



Finding our Digital Voice: Governing in the Information Age

The Crossing Boundaries Final Report and Recommendations

By

The Crossing Boundaries Political Advisory Committee

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Centre for Collaborative Government



Changing Government

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Centre for Collaborative Government

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The Political Advisory Committee

The Political Advisory Committee (PAC) was struck in the spring of 2002. The group was assembled to ensure that a strong political perspective would inform the Crossing Boundaries III initiative. The PAC will champion, create profile for and build awareness of e-government issues among elected representatives and others in the policy community. It will guide the Crossing Boundaries III initiative in its exploration of key issues and themes, such as e-democracy. In particular, the PAC will help shape CBIII's approach to the unique challenges of making e-government work for elected representatives.

PAC members come from all three levels of government and from across the country and a variety of political parties. The inaugural meeting was held in July 2002, and the committee will continue to provide guidance to Crossing Boundaries III leading up to the national conference to be held in May 2003.

Co-Chairs:

- Tony Valeri, MP for Stony Creek
- Donald G. Lenihan, Chair of the Crossing Boundaries initiative

Committee Members:

- Dr. Carolyn Bennett, MP for St. Paul's
- Alana DeLong, MLA for Calgary Bow
- Peter Forbes, MPP for Fredericton North
- Ann MacLean, Mayor of New Glasgow, Nova Scotia
- Richard Patten, MPP for Ottawa Centre
- Benoît Pelletier, MNA for Chapeau
- John Williams, MP for St. Albert

Changing Government

Since its formation in 1999, the Centre for Collaborative Government has coordinated several national partnership initiatives to research and advance understanding on a variety of leading issues in governance and public sector management.

This is the eleventh in our Changing Government series which communicates ideas and research to people working at all levels of government, the private sector and other public sector institutions. Future releases in the series will develop contemporary themes in public sector management and governance and will report on the outcomes of specific action-research projects.

All publications in this series are available at no cost and can be ordered by contacting the Centre for Collaborative Government or by visiting: www.crossingboundaries.ca
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Gouvernements en mutation

Depuis sa création en 1999, le Centre pour la collaboration gouvernementale a coordonné avec ses partenaires plusieurs initiatives nationales visant à effectuer des recherches et à promouvoir la compréhension des diverses grandes questions relatives à la gouvernance et à la gestion du secteur public.

Voici le onzième volume de notre série Gouvernements en mutation, dont l'objectif est de transmettre ces idées et ces résultats de recherche aux personnes qui œuvrent dans tous les ordres de gouvernement, dans le secteur privé et les autres institutions du secteur public. Les prochaines parutions de la série porteront sur les enjeux contemporains de la gestion publique et de la gouvernance et rendront compte des conclusions de projets de recherche précis.

On peut se procurer toutes les publications de cette série gratuitement en s'adressant au Centre pour la collaboration gouvernementale ou en visitant son site Web : www.crossingboundaries.ca. Téléphone : (613) 594-4795. Télécopieur : (613) 594-5925. Courriel : main@crossingboundaries.ca.

About Crossing Boundaries

The Crossing Boundaries initiative explores the impact of information and communications technologies (ICTs) on government and democracy in Canada. Since 1997, it has engaged hundreds of elected and public officials from all three levels of government, members of the private and third sector, journalists and academics from across the country. Over the last 18 months, the project has focused on identifying the opportunities and issues around e-government and, in this final report, provides recommendations for responding to them.

By way of background, as Crossing Boundaries I and II progressed, we heard repeatedly that the e-government file is not well understood among elected representatives. Furthermore we heard that this is one of the major obstacles to progress precisely because the removal of many other barriers requires engaged political debate, support and leadership.

As a result, a central task of Crossing Boundaries III has been to raise awareness among elected representatives by clarifying the areas and issues where political engagement would contribute to advancing the e-government agenda. To this end, the process has produced:

- A series of publications that define and explore key challenges and opportunities along the way. Volume 6 of this series, *Realigning Governance: From E-Government to E-Democracy*, captures the essence of this research and can be found at www.crossingboundaries.ca.
- A set of final recommendations based on the research that could be championed by elected representatives and senior public servants to move the file forward. They are contained in this publication.

Crossing Boundaries III has hosted a series of Ottawa-based sessions involving sponsoring departments and private organizations, a series of cross-country regional forums involving all three levels of government, international consultations by the project chair, and advisory group consultations, such as the Municipal Caucus, the Political Advisory Committee and the Information as a Public Resource Working Group.

In addition, the Crossing Boundaries website provides authoritative resources on e-government issues, a clearing-house for information and a forum for developing and testing concepts and ideas. The Crossing Boundaries team publishes a regular e-newsletter and works to find innovative ways to engage a variety of e-government stakeholders to the site – especially elected officials. The site can be found at www.crossingboundaries.ca.

Crossing Boundaries III will culminate in a national conference in May 2003 in Ottawa (www.crossingboundaries.ca/conference) that will bring together participants from across the country and all quarters of the public policy community to discuss and debate the recommendations contained in this final report. We expect that discussion to result in an action plan whose execution will be overseen by the Political Advisory Committee.

Crossing Boundaries is organized under the auspices of the Centre for Collaborative Government and is chaired by the Centre's Director, Donald Lenihan. The initiative is supported by 16 federal departments of the Government of Canada and three private sector organizations, and is advised by their representatives and elected officials.

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- Over the past five years the Crossing Boundaries project has been an on-going search for the answer to the question: What is e-government? The project has brought together people from across the country and around the world to discuss the impact of the new information and communications technologies (ICTs) on government and democracy.
- ICTs are changing how modern society and its institutions are organized. We are going through a paradigm shift. Increasingly, information and ideas will flow freely between government, citizens, civil society and business. Boundaries between them are shifting and becoming more diffuse. Knowledge and information have become the principal drivers of economic growth and prosperity.
- At the same time, ICTs provide an extraordinary opportunity to change the way government services are delivered, to develop new ones that will help Canadians establish competitive advantages in the Information Age, to improve the effectiveness of government, and to engage citizens more directly in the democratic process.
- To take advantage of the opportunities, first, governments must strengthen the democratic process by using the new tools to develop new forums for engaging citizens and stakeholders more directly in governance.
- Second, governments must learn to manage and use information differently. In particular, information must be shared across organizational boundaries and organized in new ways that maximize its usefulness for government, business, civil society and citizens.

Summary of the Recommendations

1. A new governance charter

The Government of Canada should lead a non-partisan committee made up of elected officials from all three levels of government, and including distinguished Canadians, in the development of a new governance charter. The process would be an act of recognition by government that society is changing and that representative government should be renewed in light of the changes.

2. An e-government framework

Government should develop an e-government framework to provide a mandate for change and to guide its efforts as it prepares for the Information Age. The framework would be enacted in federal legislation and would have two basic components: an e-democracy or e-governance framework and an information framework.

- Responsibility for implementing the e-government framework should be assigned to the **deputy prime minister/premier/mayor**.
- The office of the **Chief Information Officer should be established as a separate office**, reporting to the deputy prime minister/premier/mayor. The CIO should be a deputy level appointment with responsibility to assist the deputy prime minister/premier/mayor in the implementation of the e-government framework.
- One percent of the federal program-spending **budget** should be allocated to **support new initiatives** in the development of new information services, a horizontal approach to policy and e-democracy initiatives.

- Government should develop an e-democracy framework to experiment with new forums for citizen participation in governance and to clarify government's role in the forums. The framework would **establish a process of pilot projects** that use both the new and the conventional tools to explore and develop new forms of public participation on key issues of public concern.
- **Elected officials should play a key role in the pilot projects.** An immediate priority of Parliament and other legislatures should be to ensure the education and training of elected officials in the use of the new technology, in particular, setting minimum standards for a smart office, and allocating significant resources to the task of educating elected officials.
- Information will be a key resource in the future and government will be a key provider of it to meet Canadians' needs. In preparing for the future, government should clarify its responsibilities to **certify information in key areas of public interest; and set a new standard of openness and transparency for policy development** by providing public assessments of the quality of the knowledge underlying its policies.
- The information framework would permit government to begin **organizing its information holdings in new ways to promote horizontal policy development.**
 - a) The information framework would identify lead departments for key policy fields, and task them with establishing new rules for sharing information between departments in different policy fields.
 - b) Ministers of the lead departments would sit on a new horizontal policy council chaired by the deputy prime minister/premier/mayor to ensure coordination across policy fields.

The Crossing Boundaries project began five years ago as a discussion of the issues around online service delivery. It quickly evolved into an examination of the impact of information and communications technologies (ICTs) on government as a whole. In hindsight, it is fair to see the project as an ongoing search for the answer to a single question: What is e-government?

Lots of people still believe that e-government is all about delivering services online. Although e-services remain central to the concept, in many countries the discussion has broadened. It is also about information and democracy—even for those working on the service-delivery file.

E-government has become an effort to conceptualize and harness an extraordinary new capacity to connect ideas, people, organizations and information in new ways. There is still a long way to go but the road ahead is getting clearer. In setting the tone for what follows, we begin with a word about what e-government means for Canadians.

We are entering the Information Age. Canadians are extremely well-positioned to benefit from the transition. In the future, access to information and knowledge will be critical to the overall progress of societies such as our own. Canadians are already world leaders in e-government through their work in service delivery.

Canadians should lead the next phase in the evolution of e-government by using the infrastructure that is being built for service delivery to pioneer new ways of using and sharing information; and by setting a new standard for democracy, openness and accountability for government in the new era.

Canadians should lead the next phase in the evolution of e-government by using the infrastructure that is being built for service delivery to pioneer new ways of using and sharing information; and by setting a new standard for democracy, openness and accountability for government in the new era. It would take strong, informed political leadership but the goal is achievable.

This report provides something of a roadmap for the way ahead and identifies the kinds of tools and vision that government will need, if it is to play its part in transforming Canada into a productive and democratically robust society for the Information Age. The report will serve as the basis for our discussions at the Crossing Boundaries National Conference in Ottawa on May 7 – 9, 2003.

Because the issues are broad, and the community of people we hope to engage is diverse, we have taken pains to keep the various sections of the report concise. For those who wish to delve deeper, many of the issues raised here have been explored at greater length in the Crossing Boundaries publications, which can be found on the project website at www.crossingboundaries.ca.

In his classic book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Thomas Kuhn proposed the idea of a “paradigm shift.” He argued that sometimes a metaphor appears that is powerful enough to change how people see the world—what he calls their worldview. The network is such a metaphor for the 21st century.

Over the past 25 years, ICTs have been changing how modern society and its institutions are organized. The technology reorganizes them into “networks.” As the process unfolds, it is transforming societies like Canada. A new paradigm is emerging. We call it “the networked state”. It is a world where information and ideas flow freely between government, citizens, civil society and business, and where the boundaries between them are diffuse and shifting. Along with the new structure comes a new and emerging capacity to link ideas, people, organizations and information in new ways. Our discussion of the challenges and opportunities this poses for government starts from two considerations.

First, in the Information Age, **the principal drivers of growth and prosperity will be information and knowledge.** Countries that have taken the right steps to prepare will benefit economically, socially and culturally. Government will have an important role to play in helping citizens meet their information needs. For example, as we shall propose below, it should be prepared to take on new responsibilities as a provider and certifier of information.

Second, **the technology is realigning traditional governance relationships.** We see this, for example, in the increasing activism in civil society. Immediate evidence lies in the stunning size and number of the anti-war protests that have occurred around the world in recent months. The demonstrations provide evidence of the enormous communications and organizational power of the new technology.

If the legitimacy of traditional approaches to governance is waning, ranging from “brokerage politics” to conventional policy-making, it is because citizens’ views on democracy are evolving and new kinds of processes and practices are emerging. The technology is a key driver in this transformation.

Although it has been argued that citizens are becoming less engaged in politics, such developments overrule that conclusion. If the legitimacy of traditional approaches to governance is waning, ranging from “brokerage politics” to conventional policy-making, it is because citizens’ views on democracy are evolving and new kinds of processes and practices are emerging. The technology is a key driver in this transformation.

In summary, our society is changing. The old boundaries around which roles and responsibilities were defined are far less clear and will become even less so in the future. Basic relationships are being realigned and new roles are emerging. In adjusting to these changes, it will not be enough for government simply to reorganize itself or to introduce new administrative processes and tools. The changes have as much to do with what is happening outside the boundaries of government as inside them. Indeed, that is precisely the point of the networking metaphor.

How should government respond? The technology creates new tools that government can use to transform how it does business. The technology also offers new ways to bring citizens together with one another and with their governments. The fundamental challenge before government is to harness and direct the new technology and to enlist it in the service of better government and governance. To achieve this, government must rise to the following five challenges:

1. Providing leadership and vision

The new technology is a huge driver of historical change. Its effects on society will be on a scale similar to that of the printing press or steam engine. To realize that society—or government—is becoming more networked is to learn something new and useful about how it will be organized in the future; but it says nothing about the quality of life in that society. The challenge to our leaders is to provide a vision of the kind of society that Canadians aspire to achieve through the new technology and to unite them in the effort to achieve it.

2. Making information a public resource

Information and knowledge are key resources for the future. Citizens will need them for a wide variety of purposes. One challenge for government will be to ensure that it helps Canadians meet their needs for reliable, accurate, authoritative and timely information. A second challenge will be to set new standards of transparency around the development of government policy so that the process of policy-making can serve as a benchmark for assessing the quality of knowledge from other sources.

3. Thinking and acting horizontally

The new technology will significantly strengthen government's ability to think and act across organizational and policy boundaries. It will lead to the emergence of new information and knowledge, and, ultimately, to new policy-fields and new ways of providing services. This, in turn, could make government far more effective at achieving its goals. The challenge is to use the new capacity to share information to make real progress on a horizontal approach to policy-making and service delivery.

4. Finding our digital voice

The boundaries between government, civil society, business and citizens are becoming less clear. In the future, nations, governments, citizens, civil society and business will engage one another in ongoing and regular discussions on policy and other issues. Much of this will happen through the Internet. The challenge is to respond by developing new ways to engage citizens and stakeholders more directly in the governance process without undermining the principles of representative government.

5. Engaging the politicians

Adjusting governance for the Information Age requires a realignment of the role of elected representatives. Citizens and stakeholders will find themselves in a more direct relationship with government through consultation and other processes. Elected officials have a critical role to play in such processes as facilitators of public discussion and debate, and in helping citizens to consider and achieve trade-offs around complex policy options. The challenge for politicians is to open up our political institutions and to make decision-making more transparent and inclusive by using the technology to find innovative ways to engage Canadians in the political process.

The next five sections of this report work through these challenges one at a time. They provide the rationale behind our recommendations for how government should respond to the challenges. The recommendations are set out in Section 8. We begin here with some comments on the challenge of providing leadership and vision.

3.1 Developing a vision

Over the last two centuries, Canadians have created a society and culture that is recognized around the world as being among the most open, tolerant and democratic anywhere. Canadians' experience with social, cultural and regional diversity has played a critical role in achieving this reputation. A vision for the future should build on it by setting a new standard for democracy, openness and accountability, and by pioneering a new role for government in a new kind of society.

Government will likely be the single biggest producer of information in the Information Age. It will play a critical role in providing Canadians with the information they need to solve problems, create new products, and plan and organize in new ways. As such, government will have a key role as a provider of information and a facilitator of new ideas.

Government should consult with Canadians to define a vision of the society—and government—they want for the Information Age. In particular, the process should explore the changing nature of governance and the role of government as a provider and steward of public information.

First, the process should explore the difference between government's traditional approach to consultation, which limits citizens' opportunities to participate, and one based on the recognition of citizens as **partners in governance**. Although Canadians remain firmly committed to representative government, they want a more active and engaged role in the governance process between elections. What would it mean to recognize them as partners in governance?

Second, government will likely be the single biggest producer of information in the Information Age. It will play a critical role in providing Canadians with the information they need to solve problems, create new products, and plan and organize in new ways. As such, government will have a key role as a **provider of information and a facilitator of new ideas**. How can government best use its information resources to contribute to Canadians' productive participation in the knowledge economy, and to help them improve their quality of life?

Third, government has a responsibility to manage and use the resource in ways that are respectful of key values, such as democratic pluralism, the commitment to federalism and personal privacy. The title of steward carries the imprimatur of responsibility and public trust. In the Information Age, government should see itself as a **steward of public information**. What responsibilities would this role place on government in its management and use of the new resource?

The vision that emerged from this process would be articulated in a set of principles, values and goals that would provide guidance to government in moving toward the future. For example, it would help government decide what kind of new practices and mechanisms could be used to engage Canadians more directly in the governance process; or how government should organize and provide information to promote openness, experimentation and innovation.

The vision of government proposed here aims at transforming the role of citizens from passive consumers of government services into agents of public deliberation and choice. We can call such a community a "community-of-purpose".

The ultimate aim of the vision would be to produce a more engaged citizenry and a better balance between national goals and priorities, on the one hand, and those of individual citizens, other organizations, and communities, on the other.

The emerging vision, thus, is one where the relationship between citizens, business, NGOs, communities and governments is dynamic, reflective, engaged and committed. They discuss, negotiate, plan and organize together. It is about shared commitments, shared decision-making and shared responsibility. In such a relationship, there would be a high degree of consensus on the roles

of different players, the goals they were promoting, the means of assessing their progress and the mechanisms for adjusting to change. There would be new processes for sharing information, consulting on new plans and reporting on the performance of government. Above all, there would be a history and culture of collaborating on the policy, design and delivery of programs and services that would reach across jurisdictional and non-governmental boundaries. In short, the vision of government proposed here aims at transforming the role of citizens from passive consumers of government services into agents of public deliberation and choice. We can call such a community a “community-of-purpose”.

3.2 A New Governance Charter and an E-Government Framework

To achieve this transformation, government should have a clear mandate for change. It should establish a firm basis for the development of a new relationship with citizens and for defining and assuming new roles for government. This should take two forms: a new governance charter to define the vision, and an e-government framework to provide the tools and mandate for change.

First, regarding the new vision, we propose that government create a **new governance charter**. It would not be a legally binding document but would have two primary purposes:

- To provide a clear statement of the principles, values and goals that define Canadians’ vision of their society and of the changing role of government in the Information Age; and
- To provide guidance to government in its use of the new technology to help establish a new governance relationship with citizens and to realize its new responsibilities.

The charter would be a new governance instrument. If it is to have the legitimacy to guide change, it should be the result of a non-partisan, Canada-wide consultation process. Ideally, the process would involve elected officials from all levels of government, as well as a group of distinguished Canadians, and would produce a single document endorsed by all levels of government.

Second, we propose that governments enact legislation to create an **e-government framework** to provide the mandate and tools to enable them to fulfill their role in the Information Age.

Together, these two documents would serve as a fulcrum off of which to lever major changes in how government is organized, how it makes policy, what its role is in the Information Age and how it governs. They would be key instruments for facilitating the transition to the Information Age and for responding to the four remaining challenges.

The US E-Government Act

Signed into law on Dec. 17th, 2002, the U.S. *E-Government Act of 2002* sets out a comprehensive strategy for the U.S. Federal Government’s use of information technology. Securing USD \$345 million over 4 years for e-government, the act creates an Office of Electronic Government as well as an interagency forum to address information issues, and specifically tasks the Office of Management Board and the National Archives with the development of standards for ensuring the organization, accessibility, usability and preservation of Government information. It sets out a framework to address personal security and privacy issues, and commits the U.S. Government to promote and study Internet access in poor and rural areas.

SchoolNet

In the drive to 'ready learners for the knowledge-based society,' SchoolNet has connected over 500,000 schools, libraries and classrooms to the Internet since 1999. Developed in partnership between the federal, provincial and territorial governments, the educational community and the private sector, SchoolNet is an example of new public information infrastructure. The recipient of many awards, its website links to more than 5,000 teacher approved learning resources, making it easier for Canadian teachers and students to access a vast array of resources online. Easily searchable and well categorized, information is accessible, accurate and up-to-date. View the site at www.schoolnet.ca.

4.1 Defining the terms

What does it mean to treat information as a public resource? In the Information Age, information will make a critical contribution to economic and social development. Often government provides such resources when the private or voluntary sectors cannot meet the demand. Transportation infrastructure is an example. Governments build roads and bridges because the society needs them to prosper.

Quality information will be a key resource in the future, and government will be a major producer of it. The public will need information for a wide variety of purposes and topics, ranging from personal investments to family planning. Civil society and the private sector alone will meet some but not all of this need. Where they do not, citizens will look to government to fill the gap. They may also look to government to ensure that, on topics such as investments or health, the information is reliable and authoritative.

Before elaborating on this last point we should make a few comments about some concerns that may arise around the idea that information should be a public resource.

First, insofar as knowledge is a part of this resource, concerns may arise over **intellectual property rights**. Are we creating new rights for government or challenging those of others? In effect, we maintain that government could help citizens establish the quality of public knowledge by being far more rigorous and transparent about the state of its own knowledge. As will become clear below, this proposal should not prejudice current debates over intellectual property rights.

Second, because we are advocating that government take steps to make its information holdings available, concerns may arise over personal privacy. Much of the information that we think should be released would not be of a personal sort and so should not raise major privacy questions. Nevertheless, the emphasis we place in later sections on sharing knowledge—especially in our discussion of horizontal government—may well raise privacy issues.

We certainly agree that the release or exchange of government information should be in accord with privacy and security rules. But there is also much evidence that a broad public debate on privacy is overdue. Tensions exist within and between government departments over the privacy implications around information sharing. Moreover, there is disagreement among experts about how serious the privacy issues really are for e-government. As we will recommend at the end of this report, a review of the privacy issue at the political level should be a priority.

4.2 Certification as a public service

There is a traditional distinction between information and knowledge. It says roughly that information consists of simple facts, such as how many people live within a city's borders. By contrast, knowledge is supposed to be more complex. It results from synthesizing bits of information in various ways.

For example, if someone wanted to know whether the Canadian government's contribution to fighting AIDS in Africa last year made a difference, they might look at the federal budget to see how many dollars were spent on that file. Then they might look at how the profile of AIDS has changed and, finally, draw some conclusions based upon all the facts. In this view, the knowledge that results is rarely all right or all wrong because it is a synthesis of information. It is an interpretation of what all of the collected bits mean when taken together.

From a public policy viewpoint, the distinction between information and knowledge is a useful and important one. There are many areas where the rules for gathering, organizing and presenting information are well established. There is agreement on the methodology for generating and evaluating information in a wide variety of areas, ranging from metallurgy, to drug testing, to statistical information. Statistics Canada has built its international reputation on this last one.

In the Information Age, citizens, businesses and NGOs will need reliable information for a range of purposes, from investment, to research, to family planning, to health issues. As one of the largest holders and producers of information, government will make a critical contribution to the information resources that will be publicly available in such areas.

Civil society and the private sector will also be major information providers. Where this is the case, government should work with them. Where they are able to provide the service without government involvement, it should step aside.

Civil society and the private sector will also be major information providers. Where this is the case, government should work with them. Where they are able to provide the service without government involvement, it should step aside. But even where it leaves the task of providing information to others, citizens may still want government to act as a certifier of information, in much the same way that it now acts as a standard setter and *certifier* in a host of areas, from food inspection to workplace safety.

For example, the Government of Alberta is currently developing a health service online that will permit citizens to do a preliminary diagnosis on certain illnesses automatically. Someone who has stomach pains would begin by entering that information on the website. A decision tree would then guide the diagnosis by moving the individual ahead one step at a time. At each step, new questions would be posed. As the individual answers them, the causes are narrowed down until a preliminary diagnosis of the problem is reached and recommendations are given regarding the next steps that the patient should take.

In the future, the private or third sector might well provide such a service to the public, in which case there may be no need for government to do so. However, citizens will want to be confident that such a process rests on reliable methodological principles. Alternative health practices abound, some of which can be dangerous. Citizens may well turn to government to play a role in certifying the quality of such services by having government confirm that the practice conforms to recognized methodological principles.

But does government's responsibility for treating information as a public resource end here? Or will citizens look to government for more than just the provision and certification of some public information?

4.3 Making public policy a benchmark for knowledge

Consider the recent debate over the Kyoto Accord. On one hand, the Government of Alberta and many private sector organizations argued that ratifying Kyoto was a bad idea—it would harm economic growth. On the other hand, the Government of Canada and many environmental organizations maintained that Kyoto was a good idea—it would not impair growth. On the contrary, they claimed that developing new technologies would lead to innovation and growth which are necessary to protect the environment.

The debate over Kyoto was about knowledge, not information. It was over how the accord would impact on the economy, the environment, etc. Both sides produced a battery of studies, statistics, expert opinions and research to support their claims. But the vast majority of Canadians had neither the time nor the expertise to sort through them. Could government act as a certifier of this kind of knowledge in the same way that it could be a certifier of information?

It could not. The knowledge claims in the debate over the Kyoto accord went far beyond what could be authoritatively decided by methodological rules. Nevertheless, there is a role that government could play here that would parallel the role it might play in certifying information.

Government could greatly strengthen the role of citizens, business and civil society in the policy process by setting a new standard of openness and transparency for the state of its own knowledge.

An enormous and rapidly growing knowledge capacity underlies the development of government policy. Policy development is an exercise in the creation of knowledge. Government could greatly strengthen the role of citizens, business and civil society in the policy process by setting a new standard of openness and transparency for the state of its own knowledge.

Suppose that government were required to define clear, transparent and accessible standards and categories for evaluating its own thinking. Then whenever it proposed views as part of a policy discussion, or offered assessments of the views of others, it also had to provide a public assessment of its views based on the standards and categories that it had set. This would achieve three things:

- First, citizens and stakeholders could use the assessment as a trusted point of reference for further discussion and debate of the government's position, for evaluating their own knowledge claims, and for assessing those of others. In effect, it would create an authoritative benchmark for evaluating knowledge.
- Second, the assessment would help protect citizens against knowledge overload. Democracy assumes the presence of reliable, accurate and authoritative sources of information and knowledge. As the Kyoto example shows, overload is a major concern of the Information Age. Citizens need reliable sources of information and knowledge. We saw that the first can be met through government's role as a certifier of information. The second could be greatly helped by making government's own knowledge an authoritative benchmark.
- Third, it would make government more transparent and accountable.

Democracy assumes the presence of reliable, accurate and authoritative sources of information and knowledge. As the Kyoto example shows, overload is a major concern of the Information Age.

In our view, a key reason for proposing an information framework is to ensure that Canadians' needs for quality information and knowledge are met. Although government should not be viewed as the only source of information or knowledge, it will play a critical role in the Information Age.

The National Roundtable on the Environment and the Economy (NRTEE)

Since its legislated beginnings in 1994, NRTEE's task has been to identify and examine key issues with both environmental and economic implications, and suggest how to balance economic prosperity with environmental preservation. Its members are distinguished Canadians who are appointed by the Prime Minister. They represent a broad range of sectors, including business, labour, academia, environmental organizations and First Nations. The Roundtable also works in collaboration with leaders from business, government and non-profit organizations.

NRTEE is designed to ensure that issues are debated freely and openly, and that key stakeholders are heard on matters of importance to them. The sharing of information and its ability to achieve consensus make NRTEE an interesting model for work on horizontal issues like sustainability. View their website at www.nrtee-trnee.ca.

One of the biggest challenges facing government as it moves into the Information Age is to change how it makes policy. At present, policy tends to be departmentally focused. It should become more “holistic,” that is, it should take into account the impact that decisions made in one policy field may have on another policy field.

The idea behind horizontal policy development is not new. For as long as government has distinguished between policy fields, such as health and the environment, people have known that there were connections. But in a paper-based system where communication is carried out through telephones, faxes and memos, horizontal policy was simply too demanding. The technology could change this. It could give government the capacity to integrate and share knowledge and information across departmental boundaries in an orderly and effective way.

A key step lies in how government organizes and shares information across organizational and policy boundaries. At the moment, the system is fragmented and there are few or no common principles for how it is to be managed or shared. For example, because information is often attached to a particular program, few people outside the program may even know that it exists.

Suppose that a health department is studying the impact of industrial emissions on health and that its managers have built up an impressive base of knowledge on the topic. Now suppose that the department of the environment is planning to regulate emissions. If the health department people shared their knowledge with the environment department, the sharing might lead to important new benefits. For example, the health experts may have evidence that certain substances are particularly harmful to our health—which could be a very useful piece of knowledge to policy-makers who are wondering which emissions to regulate.

A key challenge, however, is deciding what information to share and with whom. The task could be compared to creating the Dewey Decimal system for libraries. It established a new way of organizing and categorizing information so that huge amounts could be stored and easily retrieved. But what is the equivalent for knowledge and information in government?

Suppose that the health policy-makers defined a rule that could serve as a guide to policy-makers in the department of labour by identifying priority goals in health to which people in labour were positioned to contribute. For example, the rule might say that a goal of health policy is to reduce illness by addressing key determinants of mental health, such as stress in the workplace. The policy-makers in labour could use that rule to guide their own policy-making in a way that it could make a positive contribution to the goal of wellness. We can call such a rule a **bridging rule** because it bridges the gap between two policy fields.

Government could strengthen its capacity for horizontal alignment by using the values and goals in the charter to establish an authoritative set of bridging rules in a number of policy fields.

For example, if one of the goals/values in the charter were sustainable development, a “lead department” would be named for that policy field. It would be instructed to develop a short list of bridging rules for each of the other policy fields. Policy-makers in those fields would then be required to take the rules into account in their policy-making.

Each lead department would also be responsible for initiating a new information- and knowledge-sharing relationship with other departments. It would be developed around the rules and would aim at building a common base of information and knowledge, and a shared understanding of the opportunities for closer alignment and integration.

Each lead department would also be responsible for initiating a new information- and knowledge-sharing relationship with other departments. It would be developed around the rules and would aim at building a common base of information and knowledge, and a shared understanding of the opportunities for closer alignment and integration.

The minister from each of the lead departments would be appointed to a **horizontal policy council**, chaired by the deputy prime minister, that would coordinate the initiative and devise steps and strategies to ensure progress. Ministers from appropriate central agencies and the Minister of Intergovernmental affairs would also be a member of this committee and would be tasked with developing a parallel process at the provincial level.

The members of the council would be required to review the programs in their respective departments on a five-year basis to identify where progress had been made and to make recommendations to the deputy prime minister for advancing the agenda.

The process would build new links between traditional policy areas, such as health and the environment. Over time, it should lead to a deeper integration and better alignment. Eventually, the old policy fields would be transformed through the new information, learning and knowledge that would occur. It could bring about a major realignment of government, starting with knowledge and information.

Government's ability to track broader societal trends and to assess the impact of its policies on them is entering a new and promising era. As a result of the evolution of information and communications technologies, over the next decade sophisticated new data-collection and measurement systems could come online that will allow governments to clear the biggest hurdle to effective results reporting: getting enough of the right information. This new capacity to acquire and use information could allow government to get far better information on outcomes than could be hoped for only a couple of decades ago. In turn, that could make policy-makers far more effective at identifying the horizontal links between policies and programs from different departments.

The technology exists or is within reach to engineer a quantum leap in the information needed to support a horizontal policy agenda. The challenge for government is to build the "infostructure"—the information and communications networks and systems—to support it.

The Government of the City of Issy-les-Moulineaux, France

The 'Citizen's Panel' of Issy-les-Moulineaux, France has proven to be an innovative and successful example of e-participation. The Panel is comprised of a representative sample of 650 Issy residents who are consulted every three months on a variety of local issues, such as safety, information technology and urban development. Consultations consist of questionnaires that are compiled by an independent institute called Opinion Way.

Reports from Issy say that no one has viewed the Panel as a replacement for the Town Council. Instead, the Panel has become a useful and efficient means of gauging opinion and reactions to proposals. Indeed, current plans are to increase the role of the Citizen's Panel. View Issy-les-Moulineaux's website at www.issy.com.

In the traditional view of representative democracy, the role of citizens is to choose their representatives in elections, who then act on their behalf in the political process. If citizens today want to be recognized as partners in governance, does it mean that they are questioning their commitment to representative democracy?

Democracy is a two-step process of public debate followed by decision-making. There is no real evidence that citizens want to wrest decision-making away from the politicians. Rather, they want to be confident that their representatives truly represent their views and that their voices are being heard.

Consider the traditional distinction between power and influence. Power is the authority that someone has to make a decision. Influence is the capacity that someone without power has to alter a decision that will be made by someone with power. If citizens want to increase their role in governance, it is not necessarily to assume a greater share of power. For the most part, they want to increase their influence over their representatives in ways that will make the institutions more responsive.

The challenge of renewing governance, therefore, is to involve citizens more directly in the debate stage in ways that will increase their influence, but that do not compromise representative democracy.

In one sense, this scenario is not new. Governments have always had consultation processes, ranging from town halls to royal commissions. But the traditional approach to consultation no longer meets their expectations, for at least two reasons. First, governments were sparing in their use of them. Second, citizens are losing confidence in their legitimacy. Why?

Traditional consultations were far too controlled by government. Government set the terms under which the consultation would take place. It posed the questions, defined the process, received the input, processed it, and provided the response and recommendations. Citizens today feel that in such processes governments do not have to listen to them. They suspect that, in the end, officials will implement recommendations that reflect their priorities. As a result, such processes confer increasingly less legitimacy on the outcome. For example, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples has not resulted in a major policy agenda, as many had hoped.

In the past, Canadians (and citizens in other developed democracies) were more willing to accept a paternalistic relationship with their governments. That is changing. Today, most citizens recognize that governments are there to serve them. If new forms of public consultation are to have legitimacy, the basic nature of the processes must change. At the foundation, the public must view them as a discussion in which government is both a participant and a facilitator. The process cannot be controlled from the top-down as in the old way. There is a simple but powerful connection between government's willingness to give citizens more say in the policy process and the credibility of its claims to want to serve them better.

Government needs new consultation models that break with the traditional style of the formal hearing, and that engage citizens in something that is more akin to a conversation. Unlike the paternalistic style of the formal hearing, a conversation is a quintessentially collaborative activity. Participants negotiate with one another regarding its purpose, direction and conclusion. Consultations must conform to this model by giving citizens a greater role in posing the questions, defining the process and developing the response and recommendations.

Moreover, such a conversation should be between citizens, not just with government. Government may be a participant and a facilitator in such a conversation, but it should not be the voice of order and authority, seated at the front of the room, to which participants must address themselves as supplicants.

If governments are to engage citizens in a conversation, they must relinquish some measure of control over the process. Citizens must be convinced that they are more than supplicants.

If governments are to engage citizens in a conversation, they must relinquish some measure of control over the process. Citizens must be convinced that they are more than supplicants. They must be participants in the entire process, up to and including the drawing of conclusions, not just in presenting a panel with options and arguments. To achieve this, we need a new approach to governance using different kinds of forums that will permit such conversations to occur.

ICTs could play a key role in creating such forums. A wide range of new tools and techniques are emerging based on the new technology. As will be clear from our recommendations in Section 8 below, we think that government should commit to a major initiative to experiment with and develop these new tools. Nevertheless, the process should be seen as evolutionary, rather than revolutionary. These are uncharted waters and there may be rocks and shoals. A number of questions need clearer answers, as we note in our recommendations. At least two should be raised here:

What if the majority of people who participated in e-democracy processes were, in fact, interested professionals rather than concerned citizens? Would that compromise the initiative?

1. How much do citizens really want to be involved in governance?

Although advocates of citizen engagement argue that citizens want to be consulted on a wide range of policy issues, there is evidence to the contrary. Studies also show that they are not interested in being engaged in more than a few key issues. On the other hand, stakeholders clearly do want to be more involved in government policy processes and decision-making. For example, business groups or environmental organizations often have highly paid professionals whose job is to influence government decision-making on policy issues. What if the majority of people who participated in e-democracy processes were, in fact, interested professionals rather than concerned citizens? Would that compromise the initiative? Would it create policy-making processes that are less inclusive and more elitist, rather than the reverse?

2. What are the respective roles of elected officials and public servants?

The new technology makes communication with government and the access to government information quick and easy. As the technology becomes more interactive, stakeholders from civil society and the business community will be increasingly engaged with government, and government with them. Citizens and stakeholders will request documents and information from public servants. They will seek answers to questions and responses to suggestions and proposals. They will congregate online to discuss government's policies, directions and performance.

As these processes become more common, larger and more developed, officials will find themselves participating in—perhaps leading—policy development processes. Will this compromise their neutral role as public servants? How will it affect their relationship with elected officials?

For their part, government officials will seek the input of citizens and stakeholders for the development of new policies, to get feedback on options, and to find new ideas. Indeed, government officials will view this access as a key part of their information and knowledge resources. As these processes become more common, larger and more developed, officials will find themselves participating in—perhaps leading—policy development processes. Will this compromise their neutral role as public servants? How will it affect their relationship with elected officials?

In fact, some realignment of responsibilities here seems all but inevitable. On the one hand, citizens and stakeholders likely will engage government officials online and expect government to respond. These relationships will multiply and develop along with the technology. On the other hand, there are not enough elected officials to man all of the terminals or participate in all of the processes. The unavoidable conclusion is that public servants will play a bigger role in the policy process in future. Government needs mechanisms, guidelines and principles to ensure that such developments do not undermine the role of elected representatives.

The unavoidable conclusion is that public servants will play a bigger role in the policy process in future. Government needs mechanisms, guidelines and principles to ensure that such developments do not undermine the role of elected representatives.

A further question concerns the so-called “digital divide”. Many Canadians would be either unwilling or unable to participate in online forums for a variety of reasons, ranging from lack of access to the technology to cultural or linguistic barriers. Clearly, any initiative to involve Canadians more directly in governance through the technology must be balanced by the use of other conventional tools to ensure that such processes include all Canadians.

Questions such as these are not meant to undermine the case for e-democracy, but to show that much remains to be learned about it. Indeed, the surface has barely been scratched. In our view, government’s response to the challenge should be positive and encouraging but measured.

There is room for rapid—perhaps even aggressive—use of the technology to bring citizens and stakeholders into the policy process. We regard this as a basic application of the principle that citizens should be recognized as partners in governance. Nevertheless, using the new e-democracy tools should provide for experimentation, development and learning. There must be room for mistakes as well as successes. E-democracy should be seen as an evolutionary process.

Canadian MPs and the Web

Despite the growing number of Canadians who use the Internet for everyday transactions, communications and information searches, federal MPs are surprisingly absent from the web. Only 58 % of Canadian MPs have official websites, according to a survey by the Centre for Collaborative Government. For those remaining, 19% of MPs had websites that are under construction, and as many as 23% had no site or any immediate plans to build one.

The research, which examined how MPs use their websites to connect with constituents, also revealed that only 27% of those with websites used interactive tools such as online feedback forms or surveys that allow citizens to express views directly to their MP through the site.

As was suggested in the last section, the role of backbench and opposition politicians is changing. As citizens and stakeholders become more engaged with government and each other online, elected officials should be there to define their role in the new arrangements. Among the many roles they do play, a natural one in such process is that of facilitators of the discussions. They could hold various parties to account for their claims and arguments, moderate differences or disputes, ensure that everyone's voice was heard, and help the parties arrive at compromises and fair trade-offs.

The growth of e-democracy will create a major opportunity for elected officials to become more engaged in the policy process. Much will hinge on their willingness to do so, however, and on their creativity and skill in using the new tools to engage citizens in a way that is meaningful to them.

The new technology could play an important role in helping elected officials adjust to other changes, as well. They live in a world where events unfold with increasing speed, where the interdependence between policy areas or between international and domestic affairs is growing rapidly, and the influence of civil society organizations is rising.

The new technology could be used to help them communicate directly and more regularly with constituents, or with colleagues in other jurisdictions; to build databases to help them monitor issues or areas of concern; and to modernize committee work, for example, through the introduction interactive of websites.

If government is to be modernized, politicians must come to see the new technology as part of a new vision of government for the 21st century. There must be a greater awareness among them of how it could be used to make the practices and institutions of governance more responsive and more inclusive, and to initiate changes and reforms within them.

Strong and informed political leadership is needed on the e-government file. Although there has been progress, and more politicians are becoming aware of the issues and asking about them, engaging politicians in the discussion remains a major challenge.

Our recommendations have been subdivided into two major parts. The first part proposes a new governance charter that would be the result of a cross-country consultation process with Canadians on their vision for the future. The charter would be proclaimed in legislation but would not be legally binding.

The second part involves the development of an e-government framework that would be enacted through federal legislation. It would be further subdivided into an e-democracy or e-governance framework and an information framework. Provincial governments could enact similar legislation.

Although these two pieces of legislation are complementary, it would be possible to pursue either one independently of the other.

8.1 A new governance charter

The Government of Canada should lead a non-partisan committee made up of elected officials from all three levels of government, and including distinguished Canadians, in the development of a new governance charter. The charter would contain a statement of the vision, values and goals that Canadians have for their society in the Information Age. The process would be an act of recognition by government that the society is changing, and that representative government should be renewed in light of the changes. The process would consult with Canadians on at least three key themes:

- Recognizing citizens as partners in governance;
- Exploring government's role as a provider of information and a facilitator of new ideas; and
- Clarifying responsibilities around government's role as a steward of public information.

Ideally, all three levels of government would endorse the charter. Although it would be a new governance instrument, it would not be legally binding.

8.2 An e-government framework

Governments should develop an e-government framework, which could be enacted in legislation, and which would have two basic components: an e-democracy or e-governance framework and an information framework.

- Responsibility for implementing the e-government framework should be assigned to the **deputy prime minister/premier/mayor**.
- The office of the **Chief Information Officer should be established as a separate office**, reporting to the deputy prime minister/premier/mayor. The CIO should be a deputy level appointment with responsibility to assist the deputy prime minister/premier/mayor in the implementation of the e-government framework.

- One percent of the federal program-spending budget should be allocated to support new initiatives in the development of new information services, a horizontal approach to policy and e-democracy initiatives.

One percent of the federal program-spending budget should be allocated to support new initiatives in the development of new information services, a horizontal approach to policy and e-democracy initiatives.

- Government should develop an e-democracy framework to experiment with new forums for citizen participation in governance and to clarify government's role in the forums. The framework would **establish a process of pilot projects** that use both the new and the conventional tools to explore and develop new forms of public participation on key issues of public concern.
- **Elected officials should play a key role in the pilot projects.** An immediate priority of Parliament and other legislatures should be to ensure the education and training of elected officials in the use of the new technology, in particular, setting minimum standards for a smart office, and allocating significant resources to the task of educating elected officials.
- Information will be a key resource in the future and government will be a key provider of it to meet Canadians' needs. In preparing for the future, government should clarify its responsibilities to **certify information in key areas of public interest; and set a new standard of openness and transparency for policy development** by providing public assessments of the quality of the knowledge underlying its policies.
- The information framework would permit government to begin **organizing its information holdings in new ways to promote horizontal policy development.**
 - a) The information framework would identify lead departments for key policy fields, and task them with establishing new rules for sharing information between departments in different policy fields.
 - b) Ministers of the lead departments would sit on a new horizontal policy council chaired by the deputy prime minister/premier/mayor to ensure coordination across policy fields.

8.2.1 An e-democracy framework

Governments should develop an e-democracy framework to experiment with new forums for citizen participation in governance and to clarify government's role in them. The e-democracy framework would:

- Ensure that government used the new tools to vigorously expand citizens' role in providing input into policy development and deliberations on issues of concern through public consultations; and
- Establish a special process that combined use of the new tools and conventional ones to explore and develop new forums for public participation on key issues of concern.

The framework would have several tasks. It should:

1. Establish **clear benchmarks for public consultation** in the development of government policy, including:
 - a) all policy processes should be required to post consultation sites on government portals along with supporting documents, such as concept and background papers, relevant studies or expert opinions;
 - b) protocols should be developed containing rules and guidelines for government's participation, including its responsibility to respond to questions and proposals on the sites; and
 - c) terms should be set requiring government responsibility to report back to the public at the end of the process. At a minimum, this should require a clear statement of the rationale behind its policy decisions.

All policy processes should be required to post-consultation sites on government portals along with supporting documents, such as concept and background papers, relevant studies or expert opinions.

2. The framework should establish a **process for a series of e-democracy pilot projects**. They would allow citizens and government to experiment with different modes of citizen participation on issues of public concern. The pilots would be designed to explore and expand understanding around a number of key e-democracy issues and questions, such as:
 - a) Who is participating in such processes (e.g. citizens or stakeholders)?
 - b) What roles and responsibilities are the various parties assuming (e.g. are elected officials acting as facilitators or advocates)?
 - c) What impact is the “digital divide” having on such consultations?
 - d) How should conventional tools be integrated with new e-tools to ensure that such processes are representative?
 - e) What standards, rules, guidelines or mechanisms are needed to help ensure that such processes lead to effective deliberation, learning, compromise and consensus building?
 - f) Are there practical limitations on the use of the technology, say, in terms of the size of the groups involved, the length of the discussions or the complexity of the issues?
 - g) Where is participation in decision-making an effective and viable choice over consultation?
 - h) What options exist for multi-governmental experiments in this area?
 - i) Do these processes pose a serious threat to representative democracy?
 - j) What impact might they have on the role of the public service?
3. The process should terminate in a **report** that would:
 - a) Detail the lessons learned from the pilots on these and related issues;
 - b) Propose guidelines for roles and responsibilities in future processes;
 - c) Make recommendations on ways to expand on and deepen the new practice; and
 - d) Propose new mechanisms for participation.
4. The process should **provide citizens with a role in selecting policy areas** or issues that would be pilot projects.
5. **Elected officials should play a central role** in the implementation of the e-democracy framework. Their education and training in the use of the new technology therefore should be a central and immediate government priority. In particular:
 - a) Minimum standards for a “smart office” should be established that all members would be required to meet. These would include providing a website, ensuring that constituency databases are developed according to uniform standards, and that members meet a basic standard of Internet literacy.

Elected officials should play a central role in the implementation of the e-democracy framework. Their education and training in the use of the new technology therefore should be a central and immediate government priority.

- b) Significant resources should be allocated to provide training for elected officials and their staff, and to encourage members to use and experiment with new tools for a variety of purposes, including new ways of carrying on committee business, serving their constituents, and networking with counterparts in other governments.

8.2.2 An information framework:

Treating information as a public resource

A key challenge for government will be to help ensure that citizens have access to the information they need, and that on key topics, such as investments or health, it is reliable and authoritative.

Information will be a key resource in the future, and government will likely be the single biggest producer of it. The public will need quality information for a wide variety of purposes and topics, ranging from personal investments to family planning. A key challenge for government will be to help ensure that citizens have access to the information they need, and that on key topics, such as investments or health, it is reliable and authoritative. Government should establish a new information framework that would:

1. Require that government departments and agencies set and respect rigorous methodological standards in the development and provision of public information in designated areas;
2. Require that these standards be made public and declare government’s accountability for adhering to them in the provision of public information;
3. Require that government define clear, transparent and accessible standards and categories for evaluating its own policy ideas;
4. Require that government use those standards to evaluate its policy proposals and positions, and that such evaluations be made public;
5. Provide citizens with a mechanism for identifying areas of special concern where government should provide the public with quality information; and
6. Establish new mechanisms to enhance government’s accountability to the public for the quality and accessibility of the information and knowledge that it provides.

Establish a horizontal approach to policy

The idea of a more holistic approach to policy—one that builds on the interconnections between separate policy fields—has been discussed for years. But making it work in a paper-based system of fax machines, telephone and memos would require a Herculean effort. The technology could change that. It could be used to share information and to monitor the impact of policy across departmental boundaries. In short, horizontal policy is now a real possibility. The information framework would permit government to begin **organizing public information in new ways to promote horizontal policy development.**

Lead departments should be required to initiate new information- and knowledge-sharing relationships with other government departments to develop a shared understanding of the opportunities for closer alignment and integration.

1. Lead departments should be identified for each key policy field and tasked with establishing an authoritative set of “bridging rules”.
2. Lead departments should be required to initiate new information- and knowledge-sharing relationships with other government departments to develop a shared understanding of the opportunities for closer alignment and integration.
3. Ministers for the lead departments should be members of a new horizontal policy council, chaired by the **deputy prime minister/premier/mayor**, and should advise him or her on steps and strategies to ensure progress on horizontal policy development.

4. The ministers of intergovernmental affairs and appropriate central agencies should be members of the horizontal policy council.
5. The council should review existing programs on a five-year basis to evaluate progress in making them more horizontal, to identify barriers to and opportunities for progress.

Privacy review

Parliament should undertake a comprehensive review of the government's privacy policies to establish how privacy might be a barrier to the advancement of e-government, and what changes, if any, might be needed to existing policies or practices to establish an appropriate balance between respect for personal privacy and the treatment of information as a public resource.

Provide for the removal of internal barriers

In order to meet the challenges and realize the opportunities posed by the new technology, new management tools would be needed and old barriers would have to be removed. Such barriers are present in a wide range of areas, including:

- Technology: Interoperability will be essential in the networking state but is government ready?
- Procurement: Is the overall approach to new technology right for the future?
- Policy/legislative/departmental mandates: What barriers should be removed to facilitate alignment?
- Privacy: Is privacy a serious barrier to progress? If so, what must be done to adjust?
- Culture: How much is the administrative culture of conventional government a barrier to progress? What can be done to change it?

Government should undertake a comprehensive review of the barriers to implementing the e-government framework and recommend steps to remove them.

In order to meet the challenges and realize the opportunities posed by the new technology, new management tools would be needed and old barriers would have to be removed.

We began this report with the statement that Canadians should lead the next phase in the evolution of e-government by pioneering new ways of using and sharing information; and by setting a new standard for democracy, openness and accountability for government in the Information Age. At the risk of appearing to contradict ourselves, we will close by asking whether e-government has—or should have—a future.

There has been much talk in recent months about the need to drop the “e” from “e-government”. Some of the same people who spent the last decade trying to get the policy community to say the “e-word” now want it banned—at the very moment it is surfacing in newspapers and on the airwaves. Why?

They are worried that the “e” has become a liability. Many of the people they most want to reach—such as politicians and opinion leaders—have taken it as a signal that e-government is a club for technology experts and that they can afford to leave it to the experts. As this report should make clear, nothing could be further from the truth.

Moreover, if it has sometimes been hard to get the attention of the politicians and opinion leaders, progress has been made. Interest has grown. There is a broader and deeper willingness to engage the issues. The last few years have been one chapter in a book that is far from finished.

Policy-makers can get on with the real work of finding the best ways to transform government through better information, services, accountability and public engagement. In the end, e-government is really only about government—so why not speak that way?

Those who favour dropping the “e” agree that the “e-government” epithet has been useful. It was a way of underlining that the technology is an enormously powerful tool—what experts call an “enabler”. Of course, the e-government debate needs technical people to keep us up-to-date on what is possible. It changes daily. But as long as that is kept in mind, they say, policy-makers can get on with the real work of finding the best ways to transform government through better information, services, accountability and public engagement. In the end, e-government is really only about government—so why not speak that way?

There is much to be said for this view. In the end, e-government really is about government. But, if the “e” is going to be dropped, it is important not to lose sight of a second point. The technology is not only a major enabler that creates new opportunities; it is also a major driver of historical change that will transform government and society, as did the printing press and steam engine.

Leaders can recognize that fact, rise to the challenge, and try to manage the change, or they can regard the new technology as “only a tool,” whose impact on government and society will be determined by the choices we make around its use. This falsely suggests that government can choose to do nothing, without consequences. If it so chooses, the technology will take its own course. An argument for keeping the “e” is that it stands as a visible reminder that something new and awesome is in our midst.

For our part, we believe that the technology is transforming society and government, moving us toward what we called the networked state. Whether or not it is best to refer to it as “the next phase of e-government” is a fair question. But let us not allow discussion and debate to be derailed over a word. The point that we want to make is that the government of the 21st century will look very different from the government of the 20th century—and that building it is now the biggest challenge and the biggest opportunity facing Canadians. Let us agree, then: that is the real point of departure for a useful discussion about the next phase of e-government.

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