



# Westminster Meets Digital: Are We Up to the Challenge?

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*In Canada as elsewhere, governments are struggling to keep up with the rapid pace of social and cultural change—especially change associated with the rise of digital culture and technology. Digital governance may well be the most significant challenge facing governing institutions in the coming years—in a context where information knows no boundaries, power is dispersed and authority and accountability need to be reconceived. Is Canada up to the challenge?*

Last October, Canadians voted for a change of government after an election campaign in which Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau arguably spent more time communicating digitally with Canadians than any previously elected G7 leader. An ambitious agenda of institutional and democratic reform suggests that the new government in Ottawa is certainly alive to many of the challenges and opportunities associated with governance in the digital age. The first step—recognition of the need for

evolution—has already been taken.

By and large, Westminster governments are beholden to command-and-control industrial-age organizational models and cultures. This is unsurprising given that public sector bureaucracies and industrial economies came to prominence roughly in tandem.

Over time, the two grew in complexity, and it became necessary to build more elaborate procedures, structures and controls for public administration. In accordance with classical principles of public administration,

public sector bureaucracies operated like stovepipes, channelling information vertically. As social and technological conditions have evolved, these stovepipes have become obstacles rather than enablers of progress.

Despite numerous attempts at change, governing organizations continue to be locked into outdated structures and ways of working. When governments, like corporations, began deploying computers and building data processing systems some 30 years ago, these were initially seen as a means to spur innovation and create efficiencies in the public sector. In reality, their introduction tended to solidify old procedures, processes and cultural norms by encoding them directly into new systems and software.

This strict adherence to industrial age organizational models is increasingly creating tensions where governing institutions come into contact with the citizens—now fully digital—that they were created to serve. A more sophisticated, demanding and skeptical public is in-

creasingly aware of the limits of what government can do for them as the Westminster system of governance—once seen as a model system for peace, order and good government—is becoming less and less relevant as an intermediary for achieving collective purposes.

The Westminster system was not designed with the digital era in mind. In our new, networked reality, issues and problems can easily fall outside the organizational fiefdoms of ministerial departments and other traditional Westminster institutions. Social, cultural and technological pressures are combining to change the overall policy and governance landscape—a landscape that has become more distributed and variegated.

The public sphere, broadly construed, is being populated by more agile organizations, including citizen-led initiatives, private and non-profit entities. Low-cost communications technology and the superabundance of readily available information have no doubt driven the proliferation of these new stakeholders, giving rise to networks that can coalesce quickly around complex public policy issues, and that can marshal the public support necessary to catalyze agency.

Indeed, governments are being confronted with the reality that they no longer hold the monopoly on defining citizens' roles, responsibilities and interests. Citizens no longer necessarily turn to governments to solve problems, and governments no longer necessarily turn to the public service for authoritative expertise.

Some of these developments are certainly encouraging in so far as they suggest avenues for increased public engagement and new, more participatory forms of democratic governance. At the same time, as traditional governing institutions cede their space to more dexterous organizations and networks, they risk losing both the capacity and legitimacy to help shape solutions to society's most pressing challenges. In a context where many public institutions are being "disintermediated"—or cut out of the policy and governance equations—new tensions have emerged: for example, the tension created by, on the one

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hand, the demand for control on the part of a siloed, compartmentalized and often insular Westminster system, and, on the other, the need for information sharing, collaboration and increased public engagement, as demanded by an emerging networked environment.

As a result of this and related tensions, the digital age is giving rise to new conceptions of power and governance, where horizontality and citizen-focused design are critical. In fact, as the state's traditional policy, service and regulatory functions are increasingly called into question, the very concepts of authority and accountability may require re-examination.

**P**ast attempts at public sector transformation have tended to focus on incremental process improvement—“doing more with less” rather than “doing different”—leaving the underlying mechanics of public administration largely unchanged. For example, the first wave of digitally enabled “e-government” strategies initiated over the last few decades delivered important benefits but many of these initiatives focused on automating existing processes and moving services online.

“Faster, better, cheaper” may well be a successful strategy for realizing efficiencies within our existing system but deep innovation will require moving to a new paradigm, one that focuses more squarely on the unique role of government in advancing the public good within the new governance ecosystem with its networks of diverse stakeholders, interests and influencers.

Embracing this new paradigm will require further exploration of opportunities for co-creation and co-design of public services, policies

and regulatory frameworks, as well as widespread public engagement in the governance process. Ultimately, the coming wave of digitally inspired innovation presents an opportunity to redesign how government operates—that is, to rethink what the public sector does, how it does it, and indeed, how governments interact and engage with citizens.

As we look to the future, the fact that societies everywhere are facing challenges of unprecedented complexity on a global scale is impossible to ignore. Sustaining modern life and its mosaic of interconnected economies in the face of wicked problems related to climate change, energy, poverty, demographics and security, for example, will test the ingenuity of all who shape and participate in the governance process across its full array of institutions.

Governing institutions must reconcile themselves to the fact that their authority is increasingly dependent on a network of powers and counter-influences of which they are but one important part. Just as the modern multinational corporation sources ideas, parts and materials from a vast external network of customers, researchers and suppliers, governments will have to hone their capacity to integrate skills and knowledge from multiple sources, external collaborators and other stakeholders, to meet expectations for a more responsive, resourceful, efficient and accountable form of governance. **P**

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