

Jeffrey Roy

Beyond Westminster governance: Bringing politics and public service into the networked era

Abstract: The underlying premise of this article stems from the following question: is our Westminster, parliamentary model of democratic governance and administration adaptable for contemporary realities and emerging challenges? By way of response, the author attempts to expose what is wrong with the current model and sketches what changes to our governing institutions must be envisioned in order to safeguard political legitimacy and administrative competence in a world that is increasingly networked. Central to this discussion is the doctrine of ministerial responsibility and accountability and an appropriate parcelling of roles and authorities to public servants and politicians. Equally important is the rise of the Internet and new forms of political mobilization outside of government, on the one hand, and the potential for more direct mechanisms of public engagement, on the other hand. Without significant innovation and reform, Parliament and the federal government instead face a steady erosion of political and human capital that cannot be reversed until the country is convinced that 1) a new approach to governing is a realistic proposition, and 2) citizens will play an important role in designing this new approach.

Sommaire : La prémisse sous-jacente du présent article découle de la question suivante : est-ce que notre modèle de Westminster de gouvernance et d'administration démocratique parlementaire peut s'adapter aux réalités contemporaines et aux défis émergents? En guise de réponse, l'article essaie d'exposer ce qui ne fonctionne pas dans le modèle actuel et donne un aperçu du genre de changements que nous devons envisager pour nos institutions dirigeantes afin de sauvegarder la légitimité politique et la compétence administrative dans un monde de plus en plus réseauté. Au centre de cette discussion se trouvent la doctrine de la responsabilité et de l'imputabilité ministérielle et une répartition appropriée des rôles et des pouvoirs des fonctionnaires et des responsables politiques. Tout aussi importants sont le rôle accru d'Internet et de nouvelles formes de mobilisation politique en dehors du gouvernement d'une part, et la possibilité de recourir à des mécanismes de participation

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publique plus directe, d'autre part. Par contre, à défaut d'innovations et de réformes importantes, le Parlement et le gouvernement fédéral font face à une érosion continue du capital politique et humain qui ne peut être inversée tant que le pays ne sera pas convaincu : a) qu'une nouvelle manière de gouverner est une proposition réaliste; et b) que les citoyens joueront un rôle important en concevant cette nouvelle démarche.

The underlying premise of this article stems from the following question: is our Westminster, parliamentary model of democratic governance and administration adaptable for contemporary realities and emerging challenges? By framing this question as "adaptable" rather than "salvageable," the implication is that there should be room for discussion and nuance, because creating something anew is hardly a realistic proposition in the world of government, dramatic crises notwithstanding. Nonetheless, whatever the value of stability and tradition, the need for significantly re-thinking the Westminster doctrine is becoming altogether more apparent (for reasons explored below). The purpose here is thus twofold: first, to expose what is wrong with the current model; and, secondly, to sketch what sort of changes to our governing institutions must be envisioned in order to safeguard political legitimacy and administrative competence in a world that is increasingly networked. Both elements matter: too often those arguing for something new merely gloss over the value of what has worked in the past (and to some degree what may be still functioning).

Consider the contrast between two domestic streams of thought in Canada in recent times. On the one hand, two books devoted to political and managerial aspects of more networked and digitized forms of government have called for wholesale changes to much of our democratic and administrative architecture (Roy 2006a; Borins et al. 2007).

On the other hand, a recent article in this journal by Nicholas d'Ombrain (2007) provides a thoughtful and thorough defence of Westminster customs, arguing for a stricter application of tradition in order to best respond to any perceived or real shortcomings. In my estimation (and the motivation of this article), the value of this latter contribution by d'Ombrain is far less in offering a way forward, however, than in providing a solid understanding of where we have been (and why). The case for a significant overhaul of Westminster governance is now increasingly informed by the experiences of other parliamentary jurisdictions, perhaps most notably in the U.K. itself. And here, in Canada, the widening gulf between federal government insularity and external perceptions (both professional and public) was exposed all too clearly by a recent Public Policy Forum (2007) report based on the findings of a recent national consultative exercise.

It is not hard to understand why the Public Policy Forum report has received so little attention across media and policy circles (to say nothing of

the citizenry itself). Neither government nor Parliament would seem to care very much about administrative or institutional reform: relative to many other developed countries there is little in the way of serious dialogue on such matters in Canada. There are some exceptions: fixed election dates and proposed Senate reforms are notable if rather narrow departures from the status quo, as is the Federal Accountability Act (S.C. 2006, c. 9). Such initiatives, however – largely reactions to past scandal – have done little to quell the emergence of all too familiar accusations against the Harper government, beginning with an over-centralizing Prime Minister’s Office and systemic aversion to information-sharing and openness.

With the Federal Accountability Act now in place legislatively, the absence of any formal agenda politically (and assignment of duties ministerially) devoted to democratic and public administration reform is telling in this regard. The reflex of central agencies (operating within tight prime ministerial confines) is thus greater assertiveness across the system, placing Treasury Board and the Privy Council Office in the impossibly dualistic role of control-minded guardians and catalysts for change. Accordingly, the political priorities of the prime minister matter and so too do specific initiatives of the PCO clerk focused on elements of reform such as staff recruitment and retention. Yet lost is a wider, more inclusive and more public dialogue on new approaches to governing. Citizen apathy is all too apparent – as Lawrence Martin put it, “rarely has federal politics been so stagnant” (2007), a depiction not without consequence in terms of how the public service is run.

It is this underlying premise that information can be contained and managed within such limited confines that presents enormous difficulty for the sustainability of the Westminster model

Minority government is one explanation offered by some as a force re-affirming caution and control (Good 2004). Is there reason to believe, however, that a Conservative majority government would become more experimental, or would it merely seek ways to more efficiently and narrowly impose its agenda? Although actions of the current government can and must be considered (particularly in responsive matters to prior governments such as the Federal Accountability Act), as politicians are undoubtedly a critical determinant of reform, partisanship is also a poor analytical prism. Successive Conservative and Liberal governments have continuously offered minor reformatations to the current model that have not prevented the current situation from arising.

What is the current situation? Simply put, more and more Canadians are less and less inclined to trust, much less feel inspired by, Parliament and the

federal public service. This admittedly sweeping characterization (and one not without exceptions) applies to voters at election time, to prospective partisans in between elections, and to both experienced and especially new professionals considering career paths (Dunleavy et al. 2005; Howe, Johnston and Blais 2005; Roy 2006a; Public Policy Forum 2007). Still, Canadian democracy remains resilient (if rather stagnant), and the federal government is in no danger of immediate implosion. A reasonably competent cadre of political and administrative leaders are more than sufficient to safeguard the status quo (many in the latter group well indoctrinated by and thus loyal to Westminster custom).

Parliament and the federal government instead face a steady erosion of political and human capital that cannot be reversed until the country is convinced that 1) a new approach to governing is a realistic proposition, and 2) citizens will play an important role in designing this new approach. Elected officials certainly matter here: even if it is asking much of those with power to sail into uncharted waters and perhaps even re-negotiate the very notion of political power itself. But it is being done elsewhere and, as importantly, politicians are now themselves routinely pledging to do just that. Systemic change will only come about through a new partnership between those inside and those outside of the system. As this article argues, Westminster traditions are increasingly under great strain and reversion to them is no solution. A danger of their defence, such as that of d’Ombraïn, is that it fortifies those within the system (particularly elected and appointed officials of the executive branch), breeding insularity. The aim of this article is to counter this inertia with an equally sweeping conceptual case for change – one not without shortcomings but nonetheless refutable of the notion that the core principles and structures of the Westminster model remain sound.

Beyond this introduction, the next two sections dissect the Westminster model in more detail, offering a critique of d’Ombraïn and others defending it. The fourth section then examines accountability in a networked age, focusing on the public service. The fifth section examines politics in an environment of interconnectedness and makes the case for new styles of public engagement and the necessity of electronic experimentation. By way of conclusion, the final section considers the presently weak prospects for significant change in the Canadian context and how such prospects might be strengthened through greater dialogue and collaboration across jurisdictional boundaries.

Westminster traditions: upheld, under strain, and ultimately outdated

The stability and functionality of the current model of Westminster-based parliamentary government is dependent on three central, relational com-

pacts: first, representative democracy as the compact between the public and elected officials (parliamentarians); secondly, ministerial accountability as the compact between elected officials and the government, on the one hand, and the appointed public service, on the other hand; and, thirdly, hierarchy and loyalty as the main organizing principles within the public service for assuring that government plans and policies are executed and implemented.

Each of these three compacts helps to ensure accountability in separate but complementary and interrelated manners. Parliament represents the broader citizenry in operationalizing oversight of government. Ministers, the linchpins between the legislative and executive branches, are answerable to Parliament for the conduct of departments and agencies within their domain. Public servants, traditionally shielded from direct public purview, must nonetheless report to their hierarchical superiors who, in turn, answer to ministers that report to Parliament (and thus the public). Three essential points provided by d’Ombrain capture the macro-essence of this model: In this model, “ministerial responsibility and the capacity of first ministers to direct the machinery of government are essential for the maintenance of constitutional government in the Westminster system” (2007: 195). “The essential point is that, without ministerial responsibility and prime ministerial control of the machinery of government, our Constitution will not work because the power of the state will not be subject to democratic control” (197). “Responsible government only works if the government commands a majority in the House of Commons (however cobbled together), and this requires that ministers work together supporting one another under the cloak of collective responsibility” (202).

The nexus between the first and second points is the derivation of democratic legitimacy from both parliamentary mandate and the dualistic ministerial role of overseeing the executive branch while remaining a part of and answerable to the legislative branch. The third point underscores the collective responsibility that ministers have in fulfilling these duties, with an equally important assertion that what cooperation does occur takes place in a protected space. The term “cloak” here is appropriate, given the inference to secrecy that permeates the apparatus of Cabinet and central agencies (beginning with the Privy Council Office, which oversees the machinery of government). It is this underlying premise that information can be contained and managed within such limited confines that presents enormous difficulty for the sustainability of the Westminster model.

Why is this so? The defence of ministerial responsibility as foundational to democratic governance stems from a twofold premise that 1) only ministers can be answerable for the policy and administrative actions of entities and individuals within their portfolio, and 2) only Parliament can scrutinize ministers and government as a whole in a manner that ensures answerability, accountability and ultimately democratic legitimacy.

It is this latter point that leads to such worry about the declining stature and capacity of Parliament since if it cannot fulfil its core mission then serious questions arise.

The problem, however, is that in today's world, information is everywhere, and answerability has been diffused in many directions beyond Parliament. The very fact that defenders of the Westminster model point to daily Question Period as an effective mechanism of accountability (d'Ombrain 2007) highlights the widening gap between Westminster customs and reality: an important and highly visible media outlet it may be, but Question Period is less and less a direct instrument of accountability (except perhaps on one or two of the most topical issues of the day). Other parliamentary mechanisms, such as committees and parliamentary officers, play a role. Increasingly, however, it is the work of special inquiries, the media, and the wider network of informed observers and activists enjoined by the Internet that create a basis for both constant and collective accountability for governments (Fountain 2001; Perri 6 2004; Oates 2003).

Strong and effective corporate governance, however, is not about making government into a private enterprise but rather it is about good decision-making and a balanced set of mechanisms for both oversight and guidance

A sufficiently empowered legislature can surely maintain an important role in this new environment by leveraging this wider net of information and knowledge into a frontline challenge function of government (one that in turn is transferred into the wider environment via digital infrastructure). But this can no longer suffice, for two reasons: first, the public is less inclined to defer to Parliament for inquisition and the related discursive functions of putting forth remedial action and proposed new courses of action (indeed, it's unclear as to whether the latter function is a prerogative of opposition politicians in a parliamentary legislature, given their constitutional mandate to oppose); and, secondly, the hugely expanded plethora of government departments and agencies operating in today's world do so outside of direct parliamentary purview (at least in the absence of extraordinary circumstances – typically scandal or life-and-death matters).

The first reason explains today's widening interest in citizen engagement techniques of one sort or another designed to share power between politicians and the public in new ways. Such an emphasis is consistent with a less deferential view of trust as a process earned through direct engagement and experience (Edelman Corporation 2005). The need for a re-definition of this relational compact – departing from the Westminster principle of representational democracy – has been recognized in Scotland in recent times during

the rare creation of a new Parliament. Suggesting that the traditional Westminster model is poorly suited to the three traditional strands of Scottish public life – deliberation, co-governance, and initiation – the former presiding officer of the Scottish Parliament notes,

A Parliamentary Concordat then would recognize that participatory and representative governance are not in conflict, but can enrich and strengthen each other . . . It would acknowledge that, if trust in politics is to be restored, that means more sustained and direct engagement of the citizen(cited in Reid 2006: 13).

The Scottish experience has admittedly been mixed in this regard, as G. Reid himself acknowledges that a “fourth principle” of the Scottish experiment, namely power-sharing, remains “elusive” and the cost has been declining voter turnout rates and eroding trust in the political process (2006: 17). For Reid, however, strengthened legitimacy and performance will require more and not less direct democracy. Elsewhere in the U.K., and across much of the developed world, the trend towards new models of direct public involvement gathers pace (Peart and Diaz 2007). In Canada, too, many provinces are moving in a similar direction (Roy 2006a; Borins et al. 2007).

The second reason for looking beyond Parliament (i.e., the widening and increasingly complex spectrum of public-sector actors) for ensuring accountability is the need for sounder and more adaptive governance mechanisms at the organizational level in a world of information abundance, technological change, and policy and service complexity. More visible and direct forms of accountability are needed for both scrutiny and oversight (the traditional challenge functions of governance and accountability), but also for steering and guidance. Here the public sector must make use of a wide array of “corporate governance” options in a manner not unlike any large and complex for-profit or not-for-profit enterprise (Roy 2007a).

Defenders of the traditional model such as d’Ombraïn are prepared to at least partially address the notion of public servant visibility and accountability by acknowledging that such assignation of duties does occur and can occur without threatening the broader rubric of ministerial responsibility. Doing so within the Westminster model requires only making clear distinctions between the concepts of “accountability,” “responsibility” and “answerability”: only ministers can ultimately fulfil the latter set of duties to Parliament, whereas accountability can be parcelled out in various ways.

In the context of the discussion about the Gomery inquiry, for example, d’Ombraïn rightfully acknowledges that preservation of the macro-principle of ministerial responsibility would not prevent making deputy ministers accountable before parliamentary committees for specific duties assigned to them. Peter Aucoin and Mark Jarvis (2005) strike a similar chord by explaining that too often ministerial responsibility and accountability are inadvertently fused into one and thus interpreted, wrongly, to mean that only

ministers must be directly held to account for any and all operations and decisions within their domain.

Yet, with regards to formalizing new governance models, traditionalists such as d'Ombrain become more concerned, no doubt sensing limitations in the elasticity of the Westminster model to adequately account for new governance arrangements across statutorily independent bodies such as the Canada Revenue Agency, the Canada Health Infoway, regulatory bodies, granting councils and other "non-ministerial organizations." D'Ombrain, for instance, while acknowledging the potential for "discretion" by ministers in granting organizations of different purposes and form varying degrees of freedom and autonomy, is far more critical of Crown corporations and the usage of boards, which he views as an erroneous parallel to private-sector governance.

In short, the traditional doctrine of ministerial responsibility is simply no match for today's contemporary governance mosaic of fluid organizational boundaries and the need to constantly re-balance independence and interdependence in devising governance regimes capable of navigating multiple forms of accountability

Strong and effective corporate governance, however, is not about making government into a private enterprise but rather it is about good decision-making and a balanced set of mechanisms for both oversight and guidance. The historically weak role of many Crown corporation boards has been a topic of much discussion and attention in recent years (Aucoin 2003), not unlike similar governance failures in the private sector. What is perhaps most noteworthy to Westminster machinery of government debates is a key lesson from many private- and public-sector failures alike – namely a concentration of power in a fused CEO-chairperson and/or a corresponding absence of sufficient independence on the part of the board. The importance of checks and balances and recent efforts to ensure greater independence in the marketplace has thus been at the very least accompanied by reforms predating and included in the Federal Accountability Act to make board members more visible, less political and passive, and thus more independent.

Whatever the complexities and legitimate debates surrounding how best to ensure good corporate governance for Crown corporations and autonomous operating agencies (and increasingly for departments themselves), this path is much sounder than the one preferred by traditionalists – namely, reverting to the power of one, the minister, to effectively oversee and publicly answer for the political and operational conduct of all organizations within a specific portfolio. Here again, except in rare cases where political involvement must be explicitly barred, traditionalists such as d'Ombrain

implicitly reject the notion that the public service can have independence from its political masters in being part of any alternative corporate governance schemes, since doing so would threaten the Westminster doctrine.

The question that must be asked, however, is whether the Westminster model is capable of providing effective accountability both after the fact by scrutinizing and more continuously through guidance and steering (here the aforementioned notion of “co-governance,” characterizing citizen engagement as a form of power-sharing, is equally apt in describing this balancing of process and performance in corporative governance mechanisms). A new mixing of independence and interdependence must characterize what are bound to be new and more complex forms of relationships between politicians, public servants and the public. Aucoin, for example, has called for an independent appointment process of deputy ministers to augment the professional capacity of the public service to steer itself operationally while providing sound, objective advice to ministers (Aucoin 2007). Such a move would bring Canada more closely in line with Scandinavian countries, where the independence of senior officials is beyond reproach and a basis for holding these individuals directly to account for operational decisions. Within the Westminster family, New Zealand’s experience in defining performance contracts to explicitly codify political agendas and expectations (minister) and operational results (chief executives) is similar in this regard.

Ironically, it is this very sort of autonomy and independence that may provide the key to enabling better collaboration and coordination in today’s networked era where initiatives such as integrated service delivery and horizontal policy-making give rise to many new systemic interdependencies across organizational and political boundaries. The success of Service Brunswick in delivering services on behalf of most provincial government departments is a case in point (Dutil, Langford, and Roy 2005; Pardo and Dadayan 2006). A Crown corporation, Service New Brunswick personifies a new governance philosophy of indirect but overarching democratic accountability, on the one hand, and managerial autonomy and performance accountability, on the other hand. This differentiation of accountability (returned to more fully below) is one that many traditionalists would prefer to avoid.

In Ottawa, by contrast, the limited capacities of Service Canada to undertake new service delivery partnerships on behalf of departments, other than its Human Resources parent, are owed to an unwillingness of the government and central agencies (i.e., the centre) to allow either more discretion (to use d’Ombraïn’s term) or to grant statutory independence. As a result, nobody can say precisely what Service Canada is, and, while there may be some comfort for d’Ombraïn and others that it remains, strictly speaking, a ministerial sub-unit (formally within a department) with some ministerial discretion granted to a deputy head (that remains accountable to both a deputy minister and minister), the cost is a sub-performing entity unable to fulfil

its mission as a collaborative catalyst for more integrated services and networked government (Roy 2006b).

Traditionalists are holding Service Canada back – much as I. Clark and H. Swain (2005) ruthlessly chastise central agencies for a systemic command-and-control approach towards performance management that paradoxically and quite unfortunately discourages innovation and rewards conformity. Moreover, examples of Service New Brunswick and Service Canada also speak to a serious flaw in Westminster logic in light of the widening imposition of a citizen-centric approach to governance that explicitly makes public servants accountable directly to the public (Kernaghan 2005). On this matter of widening significance, d’Ombrain is silent.

In short, the traditional doctrine of ministerial responsibility is simply no match for today’s contemporary governance mosaic of fluid organizational boundaries and the need to constantly re-balance independence and interdependence in devising governance regimes capable of navigating multiple forms of accountability. In its own sweeping review of the Westminster model, Britain’s Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) came to a similar conclusion, pointing out that it is no longer even possible for ministers to effectively hold public servants to account through the traditional lens of ministerial responsibility:

The doctrine of ministerial responsibility means that civil servants are not subject to external or direct accountability for their roles or functions they perform. (The exception is that Permanent Secretaries are directly accountable to Parliament, through the Public Accounts Committee, for financial probity.) Parliament – and the outside world – have very limited powers to interrogate or scrutinize civil servants. Ministerial responsibility rests on the understanding that civil servants are accountable to ministers, who are directly and exclusively accountable to Parliament. In fact, ministers cannot effectively hold civil servants to account. To do so would violate the conventions around recruitment and promotion on merit, and civil service impartiality. Ministers have very limited powers to choose their civil servants, promote them or dismiss them – or to seek redress when they feel they are being poorly served (Lodge and Rogers 2006: 3).

This latter portrayal of unchecked civil servant power gave rise in Great Britain to the infamous *Yes Minister* syndrome. It bears noting as well that the U.K. has at least a partially more independent and competitive process for appointing deputies (permanent secretaries) than Australia and Canada. The Canadian approach of de facto prime ministerial appointments might once again offer comfort to traditionalists (while reinforcing the concentration of power problem) but it only underscores the inability of ministers to hold officials to account (and the immunity of officials themselves except in the most extreme occurrences of mis-management or disloyalty).

The British think tank concludes that the traditional model of Westminster governance is not only not sustainable but already harmful. To rectify the situation they call for making a fundamental choice between two options, one more American in orientation (where ministers appoint public servants

while being held directly and solely accountable for every aspect of performance) and another that refurbishes the Westminster system with a greater delineation of responsibilities between ministers and public servants and new accountability mechanisms to better underpin this demarcation (Lodge and Rogers 2006). G. Lodge and B. Rogers endorse the latter approach, necessary if some form of parliamentary-based model is to be preserved (since the American model offers other forms of political checks and balances to guard against an over-concentration of power by the executive).

The IPPR study also suggests that the much debated Gomery proposals in this country in terms of assigning deputy ministers the formal role of “accounting officer” for their departments (as has been the case in the U.K. for some time) are far less consequential and threatening to Westminster customs than many traditionalists in this country argued. D’Ombraian partially acknowledges this point by arguing that even prior to the new Federal Accountability Act, deputies rather than ministers could appear before the public accounts committee, thus creating *de facto* accountability for administration (in the eyes of some perhaps, as this line of reasoning is weak and muddling, consistent with current guidelines for federal deputies that portray multiple forms of accountability in theory but without real mechanisms to assign direct responsibility for performance in a direct and public manner).

The bottom line, as Aucoin laments, is that any attempt to assign to public servants stature, authority and responsibilities separate from elected officials will be portrayed by traditionalists as anti-democratic (Aucoin 2007). Breaking free from this cognitive constraint is a precursor to a more reasoned and well-performing accountability regime that does a better job of distinguishing between political and managerial forms of accountability across an increasingly large and complex organizational myriad.

Secrecy, complexity and accountability

If the abundance of information in today’s environment augments the need and potential for alternative governance mechanisms (especially those more predicated on performance), it alone cannot resolve the inherent and intensifying tension between openness and secrecy at the nucleus of the Westminster model. Indeed, growing expectations outside of government for more transparency – coupled with an aversion to information-sharing within it – can only further diminish trust and performance.

The importance of some level of openness as a foundation for democratic governance is well articulated in a decision of the Supreme Court of Canada in 1997:

The overarching purpose of access to information legislation . . . is to facilitate democracy. It does so in two related ways. It helps to ensure, first, that citizens have the information required to

participate meaningfully in the democratic process and secondly, that politicians and bureaucrats remain accountable to the citizenry (cited in Reid 2004: 80).

Although there is no standardized definition of what it means for the public sector to be transparent, a useful starting point is to equate transparency with some degree of openness to those with either a right or an expectation of being able to scrutinize and understand government action. Transparency thus underpins accountability, and the emergence of the Internet has heightened expectation for more government transparency as an informationally empowered citizenry alters its views on authority and power, shunning deference and attaching far less importance to traditional representational roles and structures (Courchene 2005; Gompel et al. 2007). The rise of movements such as “transparency networks” suggests futility in attempting to contain much less control information in such settings: “The information flow is also evasive – rendering information monopolies and opaque environments ineffective and transparent. Corporations, governments and industries have spent decades erecting barriers to information flow into and out of their various organizations. “The advent of the transparency network renders such control and management techniques ineffective” (Dwyer 2004: 119).

Here lies a major foundational shift underway for democratic governance away from Westminster customs. A world of information scarcity is one that bolsters bureaucratic power and organizational secrecy within the state (central elements of the Westminster model), while necessitating representational democracy outside of it. A world of digital communication networks and widening civic engagement is far less conducive to secrecy (Roy 2006c, 2007a).

The Westminster model cannot easily adapt. Reliance on secrecy begins at the apex of power, where Cabinet meets in the closed confines of a forum designed to contain but also paradoxically share information and insight. Secrecy was originally viewed as a means to facilitate open deliberation among ministers in order to generate consensus on actions and policies that, in turn, would be presented to Parliament for further debate prior to legislative adoption – often in modified form (Barber 1991). As D. Savoie (1999) and others have aptly demonstrated, Cabinet secrecy has since become less deliberative, more dictated by prime ministerial direction (as policy debates initially taking place in Cabinet now routinely take place in numerous venues both inside and outside of government) and the need to package decisions for subsequent communication – not to Parliament but rather directly to the electorate as a whole.

With Parliament viewed as less relevant (and more adversarial) and external points of scrutiny and influence multiplying, Cabinet secrecy has become more pervasive, despite escalating challenges and costs, fuelling a systemic culture engrained in the executive branch predicated on the presumption that information must be contained and managed as best one can

(Roberts 2005). Ironically, on-line channels may well be viewed primarily by governments in power as new tools to convey and spin partisan messages. Such is the schizophrenia displayed in the U.K. where the Blair government was credited with both introducing the country's first comprehensive access-to-information law (in 2005), while forging a sophisticated communications and media relations apparatus viewed as aggressive and manipulative (Roberts 2005). Similarly contrasting portrayals can be seen in Canada, between Harper's pledges for openness while in opposition and the centralizing culture of communications since taking power.

The impacts on the information culture of the public service matter, as evidence suggests governments seeking to deploy new technologies in precisely the opposite manner as envisioned by Internet enthusiasts: creating surveillance, oversight, and filtering capacities for information requests (Roberts 2005). Similar concerns have heightened dramatically in Washington since 9/11 due to the extension of homeland security initiatives and the corresponding effort to curtail the release of government information (Roberts 2006; Gup 2007). In fact, the expanded security imperative of the early 21st century represents at least a partial re-framing of the Internet as inherently liberating to one more suspicious: an on-line network of potentially threatening movements and activities (Roy 2007b). This latter typology, in turn, reinforces the mindset of information scarcity and control. The nexus of Westminster custom and post-9/11 anti-terrorism efforts has thus greatly reinforced aversion to openness throughout this decade.

If the expanded security realm is predicated on secrecy, the drive towards citizen-centred service delivery presents a distinct but complementary problem for accountability – namely, complexity and an underlying ethos that the public need not concern itself with how government is organized, so long as delivery outcomes are satisfactory. Much work in Canada has been done in recent times to go further and demonstrate that good service contributes to public trust (Heintzman and Marson 2005), presumably therefore negating, at least partially, the widening disenchantment with politics generally and the federal government administration specifically.

Accountability and citizenship are about more than service gratification however. Not only is information the lifeblood of accountability but the notion of accountability carries an important learning component in terms of generating capacities for social learning and collective judgment that underpin a government's ability to itself deal with increasingly complex and multifaceted policy problems (Paquet 2000; Dutil et al. 2007). A government's ability to address complexity thus depends on the public's capacity to appreciate it – whereas a misleading or overly simplistic presentation of how government is actually exercising its duties is detrimental to both public confidence and collective learning. Therefore, within the current Westminster architecture, there is a counter-intuitive possibility that the development

of a more digital and complex organizational architecture to address service and security agendas is actually reducing the degree of openness in public-sector operations.

While governments provide more information describing objectives and priorities, little insight is conveyed into 1) the sorts of horizontal initiatives required in pursuing them, 2) the level of difficulty and change embedded in them, and 3) if and how ongoing performance capacities exist to guide such efforts (Fountain 2001). Secrecy stymies good governance and the formation of new accountability mechanisms better suited for complex and interdependent processes and challenges. At minimum, a legitimate if incomplete response is that ministers themselves must begin to operate in more networked and collaborative manners (Roy 2006a). Countries like Australia and the U.K. have deployed such sub-Cabinet mechanisms as committees and task forces to oversee cross-jurisdictional initiatives for service improvement and crisis-response development (Bakvis and Juillet 2004; Lindquist 2005).

One criticism of new governance models that create more direct forms of public-service independence and accountability that can be made by Westminster traditionalists – and not without some legitimacy – directly pertains to secrecy. If politicians are not fully answerable, they may well become less well informed and the resulting danger is weakened or circumvented accountability to the public (presuming for the moment that Parliament is able to fulfil its oversight role of ministerial responsibility).

The recent scandals involving the Ontario Lottery Corporation (OLC) could be construed as an argument in favour of stricter ministerial responsibility, since the problems of fraud and mismanagement remained undetected for a considerable amount of time until repeated media exposure finally forced corrective action by the minister (who responded in the legislature but who resisted calls to resign). From one perspective, the system worked as designed – ministerial discretion, perhaps excessive, led to political embarrassment and corrective action.

But the full costs of this classic revelatory approach to accountability are steep and the mechanisms poorly suited for avoidance of such problems in the future. In a financially lucrative domain such as gambling (as in many other contentious areas of public policy and public service), the solution is not to grant politicians greater control and authority in operational affairs but rather to give them less – while strengthening managerial accountability to ensure ongoing oversight and review. Even as political oversight thus remains essential, its form and purpose change: the most fundamental and serious problem with the OLC was the weak governance regime of the agency itself (including a politically appointed board and insufficiently robust reporting requirements by OLC management, beginning with the president, to the public both directly and indirectly via the board and legislature) that shielded scrutiny and created a breeding ground for allegedly fraudulent activity. Applying

such lessons across a federal budgetary envelope of some \$200 billion annually, it is difficult to envision how a strict application of the Westminster doctrine of ministerial responsibility can best foster a basis for sound governance with both proactive and reactive dimensions.

In short, a departure from the Westminster doctrine of ministerial responsibility should not mean abandoning political oversight but rather strengthening it with corporate governance mechanisms that 1) hold managers to account through appropriate checks and balances, 2) foster greater public awareness and learning through transparency (all too absent at present), and 3) complement these first two elements with an approach to accountability that is less reactionary and more evolutionary in order to both avoid scandal before it happens and strengthen continuous performance. It is this latter element to which we now turn.

Public-service accountability in the networked age

As Savoie acknowledges, whatever the past strengths of the traditional model of ministerial accountability, one cannot merely reach back and call on tradition to resolve emerging challenges (Savoie 1999, 2003). Some would seek to salvage and update the Westminster model as much as possible. Savoie, for instance, argues for a bolstered set of adversarial mechanisms within the parliamentary model (including the strengthening of political parties to provide better oversight), coupled with stronger controls over public servants (2003). Savoie is also prepared to deviate from strict tradition in other ways, notably by making the case for a distinctive constitutional personality of the public service, an important enabler of Gomery-minded reforms that sought to import the British accounting officer concept into Canada.

As the above discussion generally and the U.K. experience specifically both underscore, a greater demarcation of responsibilities for a more empowered public service is needed (a public service that, in turn, must assume management responsibilities for more than conformance to legislative spending rules). To underscore this point, one must also consider how best to nurture public-sector innovation in a more networked world and the sorts of individuals who are likely to become senior public servants. It is unhelpful to envision future recruits – in so far as they are to be among the best and brightest of today's younger generations – as conforming to an ideal 1960s prototype of a public servant (Lindquist 2006).

Rather than conformance to rules and managing down hierarchically, much evidence points to collaborative skills and outward navigation as the pillars of the public servant of the future (Entwistle and Martin 2005; United Kingdom, Economist Intelligence Unit 2006). In the aftermath of the HRDC, gun registry and sponsorship scandals, there is a strong case to be made that

much of the present difficulties plaguing federal operations stem more from Canada's reluctance to embrace bolder reforms than from any present deviations from tradition – particularly with respect to the role of public servants and the manner by which they are held accountable (Hubbard and Paquet 2005). It bears noting that over the past decade the three aforementioned scandals were rooted primarily in traditional departmental (in the case of sponsorship central agency) structures, whereas the more autonomous Canada Revenue Agency, with its usage of a board of management, has become both more technologically sophisticated and more service-oriented (owed in large measures to greater degrees of freedom in its human resource system), remaining by and large free of operational scandal or mismanagement and becoming a leader in its performance reporting practices (Public Policy Forum 2003).

In his analysis of the HRDC grants and contributions scandal and the implications for accountability, D. Good points to ongoing tensions among three forms of accountability relationships inherent throughout the reforms of recent decades: accountability for control, accountability for assurance, and accountability for learning (2003). He underscores that despite widening interest in the latter type, Canadian public administration and its reform in recent times most often reflects competing forces between the first and second types. Accountability for control emphasizes traditional top-down authority and often implies risk aversion, whereas accountability for learning emphasizes continual improvement and adjustment for bettering both the individual and organizational capacities of the public service to meet increasingly complex challenges (Agranoff 2003; Paquet 2004; Allen et al. 2005; Eggers 2005; Lenihan 2007).

While acknowledging its growing recognition in public-sector circles today, Good underlines that its potential is often stymied by the adversarial nature and structures of the political environment that seek to reinforce blame and clarity over adjustment and complexity. Good's findings reinforce those of the aforementioned IPPR study and its conclusion that Westminster customs are already harmful. Creating a new governance culture and a new balance between control and flexibility, and process and performance, requires more autonomy for public servants themselves and experimentation with corporate governance models that can better instil learning-based accountability mechanisms (while still preserving the additional contours of political oversight provided by a re-fashioned approach to ministerial responsibility).

Including the public as a stakeholder is also essential, since citizen-centred governance is not about serving but also about including the citizenry in decision-making and power-sharing in order to foster better conditions for learning (Langford and Roy 2008a). As G. Paquet states, "It is not sufficient to develop a new more encompassing cosmology . . . One must also design

new organizational forms capable of taking advantage of the new ICTs and the new network thinking, and also likely to provide more effective social learning" (2004: 199). A similar approach emphasizing collaborative engagement and learning is the presentation of "public value management" as a "new narrative for networked governance" (Stoker 2005). Explicitly contrasted with hierarchical and control-minded public-sector traditions, as well as the competitive and customer-focused business mentality of new public management,

[t]he key point in understanding public value management . . . starts with the understanding that preferences are not formed in a vacuum and should not be taken as given. Part of the challenge of public managers is to engage in a dialogue with the public about their preferences but in a way that allows for deliberation about choices and alternatives Discovering preferences involves a complex dialogue so that efficiency and accountability are trading partners, not the objects of a trade-off (Stoker 2005: 51).

G. Stoker argues, rightly in my estimation, that public value management is the only sort of governance paradigm that can adequately address the complexity and interdependencies of today's governance and managerial systems, which demand a renewed reconciliation of the often conflicting demands of efficiency, accountability and equity (Turner 2004; Treadwell 2007). This view is notably consistent with recent and thoughtful considerations of the impacts of on-line connectivity and digital technology and democracy – and the importance of re-configuring government-public engagement, enhancing the communicative power of citizens, and refurbishing legislative bodies and processes accordingly (Borins et al. 2007; Dutton and Peitu 2007). Accordingly, we turn now to political processes.

Politics in a digital age

In line with public administration governance philosophies driven more by learning and performance than by hierarchy and control, a more participative form of politics is essential. With the advent of the Internet as an enabler of a more informed and engaged society, a more participative polity requires a virtual dimension. Such a dimension need not and should not replace traditional dialogue in face-to-face forums; instead, an on-line public space must be forged in order to broaden deliberations to the widest possible spectrum of citizens and stakeholders and to embed these deliberations into a renewed and strengthened democratic architecture (McNutt 2006; Tapscott and Williams 2007).

As a starting point, Parliament itself must be refurbished with an expanded digital presence and infrastructure in order to retain its relevance in a media-centric and interconnected world. Such relevance, however, will be less rooted in the past and more shared with a variety of new actors and mechanisms – many of which ideally should be spun from within

parliamentary contours, provided it has the legitimacy and resources to do so. Here, in one sense is where a page must be drawn from the traditionalist's playbook – as only a re-balancing of the executive and legislative branches can ensure democratic accountability and legitimacy.

Nonetheless, how a renewed and more digitally enhanced legislature functions must be far different from how it has done so in previous eras. S. Coleman (2004) draws on the Schumpeterian trilogy of “invention-innovation-diffusion” suggesting that organizations first automate existing processes, then identify opportunities for innovation, especially in terms of efficiency, before finally transforming themselves anew. Coleman views the U.K.'s Westminster Parliament as evolving between the first and second stages and the necessity of wider technological and institutional reform in order to make the leap to the third phase in a positive manner:

If the third stage is conceived in technocratic terms, it is unlikely to be seen as desirable, but if it is integrated into a broader programme of cultural parliamentary modernisation, one could envision a radical role for ICT in the re-engineering of parliamentary communication. Central to this transformational potential is the capacity of online consultations to transcend barriers of distance; to promote asynchronistic discussion which can be stored, retrieved and archived; and to build linkages between public experience and expertise and legislative deliberation and scrutiny (2004: 15).

It is the linkages between the public experience and expertise of which Coleman speaks that provide the crucial linchpin between the more collective and collaborative governance mindsets of Stoker's public value management and Paquet's social learning, on the one hand, and contemporary determinations of trust built less upon deference to authority and office than direct engagement and dialogue (Edelman Corporation 2005), on the other. Research in the Flemish region of Belgium demonstrates widening consensus by citizens and politicians alike around the need for more participative democratic processes that can find a new middle ground between representational and direct democracy (Kettl 2005; Gompel et al. 2007). A key challenge at present, however, remains the absence of a robust framework for assessing and integrating the Internet's role in traditional parliamentary models due largely to a narrow exploration of technological usage by elected officials without an overriding institutional perspective on new patterns of information-gathering, disseminating and managing (Leston-Bandeira 2007).

Canada is not without experimentation entirely – particularly at the provincial level where on-line engagement tools and techniques are increasingly deployed in genuine efforts to widen participation and learning (Borins et al. 2007). Yet it bears noting that these efforts are most often led by public servants (from within the executive branch), consistent with notions of citizen-centred governance and further evidence that the Westminster model is already undergoing significant revision. The vexing

challenge within parliamentary jurisdictions is thus how to create more collaborative and participative patterns of decision-making across the citizenry, on the one hand, and the executive and legislative branches, on the other hand. In other words, how does one guard against a further marginalization of the legislature if the executive becomes the vanguard of new forms of direct and often electronic forms of democracy?

In line with a more informed and potentially engaged citizenry, a central contribution of a refurbished legislature should be to gather and share information more widely both with members and via new and more direct mechanisms of citizen review, oversight, and engagement

There is no simplistic response: instead, this question will frame the work of both activists and academics for years to come. For my part, I would put forth the notion that one starting point is to question whether political parties as we presently know them are helpful or rather a hindrance to democratic renewal. In a further departure from Westminster traditions, my view is the latter – not much of a stretch in light of present trends. The steady decline of parties continues unabated: perhaps only two to three per cent of Canadians belong to any of the federal parties now in Parliament. Other studies estimate that the average age of partisans has surpassed fifty years of age (Howe et al. 2005). Blogs, chat-rooms and other on-line venues may be eclectic and in some cases bizarre, frightening or silly, but there is also a good deal of political activity taking place through them – with more and more legislators at least making the attempt to leverage such mobilization in some manner (Wyld 2007).

Political parties in their present configuration are simply far too constraining and narrowly competitive in a world where growing segments of the population routinely fashion multiple identities on-line while learning from ideas and conversations with individuals from around the world, especially so in the case of young people (MacIntosh et al. 2003; Sloam 2007). In a thoughtful analysis of “the future of political parties as democratic organizations,” B. Rogers concludes that “the era of the mass parties is almost certainly over” (2007: 609). Although Rogers himself is far less bleak, he points to a recent Norwegian study of power and democracy that concludes that representative democracy faces nothing less than the prospect of extinction, given the absence of an alternative to traditional parties to emerge: the resulting and widening void between the public and their representatives is the threat.

While party operatives may be excused for objecting to their presumed demise, jurisdictions elsewhere are beginning to recognize the need for new conduits between the public and stakeholders and the legislature. Scotland,

for example, established the "Futures Forum, in the Parliament but not of the Parliament" in order to generate fresh thinking on long-term societal challenges in dialogues involving elected officials, external experts, advocates and less affiliated citizens (Reid 2006). The Danish parliament supported the usage of a citizen's jury to forge policy guidelines for the contentious issue of genetically modified foods and the most recent United Nations Global E-Government Review (available at <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan028607.pdf>), released early in 2008, catalogues a widening assortment of on-line experiments from around the world directing engaging citizens in policy formulation and debate.

Indeed, as Rogers argues, extinction may be less desirable than reinvention. In line with the view that 1) people are increasingly political but less partisan and 2) parties in their present form are being reduced to fundraising and spin-driven marketing operations, new and more varied forms of political movements are required, quite possibly in formation only after the election of legislators with a more genuinely grassroots, representational role than is presently the case. A renewed purpose of parties could then be to facilitate the formation of temporary coalitions in the legislature, in order to both determine priorities and foster policy agendas, while mobilizing public involvement in shared mechanisms of co-governance of the sort that Stoker and others speak.

Such directions are predicated on a view that it is no longer sufficient for a government to claim legitimacy for an electoral term based solely or even primarily on majority support in a representational chamber such as the House of Commons: a more participatory ethos requires institutional redesigns moving further away from Westminster tradition. This new ethos calls for a new interface between the public, parties, politicians and political institutions. The danger of the status quo is a further diminishment in the scope and stature of partisan activity, a problem attributable to the familiar concentration of power within present parliamentary confines. As Aucoin puts it, [A]s long as we practise a form of responsible government wherein the governing party with a majority can govern with . . . virtually no incentive to build a broader consensus for its initiatives, public confidence in our institutions of responsible government is unlikely to be restored" (1999: 1000).

Here it bears acknowledging the limited utility of minority government that augmenting the relevance of the legislature by forcing more debate and compromise does little to encourage collaboration and learning and wider public engagement. In a related manner, C. Leston-Bandeira (2007) provides evidence in Portugal that although on-line channels have fostered closer ties between elected officials and the public in some instances, a paradoxical trend is a rise in political apathy. A key reason is a parliament elected purely on a proportional basis, strengthening partisan control and limiting citizen

involvement due to a top-down imposition of representational structures on an increasingly informed and empowered (and thus disillusioned) citizenry. Her wider conclusion is that without significant institutional innovation these trends are likely to remain peripheral to the overall functioning and performance of the state both in Portugal and elsewhere (such as the more digitally ubiquitous country of Sweden where, according to Leston-Bandeira, legislators expressed deep levels of frustration in not being able to move faster in integrating information technologies and on-line channels into their legislative processes, one reason for which, it might be reasonably presumed, is the entrenched power of traditional political parties nonetheless suffering from a similar erosion of support and engagement as found elsewhere).

In line with a more informed and potentially engaged citizenry, a central contribution of a refurbished legislature should be to gather and share information more widely both with members and via new and more direct mechanisms of citizen review, oversight, and engagement. Although select committees would no doubt be required to veil specific information flows where secrecy is truly warranted, a presumption of openness would be the starting point. In the realm of national security, for instance, properly trained citizen-legislators could serve on oversight bodies, a direction consistent with recommendations from recent reviews such as the Arar inquiry and the RCMP governance study (both of which were formed in the aftermath of scandals stemming largely from secrecy and a resulting dearth of accountability). For traditionalists prepared to quash any such notions as unworkable, it bears noting that the present model has proven inept since 9/11 in providing meaningful political oversight over security policy in this country: as a case in point, the sensible idea to create a new multi-partisan parliamentary committee for security continues to languish due to partisanship and the current adversarial constraints of Parliament (Roy 2007b).

Certainly, devolving power locally is not in itself a panacea but a federal government more open to learning from local and provincial experimentation – perhaps even encouraging and partnering in such experimentation can nonetheless help

In short, the impacts of today's more open and networked societies cannot be expected to bypass the polity. It will become increasingly necessary to devise legislative processes driven far less by traditional partisan bodies and more by citizen-legislators prepared to operate in a world of shared and collective accountability by 1) facilitating the participation of citizens in policy-making processes, 2) providing oversight to public-sector departments and agencies (holding to account senior officials empowered to run such bodies),

and 3) collectively debating and fashioning policy and service ideas as a basis for executive branch agendas much more openly crafted than is the case at present. In addition, a legislature predicated on openness brings tremendous potential for e-democracy to raise the overall level of political literacy across the public at large (MacIntosh 2003). The impacts in creating better-informed voters, monitors and judges of government actions and choices matter greatly to strengthening democratic governance:

Indeed, every democrat must hold that in the medium to long run, only the robustness of the judgement capabilities of citizens can guarantee that those of policy makers will be similarly stout (Perri 6 2002: 21).

Within this broadest architectural plane for collective judgment and social learning, there is also an important link to be made between more participatory democratic mechanisms (that formally share power) and the workability of new corporate governance models in government. One point of convergence, for example, is the formation and usage of boards to oversee agencies: as more democratic forms of corporate governance are espoused in the marketplace, the same logic can apply in the state where the Internet and more participative political bodies can provide access to greater pools of prospective appointees (while at the same time strengthening the accountability of such appointees through information-sharing and discursive networks across the polity more broadly).

A more participatory political system involving new power-sharing arrangements between politicians and citizens (potentially blurring at times the boundary between these two groups) is one in which ministerial discretion alone cannot suffice in providing both steering and oversight capacities for a widening array of departmental and agency units themselves embedded in more collaborative arrangements. Public servants must themselves be directly accountable – to the public at large through more transparent processes and reporting channels as well as more operationally through a layering of corporate governance and legislative mechanisms (that can in turn better support public servants in navigating organizational and societal complexity). How such layering should occur is ultimately a political dialogue that requires a more discursive and inclusive institutional framework than can possibly be provided by the current Westminster model.

It is not hard to imagine the objections of traditionalists (and many partisan operatives) and their grimacing at the complexity of such diffused patterns of authority and governance, both politically and administratively. Nevertheless, in light of 1) mounting evidence and concern over the poor performance in recent times of the federal government, 2) a rare opportunity emerging for demographic renewal within the public service (where an openness to change will directly determine the sorts of individuals recruited and retained as public servants), and 3) a widening gap between how the

traditional doctrine of Westminster government functions on paper and how more networked forms of government and governance are unfolding in reality, it is difficult to look to the past in order to meet contemporary and future challenges.

Conclusion

Within the parameters of a seemingly untouchable Constitution, adversarial and acrimonious parliamentary chambers, and a largely risk-averse and control-minded public service, finding a catalyst for change presents a conundrum. The structures of federalism are themselves a major cause for concern here (Gibbons 2004; Ambrose, Lenihan, and Milloy 2006), as there is much about networked governance and prisms such as public value management that lends itself to devolved forms of governance where digital connectivity can be coupled with territorial proximity (Woodward 2003; Paquet and Roy 2004; Paquet 2005; Roy 2006a). Here there is a North American handicap to contend with, since both the Canada and the United States suffer from excessive centralization of politics and administration relative to many member countries in the European Union. By contrast, public-sector renewal is typically a bottom-up process led by sub-national experimentation (Goldsmith and Eggers 2004; Peart and Diaz 2007), much as most democratic reforms adopted by the Harper government reflect provincial innovations.

Yet, whether provinces can be expected to galvanize a post-Westminster governance order or instead merely re-tool the model in good currency is an open question. In jurisdictions most noted for high levels of transparency, trust and technological prowess – namely, Scandinavia – it bears noting that local governments are the primary recipients of income taxes and arguably the most successful in delineating between political and administrative responsibilities (Roy 2006a). Within the federalist realities of Canada, the municipal potential in this regard remains unexplored (Barnett 1997; Andrew 2002; Wong 2002). As the late Jane Jacobs described in her most recent book, in an exchange with former Prime Minister Paul Martin over potentially transferring income tax points from federal and provincial governments to their local counterparts, sharing or sacrificing power does not come easy to those in national office who have worked so hard to reach this plane:

Our vantage points, and therefore our views, were different. A reform that meant to me correction of a grave social and economic disconnection that is unraveling the country's complex modern functional networks meant to him, I saw as his ears and face closed up, a nasty power struggle with the premiers of ten provinces who are determined to keep their power instead of sharing it with their more knowledgeable, anachronistic wards (Jacobs 2006).

Such conflicting perspectives underscore the need for wider debate in this country on governance renewal. Certainly, devolving power locally is

not in itself a panacea but a federal government more open to learning from local and provincial experimentation – perhaps even encouraging and partnering in such experimentation can nonetheless help. Recent consultative initiatives by the Harper government on political and institutional renewal are all too indicative of unhelpful top-down inertia: polls are commissioned from friendly think tanks – studies and consultation carefully orchestrated by the executive. Involving other government levels is not a serious prospect. The rise of electronic government underlines the limits of such logic: despite the rhetoric of federated architectures permeating the digital world, Canada increasingly lags both other federations and unitary states in fostering a genuinely intergovernmental approach to information-sharing, service delivery, and public participation (Public Sector Service Delivery Council 2006; Langford and Roy 2008b).

As Aucoin (2007) puts it, rules and structures cannot replace the need for leadership. What is required in Ottawa (and in provincial capitals) is a new ethos of democratic leadership predicated less on control than on collaboration, less on representation than on direct engagement, and less on public-service anonymity and loyalty than on an outward-looking cadre of professional managers empowered to achieve outcomes within the contours of policy and service agendas formulated by new partnerships between politicians and the public. There are trepid signs of hope on which to potentially build, both within and across jurisdictions. The Canada Health Infoway has established a promising inter-jurisdictional governance model to pursue electronic health records in a manner that respects provincial jurisdiction and encourages local experimentation. Deputy ministers in charge of service transformation agendas (some of which heading agencies legislatively empowered to lead such change) have begun meeting regularly to explore more systemic collaboration and shared mechanisms for issues such as identity management. Moreover, many provinces are exploring legislative changes to empower their largest cities with greater fiscal autonomy and administrative capacities (capacities that should be used to expand democratic as well as administrative innovation).

What is required to stitch these and other innovations together is a genuinely national dialogue on the renewal of democratic governance – including if not beginning with the core Westminster doctrine of ministerial responsibility. Canadian laggardness is a mixed blessing in this regard, as there are numerous reform exercises and blueprints around the world from which to draw (both inside and outside of the Westminster family). Perhaps the 21st century equivalent to a royal commission is called for – a non-partisan, more participative and genuinely empowered forum designed to both spark and sustain a national dialogue on the future of politics and public administration for a networked era.

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