

## **E-DEMOCRACY IN THE PARLIAMENTARY CONTEXT**

**Marc BOSC**

**Mr Ian HARRIS, President** *welcomed Mr. Marc BOSC of the House of Commons of Canada to speak about E-Democracy.*

**Mr Marc BOSC (Canada)** *spoke as follows:*

### **Introduction**

In the past couple of decades, the myriad technological advances that have created what some call the “information society” have transformed society worldwide. Citizens today are accustomed to having instantaneous access to information, the ability to send messages anywhere to anyone and the ability to converse electronically with a multitude of institutions. Naturally, citizens expect similar connectivity to, and responsiveness from, democratic institutions, hence the expression e-democracy.

Parliaments, like other institutions, have generally been keeping pace with evolving technology. At a minimum, many parliaments have web sites that contain general information about the parliament, its members and the work it performs. Some have even established mechanisms that allow citizens to interact directly with parliamentarians. The challenge now is to further harness that technology to greatest effect without undermining the role of parliamentarians. What does this mean for parliaments and their elected representatives? What does this mean for clerks and secretaries-general charged with the administration of these democratic institutions? Many in this room will already be familiar with this subject. Several jurisdictions, notably in North America and Europe, have experimented with new technology applications in a parliamentary context and I hope those of you here today who have had some experience in this area will share your knowledge with colleagues.

Historically, a hallmark of our profession has been our ability to anticipate events and the needs and demands of parliamentarians. It can be argued that at a time of declining voter participation and increasing cynicism towards political and parliamentary institutions, there has rarely been a more appropriate time for us to position our respective institutions so that parliamentarians may have full access to all the tools they need to better meet the demands of citizens.

However, before this can be done, the true nature of citizen expectations must be correctly identified. The needs and expectations of parliamentarians must be known. Tools must be identified. The most appropriate forum for meeting parliamentarian and citizen expectations

must be found. Preferred conditions for the successful and rewarding use of technology in a parliamentary context must be set out.

In Canada, committees are an integral part of the parliamentary system, and many politicians find that committee work is one of the most satisfying and fulfilling parts of their jobs. Committees are often more collegial and informal than the main Chamber itself, and the atmosphere frequently less partisan and adversarial. They provide opportunities to make constructive contributions to the legislative process and to the discussion of public issues, as well as to scrutinize government and administrative actions. At the same time, committees are the place where citizens can participate in the legislative process as witnesses or by making representations; they can also allow politicians to represent actively the concerns and interests of their constituents. This paper will therefore review the issues raised above in reference to the experience of House of Commons committees, with particular reference to e-consultation (a series of techniques and mechanisms that harness the powers of new technology to provide stakeholder inputs into decision-making), one of many tools for parliamentarians performing committee work.

## **WHAT DO CITIZENS WANT FROM COMMITTEES?**

Citizen expectations can be said to fall into three broad categories: the desire for information, the desire to be consulted and, thirdly, the desire to engage in dialogue with parliamentarians and with each other.

### **Information**

The public expects an acceptable level of online information. This means having a committee website that is up-to-date, well designed and easy to use. The site must have excellent search capabilities because it must be easily accessible by the average citizen and even by schoolchildren. In our experience, speedy access to committee information, including membership, minutes of proceedings, transcripts, official reports and studies, reference material, links to pertinent government departments or studies and e-mail addresses and other contact information is essential. Without such information, meaningful consultation is difficult and productive dialogue virtually impossible.

A preview of trends suggests that in the not too distant future, on-line multimedia access to committee meetings will also be expected. The public should soon be able to view a broadcast, replay a broadcast, call up the transcript, cross-reference to statements made in the main Chamber by parliamentarians and further drill down on any issue of interest. In other words, the possibilities are staggering – and expensive.

### **Consultation**

Consultation is not a new concept or idea brought about by technology. Traditionally, committees have consulted a wide range of citizens as part of their decision-making process. They regularly invite private individuals, experts, representatives of groups and organizations, lobbyists, public servants and ministers to appear before them in order to elicit information relevant to the study currently under consideration.

Committees select witnesses based largely on two criteria: the type of study and the amount of time available. When committees are not able to hear the testimony of all of those who wish to appear, they may ask potential witnesses to submit written briefs instead of testifying in person.

Committees hear from witnesses either in person in Ottawa or through video teleconferencing, or by travelling to regions where the witnesses reside.

Over time, however, we have seen a trend toward committees hearing selectively, in Ottawa, from what some call the “usual suspects” — the experts, lobbyists, groups and other “professional” witnesses, but less and less from the general public.

Now technology, under the right conditions, has opened up new possibilities for citizens. It is fast and easy to send e-mail to a committee. Citizens expect timely responses. They expect acknowledgement of the views they have put forward. They expect the committee to recognize their contribution. Most importantly, they want to be heard.

### **Dialogue**

Traditionally, after the presentation of the brief or the opening statement of the witness, the members of the committee may ask questions. Many committees have agreed to limitations on the amount of time available to each member. This time limit includes the witness’ response. Many committees have also agreed to the order in which members will be recognized to ask questions. For many witnesses, this can be a distinctly unsatisfying experience that does not approach their view of what a productive dialogue ought to be. The interaction is stilted and truncated.

For this reason, many committees have in recent years varied the format by holding town hall or round table type hearings, where witnesses hold a real dialogue not only with committee members, but with each other as well. Yet because of the heavy emphasis on the usual suspects, some argue that the general public remains suspicious of the outcomes.

Technology has been used to bring this approach to a new level, with consultation and dialogue taking place via the Internet. Public expectations are great, with some citizens holding the belief that because access is easy and views are easily shared, decision-making ought to be shared also. As we will see, it is this expectation that worries many parliamentarians.

### **WHAT DO PARLIAMENTARIANS WANT FROM COMMITTEES?**

Although the benefits of new technology might elicit a mixed response from parliamentarians flooded with e-mail, it would be difficult to find one who in committee does not want a more meaningful role in the legislative process, an ability to represent actively the concerns and interests of constituents, influence in the political decision-making process, and recognition and credit for time invested in committee work. To achieve these objectives parliamentarians are open to the use of a variety of tools, from the traditional to the innovative. They do not see it as a case of either/or. Indeed in some cases — agriculture and fisheries come to mind — parliamentarians have a distinct and well-founded preference for travelling to the regions and meeting face to face with citizens. The underlying objective of many Chairs and members is to right the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches of government. By redefining the role of committees vis-à-vis the government and the public, parliamentarians also hope to increase their legitimacy.

Yet what parliamentarians do not want is just as important. With very few exceptions, they do not want technology to lead to direct democracy — mob rule, as some would call it — or endless referenda. As well, they fear being flooded with submissions they cannot process in a reasonable time — in other words, they want to remain in control of the consultative process. They care deeply about and wish for citizen engagement, but not at the expense of their own role and duty as elected officials. After all, they recognize that the greatest consultation of all — elections — take place regularly to hold them accountable for their decisions and actions.

## **WHAT NEW TOOLS ARE AVAILABLE?**

The traditional means of committee consultation and dialogue have already been described: hearings, witnesses, written submissions, supplemented by travel or video teleconferencing where circumstances warrant.

Today, most communications outside of these methods occur via the Internet. E-mail is widely used as an administrative and communication tool. But in the context of committee consultation and dialogue, the newest stable of tools, of which e-mail is but one, is collectively referred to as e-consultation.

E-consultation borrows from the traditional, and builds upon it; a study commissioned by the House of Commons identified as many as eight e-consultation tools:

As has been noted, e-mail can provide any e-consultation activity with a wide array of qualitative input.

A document solicitation mechanism allows a participant to work through a series of steps on a website before submitting a document. An electronic document is attached or uploaded through the website and received by the consultation point of contact, in our case the committee clerk. It is also possible to perform screening and require registration before a submission is made in this manner.

An automated submission process uses a series of web forms to allow a participant to make a contribution to an e-consultation. It moves beyond e-mail and electronic documents by providing a structured approach to the qualitative data input (highlighting of key words to filter inappropriate submissions or to facilitate analysis of particular issues).

On-line opinion polls are the electronic cousin of the traditional public opinion polls conducted by market research firms. Generally a series of questions are provided with predetermined answer options, which allows results to be tabulated and analyzed, although open-ended questions can also be used.

Issue polling involves outlining an issue through information sources, such as a background document and then asking the participant to provide comments in a structured format.

A consultation workbook is an interactive tool that allows participants to work through an issue, identifying pros and cons, and to make choices based on the impartial information provided to them.

Discussion boards or newsgroups are electronic forums where questions or ideas can be posted and responded to by interested persons.

Discussion forums use different forms of chat technologies to allow participants to discuss ideas on-line in real time. Structure can range from moderated question and answer sessions to completely open interaction.

These tools provide increased access, are modern and relevant, flexible, participative, informative, can accommodate vast numbers of participants (costs may vary), can be replicated from committee to committee and, if properly designed, can provide a committee with actionable results, often in real time.

### **WHAT METHOD UNDER WHAT CONDITIONS?**

There is no unique, correct way for a parliamentary committee to approach consultation and dialogue with citizens. Depending on the target audience, the timeline, the budget and the study, any number of combinations and permutations are possible. Committees should ask themselves whether the issue on which consultation and dialogue are desired is of specialized or general interest, whether participation is expected to be high or low, whether they are seeking qualitative or quantitative inputs, whether the issue is contentious or not, whether the audience is largely the general public, experts or a mixture, whether they are seeking opinions or deliberation, and whether it is a short or long term exercise.

### **The House of Commons Experience**

The Sub-committee on Persons with Disabilities conducted a successful pilot e-consultation this year. There was broad agreement that the Canada Pension Plan Disability Program, a program designed to provide financial assistance to disabled Canadians, was not working as it should. Led by its Chair, the Subcommittee decide to examine the issue using every available means, including e-consultation tools. Three such tools – e-mail, issue polling and document solicitation (share your story and proposed solutions) – were used. The Subcommittee deemed it essential to tie on-line components to the traditional off-line study methods. It likewise found that broad consensus on the issue being studied, as well as ongoing and active political support were critical success factors. It is interesting to note that the parliamentarians heavily promoted this particular e-consultation exercise. The subcommittee also used common marketing techniques, such as e-mail-to-a-friend and sending updates to subscribers to the site.

Other critical success factors included bringing all relevant administrative partners together at the outset, allowing adequate time for planning and development of the e-consultation exercise, establishing appropriate project management mechanisms and of course ensuring adequate financing. The pilot cost approximately \$250,000 dollars to design, launch, e-consult, analyze and report, not counting internal staff costs which, if tallied, would probably be equivalent to or exceed the actual cash outlay. A major component of staff cost in this kind of activity is related to analysis of qualitative data, a very labour-intensive, difficult to automate process.

Despite the relatively high costs and major time commitment, members of the Subcommittee felt that e-consultation was a positive experience, giving citizens unprecedented access to them as they conducted their study. They also concluded in their report that e-consultation represents “the next step in the path towards greater participation by citizens in Canada’s democracy.”

### **Other considerations**

Several other key issues must be addressed in any e-consultation. When they begin participating by registering on the site, participants often want assurances that their privacy will be safeguarded – system and e-consultation security are therefore essential. In a similar vein, parliamentary privilege limitations must be clearly indicated by way of a disclaimer to

participants, be they citizens or parliamentarians. The stability of the technical infrastructure must be tested before e-consultation begins. Balanced information must be presented to participants. Sufficient time must be allowed for the process to run its course and not too much time should be expected of participants. Access should be fast and easy. Participants and parliamentarians need to know at the outset how results will be used. Ownership and recognition of contributions should be as transparent as possible. Experienced moderators must be used if real-time chats or discussion board practices are contemplated. Finally, there must be an exit strategy to bring the e-consultation to a close and make that fact clear on the website.

## CONCLUSION

Even with the best planning and preparation, challenges remain for any consultation and dialogue, be it on-line or off-line. The vagaries of parliamentary activity may cause a loss of momentum; the costs may be prohibitive; sufficient time may not be available; interest groups may hijack the consultation; or technical complexities and glitches in a poorly designed exercise may discourage participants. In addition, the validity of the information collected may be open to question.

That being said, the opportunities afforded to committees by the use of a mix of technologically innovative and traditional tools are great. Under the right conditions and with the proper controls in place, the demands of citizens to be heard, to have access can more easily be met. Participation can increase, leading to more meaningful consultation and dialogue. Stakeholders see results and are kept informed. The community of interest is broadened. Citizenship is enriched. Parliamentarians too are advantaged: their committee role is strengthened, their influence and credibility increases, and they become part of the modern wave, guiding it rather than being driven by it. The Internet publicity alone of a properly run e-consultation to individual parliamentarians is invaluable.

Our role is to ensure that parliamentary infrastructure is equipped to meet these modern demands, should they be made. We must ensure that informational sources are objective, complete, up-to-date, well maintained and accessible, ready as a basic platform of data from which any type of consultation and dialogue can be launched. We have a lot to gain by making full use of these new opportunities and a lot to lose by not being prepared for parliamentarians' demands when they inevitably come.

In the end, as administrators of assemblies and parliaments, new technology is for us a resource to be tapped for the benefit of parliamentarians and citizens alike, and the general benefit of the institutions we serve.

**Mr Ian HARRIS, President** *thanked Mr Marc BOSC and invited members to put questions.*

**Mrs Siti Nurhajati DAUD (Indonesia)** said that in Indonesia human resources and the budget were very limited. It was extremely hard to get more staff, particularly those with the right training. She asked for more guidance on how to get expert staff.

**Mr Marc BOSC** said that this was a problem in many jurisdictions. Unless there were members of parliament who championed the cause of information technology and who made demands on the administration, then it was very difficult to solve this problem. In Canada, members of the House managed development of the system of authorised expenditure. They saw significant benefits in it.

**Mr Leendert J. KLAASSEN (Netherlands)** thought that the expenses involved were very high. He was interested in how projects were evaluated and asked whether more work would not be done and whether the benefits would filter down to lower levels.

**Mr Marc BOSC** said that it was a pilot project so it would necessarily be more expensive. It was decided to upgrade the websites of all committees and there would be an economy of scale. The House authorities would build an e-consultation tool kit to allow all committees to set up e-consultation systems when they were required. The onus to improve increasing costs involved in this was placed on politicians.

**Mr Everhard VOSS (Germany)** asked about the expectations citizens have of parliamentary committees. He noted that there would be a growth in demand for services. He asked how this demand was to be catered for in the context of no increase in staff.

**Mr Marc BOSC** shared this concern. Mrs DAUD had emphasised the lack of funds and political will. The public was accustomed to internet consultation with private organisations. He thought that there was a lot of scope for the diffusion of information.

**Mr Everhard VOSS (Germany)** asked about the expectation among citizens for a “timely response”. He asked what that meant. What was the average for a timely response?

**Mr Marc BOSC** said that systems could be prepared which gave instant acknowledgement of e-mails. If it was impossible to send out a well-thought out response early, then this had to be made clear, but he thought that what citizens really liked was seeing their contributions registered on the site.

**Mrs Maria Valeria AGOSTINI (Italy)** said that to some extent her question had been answered by previous questions. She noted that it was possible to use the internet and e-mail and asked about the problem of mass e-mails. She said that in Italy the two Houses of Parliament had made different choices. The Deputies had published all e-addresses so some deputies simply did not reply to electronic communications. The Senate published only those e-mail addresses on request by senators who were likely to use the system.

**Mr Ibrahim SALIM (Nigeria)** noted that committees regularly invited lobbyists to contribute. He asked whether such lobbyists were accredited and how they operated.

**Mr Marc BOSC** said that any lobbyists wishing to work in a particular field had to register with the House in writing.

**Mr Ibrahim SALIM (Nigeria)** asked whether lobbyists had offices in parliament set aside for them.

**Mr Marc BOSC** said no since they were private businesses.

**Mme Hélène PONCEAU (France)** said that the system in the French Senate was based on a pro-active policy to develop the website. The first phase, which had ended recently, was to publish as much material as possible. Debates were published as were a variety of documents from those relating to tabling motions to the adoption of a bill. Members decided to facilitate the provision of equipment by way of a grant for hardware and software. There was a system for the electronic tabling of amendments. Project AMELI had been described to the Association recently. The Senate had moved into cyberspace and aimed at locally elected officials. Her colleague Alain DELCAMP would continue.

**Mr. Alain DELCAMP (France)** said that it was important for questions put electronically to be answered. There were many e-mails, over half a million. The issue was one of dealing with

a critical mass. The Senate itself had decided it would not answer questions put by local officials because it was thought that these were matters for the local senator to deal with. The Senate undertook to specialise creating sites for particular groups of people. These were by way of dialogue sites. Lobbyists could dialogue with senators. The internet part was a small section in comparison with conferences. There had been a decision to target particular groups such as children. For example, target groups would have particular documents prepared for them and left on the website. There were mailing lists for aiming mail shots to particular interest groups. It had been decided to allow the public to see and hear debates via the web. '*Babillard*' was the French for a chat room and these had been set up in relation to particular topics. This allowed contact with Senate members as a group rather than individually.

**Mr Marc BOSC** summarised the exchange by saying that the impetus for the introduction of information technology and e-democracy was that some parliamentarians were concerned that they might be overtaken by information technology. Information technology should be grasped and used for the aims of parliament.

**Mr Ian HARRIS, President** *thanked Mr BOSC.*