DEMOCRACY BETWEEN ELECTIONS: POLITICS 2.0

In the April 7 edition of The Hill Times, Mr Pascal Zamprelli, a member of Canadians Advocating Political Participation, reflected on the importance of the Canada 150 Montreal conference as a “game-changer” for politics in Canada. He wrote:

“Politics 2.0 is about a culture change in Ottawa. It is politics moving from a one-way spectacle, where politicians spew talking points at voters, to a more direct, unfiltered, two-way exchange between public servants and the public they serve. It is open, inviting, transparent political processes; it is an informed and engaged citizenry; it is policy driven by a mix of best evidence and broad consultation. And its time is now.”

When he says “the time is now”, I think he is pleading for all elected representatives to become more comfortable with technology and demonstrate that they can engage citizens where they are – online.

Town Hall meetings and neighbourhood coffee parties will always be important; but information and communications technology have had an invaluable and transformative role in the parliamentary and constituency work of elected representatives. Being “connected” to the electorate has become the new norm for “representative” democracy.

Dr the Hon. Carolyn Bennett, MP, in Ottawa

Dr Bennett has been a Member of the Canadian House of Commons for the Liberal Party since 1997. A physician, she has been opposition spokesperson on health issues and was Minister of State responsible for Public Health from December 2003 to February 2006.

Treating ICT simply as a fast way to send information and administer an office will fail democracy and alienate people because democracy today is all about keeping the people involved, not just informed. A leading opposition Member of the Canadian House of Commons provides some tips on how information and communications technology can provide Parliamentarians with highly effective tools to do that.

Dr the Hon. Carolyn Bennett

is an informed and engaged citizenry; it is policy driven by a mix of best evidence and broad consultation. And its time is now.”
It has been a long time since Canadian Members of Parliament went off on the train to Ottawa and did their best to act in the interests of their constituents but with very little interaction other than letters and phone calls from the truly engaged.

MPs only began to open constituency offices during the Trudeau years (Pierre Elliott Trudeau was Prime Minister for all but nine months between 1968 and 1984). Before that, there was no real expectation that a “representative” democracy meant that representatives were able to consult broadly on issues of national importance.

Communicating electronically – both ways
There are now very few Members of Parliament without a Blackberry but still too few who truly are taking maximum advantage of the fabulous new tools that can provide a much improved “democracy between elections”.

As a doctor, I knew that the patient knew their body best and that hopefully I knew the system best. It was a partnership: 2 + 2 = 5! I would ask what’s wrong and listen and together we would develop a plan. As an elected representative the questions are the same: what’s working and what’s not. As Canadian writer and urban theorist Jane Jacobs said: “Good public policy comes when the policy makers can see in their mind’s eye the people affected”

I remember how impressed I was on one of my Sunday night MSN chats with how informed the participants were on the proposed reforms to the Copyright Act. They attached relevant website links to their posts and explained that as “downloaders” they saw a big difference between “piracy” and stealing content from artists “with the intent to disseminate” and their one time only behaviour. They thought the new law should reflect that.

Ursula Franklin, another

Social networking sites can be a good way for Members to communicate, provided it is a genuine two-way discussion.
Canadian author, has said that good governance should be fair, transparent and take people seriously. The transparency part to me is a given: it is providing all the possible information that citizens will need to make an informed decision.

But “taking people seriously” means that politics has to move to the next step – an actual two-way communication, sending AND receiving. Interactivity is the touchstone of Politics 2.0. Citizens, particularly youth, know when they are being humoured or manipulated. This must be a genuine process, or what pollster Frank Graves called “assured listening”.

Dr the Hon. Carolyn Bennett speaking in the House of Commons.

For example, in 2001, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development produced a paper called “Citizens as Partner”. It describes three levels of engagement:

1) Information – citizens are informed,
2) Consultation – citizens get to express their suggestion,
3) Participation – citizens get to decide.

About that time, I was invited by Professor Stephen Coleman, then at the London School of Economics, to participate in a conference on e-democracy. His position was that one of the cornerstones of democracy has been to provide public spaces in which citizens can discuss ideas. He suggested that the “web” provides a new and important space. He reminded us all that citizens “don’t want to govern; they just want to be heard”. He talked about “civic efficacy” and “two-way accountability”.

Since that time, most Parliamentarians have become excited about the prospect of Democracy 2.0 and the new internet technologies affording them the opportunity to be far more effective.

Website basics

The bare minimum for MPs is a website. It must be updated frequently. Stale information is a complete turn-off.

The keys to successful websites are “stickiness” and “traffic”. Great websites have people who come often and stay to view thoughtful content. Speaking in the House, media articles and explaining a vote are all components of a Member’s transparency. However websites also allow Members of Parliament to quickly clarify their position or refute misinformation, such as, “The National Post missed the point again”, with the actual speech or document attached. It is also particularly useful to have your newsletters provide “links” to relevant websites. Politics 2.0 means websites would also include links to YouTube, Flickr, Facebook and Twitter.

Furthermore, I believe that MPs should have two websites: a non-partisan one for their parliamentary function and a second one, hosted by their constituency association, for partisan events, fundraising and party membership.

In 2002, as Chair of the Subcommittee on the Status of Persons with Disabilities, I undertook an innovative e-consultation on the future of Canada Pension Plan Disability. We had a fantastic website with all the background information and three tools: Issue Poll, Tell us Your Story and Give us Your Solutions. We then invited some of the thoughtful e-participants to an in-person meeting to vet the draft report. It was a highly successful experiment.

It is regrettable that this has not become the norm. All committees should have interactive websites and the capacity to webcast every hearing. Pictures and profiles of each committee Member on the site are important to put a human face on the good work of parliamentary committees. This experiment was an excellent collaboration between the Library of Parliament and the House of Commons; it needs to be the new norm.

Political parties have also created interactive websites like the Liberal “En Famille” to host discussion and show live Town Hall meetings with MPs on a variety of topics.

Google and Google News

Alerts are important for MPs to find out what is being said about them. Occasionally these “postings” need to be responded to. Most are often not worth it!

MSN

During Canada’s 2004 election, I was encouraged to do an MSN chat every evening with the young voters. After the election was over a number of the regular participants asked if I would continue the chat on a weekly basis. Since then, every Sunday night at 9 p.m., I talk to whoever wants to talk to me. I have learned a great deal from these young people. During the 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster in the southern United States, they guided me to the websites and the New Orleans public radio station so I could listen into the actual advice and news on the ground.
Facebook
Facebook has been an interesting democratic phenomenon, particularly in view of the huge success of a truly grassroots initiative, the Canadians Against Prorogation of Parliament site consisting ultimately of over 200,000 outraged citizens.

Many Members of Parliament use their Facebook site to profile the content already on their website. Others like Hon. Bob Rae have used the site for proper discussion on matters of importance such as the situation in Sri Lanka. Other MPs like Hon. Keith Martin have started Facebook groups on issues like maternal and child health.

Twitter
Twitter has become an important way of letting people know “what you are doing”. It is important that MPs understand that no one really wants to know what you think of the weather today or that you’ve gone for yet another run. I think it is important to use the tool to reflect on a fast-breaking issue, or re-tweet an insight, or draw attention to an important article or give the URL for the conference you are attending.

It is also a great way to let people know about a new longer document posted on your website. When my father died in October many followers were grateful to find out right away and understand why I wasn’t in Ottawa. When my mother died a number of years ago, there were upsetting articles presuming that I had “skipped” a difficult vote. Twitter made sure that didn’t happen this time.

The search tool can also be important to find out what is being said on issues of interest – during last summer I found out that a paediatric unit in Alberta had been closed just by searching “H1N1”.

Elluminate
Michael Furdyk from Taking It Global has been very helpful in suggesting various ways of being connected across the country. As my party’s critic responsible for senior citizens matters, I was able to use the Elluminate software to hook up 29 constituencies across the country to give feedback to our Leader and Hon. Ken Dryden, and to Sen. Sharon Carstairs on her Interim Report on the Senate Committee on Ageing.

Each site was asked to pick three of the 84 recommendations in the report. It was exciting to see the consensus from coast to coast. Almost every site mentioned affordable housing. The next morning I was able to demonstrate “assured listening” by rising in the House of Commons at Question Period and asking a question of the Minister on affordable housing. Everyone who had participated was then made aware of their “civic efficacy”.

From the Change Commission for the Liberal Party, to our consultation on a Comprehensive Food Policy for Canada to advice on indicators for the health goals for Canada, Elluminate has provided an effective way of “taking the pulse” of the nation in real time.

Tools for a positive transformation
Tracking the successes of citizens engaging with their representatives will become even more important. We need to become much more diligent in efforts to show for example, the relevant citation in Hansard based on a thoughtful intervention from citizens.

Feedback processes are evidence that citizens were heard and are essential to the successful use of these tools, like showing citizens who attended a Town Hall meeting that it was worth their while coming out to speak with their MP.

We have to demonstrate that the technology can lead to better public policy because this new “public space” can bring together unusual coalitions presenting real solutions. There is no question that the technology can put a more “human” face on politicians who people may never have the opportunity to meet in person.

If we use these tools as gimmicks or for sheer partisan gain, we will fail. Technology must never be used to automate bad practices. We must use it to positively transform our tired democratic processes and a cynical population.

If we can use this technology to develop more timely and honest relationships between citizens and their representatives, we can look forward to a more robust democracy in which citizens feel that their representatives are more relevant and responsive.

It should mean that great people will run and citizens will vote, maybe even online.