my colleague over there, just sending a text message would probably cause less distraction in the Legislature than passing around a note.

There is a huge gap of knowledge, and it does, for the most part, filter on generations as to how this technology works. In our caucus we had a discussion around this and the use of Twitter. There were some people who did not understand the distinction between a BlackBerry and a Twitter. They thought that twittering was just being on your BlackBerry. So there is a failure to even understand what this technology is and how it worked.

Roy Boudreau MLA (New Brunswick): We tried allowing members to use the BlackBerry, but with the electronic system that we have, with our microphones, we kept getting feedback. So by mutual consent, the opposition and government agreed that while we have our regular business day we do not use electronic information. During question period, there are no notes passed back and forth. If you have a question, you ask the question and the minister answers; that is.

As soon as the Question Period is over then you can use your BlackBerry. But while we have question period, we do not allow it as a matter of respect for the person answering the question. If you have your BlackBerry anywhere near your microphone, you do not hear what is being said properly, and then, of course, the answers are not the ones that you expect.

George Hickes MLA (Manitoba): We also do not allow laptops and BlackBerrys during Question Period because ministers should be able to think on their feet without answers coming in from the caucuses. Someone said, "Well, they're going to be bringing notes in." By the time the notes come from the caucus to the page and the page gets them to the minister, it's kind of too late. So this way, the ministers have to think on their feet.

Maria Minna MLA (House of Commons): I wanted to take us back to the comment that in the House of Commons we have to be listening to each other; that is why people should not be having laptops or looking at BlackBerrys. I'm sorry, but with all due respect to all of you colleagues here, I think that makes no sense whatsoever. We're really sticking our heads in the sand. We all bring stuff into the House with us. How many of you go into the Legislature without a great big binder when you are on duty. What is the difference between going through all your correspondence while somebody is speaking and reading a message that your staff has sent you on the BlackBerry? It makes my day so much easier. I used to go back to my office and work till 10 o'clock or 11. Now I can go and read documents because all of the day's emergencies have been dealt with over the BlackBerry.

As far as the BlackBerry in question period, I remember the first time it was used on our side. One of our ministers was answering a question, and then something came up and the specific piece of data he needed was sent to his BlackBerry, so he was able to stand up and give the exact number.

Let's face it: Question period is a bit of a bit of a show and people answer as much as they can. I really think that by sticking our head in the sand and saying, "Well, this technology is going to take all of this away from us, this ingenuity, this spontaneity"—I'm not sure that there is any to start with.

Diana Whalen MLA (Nova Scotia): We are talking about the relevance of technology and making our lives easier, more productive and making ourselves accessible to the public. But there is something that we do not do in Nova Scotia nor in the Parliament of Canada and that is accept online petitions from the public.

This has been something that has bothered me for quite some time. We are trying to get the public to care about government, to be more democratic, to be involved and to vote. A lot of times when there is a pressing issue or a burning issue in your community, there will be an online petition, and people are asked to go sign it. There are often thousands of names on these online petitions, but they are not accepted at our Legislature. I have seen people print those off, bring them in, slide them in with written petitions and include them, but technically they are not accepted.

I have questioned that in our Legislature and our Clerks have gone and looked into the experience elsewhere and have come back and said it is not accepted because it is not as reliable. We cannot verify

the names and things like that. But you cannot verify the names if I bring you a thousand written signatures either.

It really bothers me, and we seem to be taking our approach a lot from the government of Canada and perhaps from other Legislatures. I think this is an issue that every one of our Legislatures should be looking at. Are we not out of touch, out of step, absolutely old fashioned, not to find a solution to this? So whatever the objections are, I think we should make it our business to find a solution so that we can actually respond to the public and officially recognize those petitions within our Legislature, introduce them, and have them as part of Hansard and the record.

Cynthia Dunsford MLA (Prince Edward Island): I think we have to choose to get with the program and make sure that we are not out of the loop. If we continue to bow down to the lowest common denominator without offending anybody who is not very technically savvy, that is kind of what we are doing: We are saying, "Okay, maybe there is a relevant percentage of people in our House who do not understand how technology works or they are afraid of it but at the same time, let us try to bring them up to speed really soon, because we are not going backwards with technology. It is changing all the time, and if anything, we should be ahead of the curve and not trying to catch up all the time.