



Democratic Renewal: Solutions in Search of a Problem

By the Co-Chairs of the Crossing Boundaries National Council Democratic Renewal Working Group
Caroline Di Cocco, MPP for Sarnia-Lambton and David McLaughlin, Deputy Minister to the Commission on Legislative Democracy
with David Hume, Research Analyst, KTA Centre for Collaborative Government

Introduction

At the Morris G. Wosk Centre for Dialogue in Vancouver, British Columbia, randomly selected members of the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform have now reached what is termed as the "Deliberation and Decision Phase" of a bold new experiment in civic engagement. They file into the centre for one of six weekend meetings where they will determine what recommendations they will make to reform the province's electoral system. There were 160 of them initially in January, though a few have had to opt out for personal reasons. Among its members are a 77 year old retired teacher, a 37 year old shipwright and a third year commerce student at UBC. All have gone through a "learning phase" where they spent six weekends studying different electoral systems around the world, then through public hearings where they heard close to 400 oral presentations on the merits of proportional representation, 'first past the post' and mixed member proportional representation. Now they will work together to come to a decision in late November as to what changes to B.C.'s electoral system, if any, they might suggest. If a new electoral system is recommended, it will be the subject of a referendum in the provincial election of May, 2005.

What's going on here in Vancouver represents just one of many initiatives that have begun to take hold across the country. It is far from a co-ordinated development; in fact, there seem to be as many approaches to democratic reform and renewal as there are initiatives. But what they are all tapping into is a collective desire to re-examine how government works for citizens and how citizens connect to their governments. Taken together, they represent a national laboratory on civic engagement, one where the experiments could lead to a huge shift in how we define democracy for the future.

So why now - what is going on that so many initiatives have sprung up at the same time? What are the objectives with these efforts? And what are the forces behind this collective will to rethink our democratic processes?

Why Now?

Perhaps what is going on is best answered by looking at what, simply, is not. Voter turnout, for example. The statistics are legion: 22% of first time eligible voters cast a ballot in the last federal election. As the National Post declared on its front page, the number of people who voted for the Prime Minister is a fraction of the number of people who voted for the winner of Canadian Idol. Approximately 30 % of those eligible to vote could identify the Leader of the Opposition. And these findings are indicative of the state of things only at the federal level. Barring issue driven campaigns (often single issue) at the local level that serve to rally a jaded electorate, aboriginal, municipal and provincial orders of government can rarely expect better results.

What also is not happening is an interest in, nor a respect for the mechanisms of government and those who claim to represent citizens riding by riding. A recent study by Elections Canada placed lack of interest, distrust of politicians and government and a preference for more important personal business to attend to as the top reasons why people don't vote¹. It is clear that many people just don't see political discourse, as it is currently configured, to be relevant in their lives.

Looking at it from a citizen's point of view can take us from these symptoms of disaffection and disengagement to a focus on the real problems. They take the form of some provocative questions: what do I get for my vote? What purpose does my M.P. serve, other than as an absentee representative, one I only see or hear from at election time or semi-regularly in a mass mailed newsletter? Why is there no genuine reflection of my values in my legislature? Why should I care about a one shot chance for me to have my views heard until the next election? And if elections really aren't about anything but a consolidation of power for one party over another, why bother?

¹ Pammet, John H. & Leduc, Lawrence, (2003) Explaining the Turnout Decline in Canadian Federal Elections: A New Survey of Non-Voters, Elections Canada, pg. 4.

Research In Action:

These questions are indicative of some fundamental points of disconnection with our current models of government, and they certainly won't be answered overnight. The initiatives that have been launched across the country are best understood as attempts to investigate, rather than to solve these problems at this stage (though recommendations and outcomes are definitely viewed as part of their *raison d'etre*). The Crossing Boundaries National Council Working Group on Democratic Renewal has travelled across the country and observed their approaches. We have discovered a framework in which much of the thinking towards renewing and redefining democracy is taking place.

The Frame:

Three themes have emerged:

- *Electoral Reform* - with consensus appearing around a shift from first-past-the-post to some alternative system appropriate to our model of parliament, a need to develop new ways of voting and legislative and/or technological measures to increase voter turnout;
- *Enhancing the Role of the Elected Official* - representatives should be given an enhanced role in policy making, scrutiny of government business, representation of their constituents; and
- *New or Enhanced Mechanisms to Increase Citizen Participation in Governance* - citizens should have more direct input into government policy development and decision making, and they need mechanisms to do so.

Electoral Reform:

The key issues with electoral reform present a big challenge for initiatives in getting citizens up to speed with the varieties of voting systems. The Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform's inclusion of a learning phase to its process is an apt example. New Brunswick's Commission on Legislative Democracy is looking at amendments to the Elections Act for proportional representation. This is sure to be an educational process in itself, the more its dialogue filters from the policy community to the public at large.

Both British Columbia and New Brunswick are also looking to engage citizens on the implications of future changes to electoral boundaries. As demographics and population densities shift over time, this significantly affects voter participation.

However, the issue of voter turnout is more pointedly addressed in the area of information and communications technology systems (ICTS). Ontario's Democratic Renewal Secretariat is committed to ensuring that

"Internet voting is an option." Connectivity and accessibility may be issues which will dramatically alter the terms of the dialogue if they are adroitly pursued. This leads to an obvious question, one that is central to the work of the Crossing Boundaries National Council: is transformative change ever unaccompanied by technological innovation?

The last important element of electoral reform - fixed election dates - may soon become a fait accompli. The provincial government of British Columbia has already put this in place. Ontario's Secretariat will be responsible for its implementation provincially, while New Brunswick's Commission will examine, make recommendations and then propose a fixed election date as well.

Enhancing the Role of the Elected Official:

Perhaps the most well known attempt here occurs at the federal level. The Martin government's Democratic Reform Agenda was a major part of its platform when it came to power. It seeks to dramatically alter the nature of member voting in the house with a three line voting system: with one line free votes, all MPs may vote as they see fit; with two line free votes, only Ministers are bound to support the government's position; with three line votes, votes of confidence or votes of fundamental importance require solidarity. Most votes in the house will fall into the one or two line category, so 'parliamentary consent will be an exercise in coalition building, and Ministers must earn the support of Members through hard work and active engagement.' The phrase 'active engagement' here speaks volumes.

And there are also efforts to increase the presence and engagement of all Members by a more open and inclusive approach to participation on committees. Backbenchers now have a role, through the caucus executive, in choosing the committees on which they wish to sit. It is a worthy attempt to address the common complaint that Members communicate Ottawa's interests to their constituents rather than the other way around.

Ontario's Democratic Renewal Secretariat is also moving forward on its mandate to expand the role of the Members. Michael Bryant, the Attorney General and Minister Responsible for Democratic Renewal, has already introduced legislation in the form of the Executive Council Amendment Act, which would require Cabinet Ministers to attend two-thirds of Question Periods in the Legislature or be fined \$500.00 for each day they fall below the standard. It is a worthy first step, one which should bode well for the direction the Secretariat is taking as it examines the roles of other MPPs in the Legislature.

However, the increased engagement of elected officials, as all of these initiatives are well aware, will mean less to the citizen without increased accountability and transparency. New Brunswick's Commission will "examine and make recommendations on enhancing the role of the Legislative Assembly and MLAs in decision-making while ensuring greater accountability of MLAs to their constituents and to New Brunswickers." As with the federal government's agenda and Ontario's Secretariat, it also plans to take this further by looking at appointments to government agencies, boards and commissions as well. The issue of setting higher ethical standards is front and centre if the role of the elected official is to be enhanced.

New Mechanisms for Citizen Participation in Governance:

Here is where the issue of engagement truly filters down to every voter. There is a sense that some legislation — say, in regard to education or health — can no longer be the sole domain of elected (and/or selected) representatives. New Brunswick's Commission is proposing a referendum act that sets out the rules and procedures for allowing province-wide, binding referendums on significant public policy issues. Ontario's Secretariat is "spearheading a public consultation and referendum on the province's voting system." They also launched a pre-budget public dialogue announced in communities that was initiated by the Ministry of Finance. Elections will no longer be the only time where people can vote on important issues.

The desire for new mechanisms is further reflected at the federal level by the advent of broader consultation powers for committees. When politicians get together to examine an issue, it stands to reason that the more significant it is to the public, the greater the diversity of voices that will be heard. Stakeholders, members of the public service and academic communities, clients and/or customers of a service all need a voice at the table. To add weight to this process, 'the government will ensure that all government responses to committee reports are comprehensive and substantive.'

In this sense, coming full circle, there may be no better example of getting voices at the table than British Columbia's Citizen's Assembly. The very randomness of the selection of people was essential to the legitimacy of the initiative. No one began as an authority on electoral systems; no one will finish this process without playing an historic role in the province's political evolution. An important word that, *evolution*. This is where these three themes are leading us - to the evolution of our democracy. Its 'renewal' cannot be achieved otherwise.

From One Lab to Another - The Role of the Crossing Boundaries National Council:

There is a story about the discovery of DNA, which could well be a parable for any significant breakthrough. In it, Crick and Watson's discovery would not have happened without one small, commonplace, ritual: the daily gathering of researchers for tea. Here, two things occurred: all the scientists literally got out of their boxes; there was a free exchange of ideas where seemingly unrelated projects found points of commonality. Those highly prized aspects of a productive process — synergy and serendipity — just naturally flowed through the nature of the dialogue.

With initiatives in democratic reform and renewal across this country, the opportunity to gather in such a way is considerably more difficult to establish. So how does one create this dialogue, this exchange of information and practices that could lead to our own breakthrough in regard to the 'democratic deficit' and that fundamental shift in how we define democracy?

The Crossing Boundaries National Council's Working Group on Democratic Renewal was established to create this dialogue. By making contact, then observing the process — and progress — of each 'laboratory', by acting as a conduit for a sharing of ideas, the council provides a framework for these points of commonality. As above, it can frame the emergent themes of these bold, new experiments. It can make it easier for synergy and serendipity to occur.

And in doing so, it can take us to more provocative questions about process. Perhaps the 'frame' for democratic renewal is far from definitive; the results or recommendations chosen could be achieved through totally different means. Perhaps the whole question of measurable results should be examined.

For example, let's return to this 'symptom' of low voter turnout. Perhaps one initiative manages to significantly increase the percentage of young people who vote. By being part of a national dialogue, another initiative becomes aware of this success and adopts the strategy. It finds no measurable improvement in voter turnout among young people. This can create a valuable exchange about the nature of the strategy, its geographical or cultural limitations. Perhaps more importantly, it can lead to a dialogue about how we define political engagement.

From the Collective Will to Results - determining where it is all going:

The 'symptom' here points to a common setback among many well-intentioned initiatives in their nascent states of development. It is about making that transition from a vague consensus about what a problem is (most often expressed as a mandate) to an understanding of what the initiative really wants to achieve.

The frame's ultimate value may be in providing a basis for determining the next step in the process. It merits a closer look, as initiatives across the country seek to determine recommendations and measurable results.

Deliberation and Decision:

On May 5, 2009, voters in British Columbia may elect a provincial government under a radically different electoral system. Electoral boundaries might be completely different. Voter turnout, because of these changes, could increase dramatically as well. As a result, elected officials may be engaged and called upon to articulate the will of the electorate as never before. And all of this will be directly linked to the 'deliberation and decision phase' of the Citizens' Assembly — 160 ordinary British Columbians, chosen at random, meeting over six weekends this fall.

About this Series Policy, Politics & Governance

This is a KTA Centre for Collaborative Government Series. The KTA Centre is a Canadian public interest research organization dedicated to breaking new ground in developing the ideas and practices that are transforming government and governance for the 21st century. New tools ranging from Internet technologies to community partnerships are impacting governments and governance. Learning to use these tools well will require experimentation and careful analysis from the public service. It will require informed debate, strong leadership and good decision-making from politicians. This series is dedicated to exploring the issues from both points of view.

About the Crossing Boundaries National Council

The Crossing Boundaries National Council is a not-for-profit national forum whose mission is to help Canadian governments understand and prepare for the Information Age (www.crossingboundaries.ca). Its 45 members include senior public servants and elected representatives from each of the 10 provinces and the federal government, as well as from municipal governments and the Aboriginal community. The initiative is sponsored by participating governments and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council.

Initiatives like this are too important not to benefit from a network of voices, from a national discussion on what the objectives and the recommendations might be for true, democratic renewal. Herein lies the importance of the Crossing Boundaries National Council in relation to all those laboratories out there, figuring out what the future of political discourse will be in this country. In doing so, Canada could lead the way in rethinking democracy for the rest of the world.

© Kaufman, Thomas & Associates, 2004

About the Authors

Caroline Di Cocco is the MPP for Sarnia-Lambton. Caroline was elected in 1997 as Councillor for the City of Sarnia. In 1999, Caroline was elected as the MPP for Sarnia-Lambton and she was re-elected in 2003. In 1993 she was appointed Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister Responsible for Democratic Renewal and she is now Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Children and Youth Services. She sits on the Management Board of Cabinet and chairs the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs. In 2002, she was awarded a knighthood (Cavaliere) from the Government of Italy. Prior to this, Caroline was an executive member of Sarnia-Lambton Folk Arts and Multicultural Council.

David McLaughlin is the Deputy Minister to the Commission on Legislative Democracy. David has over 18 years of public policy and political experience in both the Government of Canada and the Government of New Brunswick. He has worked in the Prime Minister's Office as Senior Advisor, Operations and Chief of Staff and has also served as Chief of Staff to Premier Lord. McLaughlin has a BA Honours in History and Political Science from Mount Allison University, a Main International Affairs from Carleton University, and an M.B.A. from the University of Bath in the United Kingdom.

David Hume is a Research Analyst at the KTA Centre for Collaborative Government. He is co-author, with Don Lenihan, of two publications in the Changing Government Series: *A Question of Standards: Accounting Standards Setting for the 21st Century* and *Governance in the Agreement on International Trade*. David's main areas of interest include e-government, citizen engagement, accountability, information management and governance.

The Crossing Boundaries National Council is supported financially by the federal government, the provinces, municipalities and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada



KTA Centre for Collaborative Government
Centre KTA pour la collaboration gouvernementale

KTA Centre for Collaborative Government

1354 Wellington Street, Ottawa, ON, K1Y 3C3
Tel: 613-594-4795 Fax: 613-594-5925, [Email: main@kta.on.ca](mailto:main@kta.on.ca)

KTA Centre for Collaborative Government