Canadian Study of Parliament Group

PARLIAMENT, TECHNOLOGY AND

CITIZENS

Friday, December 7, 2007
Ottawa, Ontario

CANADIAN STUDY OF PARLIAMENT GROUP

The Canadian Study of Parliament Group was created with the object of bringing together all those with an interest in parliamentary institutions and the legislative process, to promote understanding and to contribute to their reform and improvement.

The constitution of the Canadian Study of Parliament Group makes provision for various activities, including the organization of conferences and seminars in Ottawa and elsewhere in Canada, the preparation of articles and various publications, the establishment of workshops, the promotion and organization of public discussions on parliamentary affairs, participation in public affairs programs on radio and television, and the sponsorship of other educational activities.

Membership is open to all those interested in Canadian legislative institutions.

Applications for membership and additional information concerning the Group should be addressed to the Secretariat, Canadian Study of Parliament Group, P.O. Box 660, West Block, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0A6. Tel.: 613.995.2937, Fax: 613.943.9949, www.studyparliament.ca

INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

On December 7, 2007, the Canadian Study of Parliament Group (CSPG) held a conference in Ottawa on the subject of "Parliament, Technology and Citizens".

The conference was organized by Dr. Jonathan Malloy, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Carleton University, and Vice-President of the CSPG.

Dr. Malloy assembled an interesting cast of participants at the well-attended conference, which was held on Parliament Hill. Conference participants included academics, practitioners, politicians and students. The Conference drew both current CSPG members as well as newcomers to the Group, especially Internet and technology researchers.

Panel I focused on the use of technology by legislators. Dr. Mary Francoli of Carleton University discussed MPs' use of technology in Canada and Britain, Dr. Tamara A. Small of Mount Allison presented her research on MPs' blogs, and M. Patrick Byrne of the Quebec National Assembly gave an overview of the many innovative uses of technology in the National Assembly.

The keynote address was delivered by Dr. Darin Barney, Canada Research Chair at McGill University. Dr. Barney argued that information and communication technologies shape how we live as citizens and influence our view of the world and that their influence is so pervasive that technology itself can be thought of as a legislator.

Panel II dealt with the theme of committees and other external consultations. Moderated by Dr. F. Leslie Seidle, the panelists were Mr. Joseph Peters of Ascentum, Mr. Blair Armitage of the Senate and Mr. Jonathan Ferschau of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. Each panelist spoke of the challenges and opportunities of using technology to enhance committee consultations and deliberations.

The final panel, moderated by Dr. William Young, the Librarian of Parliament, concentrated on the practical applications of technology. The Hon. Carolyn Bennett, MP for St. Paul's, spoke about the need for parliamentarians to embrace technology to engage citizens. Dr. Jonathan Rose of Queen's University, Academic Director for the Ontario Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform, argued that traditional methods of discussion remain essential regardless of the new technological innovations available.

Throughout the day, the audience engaged in animated discussion with the various panelists and, as always, contributed immensely to the interesting dialogue.

Many thanks to Nancy Hall and Chloé O'Shaughnessy for all their hard work on the Conference. It is certain that the Conference would not have been a success without their efforts. Thanks to Delaney Grieg as well for taking notes at the sessions and preparing the panel summaries. Finally, thanks to the panelists for their time and efforts in providing keen insights and facilitating engaging discussions.

Dr. Jonathan Malloy

PANEL I

CURRENT USES OF TECHNOLOGY

Moderator: Dr. Jonathan Malloy
               Vice-President
               Canadian Study of Parliament

Panelists: Dr. Mary Francoli
               Carleton University

               Dr. Tamara A. Small
               Assistant Professor
               Mount Allison University

               Mr. Patrick Byrne
               National Assembly of Québec

Dr. Mary Francoli
Current Climate of Technology use in Parliament

This presentation examined the use of blogging by Canadian politicians. The concept of a blog was explained based on four defining aspects: self-expression, frequency, hyperlinking, and interactivity.   It was noted that while internationally there are several examples of blogs impacting in real world politics, in Canadian politics the use and impact of blogging remains limited. Only 11 Canadian Members of Parliament have blogs. Of these, only three have blogs that meet the defining aspects. The aspect most frequently lacking was that of interactivity. Reasons suggested for limited blogging by MPs were the time and labour intensity of blogging and the antithetical nature of Canadian politics and blogging - the former is characterized by secrecy and solidarity and the latter characterized by self-expression and openness.

Dr. Tamara A. Small
Exploring the Canadian Parliamentary Blogosphere

The panelist introduced the current climate of information technology use by parliamentarians, discussing the benefits and concerns, both actual and potential, and drawing on examples from interviews conducted with members of parliament in both Canada and the United Kingdom. The presentation highlighted the potential of technology to facilitate the modernization of government service provision and communication and to enable greater citizen engagement in the decision making process. The reluctance of parliamentarians to adopt many of the technologies now available was attributed to concerns around the time demanded for maintenance, the risk of exposure to criticism and manipulation and the possibility that over-engagement of citizens through technology would result in their input not being used.

Mr. Patrick Byrne
The use of new technology at the National Assembly of Quebec

The panelist described a number of ways the technology has been used by the National Assembly of Quebec, highlighting best practices and lessons learned. To support parliamentarians the National Assembly has established an intranet site containing a members guide, frequently needed forms and pages to follow the work of bills etc.; a wireless network

accessible in meeting rooms and the chamber; and an extranet site that follows the work of parliamentary committees by making documents, bills, amendments and studies available to all members and to the public. To enhance public engagement the National Assembly has used technology to carry out a number of online consultations for committee studies and has conduct videoconferences with witnesses. In the future, the Assembly will provide services that allow members of the public to send electronic petitions to specific parliamentarians and comment on all material being studied by the legislature. The assembly also plans to update its Web site to simplify research and enhance distance access.

LUNCHEON ADDRESS

Keynote Speaker: Dr. Darin Barney
                   Canada Research Chair in Communication and Media Studies
                   McGill University

Dr. Darin Barney
In Search of a Rightful Assembly: Parliament and the Question of Technology

The keynote speech focused on the nature of the relationship between politics and information and communication technology (ICT). The speaker proposed that ICT is commonly used as a "means" to engage in political judgment, but only rarely examined as a matter or "object" for political judgment. In politics technology is thought of as a means or instrument to gather people and used as a tool for political activity; however, greater attention needs to be devoted to examining information technology as an object itself. ICT shapes how we live as citizens, therefore its development, design and regulation warrant government consideration. It was suggested that the influence of information technology in our "technological society" is so pervasive that technology itself can be thought of as a legislator itself. Further, living in a technological society, the challenge of examining technology as an object of political judgment becomes more difficult. In technological society, technology as a means influences our way of existing in and viewing the world. It affects our view of "the good" and "the good life". The speaker concluded that while the pervasiveness of technology as a means in technological society limits our ability to scrutinize technology as an object of political judgment, it also increases the importance of this scrutiny and judgment.

PANEL II

INNOVATIONS AND CHALLENGES

Moderator: Dr. F. Leslie Seidle
              Senior Research Associate
              Institute for Research on Public Policy

Panelists: Dr. Joseph Peters
              Partner
              Ascentum

              Mr. Jonathan Fershau
              Legislative Assembly of British Columbia

Mr. Blair Armitage
Principal Clerk
Legislative Systems and Broadcasting
Senate of Canada

Dr. Joseph Peters
Online experimentation by Parliamentary Committees

This presentation explored the concept of public engagement and examined two experiments of public involvement through online consultation by parliamentary committees. The Spectrum of Public Engagement (from informing to involving to shared decision making) was explained and elements of good public involvement highlighted. It was noted that the timing and form in which the public are drawn into the decision making sequence and the policy development cycle can have significant implications in determining the effectiveness of public involvement. The examples of the House of Commons Subcommittee on the Status of Persons with Disabilities' study of the Canada Pension Plan Disability Program and the Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs Science and Technology's study on the Mental Health, Mental Illness and Addictions in Canada were used to demonstrate best practices and lessons learned in online consultation. It was found that online consultation enabled committees to collect a greater number and diversity of perspectives and to gather anonymous input; however, online consultation was also associated with scheduling, logistical and financial challenges and required that adequate background information be provided to consultation participants.

Mr. Jonathan Fershau
Electronic Consultation by All Party Committees

The panelist began by identifying four characteristics of parliamentary committees that distinguish the dynamics of their public consultations from those carried out by other government bodies. These include the politicized nature of parliamentary committees, the constraints placed on committees by the B.C. legislature, the member driven character of their activities, and the potential for the process of consultation to be more important than final results. Two examples of public consultation by parliamentary committees in British Columbia were then explored, namely the use of an interactive Web site for kids by the Standing Committee on Health's study of childhood obesity and the online budget consultation conducted by the Standing Committee on Finance. It was found that online consultations facilitated the provision of targeted responses, a greater volume of responses and the inclusion of demographics that are often excluded from committee studies. However, several reservations about online consultations were also noted, including the desire of committee members to interact more closely with witnesses and to know in advance who they would be; the time and staffing pressures of compiling high volumes of responses; and, the limited diversity amongst respondents.

Mr. Blair Armitage
Challenges of Technology in the Senate

This speaker explored the experiences of the Senate in adopting new technology and highlighted challenges faced by senators, clerks and other support staff. It was noted in the introduction that increased use of technology has generated a vastly different work environment in the Senate. At the administrative level technology has improved the volume and diversity of information that can be treated and increased the diversity of ways that the senate can engage with the public. A number of challenges to greater adoption of technology by the Senate were also noted including: the struggle of communicating clearly between clerks and legislators and

those with technological expertise; the time and work involved in overcoming the learning curve required to gain comfort and experience with e-consultation; the difficulty of balancing immediacy and language translation in online dialogue; the problem of inappropriate of slanderous commentary in online forums; and, the class and age exclusivity of technologically based consultation.

PANEL III

DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

Moderator: Dr. William Young
              Parliamentary Librarian
              Library of Parliament

Panelists: The Hon. Carolyn Bennett
              Member of Parliament
              St. Paul's

              Dr. Jonathan Rose
              Queen's University

The Hon. Carolyn Bennett
Democratic Engagement: The Role of Parliamentarians

This presentation examined the potential for technology to be used by parliamentarians to engage citizens and enhance democracy. The importance of the attitude of parliamentarians to ensuring effective use of technology was emphasized at the outset. In particular, the need for sincerity, transparency and responsiveness were highlighted. Uses of technology to enhance democracy were identified including the facilitation of consultation with citizens between elections and the creation of public space for the discussion of ideas. It was noted that for consultative processes to be legitimate timing, assured listening, tracking and feedback are required. A number of innovative, concrete examples of effective technologically based consultations engaged in by Members of Parliament were outlined including consultations in ridings, in committee work, within political parties, in non-geographic constituencies, in collaboration with government bodies and in supporting the work of MPs internationally.

Dr. Jonathan Rose
Information Technology and Democratic Engagement: The Case of the Ontario Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform

The final panelist examined the use of technology by the Ontario Citizens Assembly on Electoral Reform for both internal and external communications. The Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform was introduced and its structure, mandate and work described. Internal and public communication applications of technology by the Citizen's Assembly were then identified. Technologies used internally included a web-forum and email listserve. Those used externally included an online submission option for members of the public, online registration for consultation meetings, a chat room, online learning materials and live broadcasting of sessions. It was noted that while information technology tools became important for communication with the public, some members of the Citizen's Assembly were reluctant to adopt technological solutions for internal communication. Overall, it was found that traditional methods of face-to-face discussion were of greater value to members in their decision-making process. Information

technology alternatives provided a back-up for information collection and dissemination where face-to-face communication was not possible; however, the locus of decision making still needed to reside within a smaller, in-person deliberative body.