



Realigning Governance: From E-Government to E-Democracy

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DGL

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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 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. We heard further 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 containing a concise list of practical initiatives – the bullets—that might engage the attention of elected representatives who are committed to helping move the agenda forward.

Crossing Boundaries 3 will include a series of Ottawa-based sessions involving sponsoring departments and organizations, a cross-country consultation process involving all three levels of government, international consultation by the project chair, and advisory group consultations. 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

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.

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1.1 Toward a broader vision of e-government

Over the last few decades, information and communications technologies (ICTs) have progressed at a remarkable pace. A quarter of a century ago, huge expensive systems that filled several floors of an office building were needed to perform tasks that can now be done by a handheld calculator. The growth in raw computing power has been awesome and it continues to increase exponentially.

In 20 years, we have gone from centralized multinationals with regionally defined markets, to “borderless” corporations organized around “just-in-time” production in a global economy.

By the mid-1990s, the new technology had been used to engineer a major transformation of the private sector, reshaping markets and the basic building block of the modern economy: the corporation. In 20 years, we have gone from centralized multinationals with regionally defined markets, to “borderless” corporations organized around “just-in-time” production in a global economy.

Only a few years ago, enthusiasts predicted that the public sector was about to go through a similar transformation. A new era in government was said to be dawning. For some, *electronic-* or *e-government* promised to transform government operations leading to major “efficiency gains” in service delivery. Others prophesied of a coming boom in e-commerce that would revolutionize how business was transacted and make information services the basis of the new economy. Government, they said, had a major role to play in creating the infrastructure. As a result, governments in OECD countries have been revving up for e-government. Many have committed themselves to major ICT programs, especially in service delivery.

But e-government is proving more difficult and costly than first thought and the expected benefits have been slow to materialize. With some notable exceptions, the efficiency gains have been mixed. The boom in e-commerce was short-circuited by the dot-com bust. Is the bloom coming off the e-government rose?

Before we pass judgement on e-government, we need greater clarity on what it is and where it may lead.

That conclusion would be hasty. Indeed, the policy community is not well-equipped to hold an informed debate on the question. The prevailing vision of e-government has been influenced too much by early successes in online service delivery and misleading analogies with the private sector. It fails to do justice to the scope of the transformation implied by e-government or the opportunities and challenges it poses. Before we pass judgement on e-government, we need greater clarity on what it is and where it may lead. This paper tries to shed more light on the issues. It sets out a *storyline* that helps us arrive at a richer, more complete account of e-government—a broader vision of the terrain.

In that vision, e-government is about the transformation of government. Indeed, it may well be the biggest transformation since the democratic revolutions of the late 18th century. But as with all revolutions, many outcomes are possible. We can be more confident of some than others. For example, ICTs are very likely to lead to more efficient service delivery. It is not at all clear that they will lead to a form of government that is more open, transparent, accountable or democratic than conventional government.

Addressing such issues poses many challenges. To meet them *we must have leadership that is committed, informed and engaged, especially at the political level*. Providing such leadership may be the single biggest challenge on the horizon. A firm commitment from decision makers to think through the issues and steer the right course is critical. E-government could easily lose momentum or veer off course.

So the argument in these pages is that, in one form or another, e-government will come. But that form is undecided. Some options are better, some worse. A serious effort to describe e-government as a whole cannot ignore this reality. As a result, the paper is a sometimes-uneasy mix of analysis and advocacy, though there is an effort to keep the two separate. If, on one hand, it provides a *descriptive* account of the state of the art, on the other hand, it is also peppered with *prescriptive* arguments and comments regarding the kind of government we want for the future. As such, it is at once a piece of public administration and a call to arms—an attempt to think rigorously and clearly about an extremely challenging task and a challenge to rise to the task. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the descriptive part is anchored well enough in fact and analysis to make the framework that emerges from it a useful and solid one, even if there are doubts about the value of the more prescriptive parts.

1.2 Getting the whole picture

What is e-government? A few years ago, the word was largely unknown. Now it is part of the working vocabulary of public policy. Nevertheless, its meaning is neither simple nor obvious. Depending on whom you ask, the answer can range from “putting services online” to “renewing democracy.” No one has seen it; hence no one is in a position to declare just what it looks like.

Someone once said that where you stand depends upon where you sit. The point is worth recalling as our experience with e-government progresses and our views on it evolve. Not surprisingly, people with different interests have very different views on how information and communications technologies (ICTs) should be used to improve or change what governments do: the business community wants better services, journalists want more access to information, policy developers want more information on societal trends, “e-democrats” want more online consultations and voting.

The story of the blind men and the elephant comes to mind, a story in which each of several blind men had his hands on a different part of an elephant—ears, tail, trunk, leg, etc. Since none of them could see the whole beast, they began to argue over what it looked like. A passer-by explained that, although none was wrong, each man was describing only a part of the beast.

To get a clear picture of a new or unfamiliar thing, we often need to combine the experiences and perspectives of a variety of people who are in contact with it.

The story has a least two important lessons for e-government. First, to get a clear picture of a new or unfamiliar thing, we often need to combine the experiences and perspectives of a variety of people who are in contact with it. Such is the case with e-government. If we rely too much on the viewpoint of one or two players in the field, we will miss the bigger picture. A satisfactory effort to describe the e-government beast will take into account as many of its parts as are known, connecting them together where possible.

Second, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Although it is useful—even necessary—to analyze the various parts, that process alone is not enough. The more we know about how the parts combine and interact with one another, the better we will be at designing, constructing and managing the entire beast.

Although it may be too early to construct a complete or clear picture of the e-government elephant, enough is known about its various parts and how they combine to explore them in some detail and to provide an outline of the beast; at least that is the assumption and goal of this paper.

1.3 Three aspects of e-government

We can begin by identifying three aspects of e-government under which our discussion will be organized:

- Improving service delivery: building the new public infrastructure
- Information: a new public resource?
- E-Democracy: extending public space

These aspects are treated as themes that have emerged from discussions with many individuals who are working on or thinking about how ICTs can improve what governments do. They identify how people with different interests in government approach the topic of e-government. We can call such people “e-government stakeholders.”

There is a growing awareness among them that the new ICT networks and databases are creating a new public “infrastructure,” which is the basis of e-government. They want to be sure that, as the infrastructure develops, their interest will be taken into account.

E-government stakeholders have a professional interest in how ICTs are being used to transform government. They include public servants, politicians, journalists, the business community, academics, voluntary organizations and the international environmental movement. There is a growing awareness among them that the new ICT networks and databases are creating a new public “infrastructure,” which is the basis of e-government. They want to be sure that, as the infrastructure develops, their interest will be taken into account.

There is no perfect way to summarize the interests of all these stakeholders, but the three aspects are a useful start. They help us see how the different communities are actively shaping the e-government discussion and how they imagine the future. This, in turn, helps us assess how the technology is being put to work to achieve different public policy goals, and it shows us some of the issues and challenges being raised.

1.4 The idea of the storyline

As we think about how to design one part of e-government—such as the new service delivery channel—it is important that we think about the impact it might have on other parts. In short, we need to think about e-government holistically, as an integrated and evolving organism. This is not an easy task.

Some of the biggest challenges of e-government arise from the way that various aspects interact and how they affect one another. How we design our service delivery systems, for example, may limit the options, say, for electronic voting. So as we think about how to design one part of e-government—such as the new service delivery channel—it is important that we think about the impact it might have on other parts. In short, we need to think about e-government **holistically**, as an integrated and evolving organism. This is not an easy task.

The three aspects provide a helpful starting point. Although they are interconnected and interdependent in all kinds of ways, they can be usefully separated and considered one at a time. We can tell a kind of logical story about how one leads to the other that connects them into a series of steps. It is not without fuzziness and sometimes the sequences may seem a bit contrived, but a single storyline appears to be emerging.

The storyline begins with a view of e-government that focuses on simple tasks like paying a parking ticket online. It then moves through the three aspects of e-government in steps, ending with a discussion of e-government as a tool for democratic consultation and engagement. If there is a main conclusion on the descriptive side, it is that ICTs seem to be moving industrialized countries toward a transformation of modern government. In western democracies, this goes well beyond simply reengineering or reinventing government. It pushes citizens and governments toward a realignment of some fundamental aspects of representative democracy.

At the same time, concerns about the impact of ICTs on key democratic values such as openness, inclusiveness, accountability, transparency, personal privacy and voice draw the evolving storyline in and out of a more prescriptive engagement of the issues, options and challenges along the way. Hopefully, the tension between descriptive and prescriptive passages is a creative one and the difference between them is relatively clear.

Building the New Public Infrastructure

2.1 The origins of e-government

There is no authoritative or single place to begin telling the story of e-government. This version begins about a decade and a half ago, when a government reform movement was sweeping through OECD countries. The UK, Australia and New Zealand were among its most enthusiastic champions. Having turned to the private sector for ideas on how to improve government, the reformers distilled what they had heard about service improvement into a few basic principles that have had an enormous impact on governments of both the left and right. Our “potted history” of this period is as follows.

Policy is supposed to be about what government does. Service delivery is about who does it and how it is done.

First of all, a clear distinction was drawn between two basic tasks of government: *policy* and *service delivery*. Policy is supposed to be about *what* government does. Service delivery is about *who* does it and *how* it is done. The distinction is not a new one. Indeed, it has a long and somewhat controversial history in public administration. The reformers found it convincing, revived it, and made it a basis for much of their thinking.

They took the view that liberal democracies should care less about the *who* and *how* of government than the *what*. For example, if streets need repairing, citizens do not care much about who repairs them (i.e. a public or a private sector firm). Nor are they greatly concerned about which tools or business strategies are used to complete the job, as long as it is done effectively and efficiently and in a manner that is consistent with the liberal-democratic commitment to government that is transparent, open, accountable and respectful of personal privacy.

It is not enough that policy-making be carried out in ways that are transparent, open, accountable and respectful of personal privacy. Deciding what government should do also requires a democratic mandate and is the prerogative of elected officials.

By contrast, deciding *what* government should do—policy-making—is what the reformers sometimes called a “core function” of government. It is not enough that policy-making be carried out in ways that are transparent, open, accountable and respectful of personal privacy. Deciding what government should do also requires a *democratic mandate* and is the prerogative of elected officials. Unlike service delivery, policy-making cannot be handed off, say, to private sector firms just because they can do it more effectively or efficiently. That would be an affront to democracy. First and foremost, democracy is about exercising public authority in a way that reflects the will of the people. This means that only those who have been given such a mandate have the legitimacy to make such decisions. The most that others should be allowed to provide is advice on which decisions will lead to which consequences.

Separating policy and operations in this way allowed reform-minded governments to experiment with new ways of delivering services, including privatization, contracting out and public-private partnerships, while maintaining that the core function of government (i.e. policy-making) remained solidly in government hands. David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, two leading thinkers in the movement, famously summed up the approach this way: Government should do more steering and less rowing.¹

A second cornerstone of the movement—a principle also borrowed from the private sector—was the idea of *client-centred service*. Because governments enjoyed monopolies in many areas, the reformers maintained that they lacked adequate incentives to provide high quality services to citizens or to deliver them efficiently. In this view, governments had gotten into the rut of ignoring their “clients” and instead had become too focused on their own priorities. The client-centred approach was supposed to reverse this trend by declaring that governments exist to serve citizens, not the reverse.

¹ *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming Government*

A key goal of client-centred service was to make government user-friendly by reorganizing it around citizens.

A key goal of client-centred service was to make government user-friendly by reorganizing it around citizens. According to the reformers, government had been allowed to organize around its own priorities and interests long enough, ranging from administrative convenience to jurisdictional disputes. As a result, citizens had come to regard government as an impenetrable maze of departments and offices. In a famous Canadian case, one person had to visit over half a dozen government offices involving three levels of government to get a business license! Reformers argued that government, rather than citizens, should be responsible for the “integration.” It should be done behind the scenes so that, from the client’s perspective, the operation is seamless: a single transaction, provided at a single point of access.

This movement has heavily influenced the dominant vision of e-government in countries such as Canada. The close relationship between the service-reform movement and e-government appears to have been forged during early experiments that used websites and kiosks to improve service delivery by making it more client-centred and more efficient. In Canada, for example, Human Resources Development Canada placed some kiosks in malls across the country in the early 1990s and used them to make available information on employment insurance and job postings.

Kiosks and websites represented an innovative way to deliver services, a method that caught on quickly. The new approach was called ESD—electronic service delivery. Those who started it thought it was quite consistent with the principles and outlook of the reform movement. First, the new mechanisms for delivery—kiosks and websites—were regarded as separate from the policy behind the service and they provided a faster and cheaper way of delivering it. Second, ESD made services much more accessible and so it was certainly more client-centred than conventional service delivery. Finally, it had some remarkable successes in reorganizing government around citizens. Several services could be made available at a single website or kiosk. Because of this, ESD quickly earned a reputation as a new and promising way to promote seamless government.

If governments used the new technology to reorganize services to fit the citizen’s viewpoint, rather than their own, government services would also appear as a single, consistent and well-organized set of options, managed and delivered from one source.

By the mid-1990s the separation of policy and service delivery and the commitment to client-centred service had fused with ESD to create a vision of citizen-centred, seamless government. In this view, although government services are scattered over many departments and multiple jurisdictions, real people do not engage the world this way. For them, it is a seamless whole. If governments used the new technology to reorganize services to fit the citizen’s viewpoint, rather than their own, government services would also appear as a single, consistent and well-organized set of options, managed and delivered from one source. This vision has inspired public servants around the world to reorganize, redesign and reinvent government. We now call this *the e-government movement*.

2.2 Seamless government: the Eldorado of the reform movement?

It is noteworthy that the services most frequently put online through ESD involve a simple transaction (e.g. renewing a driver’s license or passport), acquiring information (e.g. a weather report or business digest), posting information (e.g. income tax returns), or securing forms and documents. If the thing to be exchanged in the transaction can be reduced to a bundle of information, the technology is well-suited to improving the service. The tasks involved can be defined clearly and separated easily. For example, a client enters a request for a document, government receives and processes the request, transfers the document back to the client, and the service is delivered. Such services are often referred to as the “low-hanging fruit” of e-government because they are “easily reached” by officials looking for some “quick wins” on service improvement.

As the low-hanging fruit gets picked, governments have begun to pursue what looks like the next step in the evolution of ESD: not only should different services be available at the same website or kiosk, but they should be integrated or clustered to make government more seamless.

For example, if a spouse passes away, the surviving partner will be required to complete several tasks, such as registering the death, notifying a number of government departments, requesting a transference of assets, perhaps considering a name or address change, etc. Would it not be more client-centred to have government(s) cooperate to integrate these tasks in the backroom? Ideally, the client would go online, complete a single form and submit it. Government(s) could ensure that the form requested all the information needed to complete the various tasks. The different levels of government could then share the information among themselves and their departments as required.

A logical extension of this idea is to create a single “portal” or “secure government channel” on which all or most services can be made accessible.

A logical extension of this idea is to create a single “portal” or “secure government channel” on which all or most services can be made accessible. Rather than sending citizens to a variety of kiosks or websites, they would be able to access government services through a single point. Within that portal, services would be integrated or clustered to make them as seamless as possible.

Over the last five years some governments have made big commitments in this direction. In Canada, for example, the federal government intends to have all services linked so that they are available through a single point of access by the year 2005. The “no-wrong-window” idea thus imagines government as an integrated series of electronic portals through which all or most services would be accessible. A number of other OECD countries have made similar commitments, including the United States, Great Britain and Australia.

In this network of portals, related services ideally would be “clustered” so that citizens would not have to complete a series of separate transactions to receive what, from their viewpoint, appears to be a single service. Thus one would not have to go to 10 different government departments, involving three levels of government, to get a single business license. Citizens would experience government as a seamless whole.

To some, the quest toward seamless government is beginning to look like the search for Eldorado, the fabled City of Gold, which, it seemed, existed only in the imagination of those who sought it.

However, the task of integrating services is turning out to be far more complex than imagined. With a few notable exceptions,² in Canada, at least, most federal departments have some distance to go to make serious progress on integration. Most are scrambling just to meet the more modest goal of getting basic services online by 2005. The more governments experiment with integration, the more obstacles arise. To some, the quest after seamless government is beginning to look like the search for Eldorado, the fabled City of Gold, which, it seemed, existed only in the imagination of those who sought it.

Moreover, the tendency to talk as though all services could be provided online is misleading. Renewal of a driver’s license can be fully digitalized. Other services however, such as medical services, cannot. Surgery, for example, requires face-to-face contact. Talk of putting all services online thus really refers to the extent that information related to them can or should be online. One could, for example, register for surgery online. As we will see in the section “Information: a new public resource?”, a richer vision of e-government requires a more searching debate over how ICTs should be used to support such services. For example, should there be a national system that contains the health records of all patients? If so, who should have access to it?

In conclusion, achieving **single-window access** to government services will not coincide with the launch of a new era of **seamless government**. It will be more like a comprehensive directory of government services, a single entry point into government. But what happens then? Is that the final result of 15 years of work on reforming service delivery? Is integration an unrealistic goal? What makes it so hard? What can be done about it? Is the revolution over?

² For example, see the section below on CanadaPlace

The remainder of Section 2 of this paper explores some of the obstacles standing in the way of seamless government. For convenience, we categorize them under three basic headings:

- Change management
- Concerns over the governance system
- The lack of clear and committed leadership

2.3 Change management

2.3.1 Legacy systems

The most easily understood problem for integration is interoperability; that is, technical differences that prevent separate systems from communicating.

The most easily understood problem for integration is **interoperability**; that is, technical differences that prevent separate systems from communicating. Departments or governments cannot share information or integrate services if their systems are not compatible. In fact, many are not. Many programs still rely on systems that were designed for intradepartmental use only. When they were built, little attention was paid to ensuring compatibility with systems in other departments or governments. As a result, information transfer and sharing is often difficult, if not impossible.

At one level, the interoperability problem is a technical one. It is about the vintage of equipment, the design standards, computing languages, etc. But ensuring interoperability also has political and managerial aspects.

First, to permanently resolve the issue, universal standards must be adopted for a wide variety of purposes, ranging from how information is tagged and stored to the kind of software systems that should be used to manage data. Achieving this kind of coordination across a government—let alone, across different governments—is a major political and managerial challenge. For one thing, all vendors have a major interest in promoting the standards used by their products and in discouraging the use of their competitors' products. Vendors are among the most active and aggressive defenders of the status quo precisely because they compete with one another for market share. But winning market share is based upon emphasizing the differences between products, not their sameness.

Second, replacing outdated “legacy” systems is usually very costly and time-consuming.

Neither of these issues has a simple solution. They require ongoing attention and engaged leadership at the senior management and political levels. An effective strategy is needed to ensure that universal standards are set, and that procurement policy promotes the development of a single, universally compatible system.

2.3.2 From seamless services to seamless government

The lack of universal standards and the problems around legacy systems are significant and costly to fix; however they are, in principle at least, resolvable.

The lack of universal standards and the problems around legacy systems are significant and costly to fix; however they are, in principle at least, resolvable. The issue of program coordination presents a far bigger obstacle on the path to seamless government. What is it and why does it matter?

Let us return to the case of registering a death. Beyond interoperability, information sharing of this sort does not present insurmountable technical problems. Departments could be linked by a single information system with a mechanism for sending incoming information to the right points in the system. That raises concerns around privacy—which are noted below—but let us suppose that they can be answered. If so, how easy would integration be?

In the case of registering a death, integration may be quite achievable. It involves a cluster of services that can be linked through a single transaction (i.e. the exchange of a bundle of information) because they share the same simple goal of registering a single event. However, there are many

services that, at first glance, look like good candidates for integration, which turn out to be quite challenging instead.

Consider services for disabled persons. Hundreds of such programs exist in Canada. Yet many disabled persons are unaware of more than a handful of them. They do not know which ones they are eligible to access, where they can find out about the services, from whom the services are available or what purposes they serve. As a result, disability programs lie scattered across Canadian federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments like seeds in a field.

It seeks to bring relevant services together—to “cluster” them—around key needs so that citizens encounter government as a single, integrated whole, rather than as a maze of programs and departments through which they must find their way.

Presumably, integrated service delivery should help disabled people cope with such problems. It seeks to bring relevant services together—to cluster them—around key needs so that citizens encounter government as a single, integrated whole, rather than as a maze of programs and departments through which they must find their way. As a first step, all of these programs should be available through a single point of access: an electronic portal or window.

But if integrated service aspires to be more than just a large directory—a telephone book—of government services, it should make access to and delivery of the range of options as seamless as possible. As we have seen, from the client’s point of view, a cluster of services would appear as a single, consistent and well-organized set of options, managed and delivered from one source. This certainly would be an improvement over the status quo. But what would it involve?

Suppose a disabled person wanted to apply for two separately organized government programs. Suppose that person also needed to use special government transportation services sponsored by one department to report to a new job-training program for persons with disabilities, sponsored by another department. What burden does integration place on the two departments to ensure that the services are streamlined and coordinated?

Should the disabled person be able to fill out only one application form for the two services? If letters of support or recommendation are required for both, should he or she need to provide two sets of them? If the person plans to use the services together as part of what appears to him or her as different aspects of a single task (i.e. an effort to become more employable) should that person expect the government to make them mesh? For example, suppose that the transportation service is only available after 9:00 a.m., but that the training course begins at 8:00 a.m. As a client of both departments, should the disabled person expect the services to be coordinated so that he or she can use the van to get to the course? How far are such programs supposed to be complementary? Should integration commit governments to aligning or harmonizing program objectives?

What about duplication and overlap? How far should it be minimized or eliminated? Does it make sense for two departments to use public money to offer a client what is effectively the same service? When a client of a program finds that they do, should that person reasonably expect them to eliminate one? How would that be decided?

Or suppose that it is the municipal government who sponsors the special transportation services that the disabled person needs, but the provincial government who sponsors the job-training program. As a citizen and taxpayer of both governments, how far should that person reasonably expect the two of them to work together to coordinate such programs for his or her benefit?

As these examples suggest, providing clients or citizens with what **they** regard as seamless service would require much higher levels of coordination and cooperation between departments, governments and other service providers in the private and voluntary sectors than now exist.

The pursuit of seamless service quickly pushes us beyond service delivery and into the realm of policy.

Furthermore, as the examples also make clear, the pursuit of seamless service quickly pushes us beyond service delivery and into the realm of policy. In this context, the client-centred services principle, stating that policy and service delivery can be separated, is more than a little misleading. As the examples show, any serious effort to integrate services beyond a very basic level will involve policy choices as well.

Consider the transportation example. Whether the van is allowed to pick the disabled person up at his or her home before 8:00 a.m. is not just a question about how the service will be delivered. It raises questions about why the service exists, what it is supposed to achieve and who has access to it. Providing answers to such questions will launch us into a discussion of the **policy goals** behind the program. Moreover, suppose that, in the interests of efficient and effective service, delivery has been passed to another department, level of government or private or third sector partner. Should they be permitted or expected to make such decisions? Would this amount to an unacceptable transfer of the core business of government to someone else—someone without a public mandate to make decisions about what government does?

Such considerations suggest that to treat integration as merely the next step in the evolution of ESD is misleading. It makes it sound like the issues around integration are practical ones about how to provide services more efficiently and effectively. Where services can be integrated through information sharing, such as registering a death, this may be the case. But for a great many services, it will require policy coordination. Thus, if governments really want to take the citizens' point of view, they must recognize that seamless government is about more than efficient or accessible service delivery. It also implies coordination at the policy level and, as such, is as much a policy vision as a service-delivery vision.

So unless the concept of seamless government is to be confined to services that can be reduced to simple exchanges of bundles of information, efforts to create it through e-government lead us beyond a discussion of the impact of ICTs on one part of government—its operations—and toward a discussion of e-government as a different kind of government.

So unless the concept of seamless government is to be confined to services that can be reduced to simple exchanges of bundles of information, efforts to create it through e-government lead us beyond a discussion of the impact of ICTs on one part of government—its operations—and toward a discussion of **e-government as a different kind of government**. They invite us to begin considering what such a government might look like. What kind of organizational features and infrastructure would it have? What kind of capacity must be added to the machinery that now exists in order to coordinate and integrate across departmental, intergovernmental and even private and third sector boundaries?

Early experiences suggest that such a system would include a wide range of new mechanisms, such as joint committees, information sharing networks and integrated delivery systems. In the old world of telephone calls, photocopies, fax machines, filing cabinets and bricks and mortar, seamless government was not a realistic option. However, early experience with ESD suggests that ICTs can be used to provide critical new infrastructure that could make such a system possible. Taking this idea seriously moves us beyond a discussion of experimenting with ESD to one that focuses on e-government **as a robust new public infrastructure of ICT networks and databases**.

2.4 The (internal) governance system

As we have seen, when governments began using ESD, they regarded ICTs as a tool to improve client services and the efficiency of government operations. This was consistent with their view that policy is separate from service delivery, and that e-government is about better services. However, if governments are serious about integration, the boundary between service delivery and policy must be crossed. In fact, integration raises questions about a number of boundaries that are basic to conventional government. An equally important case involves those boundaries that underpin personal privacy and public accountability.

Conventional government is organized into parts, which are based on functions or roles. For example, the Department of Health is a separate entity that exists to cure disease and promote well-being. The department is divided into smaller parts or sectors, which are then divided into smaller subsections and so on. This separation of parts goes all the way down to individual jobs, each of which has a special role to play in the system. Together, the parts make up a single system. If the parts have been designed well and all of the workers do their jobs properly, government should perform like a well-oiled machine.

This metaphor that government is like a big machine has had enormous influence on its evolution and design. Indeed, in most governments there is a high-level policy shop— (often called “Machinery of Government”) whose job it is to examine, adjust and refine the parts to ensure that they mesh.

The systems that ensure respect for personal privacy and public accountability are linked to the machine model and intertwined with it. Consider the system for protecting personal privacy. It is based on the idea that each official has a separate function or job. He or she is allowed to collect only as much personal information about a client as is needed to do that job. Officials cannot collect additional information on clients nor are they allowed to share the information that they have with other officials. Keeping their functions separate, thus, is essential to keeping information private.

The same system is essential to preserving public accountability. In the machine model, the various parts of government are organized hierarchically so that each person reports up the ladder to the next one, who is responsible for the actions of the first, and so on, all the way up to the Deputy Minister and ultimately the Minister. If the reporting relationships get blurred, for instance, because roles or functions have become unclear, the lines of accountability also become blurred.

ICT-based systems are able to support seamless government precisely because they can be used to organize people, jobs and information flows into networks, which are less respectful of legislative or administrative boundaries and less hierarchical.

Seamless government cuts across the boundaries that separate different jobs or functions in the conventional machine model. ICT-based systems are able to support seamless government precisely because they can be used to organize people, jobs and information flows into *networks*, which are less respectful of legislative or administrative boundaries and less hierarchical. But this blurring of roles and functions, and sharing of information and tasks, undermines the conventional methods of protecting privacy and ensuring accountability. As a result, what appears as a gain in client-centred service as a result of seamless government or integration may be offset by a loss in, perhaps, privacy or accountability.

The emerging conclusion is that integration is laying the infrastructure for a different kind of organizational model, one whose organizational structure more closely resembles that of a network than a machine. If so, this raises fundamental questions about the future: Does the “new system” threaten the integrity of the existing one? More specifically, does it threaten government’s commitment to respect personal privacy or public accountability? Are there alternative ways of meeting these commitments? If so, what are they and how do they work? Can the old and new systems be integrated? Do we need a balance between the two? If so, how would that be achieved?

Much of the debate over e-government today revolves around such questions. Collectively, there is a sense among officials that the move toward seamless government is necessary—probably even inevitable—but that building the infrastructure is going to be a very challenging job because, as we have seen, it is not just a matter of reengineering service delivery.

It is not clear how much of the information that governments would need to share to integrate services is of a personal nature.

The privacy and accountability issues have been barriers. Although some progress is being made, much discussion, reflection and research is still needed. For one thing, it is not clear how much of the information that governments would need to share to integrate services is of a personal nature. Information that is of a general nature compromises no one. Where information is of a personal

nature, there is still much disagreement over how difficult it is to keep it secure in a more integrated system. In some cases, information that has been kept separate for privacy reasons is now shared because citizens have given their consent in order to receive better service. In Canada, a question has been placed on federal income tax forms requesting that some personal information be integrated, with positive results. Perhaps citizens are less concerned about personal privacy in some cases than has been suggested.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the privacy issue is a barrier. There are real concerns over the erosion of personal privacy. At the same time, privacy can and sometimes is used as an excuse to not provide or share information. A broader more open discussion of the issues is needed. It should be led by politicians, who are well-positioned to consider the issue, rather than by public servants who do not have this authority.

The accountability issue is another one that has given many thoughtful people pause, when considering the goals of e-government. There seems little doubt that the networking model of government that it implies stands in tension with the hierarchical, chain-of-command kind of accountability that liberal-democratic governments have relied on for the last two centuries. But, as we will see below, e-government may give rise to an alternative form of accountability. The Office of the Auditor General of Canada has referred to it as “public accountability.”³ It may be that public accountability is a satisfactory way of offsetting—even improving upon—the loss to chain-of-command accountability that e-government implies.

2.5 Leadership: from the public service to the political

It should be clear by now that e-government is about much more than plumbing. On the contrary, it seems to imply a transformation of government, as we know it.

We have seen that key obstacles standing in the way of progress toward e-government include the inoperability problem, the need for new mechanisms and processes of policy coordination, and new approaches to privacy and accountability. It should be clear by now that e-government is about much more than plumbing. On the contrary, it seems to imply a transformation of government, as we know it. Indeed, many senior people working on the file now speculate that the redesigning and reorganization of the whole system may be required, ranging from new plumbing to new horizontal governance systems. This exercise will require everything from a new approach to procurement to a major rethinking of the principles and values underlying key pieces of privacy legislation. Such a transformation cannot be accomplished by the public service alone. It requires strong, committed and informed leadership at the political level.

As the research for this paper was under way, we heard repeatedly that the e-government file needs engaged political leadership. We heard that, without it, there is a risk that the project will lose momentum and bog down. Yet it is not always clear why this leadership is needed or what role it should play. Why do we need more engaged political leadership on the e-government file?

In general terms, political leadership is required because it can perform tasks that the public service cannot. For example, politicians can:

- make horizontal decisions more easily;
- publicly debate and champion various policy options; and
- make policy decisions.

³ For some examples of the AG’s evolving thoughts on the subject of accountability, see, for example, Chapter 1 of the *Report of the Auditor General of Canada, 2002*; or Chapter 5 of the *Report of the Auditor General of Canada, 1999*. In addition, a discussion paper on the subject was produced by the AG’s office in conjunction with the Federal Treasury Board Secretariat. It is entitled ‘Modernizing Accountability Practices In The Public Sector’ and is available at http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/rma/account/OAGTBS_E.html.

Some of the key challenges now facing e-government—such as policy integration—require action that cuts across organizational boundaries. Public servants are too constrained to achieve this alone. They lack the authority to make decisions that reach beyond departmental boundaries and mandates. Negotiating interdepartmental or intergovernmental changes to set common standards, align policies or integrate programs is therefore a long, slow process for them.

Awareness of the broader issues and opportunities among politicians is very limited. By-and-large, they tend to regard e-government as “a plumbing issue”, albeit a large and costly one.

E-government needs some significant and visible successes that demonstrate its value to the broader policy community and the public at large. One approach would be to identify a few key areas where progress is possible on achieving seamless service across jurisdictions, such as, perhaps, disability. If a non-partisan group of elected officials could be formed to champion integration in such an area, progress might be more rapid. This, in turn, would provide a public demonstration of the benefits that can flow from e-government, and would help governments arrive at a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities involved.

Getting to seamless government will require strong political leadership at the senior level to drive the process. At present, however, awareness of the broader issues and opportunities among politicians is very limited. By-and-large, they tend to regard e-government as “a plumbing issue”, albeit a large and costly one. They are, of course, in favour of better services, but beyond that, e-government is barely on their radar screens. As one politician remarked: “When my constituents come to see me, it is not to ask about e-government.” As a public issue, e-government has a very low profile.

The discussion in this section helps us see why e-government has such a low priority. Over the last decade, advocates from the public service and the private sector have made the case for expanding the use of ICTs largely in terms of their ability to improve government operations and service delivery. Not surprisingly, that is the level on which political leaders have taken notice and responded. It is now clear, however, that e-government is multi-faceted. The new infrastructure is a foundation on which whole new levels of government activity are being built. Indeed, it is now common for those working in the field to regard the discussion as one over **how to imagine, envision and build a new kind of government**. Such a debate—and such a project—requires clear and committed political leadership.

3.1 Refocusing the discussion on information

The new infrastructure creates far more than new plumbing; it also creates a dynamic and powerful new capacity to collect, create, integrate, share and store data and information, which we will call “the new information capacity.”

We have been telling a story about the growth of e-government, with service delivery as the point of departure. It led us to explore some tensions between the vertical organization of conventional governments and the new horizontal or networked one of e-government. This is a valid, useful and important way to approach e-government. But it is not the only way. The new infrastructure creates far more than new plumbing; it also creates a dynamic and powerful new capacity to collect, create, integrate, share and store data and information, which we will call **the new information capacity**.

This capacity promises to change what governments know about themselves and, indeed, the world. Using the new information capacity rather than service delivery as the point of departure for discussion sheds a new light on e-government, leading us to look at the role and value of information as a new public resource.

Our comments are divided into four sections, each of which considers a particular challenge that the new information capacity poses for government. The four challenges are:

- to make government a pre-eminent source of quality public information;
- to make government “smarter”;
- to make government more transparent and accountable; and
- to make government information a **public** resource.

The first challenge proposes that the new information capacity could lead to a new, or at least much expanded, service to citizens. The second considers how it can lead to government that makes more informed decisions and learns from experience. The third focuses on how the new capacity could make government more accountable, transparent, open and fair. The fourth asks what it means for governments to take seriously the idea that government information should be regarded as a public resource.

3.2 E-Government as a new information provider

3.2.1 Governments should liberate their information holdings

Some say that information is to the knowledge-based economy what oil was to the industrial-based one. If so, the capacity to provide high-quality information for a wide range of purposes is destined to make information services of all sorts an increasingly important part of what governments do.

Modern governments contain huge amounts of data and information. They are currently stored in a host of separate systems, many of which are the equivalent of nooks and crannies in the vast edifice of government. The more integrated government becomes, the more accessible these nooks and crannies will become. Increasingly, e-government will penetrate them, liberating much of the information from isolation and obscurity.

Indeed, it is not science fiction to imagine government eventually operating as a single system, in which vast amounts of information and knowledge that were scarcely imaginable only a decade ago have become available to governments.

Furthermore, the capacity to integrate data from various streams will grow at an exponential rate, as will the ability to collect and add new streams. Indeed, it is not science fiction to imagine government eventually operating as a single system, in which vast amounts of information and knowledge that were scarcely imaginable only a decade ago have become available to governments. An obvious and immediate task for them is to begin to collect, integrate and organize the information that now lies scattered across departments and investigate the best ways to make it available to citizens—and, indeed, many departments and governments are doing just that.

In OECD countries, the mounting wave of new information will have a major impact on all policy fields and sectors of society, including health, education, community services, transportation, agriculture, research and development, historical analysis, economic and business trends. The more the new capacity comes into focus, the more questions it raises:

- How will data be collected, integrated and combined?
- What things will citizens and governments learn that they did not know before?
- Who will decide what counts as authoritative information on a given topic and what does not?
- Who will have access to the new information and knowledge?
- Who will own or control it?
- What will it be used for?
- Who will decide how questions such as these are to be answered?

An example might help clarify the role of government as a provider of public information.

3.2.2 CanadaPlace: a new information service for citizens

As such, CanadaPlace is an electronic version of a traditional public archive (i.e. a digital archive) that is intended to provide an important public service.

CanadaPlace is an Internet portal where Canadians and others can learn about Canada by accessing authoritative information on a wide range of topics and themes relevant to its past, present and future. As such, CanadaPlace is an electronic version of a traditional public archive (i.e. a digital archive) that is intended to provide an important public service.

As a public archive, it is quickly becoming a rich source of digitalized information about Canada, beginning with key reference sources such as the *Canadian Encyclopaedia and the Historical Atlas of Canada*. At its launch, CanadaPlace will also include information from the National Archives, the National Library, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and other members of the federal Department of Canadian Heritage portfolio. All material will be indexed to facilitate easy access to the most relevant information on cultural or social topics. CanadaPlace will also be linked to a wide range of other sites to provide users with easy access to additional information and sources.

Reliable, authoritative information is a critical resource in the Information Age. Taken together, the Department of Canadian Heritage and its 16 portfolio agencies constitute a vast storehouse of information about Canada. Much of this information is of authoritative or reference quality. Putting the storehouse of material from the Heritage portfolio online through CanadaPlace will liberate it.

The material will be integrated, aggregated and assembled, using a set of indexing standards aimed at retrieving the most relevant material. A national advisory board will oversee the process. In addition, Canadian Heritage is funding a variety of organizations, including members of the portfolio, to ensure that the process of digitization conforms to indexing standards.

It sets a new standard for user-friendly access to authoritative information on themes, issues, events, places and persons with a particular relevance to Canada.

Canadians (and others around the world), ranging from genealogists and historians to journalists and school children, will be able to access documents, film clips, tapes and other archival material, using their home computers. This kind of access could hardly be imagined a decade ago. It sets a new standard for user-friendly access to authoritative information on themes, issues, events, places and persons with a particular relevance to Canada.

The quality and volume of information that will become available through CanadaPlace can be expected to have a major impact on Canadian businesses and activities, ranging from entertainment to education. For example, it will add value to a wide range of products for the knowledge-based economy; provide a key learning resource to help Canadians (and others) understand our history, laws, institutions, culture and practices. It will also support informed public debate on key public policy issues.

A central goal of the mission of CanadaPlace is to become the pre-eminent source of authoritative information on Canada, and especially on Canadian cultural content. In this regard, the digital archive may prove to be a peerless service provider. It may also serve as a model for other departments, who seek to provide a similar service in a variety of other areas.

3.2.3 Government as a manager and guarantor of information

The example shifts attention away from issues about service delivery and the installation of new “pipes” and on to questions about the content that will flow through them and its impact on Canadian society. Will e-government result in massive new levels or sources of content? Where will it come from? What will it look like? How different will it be? What impact might it have on the way governments view, discuss or understand issues?

As we move into the Information Age, a key role that citizens may expect governments to play is that of a manager and guarantor of quality information.

As we move into the Information Age, a key role that citizens may expect governments to play is that of a manager and guarantor of quality information. The prospect of being overwhelmed by so much information—much of it contradictory—that it is impossible to make informed decisions or feel a part of discussions and debates is very real. Moreover, in a world where advocacy and private interest will drive the collection and dissemination of much information, citizens may find themselves turning to governments for help in the expectation that they will act as reliable and trusted authorities on the management and quality control of information of all kinds. They want someone to provide reliable guidance on what information is authoritative and relevant in a variety of contexts. This may be one of the most important public services governments will perform in coming years.

More immediately, a key challenge that the new information capacity poses for governments is to begin treating their information holdings, and their information capacity, as a major public resource that should be put to use supporting citizens, businesses and other organizations. This will require that the range and nature of various kinds of information that governments can and should collect be further explored and defined and that policies be developed to guide the development of this new—or changing—government role.

For example, information that is collected from Statistics Canada is different from internal administrative data on various government programs. Personal information about Canadians that can be collected and matched through various government departments is another kind of information, and Memoranda to Cabinet and records of Cabinet discussions are yet another. Decisions must be made, for example, as to what kinds of information can or should be considered a public resource or whether the public should be charged for it.

3.3 E-Government as smarter government

3.3.1 Good policy-making

A second place that the new capacity should be put to immediate use is in promoting **smarter government**. What is involved?

Integrating programs leads beyond service delivery to the harmonization of policy goals.

Seamless service is an effort to organize service delivery around the needs of citizens. It begins with single-window access and then progresses to services that can be reduced to transactions involving information. However, we saw that programs such as those to help the disabled pose a problem. Integrating programs leads beyond service delivery to the harmonization of policy goals. From the client or citizen’s perspective, such coordination would certainly improve government services and is thus a desirable goal. But realizing it required us to broaden the vision of seamless government to include more than service delivery. We concluded that it must also be seen as a policy vision.

There is therefore a difference between the value added by coordinating or integrating services and the value added by good policy-making. **Smart government is about good policy-making.** It is about the policy vision behind seamless government. What is it and how can e-government help us promote it?

Good policy-making involves choosing the options that will do the best job of achieving the goals and priorities that a government has set for itself.

Good policy-making involves choosing the options that will do the best job of achieving the goals and priorities that a government has set for itself. Such goals and priorities might include, for example, a stronger economy, a healthier or more educated population, a more innovative business community or a deeper respect for democratic equality among citizens.

Suppose that a government declares that promoting a healthier population is a priority. To do this, it wants to strengthen its health care system. This is currently the case in Canada. Promises have been made to take steps to make the health care system more efficient and more effective so that rising costs can be contained. How should the government decide what to do?

A variety of policy options are being debated to improve health care in Canada. One is to introduce user fees, which advocates say will discourage patients from overusing the system. Another suggestion would allow private clinics to compete with public ones (supposedly the competition would result in more effective administration by the public sector). A third proposal is to create centralized electronic patient records, which would give doctors a much clearer picture of a patient's past care and present needs, thus improving diagnosis and treatment.⁴

All three options are at least superficially plausible. How then should a government decide which one or combination is the right one? Determining which policies are most likely to get the right result involves assessing options on at least two levels:

- Choosing the most **effective** option; and
- Ensuring that the option **fits** or **meshes** with existing policies.

Good policy-making requires the right combination and balancing of these two imperatives. We will consider them one at a time, beginning with the first. It is useful here to start with a summary of past experience.

3.3.2 The evolving role of information in policy debate

A century ago, public debate and decision-making in countries such as Canada relied mainly on two kinds of evidence: anecdotal and ideological.⁵ The first proceeds from a few examples based on anecdotal reports to a broad generalization. Suppose that a government program is launched to help farmers in financial trouble. Farmers Jones and Wilson, who are in financial trouble, fail to meet the criteria of the program and so are forced into bankruptcy. They report this to their MP, who then raises the issue in Parliament. On the basis of this evidence, he argues that the program is a failure. His assessment thus moves from a couple of cases to a generalization about the whole program. As a basis for public debate, this is better than nothing but a long way from reliable.

At the other end of the spectrum lie ideological arguments. They start with broad generalizations about history, economics, social life or human nature and use them to draw conclusions about specific initiatives. For example, someone might argue that, because humans are basically self-interested creatures, smaller government and more reliance on market forces is the best way to create wealth. In this view, humans are motivated by personal gain. If smaller government creates more

⁴ If this seems to be more of an administrative than a policy option, its implementation would require many policy changes, including privacy.

⁵ See *Measuring Quality of Life: The Use of Societal Outcomes by Parliamentarians*, by Carolyn Bennett, Donald Lenihan, John Williams and William Young; Library of Parliament and the Centre for Collaborative Government, *Changing Government*, Vol 3, November 2001. Also available at www.crossingboundaries.ca.

opportunities for them to profit by performing a service, it will also make them more industrious, innovative and efficient. This, in turn, will create more wealth for the society as a whole.

Whether such a conclusion is true or false will depend upon the truth of the supporting claim that human beings do in fact act mainly out of self-interest. But that claim is simply too broad to be known to be either true or false. It remains controversial. The usefulness of ideological generalizations such as this is therefore limited. They can help to clarify beliefs and values that may have a legitimate role in public debate, but as statements of fact, they are unreliable.

These new pools of information have become a critical resource that helps guide public debate and decision-making.

For the first two hundred years of modern government, public debate had little to rely on beyond anecdotal and ideological evidence. Then, during the 20th century, governments began collecting and compiling information on a wide range of economic and social trends, ranging from employment and inflation levels to birth rates and levels of education. These new pools of information have become a critical resource that helps guide public debate and decision-making.

Yet as we enter the 21st century, information is still too often incomplete, unreliable or altogether nonexistent. To return to the example of the three options for improving the Canadian health care system, at present there is at best partial evidence to support the claims that advocates make on their behalf. In fact, we really do not know how well any of them will perform. As a result, governments could easily spend tens of millions of dollars experimenting with one or another, only to find that it fails to deliver on the promises. The history of modern government overflows with such examples. More information is needed before a final judgement could be made.

The new information capacity could help us overcome this barrier. It promises to increase vastly the quantity and quality of information that is available on the performance of policies. As a result, many information gaps could be filled, giving decision makers a more complete picture of the issues, risks and opportunities that they need to consider. As we have already seen, governments could use the technology to liberate data and information from myriad sources within themselves and across society, and integrate it into new forms of knowledge. In addition, they could collect vast amounts of new information previously unavailable.

3.3.3 Toward a more holistic approach to policy

If the new information that is generated is to lead to good policy-making, much work needs to be done on identifying the kinds of systems and databases that will be needed.

If the new information that is generated is to lead to good policy-making, much work needs to be done on identifying the kinds of systems and databases that will be needed. In particular, governments need to gather more complete and reliable information on what we can call “societal outcomes” and the trends that produce them. Societal outcomes are the result of many factors, including actions by various governments, the private and voluntary sectors and individual decisions. Examples include safer communities, a healthier or more educated population, and a cleaner environment.

Reliable information on such outcomes and the trends that produce them is sketchy at best. Filling this gap would provide a much richer context in which to evaluate how policies and programs interact with one another, and to achieve a higher level of coordination between them. Once again, health care provides a convenient example.

The conventional approach to health policy is reactive and focused on curing illness. That is changing. Most governments now aim at promoting wellness or well-being as a societal outcome. As an outcome or goal at which policy should aim, well-being is much richer than curing illness. It includes a proactive approach to being and remaining healthy. Policy analysts who take this approach seek to identify “health determinants” or the conditions that affect good health. These can include poverty, environmental factors, sports and recreation opportunities, diet, stress levels and education.

As is evident, this goes well beyond the traditional responsibilities of departments of health. It requires an interdepartmental and, indeed, multi-sectoral approach, in which officials from the various departments, governments and sectors work together to assess the impact of their activities on one another, by assessing their impact on common goals or societal outcomes.

For example, the objective of a community day-care program for single mothers may be to give them an opportunity to seek employment, and thereby help them raise themselves out of a poverty-level existence. At the same time, a community education program to help single mothers understand the nutritional needs of their children may aim at reducing child illness. Uniting both programs under the common goal of promoting well-being or a healthier population sets them in a larger, shared context that allows the sponsoring governments or departments to focus on how their respective programs might be better coordinated to produce the overarching goal, say, by sharpening or adjusting particular policy goals.

The task of integrating policy objectives no longer seems like an uninvited guest at the dinner table. On the contrary, integrated policy is at the heart of the holistic approach we are considering.

As this example clearly demonstrates, we have now returned to the point where we broke off our discussion of service delivery: policy coordination. But there is a difference. This time we have arrived through a discussion of policy-making rather than service delivery. As a result, the task of integrating policy objectives no longer seems like an uninvited guest at the dinner table. On the contrary, integrated policy is at the heart of the holistic approach we are considering. As such, it is the natural soul mate of seamless service; it is the other half of the seamless government vision, which, as we have seen, requires integration at both the service delivery and policy levels.

The new information capacity is a critical resource for achieving that vision. It allows us to collect quality information on the broad outcomes that specific policies and programs are supposed to support. That information is what allows policy-makers to become more effective at identifying where they could strengthen, adjust or coordinate their efforts to get a better result.

In conclusion, the new information capacity created by ICTs can be expected to generate a second, much larger wave of new public information as we move into the 21st century. Preparing for it may be among the biggest and most pressing challenges that e-government poses. **A unique opportunity exists to engineer a quantum leap in the quality and quantity of information that is available to support public debate and decision-making. This should translate into a quantum leap in our capacity to produce good policy.**

3.4 E-government as transparent and accountable government

We have been discussing ways that the new information capacity could be used to strengthen public debate and policy-making. It may seem like a small step from this optimistic talk about major increases in the accuracy, scope, quantity and availability of information about government performance, to the claim that ICTs should make government more transparent and accountable. And there is no shortage of people who have made such a claim. But the gap is bigger than may first appear.

Thus, a key issue raised in our discussion of seamless service was that integration could undermine the systems that support accountability and transparency.

In conventional governments, accountability rests on what we have already called the machine model. It establishes a clear chain of command that runs from the Minister all the way down to the person who purchases the paperclips. If the chain is broken, accountability is lost. But the kind of horizontal relationships and exchanges of information that we have been discussing threaten to do just that. They cut across organizational boundaries, blurring distinctions that are essential to the chain of command. Thus, a key issue raised in our discussion of seamless service was that integration could undermine the systems that support accountability and transparency.

On the other hand, the discussion in this section suggests reasons to be optimistic. 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 a decade ago. The new information systems could give rise to a whole new system of accountability and transparency.

The question therefore arises: Is e-government likely to make government more or less accountable and transparent? Does the prospect of more information on operations and performance act as a counterbalance to concerns over a possible loss of vertical accountability?

A much more open approach than now exists could have far-reaching consequences for government transparency and accountability.

Much, it seems, will depend on the choices that are made as the new system is built. In any event, it seems clear that the new capacity for information should be viewed as more than a tool for smart government. It is also a key tool for providing oversight. This needs further discussion and debate. In particular, defining the terms of access to government-controlled information for elected officials, stakeholders or the general public is likely to be a key issue. A much more open approach than now exists could have far-reaching consequences for government transparency and accountability.

In conventional government, ministers and departmental officials decide what issues should be the subject of reports. In addition, they collect, organize and present the data and information the reports contain. As information becomes more abundant and accessible, it will be possible to allow public access to it. Indeed, it may be difficult to prevent it! This would be a big step beyond traditional reporting practices, in which governments control the information that will be made available. It would shift some control over the new resource to the public.

Governments could go even further. The technology exists to allow members of the public to begin to pose 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 to government. Is this a good idea? What risks, opportunities or costs might it involve?

3.5 Making government information a public resource

If ICTs could be used to enhance greatly the transparency and accountability of government, getting there poses a major challenge. Not only will it require significant changes to longstanding government practices, but also in the culture of secrecy and control that sometimes inhabits them.

Knowledge is power. As a result, governments are often hierarchical, secretive and controlling about information that is regarded as sensitive.

Top-down management in large bureaucracies (private or public), requires centralized control over “messaging,” such as communication of the strategic plan or the various responsibilities of different parts of the organization. Too much information or the wrong kind of information circulating throughout the organization can create serious problems. Modern governments have organized around this principle for two hundred years. Knowledge is power. As a result, governments are often hierarchical, secretive and controlling about information that is regarded as sensitive. Although almost no one disagrees that some information is sensitive and should be regarded as secret, that category is often expanded far more widely than it needs to be. Moreover, the processes by which information has been used to arrive at decisions are often less than transparent.

E-government requires a different kind of culture—one that is less controlling and more collaborative, less hierarchical and more horizontal, less secret and more transparent. Making e-government work will require more than a change in management practices or organizational design. It will require a major change in culture.

ICTs increase connectivity—across organizational boundaries and between governments and citizens. In our discussion of the first aspect, “Improving service delivery,” we saw that ICTs are being used to create a new delivery channel. As a result, citizens will be able to access government services from their homes or offices (e.g. they may be able to file income tax returns online or order government documents).

Under the second aspect, “Information: a new public resource?,” we explored three other ways that the new infrastructure and databases might be used to create new forms of connectivity: to provide new information services, promote smart government and enhance public accountability.

Our discussion of these aspects shows that ICTs are changing how governments work. Ideally, they will lead to government that is more client-centred, more responsive, smarter, more transparent and accountable.

Through this dialogue citizens and stakeholders might express their views, propose ideas, explore differences or participate more directly in decision-making, that is, in governance.

There is yet a third level on which ICTs could change how governments work. They could be used **to extend public space** in ways that might promote consultation and dialogue and between citizens and their governments. Through this dialogue citizens and stakeholders might express their views, propose ideas, explore differences or participate more directly in decision-making, that is, in governance. It could contribute—perhaps very significantly—to the revitalization of democracy and to the strengthening of the legitimacy of government. Our discussion of this aspect begins with a few brief comments on democracy.⁶

4.1 The test of democracy

In our discussion of smart government we said that it requires effective policy-making and a holistic approach. The missing ingredients here were better information, and more of it. But if that is the basis of smart government or good policy-making, it is not enough to ensure *good governance*.

Because citizens disagree about some of the key values that they think government should foster, their differences over policy options often would not be solved by more complete information or evidence. Choosing between policy options often involves a choice between competing *values*. Such judgements are controversial in the sense that there is insufficient evidence for deciding authoritatively the rightness of one value over another. Is capital punishment right or wrong? What responsibility does the state have to ensure that citizens have an equal opportunity in life, say, through state-sponsored education or employment equity? How much do considerations of equality trump those of individual liberty?

Democracy can be viewed as a way of resolving policy disputes arising from this kind of pluralism. It is a way of making decisions in the midst of uncertainty and disagreement, so that the choices: (a) treat everyone’s interests and concerns fairly; and (b) are binding on everyone, including those who disagree with them.

Democracy proposes to achieve this goal by placing three fundamental conditions on public decision-making:

⁶ The use of ICTs to create a new cultural and political institution along these lines is explored in *Post Industrial Governance: Designing a Canadian Cultural Institution for the Global Village*, by Donald G. Lenihan, Centre for Collaborative Government, Changing Government, Vol 5, January 2002. Also available at www.crossingboundaries.ca

- All voices should have a **fair chance to be heard** in the debate that precedes a decision;
- Each person should have an **equal part in the act of decision-making**: one person, one vote; and
- In order to participate in such a process, each individual must agree that, if the first two conditions are met, he or she will **accept the outcome of the process as legitimate and binding**.

Let us call these conditions **the test of democracy**. Passing this test is the ultimate challenge for any democracy. To the extent that democracy succeeds, legitimacy increases. To the extent that it fails, legitimacy decreases.

Of course, there are endless debates over how to ensure that the conditions are met and the test is passed. Indeed, it is the stock and trade of much political debate. For example, there are disputes over how fairness is affected by campaign financing, concentration of ownership in the media, differences in levels of education or access to elites. Moreover, there are as many different systems of democracy as there are democratic governments. Basic models include British parliamentary democracy and the American congressional system, each of which is capable of endless variations. Some theorists have even defended the view that “one-party democracies” can pass the test.

In short, there are ongoing disagreements and debates over which practices, rules, institutions and systems best realize democracy. Nor is a final resolution of these debates likely. After two or more centuries, the moral seems to be that the practice of democracy is itself given to pluralism. As a concept, it is a simple and flexible idea that is capable of many variations.

The control and supply of information will become an increasingly important issue in everything from election campaigns to the tabling of annual reports.

ICTs introduce a whole new dimension into the discussion. They raise new concerns and opportunities for democracy. We saw, for example, that they could massively affect the quality and quantity of information that will be available to decision-makers. Because high quality information is a critical resource for informed public debate, the control and supply of information will become an increasingly important issue in everything from election campaigns to the tabling of annual reports.

However, such considerations suggest that the impact of ICTs on democracy focuses on the **process of public debate** that precedes decision-making. Nothing stated so far implies that they will change the practices and procedures around the **act** of decision-making—or, in particular, the practice of voting. In fact, ICTs are likely to have a major impact on this aspect of democracy as well. Before considering this implication, we need to describe one more aspect of the longstanding debates over meeting the test of democracy: the distinction between participatory and representative democracy.

4.2 Participatory vs. representative democracy

In participatory democracy, citizens participate directly in decision-making, usually by voting. The act of voting is seen as distinct from the public debate that precedes it. Voting is the quintessential democratic act. It is the primary expression of our belief that citizens of a democracy are free and equal.

Supposedly, the democracies of ancient Greek city-states, such as Athens, were essentially participatory. Citizens gathered together to debate and then vote on key issues. However, with the rebirth of democracy in the 18th century, states were no longer cities, but whole countries with large and sometimes culturally diverse populations. In addition, most had developed bureaucracies, and considerable holdings and responsibilities.

Participatory democracy was not feasible in such a society. Populations were usually much larger than in the Greek city-states and citizens did not have the time, expertise or inclination to participate in every debate or vote. In addition, they lived in different cities, often separated by

considerable distances, so that the process of voting would have been preventively expensive and slow if every citizen had to be present for every vote. This issue was resolved by allowing citizens to choose representatives to stand for them in government and act on their behalf.

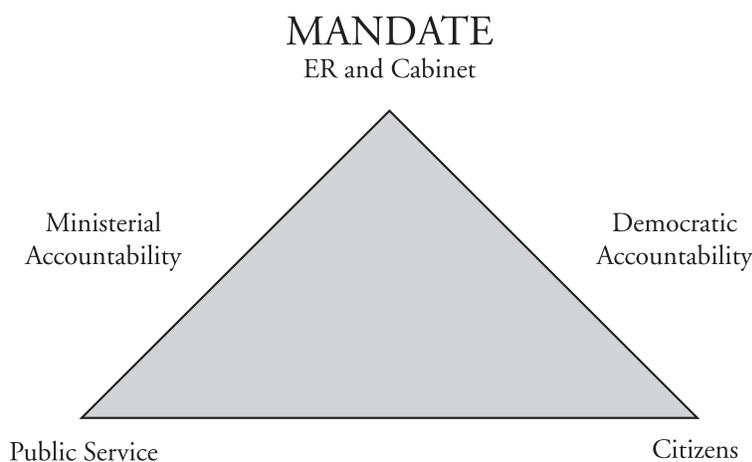
There is always some delegation of authority to an official who is empowered to make decisions on behalf of citizens and who, in this sense, is a representative.

It is worth pausing to underline that not even ancient Greek democracy was fully participatory. There is always some delegation of authority to an official who is empowered to make decisions on behalf of citizens and who, in this sense, is a representative. Given the number of decisions that must be made in any modern government, it is hard to imagine how things could be otherwise. But neither is any democracy fully representative. At the very least, citizens must participate in elections to choose their representatives. Most democracies contain a host of other participatory mechanisms, ranging from referendums to community-based partnerships.

The two models of democracy therefore are best viewed as ends of a continuum. Most modern democracies are a complex combination of the two that has evolved over the years. Thus, in Canada, there are federal, provincial and municipal legislatures with elected representatives. Even so citizens also participate in public decision-making in all kinds of ways, ranging from national referendums to the management of regional health organizations or community daycare groups. In the end, most of the really interesting debates about the future of democracy are not abstract ones over which form of democracy is better, participatory or representative, but practical ones about how, where, when and why a particular decision-making body or process should favour one approach over the other.

4.3 The Governance Triangle

The basic relationships that underlie modern representative government as it was conceived in the 18th century can be represented visually in the following diagram:



The three points of the triangle mark the three cardinal points in the division of labour underlying representative government. The theory goes something like this:

The Governance Triangle begins with citizens, whose task (and right) it is to choose representatives who will be empowered to speak and act on their behalf. This authority is invested in representatives through the electoral process. In that process, candidates must present themselves for office, informing citizens what they stand for (usually done by presenting an electoral

platform). At the end of the debate surrounding the campaign, citizens make a choice based upon their beliefs about which candidates and platforms will best represent their interests. For citizens, making this choice—casting a ballot—is the quintessential democratic act. By participating in the process in this way, they invest representatives with a **democratic mandate**, based upon the platform and debate of the campaign. This mandate provides governments with the legitimacy and the right to exercise the public authority necessary to realize the mandate. Finally, representatives remain **democratically accountable** to citizens in that the period of their mandate is limited. If they wish to remain in office, they must seek a new mandate by presenting themselves again as candidates.

The second stage of the Governance Triangle involves setting the agenda. After being elected, a new government turns its platform into a series of specific policy goals and directions. It must set priorities for action and allocate resources for that purpose (usually through a budget).

In the third stage, the project is handed off to the Public Service, which, under the direction of the appropriate elected officials, turns these instructions into programs, services, measures and (proposed) laws. Finally, these flow back to citizens, completing the triangle of governance.

Of course, this is an overly simplistic description of how any actual democracy works—particularly today. It ignores many things that can and do complicate the relationships between the three stages of the process and the principal parties involved. For example, no mention has been made of the role played by “civil society,” lobby groups, political parties or the media. Nor have we mentioned the complicated relationships that exist between regular elected members of a legislature and the executive, various houses or levels of government, the political influence of the bureaucracy or the place of the courts or the constitution.

It has underpinned the moral legitimacy and the assignment of roles and responsibilities of the cardinal players in representative democracies for two hundred years.

Nevertheless, there is an elemental logic in the Governance Triangle that cannot be ignored. It has underpinned the moral legitimacy and the assignment of roles and responsibilities of the cardinal players in representative democracies for two hundred years. However simplistic they may sound, these basic relationships in the Governance Triangle remain essential to how politicians, journalists, bureaucrats, policy advocates, academics and others officially explain, justify and assess their various roles and responsibilities in the process of representative government. The Governance Triangle still defines the basis of our democratic discourse, notwithstanding the fact that virtually every system of democracy has departed in various ways and degrees from it.

So, on one hand, the Governance Triangle remains the foundation of what we can call the social contract behind representative government: citizens choose representatives at election time; elected representatives set big policy directions, define the resources available to realize them and make the laws. The public service designs and delivers the programs and services that implement these decisions.

On the other hand, the basic relationships in the Governance Triangle have been altered and obscured by two centuries of evolution in government, sometimes to the point of Byzantine complexity. As a result, the model’s power to explain and justify government decisions has weakened.

For example, citizens are often skeptical of a government’s appeals to a mandate to justify a decision. Campaign debates are filled with vague promises and commitments. In any event, things change too quickly for long-term plans to carry much moral authority. For their part, elected representatives often complain that they are not setting the government agenda or deciding how resources will be allocated. In particular, many feel that the bureaucracy has too much control over such decisions or that authority is too concentrated in a few individuals. Public servants complain that politicians meddle in management decisions but refuse to make the hard decisions and choices necessary to set government direction and provide leadership.

The vast increase in the complexity of modern governments over the last century—and, indeed, of modern societies—has made the elementary division of roles and responsibilities in the Governance Triangle unclear, confused and increasingly ineffective.

There is no need here to take sides in such debates. The point is that the vast increase in the complexity of modern governments over the last century—and, indeed, of modern societies—has made the elementary division of roles and responsibilities in the Governance Triangle unclear, confused and increasingly ineffective. The original Triangle carves out a region of public space that 200 years ago must have seemed wide open. Today, it is crowded by intricate subsystems and a complex array of players, including political parties, “civil society,” media giants, lobbyists and the private sector. The elaborate numbers of participants, issues and interests in the governance process make it hard to decide exactly who is responsible for what, and hard to hold anyone accountable. Given the pace of change today and the complexity of the process and issues, the Governance Triangle seems almost quaint.

ICTs are not likely to improve this situation. In fact, they will likely lead to further erosion of the model. In particular, critical concepts such as “representation” and “electoral mandate” will be weakened as the relationships between the three principal players in the Triangle are eroded further. Let us briefly consider why.

4.4 Impact of ICTs on the Governance Triangle

4.4.1 The changing nature of political representation

When representative government was invented, the world was a simpler place. For one thing, it was populated by more culturally and ethnically homogeneous societies. The idea that a single individual could meaningfully represent the values, interests and perspectives of a significant number of his or her co-citizens for a period of four years, on the basis of an electoral mandate, seemed plausible.

Today, societies are socially, culturally and economically more complex. An MP in the Canadian Parliament from a riding in the City of Toronto represents perhaps 120,000 people. The social, cultural and economic interests, concerns, backgrounds and values of such a community are bewilderingly complex. Furthermore, the pace of change in a city such as Toronto is so rapid that within a year of having been elected a party’s platform may become obsolete or irrelevant. One need only think of how the events of September 11th in United States turned government agendas upside down.

The idea that a single MP can represent 120,000 people for four years under such conditions on the basis of an electoral mandate begins to stretch credulity.

Generally speaking, governments such as the Government of Canada must make decisions daily, as a result of rapidly changing circumstances and information. At the same time, because populations are so much more diverse, their views on issues are less stable and far less homogeneous. It is often very difficult to know how various communities will react to or view a new policy decision. The idea that a single MP can represent 120,000 people for four years under such conditions on the basis of an electoral mandate begins to stretch credulity.

4.4.2 The changing nature of consultation in representative government

At the same time, the new infrastructure and the information resources being created by e-government can—and almost certainly will—be used to connect citizens and governments in ways that go beyond service delivery or the use of information as a new resource. More specifically, they will be used to connect citizens and government in various forms of **consultation processes**.

Of course, such processes are not new. Public involvement processes have always played a role in government planning. They serve a variety of purposes, such as testing ideas or building awareness. Insofar as citizen- or client-centred government strives to be more responsive, such processes can make an important contribution to good governance. But what may begin as a practical effort to bring government in touch with citizens as quickly as possible can be regarded by citizens as an invitation or an opportunity to influence policy development. **What starts as an exercise aimed at developing more responsive programs and services becomes an exercise in governance.**

Consider the kind of process that was traditionally used by countries such as Canada to create new international trade agreements. First, it would involve teams of officials from each of the countries. Second, negotiations would be held behind closed doors, sometimes for years, until an agreement was reached. Third, the final product would be presented to the public as a **fait accompli**; perhaps at a summit, where leaders from the participating countries would endorse it.

In recent years, protesters, such as those in the anti-globalization movement, have taken aim at such processes, calling them elitist and anti-democratic. At the Quebec City Organization of American States Summit in 2001, they were particularly effective, forcing OAS countries to agree to release a draft text of a proposed new Free Trade Agreement for the region. Getting this text released was something of a coup for the protesters and it almost certainly sets a precedent so that, in future, no such text is likely to remain secret for long. Stakeholders, such as the protesters, will argue that drafts should be available on the Internet as they evolve. Such demands are likely to meet with increasing success. The Internet provides a whole new medium through which the public can circulate and discuss such a text.

The Internet thus could quickly become more than a tool for disseminating documents. It could become a venue for discussion, debate and engagement—an extension of democratic public space.

Now it is a very short step from demanding that the text be made available, to demanding that it be made available **for public comment**. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that governments could consent to the former without implicitly consenting to the latter. But if stakeholders and citizens are being invited to comment, they will expect governments to take their comments seriously; that is, to listen to them, and to act on them. The Internet thus could quickly become more than a tool for disseminating documents. It could become a venue for discussion, debate and engagement—**an extension of democratic public space**.

Such a dialogue could be very inclusive. It is possible to hold comprehensive, ongoing consultations with a wide array of citizens and/or stakeholders on policy issues on the Internet. As the possibilities become clearer, stakeholder groups will almost certainly intensify the push for governments to use the technology in this way. It will be difficult for governments to resist. To do so will appear elitist and anti-democratic. Indeed, opposition parties are already beginning to see the political point behind this. Casting ICTs as an instrument of democracy to engage stakeholders may be a powerful way to win support from activists outside government. If so, opposition parties will begin to make promises to use it for these purposes if elected. In Canada, at least one opposition party at the provincial level that is well-positioned to win the next election has made such promises.

The line between having a discussion and giving instructions is likely to blur very quickly and they will view themselves as giving directions—a mandate—to the government officials who have consulted them.

These reflections raise serious questions over where, when, why, to what extent and for how long governments can or should resist moving in this direction. In trying to frame some of the key issues, it is useful to view the situation through the prism of the Governance Triangle. In that model, decision-making is the responsibility of elected officials, who receive their mandate from citizens in an electoral process. In the kind of consultation process we have just been sketching, citizens connect directly with government officials. As already noted, citizens or stakeholder groups who participate in such consultations are not likely to view their input as merely an opinion sample to inform governments about what the public may be thinking. The line between having a discussion and giving instructions is likely to blur very quickly and they will view themselves as giving directions—a mandate—to the government officials who have consulted them. They will expect governments to act on this mandate.

They would view such a consultation as analogous to that between citizens and elected representatives at election time. In other words, stakeholders or citizens could argue that they are giving government officials a democratic mandate through the consultation process. The process thus would be treated as a form of participatory democracy.

This poses many questions. For one, such a mandate could altogether bypass elected representatives. That would not only threaten to undermine the basic governance relationships defined by the Triangle, it could also undermine the concept of a democratic mandate, on which the legitimacy of the government rests. What would happen, for example, if the instructions given to government officials conflicted with those that an Executive believed defined the mandate it received at election time? Who would have the “real” mandate?

The scenario shows that ICTs are reconfiguring the basic relationships that define the old division of labour in representative governance. As the new relationships develop, they could come into conflict with the old ones, undermining the democratic legitimacy of elected governments. What is the right response?

4.4.3 Toward a more participatory form of government?

Efforts to use the technology for operational or other non-policy purposes are likely to creep quickly into the policy domain.

One response is to adopt a policy of disallowing the use of ICTs for any kind of engagement processes that might have a bearing on policy development. One assumes that in countries such as Singapore or China this would be close to the government’s position. At least in democratic countries, however, it is hard to see it as anything other than a “finger-in-the-dike” strategy. For one thing, we saw in our discussion of seamless government that policy and operations cannot be kept separate for long. Efforts to use the technology for operational or other non-policy purposes are likely to creep quickly into the policy domain.

Moreover, given the willingness of opposition parties to make hay with the issue, it is highly unlikely that the attempt to suppress the use of such processes by government fiat will be effective. A government that adopts this approach will quickly be made to appear controlling and anti-democratic. The political reality is such that, if enough people outside government want the technology to be used this way, it will—perhaps it should—happen.

The view that history seems to be moving developed democracies toward greater connectivity runs through this paper; as does the view that that this connectivity is erasing many organizational boundaries and changing the relationship between citizens and governments.

This will sound worryingly like technological determinism to some. There is a measure of determinism here. The view that history seems to be moving developed democracies toward greater connectivity runs through this paper; as does the view that that this connectivity is erasing many organizational boundaries and changing the relationship between citizens and governments. To say that history is moving in this direction, and that it is to a great extent driven by the technology, is to admit a measure of determinism—just as it is deterministic to say that the printing press or steam engine changed the course of history in earlier centuries.

But if this way of looking at things implies that the future is in some sense “already defined” by the technology, it does not follow that it is “fully defined.” It is perhaps true to say that, as a result of the Internet, options for the future have narrowed. Even so there are still many possible futures. For example, if broader public engagement in policy development is likely to occur because of the technology, it is not at all clear who will be involved in such processes, what kind of processes they will be, what sort of information will be made available to the participants or how the results will be decided. And that part of the history of 21st century democracy is far from written. There is a huge and critical need here for reflection, debate, experimentation, learning and—most of all—leadership.

4.5 Where to go from here?

4.5.1 Two approaches to e-democracy

In rising to this challenge, a key task will be to revisit some of the basic concepts underlying the old Governance Triangle, such as the idea of a **mandate or of political representation**. If a more direct relationship is developing between citizens or stakeholders, on one hand, and government officials, on the other, what does that mean for the role of an elected representative, and how is a government to define its mandate?

On the Canadian political scene, some views and options are taking shape around such questions. Some observers have been impressed at how the new technology can instantly register and tabulate citizens' views on key issues. Should we settle policy disputes through electronic voting, they wonder? Would this be more democratic? Is it a way of being more inclusive and less elitist? One provincial opposition party has already promised that, if elected, it will make electronic voting a key part of its agenda for change. Let us call this the "e-voting" approach. In essence, it seeks to make decision-making more democratic by using the technology to allow more people to directly participate in more decisions through mechanisms such as electronic voting.

Essentially, it seeks to strengthen democracy by enlarging the policy development process so that more people get a say in what goes into a final product, such as a trade agreement.

Other interested groups, such as the anti-globalization protesters and some social policy advocates, have recognized that ICTs could link citizens and/or stakeholder groups directly into government discussions and negotiations. As a result, such groups are beginning to argue for a "virtual space" in which to allow participation in such discussions to happen more frequently, on a greater scale and in greater depth. Let us call this the "e-consultation" approach. Essentially, it seeks to strengthen democracy by enlarging the policy development process so that more people get a say in what goes into a final product, such as a trade agreement.

Both approaches have merit and both raise questions. Broadly speaking, the former has the virtue of being more inclusive but risks taking democratic societies like Canada too far in the direction of populism. The latter has the virtue of being more deliberative but risks slipping backward into a worrying kind of elitism. We need to examine the two a little more closely.

4.5.2 The risk of populism

Once a politician comes under the influence of such elites, he or she tends to lose touch with the common wisdom and, by implication, ceases to represent truly the people who elected him or her.

Contemporary Canadian populists have tended to rest their case for more inclusive decision-making on an appeal to the "common wisdom" or "common sense" of the common people, or some reasonable facsimile. They seem to hold that if politicians would only heed this wisdom, public policy would improve. Mainstream politicians do not listen, they tell us, because they are beholden to elites, including bureaucrats, special interest groups and lobbyists. Once a politician comes under the influence of such elites, he or she tends to lose touch with the common wisdom and, by implication, ceases to represent truly the people who elected him or her.

In response, many populists seek to reconnect common wisdom and public policy by increasing citizens' direct control over or input into decision-making, using mechanisms such as parliamentary recall, constituency surveys and referendums. ICTs could facilitate the use of such tools, but there are risks.

First, the appeal to a common wisdom suggests that there is an underlying consensus on values, beliefs, perspectives, concerns and priorities. As we saw above, if such a consensus ever existed, it is in rapid retreat. A range of new forces, including globalization, changing demography and the ICT revolution, are combining to make issues and interests far more complex, nuanced and differentiated than in the past. In Canada, we have seen this in a host of debates, including constitutional reform, health care, taxes, the role of courts, abortion, language policy, aboriginal self-government, gun control, and free trade.

The populists' appeal to a common wisdom is thus something akin to myth—the idea that there exists a quiet consensus among the majority.

The populists' appeal to a common wisdom is thus something akin to myth—the idea that there exists a quiet consensus among the majority. Perhaps a greater degree of consensus did exist when countries such as Canada were culturally, socially and economically more homogeneous. In the 21st century, however, they will be far too diverse to assume such a consensus or to rely on it to produce good governance. The world is a far more complex and diverse place than it was even 30 years ago. The pace of change, tools of mass communication, mobile populations, economic

diversity, varying levels of educations—these all contribute to making the idea of such an underlying consensus on more than a few basic values and practices unlikely.⁷

Allowing large numbers of people simply to express their “democratic will” on key issues through regular electronic voting is not likely to produce good governance.

To the extent that such a consensus is to be found, it is more likely to involve a common commitment to the principles and values of democracy, understood as a way of ensuring the fairness and legitimacy of decision-making in the midst of such pluralism. Although democracies tend to be in a state of ongoing discussion around the best way to meet the test of democracy, most citizens in these countries agree with the three basic principles we set out above. On the other hand, there is abundant evidence that consensus will be rare in most of the key policy areas, from education and health to regulation of the environment or levels of taxation. In short, allowing large numbers of people simply to express their “democratic will” on key issues through regular electronic voting is not likely to produce good governance. Nor is it likely to increase the legitimacy of governments. On the contrary, passing the test of democracy requires more than fair or regular opportunities to vote. It also requires that decision-making be preceded by an **open and informed debate**. That is a crucial condition of good governance in complex, diverse and changing societies like Canada.

4.5.3 The risk of elitism

The e-consultation approach raises different questions and concerns. Those who advocate it believe that giving citizens and/or stakeholders a more direct voice in the policy process would make it more democratic and thereby strengthen legitimacy.

Individual citizens are unlikely to become directly involved in more than a handful of such exercises.

On one hand, opening up such processes to greater public participation could be democratically liberating. On the other hand, individual citizens are unlikely to become directly involved in more than a handful of such exercises. They do not have the time, interest, expertise or inclination to pursue direct democracy beyond a few special cases. The likely participants in such an arrangement are so-called **stakeholder** groups.

Many such groups are formally committed to changing government policy and are already seeking a seat for their organizations at government negotiating tables. Often this is justified on the basis of claims to inclusiveness, or by virtue of a mandate to speak for some part of the population. Just as often, such claims are unsubstantiated and doubtful. Additionally, these groups are often ideologically motivated, highly partisan, exclusive and controlled by professional policy advocates. Giving them a “virtual seat” at government negotiating tables is therefore unlikely to enhance the legitimacy of such processes. Indeed, it may heighten the sense of elitism that already surrounds them.

If e-consultation processes are to enhance democracy, a way must be found to ensure that they are not simply taken over by interest groups, who may be committed and articulate, but who have no real claim to represent citizens.

At least two morals can be drawn from this discussion. First, if e-consultation processes are to enhance democracy, a way must be found to ensure that they are not simply taken over by interest groups, who may be committed and articulate, but who have no real claim to represent citizens. Many questions need to be answered: How much influence should they have? Which groups should be allowed to participate? What is the role of government in such discussions? What is the role of elected representatives?

Second, the diversity of interests in contemporary democratic societies such as Canada suggests that good governance often requires getting more than a simple “yes” or “no” from citizens about their views on a particular issue. Experiments with e-democracy should emphasize the importance

⁷ The changing nature of collective and individual identity and its connection to new forces such as ICTs, globalization and population mobility are discussed at length in *Leveraging Our Diversity: Canada As A Learning Society*, by Donald G. Lenihan (with Jay Kaufman), Centre for Collaborative Government, Changing Government, Vol 4, February 2002. Also available at www.crossingboundaries.ca.

of deliberation, the need to achieve compromises and to work through the issues as a group. Such processes must be designed to promote genuine discussion, learning, negotiation and compromise, while remaining open, inclusive and accountable.

4.5.4 Finding the middle ground: between populism and elitism

None of this discussion denies that ICTs could be a powerful tool to strengthen democracy. On the contrary, they can extend the reach of sophisticated new techniques of citizen engagement, ranging from complex opinion polling exercises, to focus groups, lengthy deliberative processes and referendums. As such, they are potentially a powerful tool for extending public space and making it more inclusive. Much work will have to be done to learn to use them effectively, but models for such processes already exist and have been used with considerable success in other forums.

Finally, it is worth reflecting briefly on how such a process might affect the role of elected officials. In fact, it seems to suggest a new one that is less representative and more interactive. If they are to succeed, such processes will require strong leadership and skilled facilitation. First, politicians could champion such discussions, leading governments to experiment with the technology. Second, if these processes rest on the premise that good governance is the result of hard work and reasonable compromise, thoughtful and skilled facilitators will be needed to help participants work through the issues in a constructive way.

Elected representatives could play a key role here, helping citizens to understand the issues and to engage one another in ways that will develop the kind of interpersonal and fair negotiating skills that are needed to forge consensus. The ancient philosopher Socrates comes to mind here. He disliked being called a teacher and, instead, saw himself as a “midwife to ideas”: someone whose job was to help his fellow citizens recognize the implications of their own beliefs. Perhaps politicians should see themselves less as policy-makers and more as policy midwives. Perhaps they need to consider how the shift from the metaphor of the machine to that of the network as a model for the organization and functioning of government changes their relationship to citizens and, indeed, the nature and practice of democracy.

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Conclusion

This paper is an effort to provide a clearer picture of e-government. It should now be evident that although e-government shares many features with conventional government, the two differ in very important respects. First, the network-like structure of e-government means that it is more horizontally organized. Although this has been presented as a challenge, it is not to be taken as a suggestion that vertical government should be **exchanged** for horizontal government. Rather, the challenge is to build a new horizontal dimension into existing vertical structures, without compromising key values, such as privacy, transparency and accountability.

Second, e-government involves a shift from a more closed to a more open system. Conventional government is, relatively speaking, a closed system. In it, information and decision-making are hierarchically controlled so that contact, for instance, between middle management and organizations outside the system (government) is monitored, limited and regulated to ensure that central control is not undermined. This approach is essential to the effectiveness of all command-and-control systems.

By contrast, e-government seems likely to produce a wide range of new connections that will involve government officials in relationships with organizations and individuals outside of their usual organizational boundaries. This is changing the way information enters and flows around the system of government, introducing new—and sometimes uncontrollable—influences into decision-making.⁸

E-government thus is shifting conventional government toward an organizational model that is more collaborative in style and in which decision-making could become more distributed—a concept that should be distinguished from decentralization.

Finally, by opening up the boundaries of conventional government in this way, e-government weakens its traditional command-and-control structures. E-government thus is shifting conventional government toward an organizational model that is more collaborative in style and in which decision-making could become more **distributed**—a concept that should be distinguished from **decentralization**.

Decentralization involves the transfer of authority from one command-and-control centre to another, such as from central agencies to line departments, or from federal to provincial governments. In decentralization, the transferred authority remains centralized, but is moved to a new centre (or a series of new centres). By contrast, **distributed governance** takes some of the centralized authority and spreads it around the system.

Conventional government, with its management system of paper filing systems, fax machines, top-down planning committees, hierarchical reporting relationships and departmental silos is too hierarchical to permit a significant deconcentration of authority and too slow and mechanical to ensure that, if it were attempted, it would remain responsive, transparent and accountable. As a result, conventional government could only decentralize. Not surprisingly, since the beginning of modern government, debates over government reform have usually been framed in terms of centralization vs. decentralization. **Perhaps the most exciting and far-reaching feature of e-government is the prospect of creating a communications and management infrastructure that could support a more distributed approach to governance.** Such a development could be as momentous in the history of liberal-democratic thinking as the revolutions of the late 18th century.

⁸ These ideas are discussed in *Opening the E-Government File: Governing in the 21st Century*, by Reg Alcock and Donald G. Lenihan, Centre for Collaborative Government, Changing Government, Vol 2, February 2001. Also available at www.crossingboundaries.ca.

In conclusion, all three points raised here pose fundamental questions about the future of liberal-democratic government:

- How far do such governments want to go in the direction of e-government?
- How fast should they move?
- What can they do to facilitate (or prevent) e-government?
- What tools and options are available for managing such a change strategically (or preventing one from happening)?

The principal aim of this paper has been to provoke a richer and more wide-ranging discussion of the issues that such questions raise.

