

Notes for a Speech

by

Arthur Kroeger

Crossing Boundaries Conference

Ottawa, May 8, 2003

Panel on Parliamentary Reform and Digital Democracy

Our assigned subject today is the place of Members of Parliament in a digital democracy, and how information and communications technology (ICT) could lead to a more significant role for them.

My own assessment is that ICT may in fact have the opposite effect, reducing rather than increasing the role of MPs, and that serious efforts to adapt the functioning of traditional representative democracy will be necessary if this outcome is to be avoided. What I find worrying at present is the lack of evidence that such efforts are even being considered in Canada.

Much has been written in recent years about what is termed public disengagement from politics. I think this is a mis-characterization. What people are disengaging from is politics as it is presently practiced, but not from public policy issues. They are looking for new ways of inter-acting and communicating with governments, because they have found the old ways wanting.

Canadian Policy Research Networks recently completed a far-ranging examination of public attitudes, including attitudes towards governments, across the country. Its report, issued last month, states that, “Citizens now see themselves as more than voters...They wish to be more active participants in public business...Canadians are moving from deference to governments to demanding a voice, and from unengaged citizens to citizens actively involved through dialogue” (emphasis added).

Canada today has the best educated and best informed population in its history. The mushrooming of talk-back lines and similar phenomena are clear evidence that the public have plenty of views and are looking for ways of expressing them. Every year another 2000 or so non-profit organizations are formed, evidence of the desire of citizens to become directly involved in addressing issues. If in parallel there has been a decline in voting at elections, this is a commentary on public alienation from the present system, and not on the public itself.

The phrase “participatory democracy” has been in play at least since 1968, when Mr. Trudeau injected it into the election campaign of that year. What is remarkable is how little has been done in the intervening 35 years to reconcile traditional representative government with demands from the public for direct participation. Indeed, the only political leader I have ever heard to even express the view that a problem exists was Mr. Preston Manning. A surprising number of elected representatives, federal and provincial, continue to dismiss demands for direct participation as just the work of “special interest groups.”

It is this lack of evolution in our system of representative government that I find the most unsettling in the present scene. The functioning of the Public Service has changed greatly since I was a probationary Foreign Service Officer, and particularly in the past decade as the coming of the Information Age has gathered momentum. Our politics, on the other hand, seem to be frozen in amber.

When I was Chairman of the Public Policy Forum in the period leading up to the 1993 federal election, we produced a document called Making Government Work. The section on Parliamentary reform included the following passage:

Given the sustained and often angry criticism that has been widely expressed by the public in recent years, it is remarkable how little has been done by way of reform. Of all the grounds on which successive governments, together with MPs, could be charged with being unresponsive, none is more striking than the lack of response to unmistakable expressions of public dislike of the manner in which Parliament goes about its business. If Canadian Parliamentarians are unwilling to effect changes, they must be prepared to accept a further loss of public regard.

This passage was quoted a few months later in Red Book One, which might have implied an intention to address the problem. I will leave it to you to judge how much things have actually changed over the intervening ten years, whether in the functioning of the Canadian Parliament, or of any provincial Legislature for that matter.

In my view, the coming of ICT has widened the gulf between what the public are looking for and how our legislatures actually work. One subject that deserves to be singled out as an example is the harshly adversarial character of our politics as they are now practiced.

It is this characteristic more than any other that is inconsistent with the ethos of the Information Age, and it could by itself provide a plausible explanation for the widely

observed phenomenon of young people – the Net Generation – turning away from our political institutions.

A survey by a California institute found that high tech workers were accustomed to team based, collaborative work environments, and looked for a consensus approach to politics. Other surveys in Canada and elsewhere have found that in speaking of governance today the public use terms such as “ partnership”, “collaboration”, “joint planning”, and “framework setting”. In brief, people, and particularly young people, think in terms of using information and networks to solve problems. The contrast with the verbal abuse and theatrics that characterize the proceedings in our legislative bodies could hardly be more striking. Whatever purposes may be served by the daily Question Period in Ottawa, solving problems is not one of them.

A fundamental point that needs to be recognized is that ICT constitutes a two-way medium, and therefore escalates the pressure for direct public participation in government. We all know the far-reaching effects that radio and television have had on governance. These media however only enabled the public to listen and be informed; ICT provides the ability to talk back, and the public are doing so in growing numbers, as evidenced for example by the steeply rising number of hits, year over year, on government web sites.

The question then arises, with whom are the public going to communicate, and about what? Part of the answer is to be found in the Government-on-Line program, which has

as its objective that Canada should become a leader in providing its people with electronic access to its government and to government services. Necessarily such access involves direct communication between the public and officials. The scale of communications is already far in excess of what Ministers or 301 Members of Parliament could possibly handle. What is in train, therefore, is a rapidly growing volume of communications between a wired public and a wired bureaucracy, and this trend is bound to continue.

So long as these communications were about service delivery and the provision of information, they could be regarded as a welcome development. However, what experience is demonstrating is that the public are not limiting themselves to directing questions about “What?” or “How?” to officials. They are also posing “Why?” questions, and these place officials in an awkward situation. Such questions are the preserve of elected people, but it is far from clear how the public’s desire for a wide ranging and continuing dialogue with government can be reconciled with the need for responses to be cleared upwards through a hierarchical system.

The risk is that the sheer volume of future communications, combined with public alienation from the political system, will increasingly result in elected people being bypassed. This risk is not limited to Canada. Following is an excerpt from a report by a panel of experts on public administration that was issued last February by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations:

“...a debate about representative democracy versus direct democracy may be necessary. Information and communications technology is pushing the world in the direction of eliminating intermediaries, and elected representatives are well advised to start demonstrating the advantage and the value that they add to the political process if they intend to remain an element of the political landscape of the future...”

I think it important that this advice be taken seriously. I have no particular competence to say what form the modernization of our institutions should take. This is a matter that must be addressed by elected people themselves. I will however venture one opinion, which is that the kind of measures to reform Parliament that are frequently heard about, such as more free votes, will not by themselves suffice. The problem I have been talking about is more fundamental than that. In essence, it is about the basic relationship between the public and their governors.

I recognize that the prospect of electronic democracy faces us with a number of worrying prospects – the risk of dialogues being taken over by lobby groups, the digital divide, and so forth. The mistake that many elected people make, however, is to cite these problems as a reason for not changing anything, and sticking with familiar ways of doing things. But the reality is that the effects of ICT on the public are already here and cannot be ignored without penalty. And let’s not overlook the fact that the present political system is not without problems either.

A possible starting point for initiating change would be for Canadian Parliamentarians to look at some recent initiatives taken in Britain. Prime Minister Blair has described ICT as “the transforming technology of our age”, and has spoken of the present as “the second age of democracy” – the first being the progressive extension of voting rights during the 19th and early 20th centuries. He has established a Cabinet Committee on electronic democracy, and last summer his government issued a public consultation paper on the subject - to my knowledge, the first time any government has taken such a step. In the British Parliament there is an All Party Internet Group. I will feel more reassured if one day comparable actions are taken in Canada.

Canadians want our institutions to work. They know that Canada will not be better off if public regard for our system of representative government continues to decline. The public interest cannot be calculated simply by counting the number of hits on an Internet site. Whatever changes ICT may force upon governance, there is still a need for deliberative bodies in the machinery of democracy. However, if existing deliberative bodies do not look to modernizing their modes of functioning, they risk further marginalization in the future.

To conclude, the growth of mass communications in recent decades has had a transforming effect on institutions everywhere: corporations, universities, voluntary organizations, and certainly governments. It has long been held that knowledge is power, and one effect of the widespread dispersion of information today has been a concomitant dispersion of power. Networks rather than hierarchies are the order of the day.

Opinions differ on what is referred to as technological determinism - the degree to which technology determines history, and in what measure there is scope for human influence on current trends. However, unless an effort is made at political level to bring such influence to bear, technology is going to have the field all to itself.

Arthur Kroeger