



## **E-Government: The Message to Politicians**

**Crossing Boundaries III Political Advisory Committee:**

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**The 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 international conference to be held in May 2003.

### **Co-Chairs:**

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

### **Other PAC Members:**

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

# About Crossing Boundaries

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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 next year and a half, the project will focus on identifying immediate barriers to the progress of e-government and pose strategies to remove them.

More specifically, as Crossing Boundaries 1 and 2 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 3 is to contribute to raising 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 will produce:

- A clear readable account of e-government – a storyline – that defines key challenges and opportunities along the way; and
- A three to four page appendix to the storyline containing a concise list of practical initiatives that could be championed by elected representatives and senior public servants to move the file forward.

Crossing Boundaries 3 will include 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 consultation 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. These activities will culminate in an international conference in 2003 that will bring participants and findings together into a forum where stakeholder commitment can be demonstrated and tested.

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](http://www.crossingboundaries.ca)

Crossing Boundaries is organized under the auspices of the Centre for Collaborative Government and it 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.

# Changing Government

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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 seventh 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](http://www.crossingboundaries.ca)  
Telephone: (613) 594-4795 Fax: (613) 594-5925 or email:  
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## Gouvernements en mutation

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Depuis sa création en 1999, le Centre pour la collaboration gouvernementale a mis en oeuvre, avec de nombreux partenaires, toute une série d'initiatives nationales de recherche afin d'approfondir certains des enjeux majeurs qui confrontent les gestionnaires du secteur public.

Il s'agit du septième volume de notre série Gouvernements en mutation, dont l'objectif est de transmettre ces idées et ces résultats de recherche à un auditoire plus large à tous les paliers de gouvernement, ainsi qu'au sein des sociétés privées et parapubliques. Les prochaines parutions porteront sur les enjeux contemporains de la gestion publique et rendra compte des conclusions de projet de recherche précis.

On peut se procurer Gouvernements en mutation gratuitement par l'entremise du Centre pour la collaboration gouvernementale. Il est aussi disponible sur notre site Web: [www.crossingboundaries.ca](http://www.crossingboundaries.ca). Téléphone: : (613) 594-4795. Télécopieur : (613) 594-5925. Courriel : [main@crossingboundaries.ca](mailto:main@crossingboundaries.ca)





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Through this paper the Political Advisory Committee of the Crossing Boundaries project considers why politicians should care about e-government, clarifies the respective roles of politicians and bureaucrats in promoting e-government and identifies the issues that politicians need to address. The discussion has been structured around four basic questions.

## **1. How should the story of e-government be told to make it relevant and engaging for politicians?**

A growing number of politicians see e-government as part of a **new vision of government for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**. For them, e-government is much more than a tool to put services online. They see the Internet as a “transformative technology”, much like the printing press or the steam engine. This group believes that e-government could harness the power of the Internet and use it to achieve a variety of goals, including the reform of Parliament, the renewal of federalism, improved accountability and the strengthening of democracy.

Others view e-government more practically as a tool to help them improve the way they do their job. It provides an **opportunity** to do what they do faster, cheaper and more effectively. There is a third group for whom the real motivator will be more basic and urgent. Increasingly, the realization is dawning on many politicians that e-government is a critical tool for doing their job, connecting with and serving constituents. Politicians who don't adapt risk being replaced by those who do.

Unfortunately, statistics show **that many politicians are not using technology at all**. If we want to engage them in e-government, the issues must be cast in terms that relate to politicians' roles, responsibilities and priorities. One way to do this is to demonstrate how e-government is relevant to their chances for re-election. We should also appeal to their sense of public spirit. We must show them why lending their support as elected representatives to e-government is in the public interest.

Our committee identified **five e-government goals** that we feel will resonate with many of our colleagues:

1. Improvement of relations between a government and its citizens – i.e. through increased transparency and accountability, and through improved communication between elected representatives and their constituents
2. Promotion of democracy through public consultation, informed debate, and encouragement of the expression of views;
3. Reform of institutions, including the electoral process and federalism;
4. Transformation of governance—i.e. the internal processes and organization of governments and their departments or ministries;
5. Reinforce political credibility – strengthen politicians' ability to effectively communicate the nature of their work to the public.

## **2. Why do we need to involve politicians in the e-government discussion?**

The answer seems to be straightforward—politicians have the authority to remove barriers to progress that public servants cannot remove (see Question 3). At least three other tasks were identified for elected representatives:

- e-government needs politicians to act as champions
- politicians are uniquely positioned to help government become more directly linked to the community by acting as an important feedback mechanism
- politicians could participate in projects that promote democratic change.

### 3. What issues must politicians address if the agenda is to move forward?

- **Seamless government requires greater policy alignment:** Aligning policy goals requires political debate, negotiation and compromise. If e-government is to produce seamless government, it needs political leadership on policy integration.
- **Avoiding information overload:** In the Information Age, governments must regard their information holdings, and their growing capacity for gathering and integrating information, as key public resources. But making these resources available to the public requires a judicious balance of “liberating the holdings” and providing a measured release of authoritative and accurate data. Striking this balance requires political debate and decision-making.
- **Enhancing transparency and accountability:** If ICTs are to enhance the transparency and accountability of government, a major change in culture is needed. Governments must become much more open, much less controlling and more collaborative, less hierarchical and more horizontal, less secret and more transparent.
- **Promoting public consultation and debate:** ICTs are expanding public space into cyberspace, as a location for public consultation, discussion and debate. Politicians should be involved in and leading such debates and consultations.

### 4. What strategies are available to involve politicians in e-government in a meaningful, productive and rewarding way?

Politicians could **use the committee systems** to bring together different government departments and stakeholders to identify opportunities and ways to coordinate across organizational boundaries. Indeed, they could go even further, drawing together different levels of government to discuss areas for program integration.

Another option is to break with the traditional style of the formal hearing, and promote an approach to **consultation as a conversation**. The conversation would be one between Canadians, not just with government. Government may be a participant and a facilitator in such a conversation

### Conclusion

Change can be managed, perhaps even directed. But it requires commitment and the courage to make major decisions under conditions of great uncertainty—a willingness to use the levers of power to shape the future, and a capacity to win and maintain the public support needed to give such decisions legitimacy. The Crossing Boundaries Political Advisory Committee is committed to promoting such leadership on the e-government file over the coming months.

The Crossing Boundaries project began in 1997. The goal was to engage a cross-section of public servants, politicians, journalists, academics, and private sector participants in a discussion of the impact of information and communications technologies (ICTs) on government and governance.

By the end of Crossing Boundaries I, participants had drawn the conclusion that public servants cannot remove many of the obstacles along the road to e-government or exploit the opportunities on their own. They need political support and leadership because such tasks often exceed their authority. For example, changes to privacy legislation, alignment of policies across departmental boundaries, strengthening accountability or using ICTs for innovative public consultation processes all require political support and leadership.

A clear result of those discussions was that politicians need a better understanding of the issues, challenges and opportunities around e-government and, ultimately, a more engaged role in it.

In response, the project organizers recently established the Crossing Boundaries Political Advisory Committee (PAC), which includes eight elected representatives, along with the Chair of the Crossing Boundaries III project. As the members of that committee, we come from all three levels of government, a variety of political parties and different regions of the country. We are committed to working together to engage other elected officials in our respective governments in the discussion and to taking a leadership role in helping to move the e-government agenda forward in Canada.

This paper is the first in a series of initiatives that we hope to undertake in an effort to realize our goals. Don Lenihan, Chair of the Crossing Boundaries III project and Co-Chair of the PAC, prepared an earlier draft of the paper, based on roundtable sessions, dinners and interviews on the subject with project participants. It was then reviewed and discussed by the PAC at its inaugural meeting in Ottawa in July 2002. It has since been revised to reflect our discussion, comments and suggestions.

### 1.1 What is e-government?

As part of its work on e-government, the Crossing Boundaries III project recently published *Realigning Governance: From E-government to E-Democracy*. The paper provides a comprehensive answer to the question “What is e-government?” based on consultations with governments and stakeholders across the country and around the world. It separates the work underway on e-government into three basic categories:

- **Improving service delivery:** Governments are using Internet technologies, such as websites and portals, to make services and information more accessible to citizens and more “client-centred.” Ideally, all government services would be available through a single point of access, such as a personal computer. Citizens would be able to move freely and easily across departments and levels of government, as they accessed different but related services. However, providing this kind of seamless access to services remains an ideal. There is still a long way to go. Getting there will require major changes to government, ranging from privacy legislation to a greater alignment of policies in many areas.
- **Making information a public resource:** The new ICT infrastructure now being built for service delivery will also create an enormous new capacity to access, integrate and use information. Information is an increasingly critical resource for many activities, ranging from investment and

research to making government more accountable. Some say that information will be to the knowledge-based economy what oil was to the industrial one—that is, a source of wealth, influence and power. But who controls the resource? Who will benefit from its use? How? What claim does or should the public have over the use of this awesome new power in government?

- **E-democracy: Extending public space:** The new infrastructure can also be used to engage citizens and stakeholders in discussion, debate and even decision-making. How will the new technology be used to change democracy? Can it be used to enhance existing practices? Does it pose a threat to democracy? Do Canadians want more involvement in public debate and decision-making?

Our committee recognizes that the breadth and scope of e-government implied by these three aspects, and as set out in the *Realigning Governance paper*, call for broader, more informed public discussion of the issues. If a central goal of our work is to engage more elected representatives in such a discussion, we feel that it is important to work toward a clear vision of e-government that they can relate to, understand, and support. As a start, we were able to identify some key goals at our first meeting.

**Citizens would be able to access government services and information based on their needs, without having to worry about which level or department of government might provide the service.**

First of all, we think that the main goal of e-government is to **make government and governance more relevant to citizens and more effective in serving them.** For example, ideally, citizens would be able to access government services and information based on their needs, without having to worry about which level or department of government might provide the service. The new technology could make this possible. But if that is to happen, politicians must provide the leadership needed to ensure that governments work together to realize this vision.

Second, we believe that **the technology can be used to make government far more accountable and transparent.** For example, citizens should have access to more information on government performance. Politicians must provide the leadership needed to ensure that such information is available in ways that will allow citizens to assess their government's performance.

Third, we think that **e-government could allow citizens to relate to their governments and to their elected representatives in new and more effective ways.** Citizens often have a variety of views and opinions on government policies. They do not always have effective ways of making their views known or heard. The technology could be used in new ways to ensure that citizens and their representatives can engage one another more directly and in a more timely way on issues of concern. This change could contribute to better and more effective representation of constituents by their politicians.

**The new technology may enable us to reform our political practices and institutions in ways that will make them more responsive and more inclusive.**

Fourth, **the new technology may enable us to reform our political practices and institutions** in ways that will make them more responsive and more inclusive. For example, e-voting could allow citizens who are currently excluded from the electoral process (because they live in isolated locations or are unable to leave their homes) to participate. Innovations such as e-voting would help to modernize the democratic process.

For changes like these to happen, it will be necessary for governments to work together at the political and the administrative levels. Politicians must lead and support the process.

### **1.2 The political challenge of Crossing Boundaries**

We think ideas such as those in the last section make a good start at telling a compelling story of what e-government is about and why it is important. Unfortunately, it is a story that is not well known among politicians. They tend to regard the e-government discussion as one for public servants. We disagree. But what should we say to convince them otherwise?

When the people sitting around the discussion table are mainly public servants, the call for political leadership seems to need little explanation. There is much nodding of heads. But as Crossing Boundaries attempted to engage more politicians and pass the word on to them, it found many of them asking back: “Why should this matter to us?”

When Crossing Boundaries first began, the question made everyone feel a bit awkward. No one had a simple, convincing and practical answer. Perhaps it is obvious to public servants that e-government needs political leadership, or that politicians should care about the issues, but after three years of reflection and discussion, it can be said with confidence that it is not so obvious to many politicians. As one MP wryly observed: “When constituents come to see me, it’s not to talk about e-government!”

**As the Political Advisory Committee of Crossing Boundaries, we maintain that e-government should be high on every politician’s list of priorities.**

As the Political Advisory Committee of Crossing Boundaries, we maintain that e-government should be high on every politician’s list of priorities. Nevertheless, it is clear that many politicians do not understand the issues or their own role in solving them. They regard e-government as an incomprehensible interest and invention of bureaucrats. For their part, public servants have failed to make clear why politicians should take an interest. What’s wrong?

### **1.3 Four questions that framed our search for the political perspective**

Building on the perspectives provided by PAC members, this paper considers why politicians should care about e-government, clarifies the respective roles of politicians and bureaucrats in promoting e-government and identifies the issues that politicians need to address. The questions we posed in researching the paper are as follows:

- How should the story of e-government be told to make it relevant and engaging for politicians?
- Why do we need to involve politicians in the e-government discussion?
- What issues must politicians address if the agenda is to move forward?
- What strategies are available to involve politicians in e-government in a meaningful, productive and rewarding way?

The paper responds to these questions, based on what we heard at roundtable sessions and on the observations made by committee members at the PAC meeting.

# How should the story of e-government be told to make it relevant and engaging for politicians?

As members of the PAC, we recognized that if we want to engage our colleagues on e-government, the issues must be cast in terms that relate to politicians' roles, responsibilities and priorities. One way to do that is to demonstrate how e-government is relevant to their chances for re-election. We should also appeal to their sense of public spirit. We must show them why lending their support as elected representatives to e-government is in the public interest.

How do we do this? Building on our initial efforts to provide a compelling vision of e-government for politicians, our committee identified the following set of five e-government goals that we feel will resonate with many of our colleagues:

1. Improvement of relations between a government and its citizens – i.e. through increased transparency and accountability, and through improved communication between elected representatives and their constituents
2. Promotion of democracy through public consultation, informed debate, and encouragement of the expression of views;
3. Reform of institutions, including the electoral process and federalism;
4. Transformation of governance—i.e. the internal processes and organization of governments and their departments or ministries;
5. Reinforce political credibility – strengthen politicians' ability to effectively communicate the nature of their work to the public.

There is an enormous range of awareness and understanding at the political level of how or why politicians should be interested in the topic. A small but growing number of politicians see it as part of a **new vision of government for the 21<sup>st</sup> century**. For them, e-government is much more than a tool to put services online. They see the Internet as a “transformative technology,” that is, one that will transform society, as did the printing press and steam engine in earlier times. This group believes that e-government could harness the power of the Internet and use it to achieve a variety of goals, including the reform of Parliament, the renewal of federalism, improved accountability and the strengthening of democracy.

A second and larger group views e-government more practically as a tool to help them improve the way they do their job. In short, it provides an **opportunity** to do what they do faster, cheaper and more effectively.

Finally, there is a third and even larger group for whom the real motivator will be more basic and urgent. Increasingly, the realization is dawning on many politicians that e-government is a critical tool for doing their job, connecting with and serving constituents. Politicians who don't adapt risk being replaced by those who do.

The new technology is increasing the speed at which events occur and are played out. For example, the collapse of the Thai Bhat a few years ago sent shockwaves around the world that within weeks had been felt from stock markets to living rooms. Key players in such events are linked through a global information and communications network that is rapidly expanding. As a result, reaction to such events is swift and direct and can have huge implications for governments.

As events accelerate, there is growing concern that governments act too slowly. Pressure is

Pressure is increasing on high-level officials, such as ministers and senior public servants, to respond immediately and directly to changing circumstances.

increasing on high-level officials, such as ministers and senior public servants, to respond immediately and directly to changing circumstances. The technology is shifting the locus of discussion, debate and decision-making away from the legislatures—a trend that threatens to make them increasingly less relevant.

When the technology makes it possible to get along without you, experts like to say that you have been **disintermediated**. If information and communications technologies (ICTs) are not used to strengthen the role of backbench and opposition politicians by bringing them into the discussion, ICTs may well disintermediate them. At the very least, politicians who cannot use the new tools to join in the discussion will be increasingly ineffective and, out of touch. This presents them with a serious challenge.

On one hand, a powerful new set of tools is emerging that can and will be used to engage the public in new ways.

On one hand, a powerful new set of tools is emerging that can and will be used to engage the public in new ways. The tools give politicians the opportunity to redefine and reinvigorate their roles as champions of particular issues; and, more generally, champions of a new way of doing politics that is more democratic, open, transparent, accountable, efficient and effective. For example, the New Democratic Party recently announced that it would be the first federal party to open up a leadership vote to all its members through the Internet. The last time the Party chose a leader, only about one to two percent of the members were involved. This time, party officials hope to increase voter participation dramatically among members.

On the other hand, politicians who fail to master the new technology risk turning the very tools that should be reconnecting them with government and citizens into instruments of their own disintermediation. There is evidence that this could already be happening.

Crossing Boundaries recently conducted a study of the use of e-based tools by MPs. The results were surprising in two respects. First, of 301 MPs, only about half (58%) currently have functional websites. Second, and even more revealing, of these sites, only about one-third (36%) includes a feedback mechanism. As one participant remarked, not only are too few MPs making use of new technology, those doing so are in “send” and not “receive” mode.

This is an interesting—and worrying—snapshot of the state-of-the-art among elected representatives at the federal level. Within a decade, access to new technology will be so universal that using Internet sites for everything from shopping to voting may be simpler than making a telephone call.

Politicians who want to prosper in the future would be wise to begin exploring ways to integrate the new technology into their work.

Politicians who want to prosper in the future would be wise to begin exploring ways to integrate the new technology into their work. At first, this could be with an eye to performing their various roles better. As e-government evolves, however, they will discover that the technology is changing their roles. For those who choose to ignore the trend, a basic but powerful message emerged from our discussions: **E-government is the way of the future. If you don't get with the program, you risk not being part of the future.**



If the first question resulted in a message that was stark, clear and a bit unnerving, the response to the second one was more nuanced and layered. The question was supposed to get participants to reflect on the call for political leadership and to explain what it is that politicians can do to move e-government forward that public servants cannot do. For example: What specific roles can politicians play in the e-government discussion that public servants cannot play? What unique skills or authorities do they have that are needed to move the agenda forward?

Our discussions led us quickly to conclude that the question as posed —Why must e-government involve politicians?—should be split in two: “Why does the e-government movement need politicians?” and “Why do politicians need the e-government movement?” The next section briefly recaps some of the key thoughts around each question.

### 3.1 Why does the e-government movement need politicians?

When the question why e-government needs politicians was first asked, it might have appeared to some that the answer was straightforward—politicians have the authority to remove barriers to progress—and so the discussion would be short. That was not the case. Although the removal of barriers remained central to the discussion, participants and the PAC members went well beyond it. At least three other tasks were identified for elected representatives, giving us four in all.

Politicians can perform certain tasks that public servants cannot.

**1. Solving problems and removing barriers:** Politicians can perform certain tasks that public servants cannot. For example, they can make horizontal decisions more easily, debate publicly and champion controversial policy options, and they make policy decisions. As noted, progress on the e-government agenda has been slowed by a number of barriers. Some of these will almost certainly have to be resolved at the political level, including in committees and party caucuses, at the cabinet table and in the legislatures. For example, issues such as privacy may require a larger political debate, followed by legislation. Integrated services may require new intergovernmental standards. In both cases, elected representatives would have to play a lead role.

**2. Becoming champions of e-government:** Our discussions suggested that more politicians must become champions of e-government, who can inform, educate, debate and advocate for change at various stages of the policy process. Inside government, they could do so at caucus meetings, within committees and in the legislatures. Externally, they could carry the message to Canadians, educating stakeholders and citizens about e-government and the issues, challenges and opportunities it raises. They could promote a broader public debate in the media, academia, think-tanks and elsewhere. Many of our participants in the discussions felt that building more political champions was critical to the success of e-government. They also viewed it as a natural role and a career opportunity for backbenchers and opposition members.

More effective forums should be created that would allow politicians and public servants to speak freely and candidly about citizens' needs and expectations.

**3. Helping government become more directly linked to the community:** Politicians are keenly aware of what their constituents want and expect from their governments. They could be an important source of front line information on the community's priorities and needs. More effective forums should be created that would allow politicians and public servants to speak freely and candidly about citizens' needs and expectations. Politicians could become an important feedback mechanism for public servants who are designing and testing new e-government initiatives, ranging from service delivery to policy consultation processes.

**4. Participating in projects to promote democratic change:** Ongoing research from Crossing Boundaries has suggested that e-government will change the practice of democracy, causing a realignment of the roles played by citizens, elected representatives and the public service. This will happen over time. As the process unfolds, a new balance must be struck between direct and representative democracy. It will involve a process of trial and error in which the three parties must actively engage one another, again and again, trying new processes and new approaches that will help them rebalance and realign their respective roles. Some of these experiments will work and some will fail. We must be able to learn from the experiences and incorporate best practices into the new evolving system. Ultimately, it is through this ongoing process of experimentation, trial and error that each of the main players will find his or her place in the new system.

Backbench and opposition politicians should be very engaged in this process. They should be at the forefront of a wide-ranging series of experiments and pilot projects with the new consultation tools, to help them discover and develop their future roles in governance as our democratic institutions evolve.

### **3.2 Why do politicians need the e-government movement?**

An ongoing discussion of how politicians might use ICTs to do their jobs better—and, ultimately, to redefine their roles or to change our governance practices—should be a critical part of any plan to move the e-government agenda forward. A good place to start is to identify the different roles that politicians play and ask what can be done, most immediately, to begin the process. Our discussion touched on four basic roles.

**1. Representing constituents:** The job has two parts: first, politicians represent the views of their constituents in government. Second, they act as an advocate or expediter for a constituent that has a specific problem with government, such as an immigration request.

Discussion forums, list serves and websites allow people from a variety of backgrounds to reach and be heard by their representatives more easily than ever before.

ICTs increase politicians' ability to communicate with their constituents. Discussion forums, list serves and websites allow people from a variety of backgrounds to reach and be heard by their representatives more easily than ever before. For instance, Dr. Carolyn Bennett, MP for St. Paul's, Toronto, uses the technology to experiment with electronic town halls and other consultation processes.

ICTs can also be used to do case work more effectively, ranging from the widespread use of e-mail to manage a file as it works its way through the bureaucracy, to the use of sophisticated government databases to provide information to constituents for investment planning or local research.

As the technology evolves, those who have adapted will be able to communicate and consult with their constituents far more frequently and reliably than those who have not. They will be more aware of issues and trends in their ridings. They will be able to provide constituents with high-quality information for a variety of purposes. And they will be adept at navigating through government systems quickly and effectively to expedite requests, decisions and changes.

The expertise can pay off at election time. For example, Reg Alcock, MP for Winnipeg South, and an ardent technophile, uses a wide range of ICT applications to monitor and serve his constituents, including video-conferencing from Ottawa and a huge database loaded with information about the people and events of Winnipeg South. Not coincidentally, he is one of the few government members in Manitoba to have increased his margin of victory—handsomely—in the last federal election.

- 2. Representing government and/or their parties to their constituents:** All politicians must explain the policies and platforms of their parties to their constituents, and defend them when they conflict with the views of constituents. Politicians who are part of the governing party are responsible for representing and defending the decisions of government to their constituents.

**A consequence of the new communications channels is that representatives will be called on more often to explain, discuss and defend the actions of their government or party to their constituents.**

A consequence of the new communications channels is that representatives will be called on more often to explain, discuss and defend the actions of their government or party to their constituents. ICTs will allow them to provide fast, reliable and accurate answers to such requests. It will also allow them to target messages to large cross-sections of the population with lightning speed and at almost no cost. They and their staff will be able to be virtually present in their ridings from anywhere in the world, if needed.

The new technology can also be effective in building and mobilizing new and powerful voter coalitions. The election of Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura, who relied on a variety of web-based tools to recruit new and younger voters, is a high-profile example of this phenomenon. The web can also be a powerful new and broad-based tool for political fundraising, as evidenced by the experience of Senator John McCain's run for the his party's nomination during the 2000 Republican primary. He raised upwards of \$5 million through his website alone.

- 3. Promoting informed debate:** In parliamentary debates and committees, elected representatives are supposed to represent all Canadians (or residents of their province) as they consider and decide upon the issues of concern before them. One of their most important responsibilities is to foster and lead public debate to ensure that options are fully explored, consequences are considered and interests have been weighed. John Godfrey, MP for Don Valley West, Toronto, discussed with us how he uses the technology to respond more efficiently to constituents' requests for information, and to network with international legislators on issues of concern.

**Politicians who have not latched on to using the technology will be hugely disadvantaged; they will need to be able to access authoritative and reliable information to help them and their constituents understand options, engage in informed debate about them, or organize responses.**

In an information-rich society, public-policy advocates will marshal increasingly large amounts of data and information to support their claims. They will also use the technology to organize media campaigns, rallies and demonstrations, to create petitions and initiate processes and actions. Politicians who have not latched on to using the technology will be hugely disadvantaged; they will need to be able to access authoritative and reliable information to help them and their constituents understand options, engage in informed debate about them, or organize responses. ICTs are powerful tools for promoting informed debate to counter sophisticated advocacy and lobbying efforts, and they are effective tools of organization to promote public action.

- 4. Holding government to account:** Politicians must ensure that the government is publicly accountable for its actions and decisions. This is a key role of opposition members, but it is also a primary responsibility of members from the governing party. In the legislatures, in committees and in public debate, elected officials from both sides of the legislature must ensure that the processes of government are open, transparent, fair, accountable and democratic. They are charged with overseeing the business of government and ensuring that decisions are implemented effectively and efficiently.

The new technology allows for much closer monitoring and reporting on internal processes and operations. At the same time, ICTs are being used to support new methods of tracking the results of government policies and programs and of reporting on them. During the recent public scrutiny of discrepancies in government sponsorship and advertising contracts, the Prime Minister was heard to say to the media that without the Internet, such rapid access to this kind of detailed information would not be possible.

**Understanding the technology and being able to use it to access and share this information will be crucial to the effective exercise of members' oversight role in future.**

Understanding the technology and being able to use it to access and share this information will be crucial to the effective exercise of members' oversight role in future. More comprehensive and better information should be easily available to politicians who know how to find it. In principle, ICTs should lead to a massive increase in the transparency and accountability of government, as politicians and the public become more skilled at using it.

Over the last four years, Crossing Boundaries has heard the claim that e-government needs politicians to remove barriers, more times than we can count. What are the main barriers that require political attention? The list is a long and sometimes confusing one. A key task for Crossing Boundaries III is to simplify it by consolidating a number of issues under a few broad themes or “clusters” of issues. The assumption is that if politicians begin discussing the themes, they will sort out the specific issues as they go. We have settled on four basic themes: policy integration, information overload, accountability and strengthening democracy.

Citizens would move across organizational boundaries effortlessly, encountering government as a single, seamless web of connections—a network.

#### 4.1 Seamless government and the challenge of policy integration

E-government has given rise to an inspiring new vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> century: **seamless government**. Services would be organized and integrated into clusters or packages around citizens’ needs. Information and access to programs would be possible through a single point of entry, such as a home computer. Citizens would move across organizational boundaries effortlessly, encountering government as a single, seamless web of connections—a **network**.

Studies and surveys show consistently that citizens want their governments to work together to minimize overlap and duplication and to ensure that programs that are intended to serve similar needs complement one another. The same studies show that when citizens use a government service, they are relatively indifferent as to which department or level of government provides it. For example, they do not want to visit eight different departments, involving three levels of government to get a business license. In the private sector, industries such as tourism and financial institutions are able to cooperate to provide clients with integrated packages. They wonder why governments cannot do the same.

ICTs make real the prospect of integrating services into packages. But integration requires much higher levels of cooperation than now exist between departments, governments and other service providers in the private and voluntary sectors. This is about more than merging backroom operations, such as payroll operations. It requires harmonization across departments and governments at the policy level. In short, governments must reach agreement on the particular goals of related programs and services.

It is not an easy task. It is certainly not one that can be accomplished by public servants alone. Harmonizing policy goals requires political debate, negotiation and compromise. If e-government is to produce seamless government, it needs political leadership on policy integration.

#### 4.2 Avoiding information overload

Information is to the knowledge economy what oil was to the industrial economy. This presents both a major challenge and an opportunity for governments. For one thing, government departments and agencies have vast information holdings. They possess data, documents and studies that could shed new light on public policy issues, help businesses make better investment decisions, support research in the private and public sector and be useful to citizens in countless other ways. Access to the resource could improve public debate, economic productivity and the services available to Canadians. Moreover, e-government is creating a powerful new capacity to integrate, organize, and circulate whole new streams of data and information. Governments could use this capacity to provide high-quality information to Canadians.

Simply flooding public space with data and information risks creating confusion, uncertainty and, ultimately, indifference among citizens.

But there is also a danger of overloading the public with too much information. Simply flooding public space with data and information risks creating confusion, uncertainty and, ultimately, indifference among citizens. Consider the debate over the Kyoto Accord. There is much uncertainty about what the Accord really means. Interest groups ranging from the environmental lobby to the business community are releasing large amounts of information and analysis to support conflicting claims about it. Ordinary citizens have neither the time nor the expertise to evaluate such claims. They need information that they can trust to be accurate and authoritative as a basis for discussion and debate. Many believe that in the Information Age governments should act as a reliable source of such information. But if a government overwhelms the public by flooding the public domain with data, information, studies and documents from its vast holdings, informed debate will become impossible. The result may be public disengagement.

In the Information Age, governments must regard their information holdings, and their growing capacity for gathering and integrating information, as key public resources. But making these resources available to the public requires a judicious balance of “liberating the holdings” and providing a measured release of authoritative and accurate data. Striking this balance requires political debate and decision-making. E-government needs political leadership on this front.

#### **4.3 Enhancing transparency and accountability**

E-government should vastly improve the accountability of government. As information becomes more abundant, it will be possible to allow public access to it and, in the process, to enhance accountability and transparency. The emergence of the new information capacity could make it possible for the public to learn more about the performance of government policies and programs and, indeed, about the internal operations of government, than could be contemplated only a decade ago. Much, it seems, will depend on the choices that are made as the new system is built.

It is quite possible for governments to design search engines that would help citizens seek out and integrate data to create new information that would answer the questions they would like to pose.

Indeed, governments could go even further. The technology exists to allow members of the public to begin posing their own questions to government. It is quite possible for governments to design search engines that would help citizens seek out and integrate data to create new information that would answer the questions they would like to pose.

At present, ministers and departmental officials decide what issues should be the subject of government reports. They then collect, organize and present the information the reports contain. Allowing for more public involvement in posing the questions would be a big step beyond traditional reporting practices. It would shift some control over the new resource to the public.

But knowledge is power, and power is not easily relinquished. If ICTs are to enhance the transparency and accountability of government, a major change in culture is needed. Governments must become much more open, much less controlling and more collaborative, less hierarchical and more horizontal, less secret and more transparent.

This will take committed political leadership. A transformation of the culture at this level is not something that public servants can achieve alone. As long as the political culture does not allow the admission of error, ministers will live in fear of it, and public servants will continue to go to great lengths to avoid embarrassing a minister. The transformation of the political culture must be led by politicians and must begin at the political level.

#### **4.4 Promoting public consultation and debate**

ICTs are expanding public space into cyberspace, as a location for public discussion and debate. Governments are major players in this trend. Public servants are using ICTs to involve stakeholders and citizens in consultation processes more frequently, more directly and in larger numbers. Techniques range from electronic polling to deliberative polling to discussion groups and referendums. Governments at all three levels are gearing up for even greater citizen involvement in such exercises.

But expanding participation in governance this way raises questions: How involved do citizens want to become? If citizens are too busy to participate, could stakeholders and interest groups hijack the discussion? Are politicians being left out? Are citizens who do not have access to the technology being left out of policy consultation because of the “digital divide?”

# What strategies are available to involve politicians in e-government in a meaningful, productive and rewarding way? 5

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Crossing Boundaries has always argued that politicians should be very involved in the e-government debate. However, politicians will be forgiven for wondering what, if anything, they can do about many of the issues. For example, we have warned that integrated services could erode privacy. In reply, politicians have been quick to acknowledge that this as a political issue. But they have underlined that it is not enough for us to say to them: “Why don’t you change privacy?” If the issue is to engage them, they must be asked to do something that is more specific. The goals must be clear and achievable, and there must be a sound strategy for pursuing them.

In raising the strategies question with our participants, we hoped that they would provide some practical suggestions to help politicians address the issues we just identified. The PAC members emphasized that in order to engage politicians, the strategies must be very practical, and should address matters that are top-of-mind in today’s political environment. At least three broad strategies have emerged from our discussions. Each one suggests a rich array of possibilities for backbenchers and opposition members who want to get more involved in the e-government file.

## 5.1 A new horizontal committee system?

If citizens want more seamless government and this requires greater coordination and integration across organizational boundaries, what can elected representatives do to facilitate this?

Politicians could use the committee systems to bring together different government departments and stakeholders to identify opportunities and ways to coordinate across organizational boundaries. Indeed, they could go even further, drawing together different levels of government to discuss areas for program integration. At least two federal MPs now head sub-committees that are experimenting with a more horizontal approach. Carolyn Bennett, MP for St. Paul’s, Toronto, heads a sub-committee on the status of persons with disabilities, and John Godfrey, MP for Don Valley West, Toronto, heads one on children and youth at risk. These committees have been experimenting with new ways of thinking about, evaluating and delivering programs and policies.

**Committees must modernize, functioning more along horizontal lines, to reflect the more horizontal nature of e-government.**

By contrast, the traditional committee system reflects the old model of self-contained policy areas. Existing committees are tied to departments and, like them, are expected to work within policy silos. Committees must modernize, functioning more along horizontal lines, to reflect the more horizontal nature of e-government. They must be free to track issues that cut across a variety of policy and program areas and to consider how these areas may combine to produce or prevent a desired outcome, or how various policies and programs that are designed to produce a similar outcome could be integrated.

Such committees might ask departments to prepare briefings on the policies and programs in their areas that impact on the issue or outcome, based on the priorities and planning and performance reports. Together, departmental officials and committee members could examine, discuss and consider a range of key questions, including:

- What are the policies and programs in the area that impact on the issue?
- How do we know how well they are working?
- What mechanisms, if any, exist to ensure coordination across departments?
- How effective are they?
- Is there any attempt to provide horizontal or collective reporting?
- Would that be feasible?



In addition to providing insight into the issue and how it may be managed better, the process would provide important generic lessons for other committees seeking to take a similar approach.

There is some further evidence that new and innovative committee practices are beginning to emerge in the federal government. In May of this year, the new federal Government Operations and Estimates Committee (GOEC) was created. It has an unusually broad mandate to review and report on operational and expenditure plans for all federal government departments and agencies. The mandate specifically includes examination of the use of ICTs to improve government operations.

Although committees are usually authorized to evaluate estimates within specific departments, the GOEC will take a “horizontal approach” and look at them across government departments. It will focus on finding solutions to government-wide issues, some of which may be addressed through the use of ICTs. Politicians in legislatures at all levels of government could learn from this experiment.

### **5.2 Getting politicians back into the democracy game**

In a city such as Toronto, an MP today may represent a constituency of 130,000 people. Economically, socially and culturally, it is a very diverse group. A single individual cannot be expected to represent so many interests adequately or to speak for them in Parliament. Similarly, it is impractical to expect some 300 MPs to represent a country of 30 million people that is as regionally, technologically, economically, socially and culturally diverse as Canada. The result is that some groups have far more influence than others.

We need a new model, one that is more **inclusive**. One option is to introduce e-voting, such as referendums, which would give more people a direct say in public affairs. Another option is to break with the traditional style of the formal hearing, and promote an approach to **consultation as a conversation**. The conversation would be one between Canadians, not just with government. Government may be a participant and a facilitator in such a conversation, but it is not the paternalistic voice of order and authority, seated at the front of the room, to which participants must address themselves as witnesses before a committee.

The idea of an “electronic” or “digital commons” has been conceived as a way of reviving the spirit of the traditional commons. It is designed to help recreate the traditional “commons”, the public space where citizens can assemble, meet, discuss, debate and explore their community, their membership in it and their common interests.

Government could use the digital commons to engage a broader cross-section of the society in consultation processes. For example, voluntary organizations play a major role in providing community and social services in many Canadian cities. Should this expertise be tapped in policy development? Would this be a way of giving marginalized groups, such as the homeless, single mothers or the disabled, a stronger and more articulate voice in decision-making? Would it help reduce some of the disaffection that Canadians feel for their political processes? We would argue “yes” for at least two reasons.

First, citizens feel that governments do not listen to them. A key claim made by advocates of a more inclusive approach to governance is that it would help restore trust in government. Second, governments find it increasingly difficult to form and implement major policy initiatives. Election campaigns and promises are notoriously vague and the “mandate” they provide, unclear.

The digital commons certainly would be about citizen engagement, but it would be about citizens engaging one another.

The digital commons would be far more than a government website where citizens can get authoritative information. It would not be just a facilitated chat room aimed at “engaging” citizens on current issues. The digital commons certainly would be about citizen engagement, but it would be about citizens engaging one another. Government could participate in such discussions—it could even initiate them—but it would do so as one among many, not as the voice of authority and control.

Could the digital commons be a powerful tool for public policy discussion and debate and a forum for the development of new ideas and options? Could it encourage public discussion and debate that is inclusive, open and uncontrolled? A recent pilot project to test the digital commons at the Department of Canadian Heritage (PCH) has produced some fascinating and promising learning on this idea.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of the pilot was to create a safe environment to explore key issues and assumptions associated with having government and elected officials as participants in an online dialogue with Canadians. Thirty-five French- and English-speaking university students from across Canada participated in the pilot, as well as six senior public servants from PCH and three Members of Parliament. The pilot was developed to shed light on questions such as: What do we need in order to have meaningful debate online? What is the role of “government” in such a debate? And what defines “government participation?” Why would Canadians want to engage in a discussion in which government is a participant? What would government gain from such an exercise?

The Digital Commons E-democracy Pilot proved that it is possible to engage a group of students, parliamentarians and public servants in an interesting and thoughtful online discussion where all participants were treated as equals.

The Digital Commons E-democracy Pilot proved that it is possible to engage a group of students, parliamentarians and public servants in an interesting and thoughtful online discussion where all participants were treated as equals. In this environment, dynamic and multidirectional exchanges occurred between all participants. Despite the hands-off approach taken by Canadian Heritage, participants moved forward in the discussion and were able to make gains in their understanding of areas such as the role of an MP in our democratic system, and on issues such as western alienation.

Relationships developed between students and elected officials on the site. The dialogue that took place between these two groups provided an opportunity to put a human face on government and to address the cynicism about government and its role in Canadian democratic society. From the standpoint of both government and elected officials, this was a very important outcome which underlines the power of a forum like this to re-engage Canadians in rebuilding their democratic capital.

### 5.3 A pilot project by the Political Advisory Committee

As our Crossing Boundaries Political Advisory Committee discussed practical ways of engaging elected officials in the e-government agenda, we began to discuss ways in which the committee, itself, could act as a kind of prototype of a new intergovernmental committee on e-government. As a prototype, the committee could undertake a pilot project that would demonstrate in some practical but substantive way how politicians in different levels of government could successfully make progress on an e-government issue.

For example, committee members could conduct an e-democracy exercise to explore how new consultation processes might improve their communications with constituents. Another option would be for committee members to test the feasibility of conducting intergovernmental policy development online. Another type of pilot project could even give committee members the means to explore how they might use e-government to increase the interest and participation of youth in public debate and elections. Finally, PAC members felt that a pilot project could also examine

<sup>1</sup> The Centre for Collaborative Government and the Department of Canadian Heritage have been working together to develop and implement the concept of a Digital Commons. A copy of the final report is available at [www.crossingboundaries.ca](http://www.crossingboundaries.ca).

e-government within the context of a particular subject area. A wide range of possible ideas or topics surfaced during our discussions, including:

- barriers to inter-provincial trade (but we agreed that we would need to clarify and focus on the e-government aspects of this topic);
- a health care issue that raises important intergovernmental questions from an e-government perspective, such as, perhaps, the sharing of health information;
- integrated emergency response, which raises the challenge of coordinating many departments and governments and accessing critical care information in emergency situations;
- municipal networks as the basis for nation-wide, sustainable infrastructure development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century;
- the role of governments in providing reliable accurate information to the public to facilitate informed public debate around the Kyoto Accord; and
- expanding the work already underway by a parliamentary sub-committee on persons with disabilities to integrate programs from the three levels of government.

We concluded that a pilot project of the sort envisaged would be a multi-level, multi-department initiative. To be successful, we would need to build awareness of and support for the existence of PAC, the role it could play and the potential benefits that would flow from such a pilot project. As a committee, we agreed to use the current paper as a background document to help us promote awareness of our interest in e-government, our commitment to raising its profile among our colleagues and seek recognition of the importance of the PAC's work from our respective governments.

The story of e-government that professionals in the field tell one another—and the politicians—is a complicated tale of evolution and change in the management and operations of government. Its authors are mainly bureaucrats and technology vendors from the private sector who are experts in such matters. Not surprisingly, they have cast e-government as a rather grand “plumbing” issue—a story about government operations. After all, these are the plumbers of government.

At one level, as our committee recognized, e-government really is a plumbing issue and the plumbers have made a good case for overhauling the pipes of government. Indeed, many political leaders have found the story convincing enough to make initiatives such as the federal Government On-Line project a funding priority. Like most homeowners, politicians want good plumbing in their governments. They do not want the drains backing up or the hot water running cold. They understand that they must pay to keep the systems in good repair or replace them as they age.

But as a metaphor, e-government-as-plumbing fails to capture the minds of politicians because it does not speak to their interests or their aspirations. They do not have the time or patience for long lectures about how the systems inside government work. They want them to be reliable, but they do not want to spend their evenings discussing whether the pipes should be copper or plastic or how many gallons of water should rush through them. They will leave that to the plumbers.

**overnment is about far more than plumbing. It is about the transformation of government and, indeed, of governance.**

The plumbing metaphor has become a barrier. It is not so much that it is wrong, as misleading. It fixes too much attention on one part of e-government. As this paper has tried to suggest, **e-government is about far more than plumbing.** It is about the transformation of government and, indeed, of governance.

Let us extend the plumbing metaphor: e-government involves a major renovation of the entire edifice of government, including the addition of a new level. But redesigning a building and refitting its plumbing are very different tasks. If government is being redesigned, we will need to bring in the architects, not just the tradesmen.

The architects are the elected representatives. Certainly, they must work closely with the tradesmen (bureaucrats) to find out what is possible and what will work well. But this is only one part of a much broader discussion. The architects’ job is to draft a blueprint that reasonably meets the wants, needs and budget of the building’s owners (Canadians) and that the tradesmen can execute effectively and efficiently.

**It calls on politicians to recognize that e-government needs a real blueprint for the future. Until they provide it, the tradesmen cannot get on with the real work.**

The plumbing metaphor falls short—and ultimately misleads—because it fails to distinguish between the job of the architects and that of the tradesmen. This paper begins the task of separating them. It calls on politicians to recognize that e-government needs a real blueprint for the future. Until they provide it, the tradesmen cannot get on with the real work.

The new technology must be harnessed. It must be used to create new institutions, systems and practices that will redefine government for the 21st century. These will affect virtually every area of government, from the delivery of services to how governments report; from the processing of administrative data to the distribution of public information; from registering online for a program to engaging in a public debate. The technology will change how governments plan, implement, report, evaluate and make decisions — virtually everything they do.

Our leaders must provide a plan to redesign, refurbish and, in some cases, replace the old systems, structures and practices. If they fail to rise to the challenge, history will take its own course, driving us forward like a rushing river, whose path is determined only by the blind logic of gravity and the objects in its way.

Change can be managed, perhaps even directed. But it requires commitment and the courage to make major decisions under conditions of great uncertainty—a willingness to use the levers of power to shape the future, and a capacity to win and maintain the public support needed to give such decisions legitimacy. The Crossing Boundaries Political Advisory Committee is committed to promoting such leadership on the e-government file over the coming months.



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