

By Christopher Wilson, Senior Research Fellow, Centre on Governance, University of Ottawa

Current governance principles and practices are misaligned with the realities of the modern world. Striking the 'right fit' between knowledge, resources, processes and outcomes in complex environments where different groups have something to contribute towards shared outcomes – even while pursuing their own objectives – this is what is called intelligent governance. The work of the Committee on Electoral Reform needs to adopt to this new paradigm. Simply choosing one voting practices over another will do little to foster the 5 principles laid out by the Committee -- legitimacy, engagement, inclusion, integrity, and local representation -- neither will it improve the capacity of government to resolve complex problems, or allow government to fulfill its much needed role in facilitating social coordination.

The remarks by Minister Monsef to the House Committee on Electoral Reform on July 7th were welcome and hopeful. Nevertheless, it would seem that the approach of the Committee will fall short in addressing a number of fundamental questions, such as:

- a) Whether the original rationales for constructing our democratic institutions remain valid? Despite the Minister's insight on voting, current institutional assumptions remain that whatever was good in 1867 is good for today.
- b) And yet if those rationales are invalid, then what about the institutions they underpin and voting system that empowers them? We could choose the right voting system for the wrong institutions. What, if any, are the new rationales for our institutions?
- c) More importantly, there is a deeper question about what our democratic institutions are meant to serve? Is the purpose of democracy today different from 1867, and if so, are our inherited democratic structures enhancing or diminishing it?
- d) Are there other tools that exist, or may exist shortly, that may be utilized to serve that modern purpose? How might they be employed? Finally,
- e) What process is best suited to engage Canadians in their democracy to serve today's needs and purposes, while making use of today's knowledge and technological capacities?

Fundamentally, what's missing is an opportunity to identify the shared possibility that all Canadians want to live into, and an understanding of how Canadians should govern themselves to live into that reality. Could not the Committee take the approach, "let's design our democratic institutions from today, considering today's needs, and the knowledge and tools we have at our disposal". And if we begin there, would we really create the same structures and processes that we have inherited?

For any significant outcome to emerge from this Electoral Reform process, it must be based on a process of reflective learning that is willing to ask serious and fundamental questions about the institutional status quo and its degree of 'fitness' with the environment of the modern world. To achieve that, the Committee needs to design a collective learning system -- not only for itself, but one that could become a prototype for Canadians as a whole.

Having addressed the need for change, the Minister should identify the key features of a new electoral system. How would those features engender the desired national capacities, with effective social learning being foremost among them? While voting practices are important, the

electoral system was only ever designed to make a single, collective decision – who should make decisions for everyone on a wide assortment of issues. This takes minimal advantage of Canadian collective intelligence.

Unfortunately, in today's world, the needs of Canadians cannot be resolved by a single leader, a single party, or even a single government. We must consider systems of distributed governance that can be inclusive of many inputs of knowledge, resources and power from multiple stakeholders –as many as each issue demands. And, if we accept the recent statements by both our partisan leaders and the leaders of the public service, we must find better ways to work together in collaboration and partnership¹. How do we identify those stakeholders, and how do we engage them, and what new skills and practices are required? We need a new system for this. Relying on a system that was designed solely to make decisions, will not suffice -- either to engage stakeholders or to sustain their commitments.

Why was the current democratic system designed the way it was? Our Westminster system of representative government was crafted to affect control not collaboration. Its design arose from so many people being spread over an immense geography; with no real means to communicate other than in-person or by mail (i.e. no social media, no Internet, no phone, no TV or radio, no cars, not even a national rail system!). This meant that if people wanted to have a conversation on issues of importance, they would have to travel by horse and buggy over very long distances. Concurrently, very few people had any formal education. Citizens, therefore, were willing to delegate their democratic ownership to those few who they believed were virtuous, knowledgeable people and who they believed would work on their behalf to develop public policies based on objective knowledge, free of vested interests.

With no way for citizens to directly connect with each other, or to share their knowledge and experience, or to collaborate beyond their immediate community, they opted to elect agents to act for them. Then, the best way for these agents to communicate, learn together, and coordinate their policy making, was to bring them all together in one central place, along with all the expert knowledge, resources and power they needed to accomplish their intents. Finally, to coordinate among all the agents, one 'wise' person was put in charge as the leader of Government.

Are those rationales still valid today? No. None of them are. With universal education, universal connectedness (virtually) and universal access to information, none of the original rationales for representative government currently exist. Canadians are well educated. They can connect in real time to anyone, anywhere, anytime. Through the Internet they have the world's library at their fingertips. As a result, they can learn from many people and have the information they need at a keystroke; they can share their stories and issues without leaving their home or office; they can pool their resources through crowdfunding tools; or organize events involving millions of people simultaneously². They can create new policies³ and revise their constitutions.⁴

¹ Paquet, Gilles and Christopher Wilson. 2016. *Intelligent governance: an alternative paradigm*, Paper & presentation to the 68th IPAC National Annual Conference, 28-29 June 2016, Toronto

² For instance, the worldwide anti-SOPA demonstrations in 2012 that involved 10s of millions of people.

³ _____. 2007. "NZ police let public write laws", *BBC News*, 26 September.

⁴ _____. 2011. "Iceland is crowdsourcing its new constitution", *World e-gov Forum*, June 16th. Accessed at: <http://wegf.org/en/2011/06/iceland-is-crowdsourcing-its-new-constitution/>

They can do all of this without the use of intermediaries. The Athenian model of *direct participatory democracy* is today, not only doable, but with new technologies like the *blockchain*⁵ for instance, it can be more reliable than ever; and through *open source* technologies it can potentially be more innovative than our current system.

Further, we need to accept that today's world is quantum, filled with uncertainty, unpredictability and self-organizing phenomena, which means that no one, including governments, is "in charge" or has all the answers -- let alone all the resources or power to control an outcome of any significance. Those that say they are, are simply frauds. The capacities to solve societal problems are now spread among many people, hearts and minds. This means that concentrating problem solving in the hands of a few – no matter how worthy – is inherently problematic and creatively limiting. Says management guru Gary Hamel, "when you concentrate the responsibility for innovation at the top, you're holding your capacity to change hostage. It disempowers people ... Bureaucracy has to die."⁶ Thus instead of trying to revise an antiquated, agent-focused model of democracy, Canadians might be better served if they didn't cast off their ownership of problems and solutions to others, and instead found better ways to work together. In effect, the solutions we seek reside in all of us.

This is the point where experts like to jump in and say, "but referenda result in stupid decisions. Just look at the UK's Brexit referendum and the problems it has caused." And these people would be absolutely right. Others will say that "sovereign people deserve to have their direct say"⁷. And they are also right. Both miss a fundamental point. When you ask people in a referendum only to make a decision, as is their right, without affording them the opportunity for collective learning, you do get stupid decisions. Garbage in, garbage out. But the same may also be said for MPs who vote according to another's direction, without engaging in their own experience of social learning. What's really needed is a process for collective learning on a national scale that becomes an integral part of our modern democracy. The current democratic process does not allow for this. It is entirely focused on deciding, not collective learning.

On the other hand, through *open source* technologies, for instance, many thousands of people can initiate, test and evolve solutions which are technically far superior to anything created by a handful of expert developers and they don't even have to meet up. Just the fact that the Internet runs on *open source* software, should dissuade anyone from thinking that open, collective learning can't be both smart and effective.

Says Linus Torvalds, the originator of Linux, "I would seriously argue that especially in the face of complexity you absolutely have to have an open and collaborative development process, exactly because it's the only thing that scales. However, it's not enough to be open and collaborative — it needs to be distributed as well. And by 'distributed', I mean the massive

⁵ Antonopoulos, Andreas M. "Andreas M. Antonopoulos Educates Senate of Canada about Bitcoin", Senate Committee on Banking, Trade and Commerce, "Study on the use of digital currency", 11th session, 8 October 2014 Accessed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xUNGFZDO8mM>

⁶ Quoted in Mearian, Lucas. 2013. "The next corporate revolution will be power to the peons", *Computerworld*, 4 June

⁷ Coyle, Jim. 2016. "People deserve to have their 'direct say' in referendums, author says", *The Star*, July 10.

parallel kind where everybody can replicate the whole thing.”⁸ If we are to “let bureaucracy die” and tap into the collective intelligence of Canadian society, we need to figure out how to learn collectively and collaborate on much greater scales.

That leads me to a basic question for electoral reform, “**what do we mean by democracy?**” Is it simply a competitive entertainment involving winners and losers, like the spectacles of reality TV? Does democracy refer only to the episodic opportunity to cast a vote, as many in government still believe, after which we must suffer the tyranny of the elected? Is it a contest of supremacy between social groups -- us vs. them? Or does it draw from the original Greek and actually mean ‘rule by the people’, conferring upon each member of society a right of shared ownership? If so, it necessitates a collective process wherein citizen owners agree to cooperate to achieve their shared goals, thus achieving a coherent, prosperous and innovative society for everyone. This does not negate a role for MPs, but it does change it towards supporting that shared ownership, facilitating collective learning, and stewarding working together?

Even as is, the flaws of the current system call for major corrections. As your former colleague Brent Rathgeber recently pointed out⁹, effective democracy is premised on effective representation. However, party platforms and discipline distort effective representation. Responsible government requires governments to be responsible to their legislatures, whose elected members are in turn responsible to their electorate **not** to their parties. At present, the MPs are supposed to be “representatives of the voters to Parliament” but the mechanics of caucuses, whips, etc. transform “the elected representative **of** the people into “a partisan spokesperson **to** the people”.

As for legislatures that are supposed to exist to “hold governments to account”, they have become consumed by party discipline and do little beyond advancing partisan interests. As one former Deputy Minister confided in me, “governments are not about solving problems, they are about taking positions. If a problem ever gets solved, it’s only by coincidence.” Therefore, simply changing how we choose partisan winners is unlikely to make a difference in the quality of governance.

Lastly, before the Committee assesses the best means of voting, it needs to ask, “**what is the purpose of government that voting is meant to enable?**”

Traditionally, it is thought that the first function of government is *social coordination* -- either to reduce the natural conflicts among society’s members, or to facilitate collective innovation. The second function is *stabilization*. This pertains to government interventions to compensate for cyclically fluctuating levels of activity in the private sector. The third is *redistribution*, involving the transference of resources from those who are supposedly better off to those supposedly less well off, through a variety of techniques including taxation, subsidies and the provision of public goods and services; but also through transfers among and between regions, sectors, and demographic groups. The fourth function is *pedagogical and ideological* involving the education

⁸ Quoted in, Love, Dylan. 2014. “A Conversation With Linus Torvalds, Who Built The World’s Most Robust Operating System And Gave It Away For Free”, *The Business Insider*, 7 June. Accessed at: <http://www.businessinsider.com/linus-torvalds-qa-2014-6#ixzz34cksJobN>

⁹ Rathgeber, Brent. 2016. “Resist reforms that strengthen parties rather than individual MPs”, *The Ottawa Citizen*, 13 May

of citizens to make the activities of government seem more legitimate. That said, the primary function of government is coordination, while the other three are the tools that governments employ when coordination is not achieved. Thus how will the simple choice of a voting system foster greater coordination in Canadian society?

Despite what we would all prefer, governments can't change the past, nor can they do much to change the present. What they can change is the future. So if we don't like what we see today, then can we name a future that we do like? Consequently, it would seem that a fundamental task of the Committee should be in identifying, "**what is that future which we all want to live into?**" And if mine is different from yours, can we find some common ground? What then do we need to do together as Canadians to make that future a reality? This is how coordination can be achieved against the background of Canadian diversity, and what should be the foremost task of government – helping to coordinate to create a better future for us all.

Given that the provision of basic public goods and services will become increasingly automated due to new technologies, artificial intelligences, and all things connected in the Internet of Things, "**what kind of system of coordination do we need, to help create the future that we want?**" Here, the primary obstacle is our own imagination. All else stems from this. This should be the cornerstone of the Committee's work.

Will the current system get us to where we want to go? Even with a change in voting practice, my opinion is NO. In fact, given the growing complexity of policy issues, the declining public confidence in both governments and their leaders, combined with growing fears about security and the economy, the current system may actually encourage us to step backwards towards some anti-democratic, strongman solution where certainty is wrongly presumed to be attainable. This is further encouraged by our teenaged obsessions with romanticized leaders and their siren promises to fix all that ails us – promises that can never be kept. As citizens, we need to grow up and stop avoiding the adult choices that stem from our ownership of both problems and solutions.

If we can embrace our shared ownership, then conceivably, we could design systems to work together and apply our combined creativity on some platform of human cooperation, one that would most likely resemble the Internet itself: networked, open, inclusive, collaborative, innovative and adaptive¹⁰. Designing such a platform is the primary challenge for a 21st Century government.

However, what appears more probable is that various parties will come to the table simply to advocate pre-established positions, which they believe offer them some comparative advantage in the next election. Yet if all we are doing is tinkering like this on the margins of Canadian democracy, the ongoing freefall in the *perceived legitimacy of the public sector*, and in the *public's confidence in the ability of government to effectively deal with matters of importance to Canadians* (now at record historical lows) will not be staunch; nor will the quality of government actions improve.

¹⁰ Don Tapscott quoted in Tossell, Ivor. 2013. "Let's crowdsource Canada", *The Globe and Mail*, 20 Feb.

Are there other, better ways of doing the same things? *When it comes to social coordination, the traditional monopoly of government has ended.* There are a number of options that have been developed, and are being developed, that can sidestep governments and the electoral process entirely¹¹. These might involve the creation of: community-based groups; partnerships among businesses and not-for-profit organizations; network technologies like [Bitcoin](#) that eliminate the ‘central authority’ role of governments in an economy; [MOOCs](#) (massively open online courses) which drastically reduce or eliminate the role of governments in education; software, like [DemocracyOS](#) and [Loomio](#) -- which can reduce or eliminate the role of elected Parliaments. More and more of these tech options are being introduced every day, and while they may choose to ignore the fact, *governments are being disintermediated*, just as surely as the travel industry once was.

How would government need to change? If the old institutions of government are misaligned, is there a new value contribution for governments? Absolutely. First and foremost is the capacity to facilitate coordination among owners who have the motivation, knowledge, resources and power to do what needs doing. But governments must then acquire a different toolbox -- the knowledge, skills and practices for collaboration. They need to foster the capacity for stewardship¹² rather than leadership. They need to develop systems to share information and knowledge as widely as possible. They need to foster and facilitate forums so that those citizens most interested in an issue can participate in an effective, learning conversation. They need to adopt an attitude of “how can we help?”, instead of the old assertion of “thou shalt do this”. In return, if citizens can be successful on the basis of the helpfulness of governments, then their reputations and legitimacy will soar.

Which voting system – first-past-the-post, ranked ballot, proportional representation -- best fits this scenario of empowered citizens and a ‘helpful’ government? I honestly don’t know -- maybe one, maybe none -- but it’s the wrong question. Blockchain technologies, for instance, can already replace these voting options and institute more reliable, direct, citizen decision making. What matters more is not how to choose agents, but how those agents can act as stewards to foster learning conversations and collaboration amongst citizens.

If this reform exercise is to be meaningful, then its central task should not be to advocate pre-established positions, but to ask questions, lots of questions, to ask them openly and authentically, and not in closed sessions, or with time limits imposed. Discovering an effective system to foster collective learning, should be its foremost objective. Let the Committee experiment with how this may be achieved in the wider population.

In the real world, there are many complex, wicked problems which Canadians look to their governments to solve on their behalf. But government actors – both political and bureaucratic – remain largely constrained by an outdated model of thinking and operating that severely limits their capacity for innovation, as well as their ability to collaborate and cooperate. They are like the blind men, in that old adage, who argue about “who’s right?” among their partial experiences

¹¹ Wilson, Christopher. 2014. *The Internet Will Make Governments Unrecognizable*, paper and presentation to 14th International Conference on Knowledge, Culture and Change in Organizations, Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK 4-5 August

¹² Hubbard, R., G. Paquet & C. Wilson. 2012. *Stewardship: Collaborative Metagovernance and Inquiring Systems*, Invenire Books, Ottawa

of an elephant. Their incomplete knowledge encourages a fight over readymade, pre-disposed answers, but gets them no closer to the truth. And the fight discourages a pooling of experiences and the construction of more comprehensive understanding that may lead to truly effective solutions. Instead of admitting a lack of full understanding, or right answers, they compete to impose their incomplete solution over others.

There is a paradigm shift that is occurring in the public sector -- from management, decision making and leadership **to** collaboration, social learning and stewardship – which my colleagues and I at the Centre on Governance have described as *Intelligent Governance*¹³. It begins with the simple and honest observation that one does not have all the knowledge, resources or power to affect one's intents. It's an admission that no one is in charge; but it's also an extraordinary creative challenge: for if I can't do it, and then maybe I can do it with others. Instead of wasting time and effort to 'control' a complex and unpredictable array of factors, one embraces the freedom to bring together those who can contribute to the understanding of the problem and who have ownership in shaping its resolution¹⁴. Designing such a system would be real democratic reform.

¹³ Paquet, Gilles and Christopher Wilson. 2016. *Intelligent Governance*, Invenire Books, Ottawa

¹⁴ Christopher Wilson. 2016. *Re-imagining Government*, Invenire Books, Ottawa, Fall