Rethinking E-Government:

Dilemmas of Public Service, Citizenship and Democracy in the Digital Age

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Introduction

Ironically, just as the dot-com craze of the late 1990s fizzles and e-commerce begins to lose its lustre, a new buzzword has begun circulating among high tech seers, politicians, bureaucrats, business leaders, and a handful of academics in Canada: *e-government*. The concept of using new information and communications technologies (IT) - networked computers and the Internet in particular - to improve government services, streamline internal administrative processes, and enhance opportunities for citizens to engage with government, has moved to centre stage in governments' efforts to restructure and reinvent themselves. Conceiving and implementing e-government in Canada now commands the attention of the Prime Minister, provincial Premiers, deputy ministers, public sector CIOs, legislators and academics, not to mention the IT hardware, software and services industries.[1] Encouraged by technophilic legislators, bureaucrats, think tanks, international organizations, and, of course, the IT industry,[2] the federal government is in the process of planning and implementing two major IT-related projects: Government On-Line (GOL), designed to provide access to government information and services over the Internet, and a national broadband infrastructure initiative intended to ensure universal access to electronic government. Together, these projects could cost as much as $6 billion.[3] The Chretien Liberals have been eager to focus attention on these initiatives as part of their agenda to promote Canada as an innovative, knowledge-based economy and society.

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[1] See, for example: Alcock, Reg, and Donald Lenihan, *Opening the E-Government File: Governing in the 21st Century*, (Ottawa: Centre for Collaborative Government, 2001); Canada, *Government On-Line: Serving Canadians in a Digital World*, http://www.gol-ged.gc.ca/pub/serv-can/serv-canpr_e.asp; Canada, *Speech from the Throne to Open the Second Session, Thirty-Sixth Parliament of Canada*, October 12, 1999, http://www.pcobcp.gc.ca/throne99/throne1999_e.htm; Cappe, Mel, "Making Connections and Meeting the Challenge: E-Government and the Public Service of Canada," Notes for an Address by Mel Cappe, Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to Cabinet, at the Assistant Deputy Ministers' Forum, Ottawa, May 3, 2000, http://www.pcobcp.gc.ca/ClerkSP-MC/adm-forum-2000_e.html; Boston Consulting Group (Canada), *Fast Forward: Accelerating Canada's Leadership in the Information Economy*, Report of the Canadian E-Business Opportunities Roundtable, (Toronto: Boston Consulting Group (Canada), 2000); and Information Technology Association of Canada, *Electronic Government: The Government of Canada as a Model Knowledge-based Enterprise*, (Mississauga: Information Technology Association of Canada, 1999).

[2] May, Kathryn, "752 firms bid for federal billions: E-government project lifeline for tech sector," *The Ottawa Citizen*, April 18, 2001.

[3] Based on a projected minimum cost of $1.5 billion for the national broadband infrastructure project and IT industry estimates of $3 to $4 billion for the total cost of GOL. See: Industry Canada, *The New National Dream: Networking the Nation for Broadband Access*, Report of the National Broadband Task Force, Executive Summary, http://broadband.gc.ca/Broadband-document/english/executive_summary.html; and, InBusiness Solutions Inc., "InBusiness Qualifies for Government Online Contracts," Press Release, June 19, 2001, http://www.inbusiness.com/press/2001/Jun_19_2001.html

According to its proponents, the potential benefits of e-government include: more efficient, affordable and convenient "citizen-centred" service; greater access to information regarding government services and programs; less confusing, horizontally integrated "seamless" access to all branches and levels of government via "single-window" access points such as web sites and 1-800 telephone centres; more transparent, accountable, and responsive government; and greater opportunity for direct citizen input into and engagement with the policy making process.[4] But such putative benefits and massive commitment of resources also invite close scrutiny. The work of assessing the political implications and effects of e-government for state structures and citizen-government relations has scarcely begun in Canada. With a few exceptions,[5] discussions of IT and its impact on government have been the preserve of public administration specialists.[6] However, if, as its advocates suggest, e-government entails the wholesale reinvention of government, then it should command the attention of all students of Canadian politics.

Despite the giddy rhetoric of "digital democracy" and "citizen-centred" service often associated with the movement toward on-line government, this paper argues that e-government is no mere passing fad. While the federal government's GOL project was only announced in 1999, governments in Canada have been leveraging IT to rationalize and restructure administrative systems and service delivery for well over a decade. Initiatives in electronic service delivery (ESD) have been central to public service restructuring plans since the late 1980s. Thus, while it would be premature to pass final judgement on e-government in Canada at this stage, it is not too soon to begin to assess the fruits of public sector IT investment and IT-related restructuring over the last ten years in order to discern some of the trends, issues, and problems likely to rise to prominence as e-government becomes a reality.

The Canadian federal government's commitment to implementing e-government was formally announced in the 1999 Speech from the Throne. In it, the government resolved to become "a model user of information technology and the Internet" by 2004, and to become "known around the world as the government most connected to its citizens, with Canadians able to access all government information and services on-line at the time and place of their choosing."[7] In support of this plan, the GOL initiative was announced, allocating $160 million over two years for the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the on-line delivery of federal government

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[4] Canada, *Government On-Line: Serving Canadians in a Digital World*, http://www.gol-ged.gc.ca/pub/servcan/serv-canpr_e.asp

[5] See, for example: Alexander, Cynthia, "Wiring the Nation! Including First Nations? Aboriginal Canadians and Federal e-Government Initiatives," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Volume 35, No.4, (2001 Winter) 277-296; Alexander, Cynthia, and Leslie Pal, eds., *Digital Democracy: Policy and Politics in the Wired World*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998; and Gibbins, Roger, "Federalism in the Digital Age," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, XXXIII: 4 (December 2000) 667-689.

[6] See, for example: Bent, Stephen, Kenneth Kernaghan and D. Brian Marson, *Innovations and Good Practices in Single-Window Service*, (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, 1999); and Brown, David, "New Information Technologies and Canadian Public Administration," in Charih, Mohamed, and Arthur Daniels, eds., *New Public Management and Public Administration in Canada*, (Ottawa: Institute of Public Administration of Canada, 1997) 93-112.

[7] Canada, *Speech from the Throne to Open the Second Session, Thirty-Sixth Parliament of Canada*, October 12, 1999, http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/throne99/throne1999_e.htm

information and services. In part because numerous initiatives in ESD predate the e-government plan, the federal government has achieved numerous successes already. For example, the Canada Site, an Internet portal to all federal web sites giving one-stop access to electronic directories, program information, and frequently requested forms, received 237 million hits for the year 1999-2000, with approximately 24,000 separate pages viewed.[8]

Individual departments and agencies have achieved noteworthy successes as well. The Canada Customs and Revenue Agency (CCRA), for example, received over five million electronically-filed T1 income tax returns in 2000, and a further 400,000 via the Internet. The latter transactions, part of the agency's Netfile pilot project, led to a reduction of the average return processing time to a mere two weeks.[9] 1999 figures on government connectedness in Canada show that the public sector has a more extensive on-line presence than its private sector counterparts, in spite of all the ink devoted to e-commerce.[10] Federal government efforts to promote connectivity in the public sector appear to have paid off. A survey of progress toward e-government in 22 countries recently singled out Canada as an "innovative leader" and ranked it first in the "overall maturity" of its e-government services, ahead of IT powerhouses such as Singapore and the U.S..[11]

In spite of these noteworthy, and highly publicized, success stories, there are grounds for reserving judgement on the extent to which e-government will deliver on its promise to reinvent government and reinvigorate the relationship between government and citizens in Canada. By looking at the previous ten years of government investment in IT, along with its relation to public sector restructuring, I will argue that government investment in IT to date has been narrowly focused on administrative rationalization, cost-cutting, and service reform. Such a focus reflects a relatively narrow view of e-government which largely ignores IT's potential to enhance opportunities for greater citizen political engagement with government, the policy making process, and with each other. It is also bound to reinforce resistance to the adoption of new technologies by civil servants who have come to see them as a threat, in many cases rightly so, as we shall see.

Secondly, the story behind the putative gains in efficiency and service quality as a result of IT-related systems integration and service delivery is more complex and ambiguous than meets the eye. Self-congratulatory departmental studies and reports detailing service improvements as a result of ESD often fail to acknowledge or capture the degree to which other administrative and legislative measures adopted in the 1990s have left citizens substantially worse off. Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) offers a case in point, as we shall see, where recent departmental claims of improved "customer service" and satisfaction as a result of technological innovations in service delivery clearly fail to take into account the effect of the 1996 EI reforms, which reduced client benefits while increasing insurance premiums. Only on the basis of the

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[8] Public Works and Government Services Canada, *Performance Report: For the Period Ending March 31, 2000*, (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2000) 30.
[9] Canada, *Government On-Line*
[10] See: Statistics Canada, "E-commerce and business use of the Internet," *The Daily*, August 10, 2000, http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/Eng/000810/d000810a.html
[11] Accenture, *Rhetoric Vs Reality: Closing the Gap*, 10, htttp://www.accenture.com

narrowest possible definition of service quality can HRDC's claim be taken seriously. Furthermore, claims regarding the cost-savings achieved through IT investment need to be regarded with a skeptical eye. While providing more cost-effective and affordable government is often touted as one of the key benefits of e-government, actual cost savings due to IT investment are notoriously difficult to track and quantify, and IT projects are chronically prone to cost overruns, delays, and outright failure.

Finally, I consider the extent to which the potential for e-government to enhance democratic engagement, transparency, and accountability within Canada will be resisted or subverted by other features endemic to its political system, such as the institutional concentration of policy and decision making power in the executive, and by other trends associated with the reinvention of government, such as privatization and alternative service delivery. The persistence of the so-called "digital divide," itself a reflection of historically recalcitrant cleavages within Canadian society, also poses a significant problem for the inclusiveness of any future system of e-government. Unless measures are taken to address these other aspects of society and governance in Canada, e-government alone may produce little if any net gain for the quality of democracy. There is no quick technological fix to these problems. The extent to which Canadian democracy will be enriched depends less on putting government on-line and bringing broadband access to every citizen and more on addressing the institutional, political, and socio-economic context in which these technologies are deployed. Let us now trace the genesis of e-government in Canada by examining the federal government's investment in IT over the last decade.

The Origins of E-Government in Canada:

From Electronic Service Delivery to Government as a "Model User" of IT

In spite of the relative novelty of the concept of e-government, the Canadian government's infatuation with IT dates back to the late 1980s. Indeed, rather than a novel initiative, GOL is best understood as continuous with a surge in IT investment by the federal government dating back to that time. A Treasury Board Secretariat (TBS) review of IT expenditure in the federal government between 1986-1992 reveals a strong upward trend. IT investment grew at an average annual rate of 8% during the period, reaching a sum exceeding $3 billion by 1993.[12] This figure, which includes funds spent on goods, services, and salaries of IT personnel, represented more than 10% of the government's total operating budget. By 1993, these funds were being deployed across over 1200 programs and services. In his 1994 Annual Report, the Auditor General suggested that if all government activity related to IT were consolidated into one department it would rank as the fourth largest by budget, behind Finance, Human Resources Development, and National Defense.[13] Since the time of the Treasury Board study, federal expenditures on IT have ballooned

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[12] Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Powering Up: A Review and Analysis of Information Technology Expenditure Trends in the Canadian Federal Government 1986-1992*, (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1993) v.
[13] Auditor General of Canada, *1994 Report of the Auditor General of Canada*, Chapter 8: Information Technology: Reaping the Benefits and Managing the Risks, http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/domino/reports.nsf/html/9408ce.html

to $5 billion annually, according to the TBS's Chief Information Officer (CIO), Michelle d'Auray.[14] Even this impressive figure may be conservative in light of the various hidden and indirect costs associated with IT investment. Every purchase of IT goods carries future costs in maintenance, training, and energy which can exceed initial outlays by up to 5 times, according to estimates.[15]

The main driver behind this investment was the public sector restructuring agenda of the 1980s and 90s inspired by the ascendancy of the principles of the New Public Management (NPM) within the senior civil service and growing concerns regarding levels of public indebtedness. Beginning in the early 1990s, the federal government began to see the potential for IT to provide more efficient, convenient, and cost-effective "citizen-centred" services, thanks to the growing influence of the principles of NPM within the public service. NPM reconceives the focus of the public service from that of meeting the needs of *citizens* and their communities to one of satisfying the demands of individual *clients* and *customers*, which in turn reflects a broader rethinking of government along the lines of running a business. In general, the work of public servants under the NPM paradigm is carried out within a frugal, streamlined, and increasingly marketized and decentralized organization which sees itself as a business enterprise devoted to providing quality services to customers at the lowest possible cost.[16] The rise of NPM thinking coincided with dramatic developments in the field of IT, including the microcomputer, the ATM, and the Internet, and the latter were rapidly assimilated to its agenda for civil service restructuring.

The degree of fit between NPM and new ITs was recognized early on, and has remained a constant theme in public service reform in Canada throughout the 1990s.[17] In a key Treasury Board policy document from 1994, entitled *Blueprint For Renewing Government Services Using Information Technology*, IT was seen as the key to providing better quality services by offering more convenient access through a mix of delivery channels such as call centres, self-serve kiosks, and Internet web sites. [18] In the *Blueprint*, service quality and client satisfaction are equated with such factors as convenience, reduced waiting and response times, and accuracy of information received, all of which are amenable to IT enhancement. The *Blueprint* also endorsed the use of IT to cut or avoid labour costs associated with traditional channels of service delivery through systems integration and the automation of manually intensive tasks such as data collection, storage and retrieval. A very close fit, then, between the concepts, values, and principles of NPM and the

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[14] In addition, omitted from the CIO's official figure is the one-time cost of $1.9 billion related to the government's response to the Y2K problem. See: Canada, *Proceedings, The Subcommittee on Communications of the Standing Senate Committee on Transport and Communications*, Issue 5 - Evidence, September 18, 2000, http://www.parl.gc.ca/36/2/parlbus/commbus/senate/com-e/comm-e/05ev-e/html

[15] Canada, *Powering Up*, 12.

[16] Charih and Rouillard, "The New Public Management," 31-36.

[17] As one TBS official put it: "[t]he introduction of new information technologies in government has been closely linked to the growing adoption of new public management. Distributed computing fits well with efforts to de-layer organizations […] the new telecommunications environment, epitomized by the Internet, has facilitated the move towards client-oriented service delivery, building from call centres to the 'electronic commerce' vision of on-line, menu driven, self-service by the public of government information and programmes." See: Brown, "New Information Technologies and Canadian Public Administration," 107.

[18] Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Blueprint for Renewing Government Services Using Information Technology*, (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1993).

qualities of speed, efficiency, and accuracy associated with IT help explain the rapid adoption of the latter by a government under pressure to maintain and improve performance while curtailing spending.[19]

While previous government initiatives on IT, including the Treasury Board *Blueprint*, always made some reference to the context of fiscal restraint, the advent of Program Review in 1994 added further impetus to IT investment as a tool to restructure government. Program Review was announced by the Minister of Finance, Paul Martin, in February 1994, and involved a comprehensive review and "rethinking" of the federal government's role and responsibilities in the delivery of programs and services to Canadians. Under Program Review, the Minister of Finance called for $17 billion in expenditure reductions over three years in order to meet the government's deficit target of 3% GDP by 1996-97. These reductions were to be achieved by streamlining administrative processes and eliminating "non-essential" programs and services, along with structural changes such as devolution, privatization, and commercialization. In addition, the magnitude of expenditure reduction required made significant public service job loss a virtual certainty. Indeed, over the four year period of Program Review, full-time public service employment declined from 231,000 positions in 1994 to 186,314 by 1999, a reduction of 45,000 positions representing almost 20% of the public service.[20]

IT investment was seen as key to achieving the objectives of Program Review by enabling both the streamlining of government processes and the roll-out of assorted experiments in alternative service delivery in order to achieve cost reductions. As a 1997 TBS status report on Program Review put it: "There are many alternatives to traditional departmental structures for delivering programs, and the government is vigorously pursuing these alternatives. IT will continue to play a key role in the modernization process. Canadians expect affordable, accessible, and responsive service […] The strategic use of IT helps us meet these expectations…".[21] It was also key to the government's efforts to reduce overall labour costs without compromising the quality and accessibility of its services. While the architects of Program Review seldom made explicit the anticipated labour cost savings from IT investment, the connection seems evident. While a considerable amount of federal public sector job loss can be accounted for by structural changes such as privatization and devolution, much of it occurred as a result of efforts to streamline operations and programs from within various departments, efforts which included significant initiatives involving IT. While it is difficult to establish a direct connection between

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[19] The growing importance of IT was also reflected in the government reorganization initiated by Prime Minister Kim Campbell in 1993. As a part of this larger effort to reorganize government departments, the position of Chief Informatics Officer, later renamed the Chief Information Officer, was created within the Treasury Board Secretariat and assigned the task of promoting the use of IT government-wide, particularly in service delivery. The Treasury Board has since become the central agency focal point for the use of IT in government restructuring to increase productivity and reduce administration costs. See: Brown, "New Information Technology and Canadian Public Administration," 101-102, 107; and Auditor General of Canada, *1996 Report of the Auditor General of Canada,* Chapter 16:Treasury Board Secretariat - Renewing Government Services Using Information Technology, 16-67.
[20] Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Employment Statistics for the Federal Public Service: April 1, 1998 to March 31, 1999*, (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1999) 8.
[21] Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Getting Government Right: Governing For Canadians*, (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1997) 11.

discrete IT investments and public sector job loss, a suggestive pattern of IT investment and subsequent job loss did emerge. Over the course of Program Review, overall federal expenditures on IT-related activities rose from $3 billion to $5 billion, an increase of 66%. Total ministerial spending on personnel costs declined, meanwhile, by 6% in the same period and full-time employment dropped by 20%.

While the above pattern is only suggestive of a relationship between IT investment and public service job loss, a number of government initiatives were explicit in connecting the adoption of IT with reductions in employment. HRDC, for example, which together with Public Works and Government Services Canada (PWGSC) accounted for the majority of employment reductions *not* related to privatization and devolution, initiated significant service-related IT projects at the same time as it engaged in large staffing reductions. Faced with a Program Review expenditure reduction target of $200 million, the equivalent of roughly 5,000 full-time equivalents (FTEs), HRDC embarked on a number of major projects in 1995 to streamline and restructure operations. One area targeted for major restructuring was the department's service delivery network (SDN), including roughly 800 frontline and regional offices, and numerous call centres and mail service centres. The department's interactions with citizens involve a huge volume of office visits, phone calls, correspondence, and financial transfers. As of 1998, HRDC served 9 million Canadians per year, and handled 60-80 million telephone calls and 100 million items of correspondence.[22] Under the imperatives of Program Review, then, relying on traditional channels of service delivery was not considered an option. HRDC's proposed solution involved transforming its SDN into an *electronic* service delivery network (ESDN).

By 1998, much of HRDC's new Electronic Service Delivery Network was in place. Implementing the ESDN involved significant new investment in IT and the automation and consolidation of numerous operations. For example, HRDC closed or consolidated over half of its local and regional front-line offices, the number of which declined to 320 by 1998.[23] Building on a 1992 pilot project, the department also introduced a new generation of electronic self-service kiosks, through which citizens could file Employment Insurance (EI) applications, find labour market information, and search for job opportunities. The number of kiosks expanded dramatically, from under 2000 in 1995 to over 5,000 by 1998.[24] HRDC relied extensively on this kiosk technology in the 1990s in order to meet staff reduction target. At HRDC's Niagara Area office, for example, the workforce was reduced by 48% during the 1990s as a result of the introduction of the ESDN, along with other management initiatives.[25] Over the same period, HRDC also invested heavily in telecommunications to support a network of telecentres, Interactive Voice Response systems, and its 1-800 toll free services.[26] Overall, HRDC external

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[22] Human Resources Development Canada, *Performance Report: For the Period Ending March 31, 1998*, (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1998), 2:3.

[23] Ibid., 3:2.

[24] Ibid., 2:3.

[25] See: Loucks, Kenneth E., and Michael B. Robertson, "Empowerment and Workforce Adjustment in The Niagara Area Office of Human Resources Development Canada," in *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, Innovation Case Study, http://www.innovation.cc/case_std/workforce.html.

[26] Human Resources Development Canada, *Performance Report: For the Period Ending March 31, 1998*, 2:3.

expenditures on IT goods and services increased by 120%, from $101 million in 1994-95 to $221 million in 1999-00,[27] while at the same time its personnel expenditures declined from $1.4 billion to $1.2 billion, a drop of almost 15%, and its total employment declined by 20.9%.[28] In terms of leveraging new IT investment in order to achieve Program Review objectives, HRDC's ESDN initiative was highly successful.[29] The department's employment reduction goal of eliminating 5,000 FTEs was achieved within three years, leading to annual departmental savings of $195 million in personnel costs. Much of this savings was realized as a result of the implementation of the ESDN. As the experience at HRDC shows, then, much of the enthusiasm for IT investment among senior public servants during the Program Review exercise can be traced to its potential to eliminate personnel and lower labour costs.[30]

A final impetus to the federal government's rapid conversion to the use of IT came from the recommendations of Industry Canada's Information Highway Advisory Council (IHAC), largely composed of senior executives from the IT and telecommunications industries, which released a series of reports and recommendations on federal information highway policy between 1995 and 1997.[31] Both reports urged the federal government to "set an example as a model user of communications and information technology" in order to streamline its services and internal administration and spur the development and growth of the information highway.[32] The IHAC recommendations fell on receptive ears, not least because the Council's overall approach to the development of the information highway in general and to the proper role of government jibed with both the principles of NPM and the practical imperatives driving Program Review. Buoyed by the success of initiatives originating out of the *Blueprint* and Program Review, and urged on by IHAC, the federal government embarked on an aggressive agenda to intensify and expand its reliance on electronic service delivery. In its official response to IHAC's first report, *Building the Information Society: Moving Canada Into the 21st Century*, the government committed itself to the

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[27] Canada, *Public Accounts of Canada*, 1994-95 to 1999-00.

[28] Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Employment Statistics for the Federal Public Service: April 1, 1998, to March 31, 1999*, (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1999), 62-63.

[29] In terms of other kinds of criteria, including staff morale and relations between front-line workers and management, however, the restructuring of HRDC clearly entailed its costs. A report on conditions in one area office speaks of the atmosphere of "fear and mistrust" which developed as a result. See: Loucks and Robertson, "Empowerment and Workforce Adjustment in The Niagara Area Office of Human Resources Development Canada".

[30] In addition, combined with Program Review job reductions, IT investment has had a significant impact on the occupational mix of the federal public service in recent years. Along with massive reductions in the number of administrative support and general services, labour, and trades personnel, fast growing employment in the computer systems group has contributed to a modest "up-skilling" of the public service as a whole. Total employment in the latter group grew by 63% between 1993 and 2000, reaching a high of 10,408 positions. This change has come at a price, however, including the erosion of future opportunities for women in the public service, who were overrepresented in groups which experienced large job cuts and who are under-represented in groups, such as computer systems, currently experiencing growth. Fully 70% of computer systems positions in the federal public service are occupied by men. See: Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Employment Statistics for the Federal Public Service*, 1996-2000.

[31] See: Industry Canada, *Connection, Community, Content: The Challenge of the Information Highway*, Final Report of the Information Highway Advisory Council: Phase One (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1995); and Industry Canada, *Preparing Canada for a Digital World,* Final Report of the Information Highway Advisory Council, 1997, http://www.Strategis.ic.gc.ca?SSG/ih01650e.html

[32] Industry Canada, *Preparing Canada for a Digital World*.

concept of government as a "model user" of IT.[33] The rationale offered at the time reflected the on-going influence of NPM principles and Program Review imperatives:

> "[t]he shift to provision of government services electronically will bring about a qualitative improvement in the responsiveness and accessibility of government. The new technology   also promises to enhance the *affordability* of government, allowing it to do more for less
>
> - an important consideration in these times of fiscal strain."[34]

The October 1999 Speech from the Throne announced the GOL initiative, according to which the federal government committed to becoming the most electronically connected government in the world to its citizens. Building on existing government IT infrastructure and ESD initiatives, the Treasury Board and its CIO were mandated to ensure that the main objective of GOL, to make ESD the dominant mode of interaction between government and citizens, was met by 2004. Since originally being announced in 1999, GOL has received over $280 million in funding.[35]

The federal government has since launched or expanded initiatives across a broad range of services and programs designed to deliver e-government to Canadians. A shortlist of such projects and pilots would include:

- **The Canada Site:** a single-window Internet portal to federal web sites, directories,   and frequently requested forms and publications.

- **Canada Customs and Revenue Agency:** E-file and Net-file allow tax filers   to submit T1s electronically. Currently used by 5.5 million Canadians.

- **Industry Canada's "Strategis" web site:** offers single-window Internet gateway access to information, programs, and services to Canadian businesses.

- **Canadian Intellectual Property Office:** maintains a web site allowing on-line   patent application and approval.

- **Statistics Canada:** on-line access to government statistical data base and analysis.

- **Industry Canada Spectrum Internet Auction:** electronic auction over the Internet   of licenses for radio frequency spectrum.

- **Human Resources Development Canada:** Internet transmission of Record of Employment (ROE) forms from employers.

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[33] Industry Canada, *Building the Information Society: Moving Canada Into the 21st Century*, (Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada, 1996).

[34] Ibid.

[35] Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, "Government On-Line: Progress and the Challenges Ahead," Speech by Lucienne Robillard, President of the Treasury Board, March 29, 2001, http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/media/psdp/2001/0330_e.html

- **Foreign Affairs and International Trade:** Consular services provides web-based travel information, country conditions, and travel warnings and advisories.

- **Canada Health Network:** a Health Canada Internet database with access to information on over 1,000 health-related topics.[36]

Complementing these initiatives is the federal Connecting Canadians strategy, designed to develop and increase citizen access to the information highway infrastructure by supporting the construction and expansion of network hardware and bandwidth and connecting thousands of schools, libraries and public access centres to the Internet.[37] Designating on-line service delivery as its preferred mode of doing business with its citizens has obliged the federal government to take steps to ensure they actually have reasonably convenient and affordable access to the network. Along with on-going efforts to leverage IT to reduce internal administration costs, GOL and the Connecting Canadians project will ensure that the federal government's enthusiasm and appetite for IT will remain strong for the foreseeable future.

Net Gains? Rethinking E-Government in Canada

According to Alcock and Lenihan, the discussion and implementation of e-government in Canada can be framed within a number of more or less expansive visions.[38] The first, and most narrow and conservative, view focuses on the use of IT to improve the quality and efficiency of government programs and services through automation, ESD, and the clustering of services via one-stop "single-window" access points. A second view endorses the application of sophisticated IT and information management (IM) systems to all aspects of internal administration and policy making within government. In this view of e-government as "smart" or "networked" government, governments exploit the increasing data collection, processing, and systems integration capabilities of IT in order to facilitate information sharing and communication across departmental and jurisdictional boundaries and to more accurately track economic and social trends, thus allowing governments to devise better policies and programs. While each of these two visions has more or less significant implications for the nature and structure of government, they share a focus on the use of IT to restructure government *internally*, by facilitating the development of clustered services and a more holistic approach to public administration and program development. What these visions tend to ignore are the possibilities for e-government to transform government in terms of its *external* interface with citizens by making it more transparent, open, and

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[36] For a broad overview of these various initiatives see: Alexander, Cynthia, "Cents and Sensibility: The Emergence of e-government in Canada," in Leslie A. Pal, ed., *How Ottawa Spends 2000-2001: Past Imperfect, Future Tense*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000) 185-209.

[37] See: Industry Canada, *The New National Dream: Networking the Nation for Broadband Access*, Report of the National Broadband Task Force, Executive Summary, http://broadband.gc.ca/Broadbanddocument/english/executive_summary.html; and http://www.schoolnet.ca/home/e/

[38] Alcock and Lenihan, *Opening the E-Government File*, 9.

accountable.[39] Others envision a model of e-government as some form of "digital democracy" involving the use of IT to improve upon the quality and availability of information accessible to citizens, as well as mechanisms for empowering citizens by increasing their input into policy discussions and policy making.[40]

Judged on the basis of these visions of e-government, it is clear that the federal government's IT investment, in general, and the GOL initiative, in particular, have been framed overwhelmingly within the confines of the first two, which focus on the internal impact of IT on the structure and administration of government. Most of the IT-related initiatives discussed above had as their primary objective the rationalization of scarce resources and the reduction of labour costs in response to the imperatives of Program Review. The federal public service's commitment to service improvement may have been genuine, but its experiments in ESD more often than not constituted a rearguard action to preserve service levels in the face of budget cuts. The narrow view of e-government continues to prevail, and is reflected in the implementation goals set by the architects of GOL in the Treasury Board. GOL is to be implemented in three "Tiers," which call for: online access to standard forms and information on departmental programs and services (Tier 1); secure on-line transactions for key services (payments, filing forms and applications) by the end of 2004 (Tier 2); and the development of horizontal partnerships with other jurisdictions (Tier 3). There is little sentiment regarding transparency, accountability, or *democratic* empowerment of the sort found in the latter visions of e-government described by Alcock and Lenihan.[41]

To be fair, however, federal IT-related restructuring and other initiatives in e-government must be evaluated on their own terms; in other words, in terms of how successful they have been in meeting their stated objectives of improving the overall quality of service delivery and making programs and services more cost-effective. The following section examines the claims made on behalf of e-government in terms of service delivery and fiscal prudence. I then conclude the paper by examining a number of deficiencies within and obstacles to e-government initiatives which stand in the way of realizing a more expansive, inclusive and participatory vision of Canadian democracy in the digital age.

"*Delighting the customer*"?
Prominent in the philosophy of NPM which, as we have seen, informs a great deal of IT investment in Canadian public administration, is a concern with improving the quality of government services to citizens. The implementation of NPM principles has also entailed a

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[39] I am indebted to Alcock and Lenihan for this distinction. See Alcock and Lenihan, *Opening the E-Government File*, 10.

[40] I would add to this discussion the point that the mere presence of IT-enhanced connections between citizens and *existing* institutional structures of representative liberal democracy should not, by itself, be mistaken for the apex of democracy in the digital age, since that would be to assume the adequacy of the existing structures, an assumption which ought to be resisted for reasons clear enough below.

[41] To be fair, discussion of promoting forms of on-line engagement between citizens and government has taken place inside government, but many obstacles remain, and initiatives are sparse and lacking in the kind of coordination and senior level sponsorship driving service delivery reform. See, for example: Richard, Elisabeth, *On-line Engagement – New Models and Implications for Government Departments and Officials*, A roundtable by the Canadian Policy Research Networks, Final Report, March 6, 2000, http://www.cprn.org/cprn.html

transformation in the conception of the relationship between government and citizens using various market analogies. Against the conception of citizenship dominant in Canada during the

Keynesian postwar period, in which citizenship entailed collective entitlements to social rights and the state was seen as the guardian and purveyor of various "public goods," the NPM conceives citizens as "clients" and "customers" of services, and as "taxpayers" who foot the bill. In such capacities, citizens are conceived as market actors seeking the most cost-effective responses to their needs. For its part, the state's role is confined to that of efficiently managing a more tightly circumscribed set of services, with a focus on efficiency, cost-effectiveness and "value-added" in order, as the customer service industry says, to "delight the customer". Much has been written on the implications of NPM for the nature of citizenship in Canada. A number of commentators and critics have argued persuasively that the NPM's tendency to marketize citizen/state relationships leads to a confused and impoverished conception of the citizen.[42] We need not recapitulate these arguments here. Rather, I want to suggest that IT-related initiatives in public sector restructuring threaten to perpetuate the confusion and entrench inapt market models for relations between government and citizens which have led to the erosion rather than improvement of certain government services. Again, the case of HRDC is instructive.

HRDC claims to have made significant strides in the last half decade in improving the quality of service delivery to its clients. It has adopted a Quality Assurance statement which promises clients "courteous and considerate treatment," "complete and accurate information," reduced waiting times to speak with client services officers, and set maximum intervals ranging from 28 to 35 days between the time a benefit claim is submitted and the first payment is received.[43] By its own account, due in no small measure to IT-related enhancement of its service delivery network, the department has succeeded in meeting its service delivery improvement goals. HRDC reported, for example, that in 1998-99 fully 95.5% of first benefit cheques were paid to clients within the 28 day target period, an improvement of 3% over 1997-98. In addition, call centre clients accessing the department's voice automated enquiry system got through 99.5% of the time without a busy signal, up from 98.6% the previous year.[44] On the face of it, then, HRDC appears justified in its claim that providing high quality service to its clients is a key departmental priority. When the quality of programs and services is measured strictly in terms of such criteria as telephone waiting times and claims processing speeds the success of HRDC's initiatives is difficult to dispute.[45] But the department's narrow emphasis on addressing the "service gap" for its

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[42] See, for example: Brodie, Janine, "Restructuring and the New Citizenship," in Bakker, Isabella, ed., *Rethinking Restructuring: Gender and Change in Canada*, (Toronto: U of T Press, 1996) 130; Gow, James Iain, "Frauds and victims: some difficulties in applying the notion of service to the clientele in the public sector," *Canadian Public Administration*, Volume 38, No. 4 (Winter) 557-577; Pierre, Jon, "The Marketization of the State: Citizens, Consumers, and the Emergence of the Public Market," in Peters, Guy, and Donald Savoie, eds., *Governance in a Changing Environment*, (Ottawa, Canadian Centre for Management Development, 1995) 55-81; Shields, Jon, and B. Mitchell Evans, *Shrinking the State: Globalization and Public Administration 'Reform'*, (Halifax: Fernwood, 1998) 79-81.

[43] Human Resources Development Canada, *Performance Report: For the Period Ending March 31, 1999*, 6.

[44] Ibid., 28.

[45] A recent review of these claims by the Auditor General casts some doubt on the magnitude of the improvement. See: Auditor General of Canada, *2000 Report of the Auditor General of Canada,:* Chapter 2: Human Resources

clients obscures the ways in which much of the substantive content of HRDC policy *failed* many clients and other Canadian citizens during the very same period.

Effective July 1, 1996, as we know, the federal government replaced the *Unemployment Insurance Act* with a new *Employment Insurance Act*. The new legislation tightened eligibility criteria, reduced the level and duration of benefits, and penalized repeat claimants. The major effect of the new Act was to reduce the number of Canadian workers eligible for benefits and to reduce the benefits paid to those who qualified. As a result of the *Employment Insurance Act*, the percentage of officially unemployed Canadians eligible for EI benefits fell to 50%, a drop from 87% as recently as 1989, and from 64% at the time the Liberals assumed office.[46] Benefits, meanwhile, decreased in duration and fell from 66.6% to as little as 52% of insurable earnings.[47] Meanwhile, premium increases swelled the EI surplus to an estimated $20 billion by the late 1990s.[48] In light of these substantive changes to unemployment insurance benefits, only under the narrowest and most impoverished understanding of service quality can HRDC still be seen as having succeeded in improving the quality of its programs and services to the unemployed. For many citizens, in effect, improved service at HRDC amounted simply to having their EI benefit claims rejected *faster*.

The ambiguities of IT-related restructuring at HRDC were further underscored when, beginning in 1995, the department began routine data matching of insurance claim records and Traveler Declaration Cards supplied by Revenue Canada in order to identify fraudulent claims.[49] While the Privacy Commissioner of Canada has charged that such matches violate basic privacy rights and effectively cast a cloud of EI fraud suspicion over every traveler returning to Canada, routine data matching has recently received the blessing of the Supreme Court of Canada in its 2001 *Smith v. Canada (Attorney General)* decision.[50] Meanwhile, in 2000, the Privacy Commissioner reported on HRDC's development of its Longitudinal Labour Force File, a detailed research database containing information from across government on over 30 million individuals and at a level of detail described by the Commissioner as "a *de facto* citizen profile."[51] The

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Development Canada - Service Quality at the Local Level, http://www.oagbvg.gc.ca/domino/reports.nsf/html/0002ce.html. Furthermore, an internal audit of the department in 1999 revealed a number of indicators that service quality was declining, such as an increase in appeals, employee burn-out and low morale. See: Internal Audit Bureau, *Final Report: Review on Capacity to Deliver HRDC`s Programs and Services*, Project #405/98, April 1999, Ottawa: Human Resources Development Canada, 1999, http://www.hrdcdrhc.gc.ca/fas-sfa/iab-bvi/menu/tab04.shtml

[46] Battle, Ken, "Transformation: Canadian Social Policy Since 1985," paper presented to the 92nd Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, Toronto, August, 1997, 22.

[47] McBride, Stephen, and John Shields, *Dismantling a Nation: The Transition to Corporate Rule in Canada*, (Halifax: Fernwood, 1997) 96.

[48] Battle, "Transformations: Canadian Social Policy Since 1985," 23.

[49] Privacy Commissioner of Canada, *Annual Report 1996-1997*, (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 1997), http://www.privcom.gc.ca/ar/02_04_05_e.asp

[50] See *Smith v Canada (Attorney General)*, 2001 SCC 88, http://www.lexum.umontreal.ca/cscscc/en/rec/html/smith10.en.html

[51] Privacy Commissioner of Canada, *Annual Report 1999-2000*, (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2000), http://www.privcom.gc.ca/ar/02_04_08_e.asp

department dismantled the database in response to the ensuing public outcry. These episodes suggest that HRDC's interest in deploying IT extended well beyond the desire to ease client access to its services, to include surveillance of not only EI recipients but the majority of Canadian citizens.[52] The legislative changes and administrative practices described above make a mockery of HRDC's commitment to satisfying the needs and exceeding the expectations of its clients. The ambiguities and tensions at the heart of so-called "citizen-centred" service delivery reform at HRDC offer a perfect illustration of the confusions introduced by such reforms in general, and beg the question of who the real clients of its policies and practices were: benefit recipients, or the Cabinet ministers, fiscally conservative voters, and financial markets to whom they appealed?

The HRDC experience also renders dubious the claims made by advocates of IT-related public service restructuring that it will enrich and humanize the delivery of government programs and services. The dominant form of citizen-government interaction envisioned by advocates of *e-government* is modeled on *e-commerce*, that is, highly automated and impersonal commercial transactions such as information searches, payments, and direct deposits. This model is a curious choice, it warrants mentioning, given that consumers themselves remain skeptical.[53] In addition, the rhetoric of using ITs to enrich and humanize citizen-government relations is belied by the underlying logic of *rationalization* driving IT investment by government. The Treasury Board *Blueprint*, for example, called explicitly for the use of ITs to *eliminate* as much human intervention as possible from the operations of government. Here again, the HRDC experience is indicative of the trend; an explicit goal of IT-related restructuring was to eliminate as many face-to-face interactions as possible between HRDC clients and staff, through office closures and consolidations and the introduction of self-service kiosks in particular, and to reduce the amount of time spent with each client in situations calling for direct contact.[54] Indeed, despite a good deal of government rhetoric surrounding "citizen-centred" service delivery, particularly through more intensive use of IT, there is plenty of evidence that the quality of many government services has been in decline as a result of precisely the kinds of belt-tightening policies with which enthusiasm for ESD is often associated. The case of HRDC is far from the only example.[55] None of this is to romanticize traditional in-person service delivery, but initiatives like these threaten to exacerbate what service deficits currently existing in Canada. While initiatives in the area of ESD may well have achieved success in terms of easing interactions such as income-tax filing or applying for

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[52] One notes the paucity of commentators on e-government who are sensitive to the potential surveillance and privacy implications of networked government. George Radwanski, the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, remains a voice in the wilderness on this issue. See: George Radwanski, "Opening Address," GovNet 2001: Government Online and on the Front Line, Hull, Quebec, April 23, 2001, http://www.privcom.gc.ca/speech/02_05_a_010423_e.asp

[53] A mere 5% of Canadian households reported making an on-line payment in 1999, and a majority of all Internet users express concern over privacy and security issues related to such transactions. See: Ellison, Jonathan, Louise Earl, and Stacie Ogg, "Internet Shopping In Canada," Connectedness Series #3, Statistics Canada, (Ottawa: Minister of Industry, 2001).

[54] Loucks and Robertson, "Empowerment and Workforce Adjustment in the Niagara Area Office of Human Resources Development Canada".

[55] See, for example, the 1997-98 Annual Report of the Ontario Ombudsman, which details poor service at numerous provincial agencies: Ombudsman Ontario, *Annual Report 1997-98*, (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1998), http://www.ombudsman.on.ca/frames_en.html.

vehicle permits and hunting licenses, putative gains in service convenience as a result IT must be seen in the wider context of many off-setting service deficits such as those detailed above.

IT project management: cancel, retry, failure

One of the most common and seductive arguments on behalf of e-government is that investment in IT will reduce the costs of administration and service delivery. Events at HRDC would appear to confirm such claims. However, despite the connection that can be made between IT investment and reduced labour costs in this and other examples, it is a mistake to automatically identify IT investment with fiscal prudence. Firstly, as we have seen, recent investments in IT by the federal government have not been cheap. Officially, the federal government's annual bill for IT hardware, software, services, training and personnel is approximately $5 billion. The GOL project, the final cost of which remains unknown despite two and half years of planning and implementation, meanwhile carries with it the additional cost of as much as $4 billion to ensure universal high speed access to the Internet.[56] Disturbingly, such figures routinely fail to acknowledge an assortment of other indirect and hidden costs associated with the initial investment, including maintenance, training, energy, and initial lost productivity as users adapt to new systems. Estimates of the true cost of an IT investment range from two to five times the original outlay, as we have seen. Bearing this in mind, the Treasury Board estimate of $5 billion in annual IT spending may well be very conservative, if not misleading. Moreover, as the Auditor General has indicated on numerous occasions, financial management practices associated with IT projects are flawed, casting doubt on whether or not savings objectives are in fact being met. In his 1996 audit of the Treasury Board's role as a focal point for government-wide IT projects, the Auditor General chastised the Board for failing to adequately "assess the costs of investments against their expected benefits to the government as a whole" and for "a general lack of focus on measuring results and providing information on outcomes."[57]

Equally disconcerting, research on IT spending in the public and private sectors both in Canada and abroad reveals that large IT projects, especially those of the scope and complexity of a project like GOL, have a dismal record of mismanagement, cost overruns, delays, and outright failures. Research by the Standish Group, for example, has revealed a stunning record of poor performance for major IT projects. According a 1995 report, 31% of projects are cancelled before completion and a mere 16% of projects are completed on-time and on-budget.[58] More recently, U.S. corporate giants such as Nike and Hershey have been bitten by the IT-failure bug, as has Sobeys Inc., a major Canadian grocer.[59] The news from the public sector is equally discouraging.

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[56] TBS CIO, Michelle d'Auray, was quoted at the time of writing as saying: "We don't know how much it will cost." See: Sheikh, Fawzia, "Ottawa lays its services on the line," *The National Post*, August 7, 2001.

[57] Auditor General of Canada, *2000 Report of the Auditor General of Canada,* : Chapter 16: Treasury Board Secretariat - Renewing Government Services Using Information Technology, 16.17, 16.87, http://www.oagbvg.gc.ca/domino/reports.nsf/html/9616ce.html

[58] The Standish Group, *Chaos: The Standish Group Report*, The Standish Group, 1995, http://www.scs.carleton.ca/beau/PM/Standish-Report.html

[59] See: Piller, Charles, "With Tech Decisions, 'Just Do It' Can Cost a Company Millions: Nike, Hershey tried too much, too soon, too expensively," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, April 6, 2001; and "Software hangover staggers Sobeys stock after $89M computer system problem," *The National Post*, January 25, 2001.

In its 2001 High Risk Series Update, the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) identified 3 major federal IT projects on its list of 22 "high risk" programs and projects, including the Federal Aviation Administration's estimated $45 billion (U.S.) Air Traffic Control System modernization, the Internal Revenue Service's $477 million (U.S.) systems modernization, and the Department of Defense's entire $20 billion (U.S.) annual IT budget.[60] In the United Kingdom, the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts has investigated over two dozen major government IT projects since 1990 which have either failed or experienced significant delays and cost overruns, including the National Insurance Recording System debacle at the Department of Social Security (DSS) which resulted in the delay or underpayment of social security benefits to hundreds of thousands of elderly and disabled citizens and the subsequent payment of millions of pounds in compensation.[6162]

The Canadian experience more or less replicates and confirms these findings. In 1995, for example, the Office of the Auditor General reported on its audit of four major IT systems projects under development within the federal government, representing a combined investment of $500 million.[63] Of the four projects, only one was deemed headed for success. Ironically, IT project difficulties have recently been reported at HRDC, as well, threatening its ability to meet the objectives of GOL.[64] Provincial governments have experienced similar difficulties. In Ontario, for example, a 1980 project to establish and automate the Province of Ontario Land Registration System (POLARIS), initially to be completed by the early 1990s, is now slated for completion by perhaps 2010, with the possibility that the final bill could reach $1 billion.[65] Clearly, then, governments in Canada and abroad experience serious problems in predicting and managing the costs and timelines associated with major IT projects. Indeed, the GOL initiative itself remains at risk due to its size, scope and complexity.[66]

Thus, even when judged on the basis of fiscal prudence, e-government may not deliver the goods. Advocates of e-government consistently assert that IT investment in restructuring

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[60] United States General Accounting Office, *High-Risk Series: An Update*, GAO-01-263, January 2001, 10, 27-30, 112, http://www.gao.gov/

[61] Committee of Public Accounts, *First Report: Improving the Delivery of Government IT Projects*, 5 January,

[62] , 1999-2000 Session, http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmpubacc/65/6502.htm. See also: Ranger, Steve, "State IT failures squander £1bn," *Computing*, July 5, 2001, http://www.vnunet.com/Print/1123675

[63] Auditor General of Canada, *1995 Report of the Auditor General of Canada*, Chapter 12: Systems Under Development, Managing the Risks, http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/domino/reports.nsf/html/9512ce.html

[64] Human Resources Development Canada, *Risk Assessment of Government on Line (GOL): National Report*, Internal Audit and Risk Management Services Project No.6522/00, http://www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/fas-sfa/iabbvi/pdf/6522_00.pdf

[65] Office of the Provincial Auditor, *Special Report on Accountability and Value for Money(2000)*, (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2000), 5-6, http://www.gov.on.ca/opa/english/r00t.html

[66] See for example: "Bureaucrat v bureaucrat: Canada's CIO plods along to get services on-line," *The National Post*, February 16, 2001; and "Tendering delays cramp federal plan," *The Globe and Mail*, January 28, 2000. [66] A recent OECD policy brief entitled, "The Hidden Threat to E-Government: Avoiding large government IT failures," suggests as much. According to the OECD's findings, "[t]he inability of governments to manage large public IT projects threatens to undermine efforts to implement e-government […] unless governments learn to manage the risks connected with large IT projects, these e-dreams will turn into global nightmares." See: OECD, "The Hidden Threat to E-Government: Avoiding large government IT failures," PUMA Policy Brief No. 8, (Paris: OECD, 2001) 1.

government programs and services makes these more cost-effective and affordable. However, while on the face of it such investment can be shown to cut certain costs - labour costs in particular - it should not be equated with sound financial or project management. As the numerous cases cited above have shown, while IT investment may produce cost reductions of a sort, it has by no means contributed to a *qualitative* improvement in government spending. Indeed, the seemingly inextricable link between large IT projects and high rates of project failure suggest that e-government may be its own worst enemy.[66]

E-government and the Democratic Deficit

According to Alcock and Lenihan, advocates of a more expansive vision and implementation of e-government, electronic government represents "a huge opportunity to strengthen commitments to values of transparency, openness and accountability" as well as "vastly increasing government's capacity to dialogue with citizens" and to "create new opportunities for involving citizens in deliberative exercises that influence the policy process and ultimately decision making."[67] While there is much to be said for using IT to maximize the availability of government information and open new channels for communicating with politicians, however, such expectations of e-government in Canada are bound to be disappointed for the foreseeable future. As we have seen, despite frequent references to democratic empowerment, government initiatives in electronic government have focused overwhelmingly on administrative rationalization and service delivery thus far. Furthermore, e-government boosters tend to overstate the transformative capacity of information technology and to underestimate the numerous obstacles to enhancing the quality and participatory nature of Canadian democracy, including endemic structural features of the political system, entrenched habits of government secrecy and hostility to access to information laws, the effects of neoliberal public policy and public sector restructuring, and the recalcitrant, multiple inequalities cross-cutting the social fabric of Canada. As Thomas has argued recently, "[w]ider, deeper, more subtle and probably more powerful forces than the dazzling array of new technologies are affecting how democracy is perceived, understood, and practiced by citizens and public officials."[68] Let us call these forces Canada's democratic deficits. The democratizing potential of e-government will be severely constrained in the absence of meaningful efforts to overcome them.

Vertical vs horizontal government
Among the many structural features of Canada's political system which pose a challenge to the democratizing potential of IT is the enormous concentration of policy and decision making power in the political executive of its Westminster model of parliamentary government.[69] While, as its advocates suggest, e-government may favour the horizontal integration of government

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[67] Alcock and Lenihan, *Opening the E-Government File*, pp.17-19.
[68] Thomas, Paul, "The Future of Representative Democracy: The Impact of Information Technology," in *Modernizing Governance: A Preliminary Exploration*, (Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Management Development, 2000) 59.
[69] Thomas, "The Future of Representative Democracy: The Impact of Information Technology," 80.

functions, departments and decision-making, in general, and the diffusion of power among government actors, stakeholder groups and citizens, Canada's parliamentary system and the principle of ministerial accountability contain a strong bias toward vertical hierarchies of decision-making power and authority which often marginalize all but a few key players in the policy-making process; a bias that will not simply disappear with greater investment in IT. This vertical concentration of power, which was the subject of Donald Savoie's recent book, *Governing From the Centre*, appears to be increasing, no less, as a result of a number of factors, including the media and globalization.[70] Governments in Canada still routinely announce new policies and initiatives, often involving hundreds of millions of dollars in public expenditure, with little or no consultation, and often in spite of it. PM Chretien, for example, announced the Millennium Scholarship Foundation in 1997 without consulting his Cabinet colleagues; this despite the fact that the initiative carried a price-tag of $2.5 billion.[71]

The recent announcement of a private school education tax credit by the Finance Minister of Ontario, to the surprise of the Education Minister and other Cabinet colleagues, is another more recent case in point.[72] What hope for citizen influence via e-mail or parliamentary Internet chatrooms is there in a system in which the vast majority of legislators have already been marginalized in the policy making process? Indeed, as long as they are not meaningfully connected to policy outcomes, schemes for using IT to increase citizen engagement and communication with their representatives could backfire, by deepening citizen apathy and cynicism. Genuine citizen empowerment, then, will require bold political and administrative reform as well.

Furthermore, while Canada's vertically oriented structures of power and decision-making tend to concentrate power, they also provide for relatively clear lines of accountability with respect to policy decisions and outcomes. As e-government, along with other management innovations like alternative service delivery, tends towards the horizontal diffusion of power and decision-making, it promises to blur lines of accountability as well, potentially rendering government *less* rather than more transparent to its citizens as a result. As functional and jurisdictional "stovepipes" are dismantled to facilitate the growth of more horizontal patterns of information sharing and decision-making across government, care must be taken to ensure that citizens remain able to locate and give credit to and/or hold accountable those who make authoritative decisions.

Too much information?
It has been said that we live in an information age in which the power to produce, manipulate, distribute and store information has been radically democratized by the advent of digital technology. This change in the ecology of information towards so-called "data democracy"

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[70] Savoie, Donald, *Governing From the Centre: The Concentration of Power in Canadian Politics*, (Toronto: U of T Press, 1999)

[71] Ibid., 154.

[72] See: "Ontarians to get tax break for private schooling," *The National Post*, May 10, 2001; and "Harris ministers 'brawl' on tax credit," *The National Post*, May 18, 2001.

is irresistible, it has been suggested, because, in the words of John Perry Barlow, "information wants to be free".[73] With the rapid development and spread of the Internet, it is tempting to join the chorus of information age optimists. If they are correct, then, as citizens, we ought to enjoy access to more and higher quality information in this new ecology of information, enabling us to hold governments more accountable and to monitor and participate in political debate more effectively. The question examined in this section is whether or not initiatives like GOL significantly alter the ecology of information, or the informational balance of power between governments and citizens, in ways favourable to citizens as active participants in and observers of the policy-making process. I argue that while impressive strides have been made in making certain information more readily and conveniently accessible to citizens with Internet access, there are numerous obstacles to be overcome before Canada approximates the vision of an information society. These obstacles are of a technical, administrative and political nature, and will not be overcome simply by digitalizing existing government information practices or universalizing access to the Internet.

Firstly, there are serious technical and administrative challenges which stand in the way of the success of GOL from the standpoint of the citizen. Just as with commercial search engines like Google, the tools for finding relevant and timely information on government web sites are in need of much improvement. Most search engines return far too many hits, and often in random order. The Canada Site, for example, routinely retrieves tens of thousands of items in response to search terms like "climate change," "terrorism" and "aboriginal land claims". Limited opportunities to refine searches or customize browsing make looking for government information not unlike searching the Library of Parliament without a catalogue. Under the circumstances, where its utility to citizens is concerned, too much information combined with limited search-ability is just as bad as no information at all.

Granted, some attempts by the architects of GOL have been made to increase the user friendliness of the Canada Site and other sub sites.[74] In the former case, citizens are presented with numerous "service gateways" organized around various "life events" such as birth, education, employment and unemployment, illness, and starting a business.[75] These work well for citizens as consumers of *existing* government services and programs, such as registering a business or accessing information about EI benefits. By speeding users of government web sites to existing services, however, this approach contains a built in bias towards the *status quo*. What it fails to address are the needs of citizens who are interested in evaluating, interrogating and contesting these same programs and services in terms of their *adequacy* or *effectiveness*. Most government web sites are not set up with the citizens as active observers of or participants in the political process in mind. Finding internal departmental reports, program audits, and legislative committee briefs and reports, in which can be found useful information for such purposes, can still be very challenging. The degree of political sophistication and information literacy demanded of citizens

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[73] See, for example: Barlow, John Perry "The Economy of Ideas: Selling Wine Without Bottles in the Global Net," http://www.eff.org/~barlow/EconomyofIdeas.html; and Gates, Bill, *The Road Ahead*, New York: Penguin, 1996.

[74] Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, *Common Look and Feel for the Internet*, http://www.cio-dpi.gc.ca/clf-upe/index_e.asp

[75] Government of Canada, *Canada Site: Services for You*, http://www.canada.gc.ca/main_e.html

to find information, other than that offered as part of a government's communications strategy, often exceeds that of all but a minority of users.

Future plans also include joint ventures to offer "citizen-centred" web based services cutting across jurisdictional and functional lines in order to create an experience of "seamless" government, on the grounds that citizens find the organizational and jurisdictional structure of government confusing and alienating. The ideal often described is one in which a citizen will be able to register an address change on one web site and have that change reflected in every database across levels and branches of government. In other words, while the "back office" structure of jurisdictional and functional silos of government might remain in place, citizens' experience of the "front office" is of an easy-to-access, "customer-friendly" one. However, while the ease and convenience of such seamless service might be desirable for citizens wishing to *transact* with government for *existing* services and programs, they may be less well served in situations where they wish to effect *change* to them by influencing government. If the admittedly complex power structure of government policy and decision making is rendered *less* apparent to citizens who become accustomed to "single-window" access and "seamless" service, one wonders how effectively they will navigate and insert themselves within it not as consumers of services but as active citizens. What I am suggesting is that one of the very means alleged to improve citizen access to government information, by making it less confusing and more "citizen-centred," may actually erode the kind of *civic literacy* necessary for effective citizenship. On-line one-stop shopping for government services and programs may make it easier for citizens to *transact* with the government, but may actually make it more difficult for them to *influence* it.

Secondly, the administrative challenges of information management within government threaten the success of GOL for citizens and government alike. To date, no government-wide uniform standards exist for cataloguing, formatting, creating, or destroying government documents in digital form.[76] Electronic information can appear one day and be deleted the next, while obsolete information can be left on a web site for years. Since few documents from prior to 1995 have been digitized and posted on government web sites, there is a serious threat of citizen and institutional memory loss as governments move to a digital environment. Meanwhile, few plans and resources are in place for "migrating" digital content to new formats when current ones become obsolete, as they surely will. Such information management problems not only exacerbate the kinds of problems with the accessibility and search-ability of government information mentioned above, but threaten the effectiveness, integrity, and accountability of government services and programs due to the heightened risk of lost, incomplete, deleted, or compromised data and information.

Both the technical challenge of developing more effective search tools and the administrative challenges and risks of managing government information in a digital environment suggest that an important obstacle to the democratic success of GOL is one of *too much information*. If the problem with GOL is that it makes available too much information that comes

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[76] McDonald, John, *Information Management in the Government of Canada:A Situation Analysis*, for the Chief Information Officer, Treasury Board Secretariat and The National Archivist, Ottawa: Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2000.

to users in an unfiltered, unmediated and poorly organized fashion, then one might be tempted to conclude that there is a content glut rather than deficit where government information is concerned. If that is the case, then leveraging the potential benefits of GOL for citizen-users looks like a technical and administrative matter of simply developing better search tools and information management practices. While clearly desirable, however, such improvements will have a limited impact on the overall success of GOL from the citizen perspective because they fail to touch upon or alter the information dissemination practices of the federal government. Set against the larger backdrop of public sector reform and government information dissemination practices, which include deeply entrenched habits of secrecy and cost recovery policies which discourage citizens from seeking information, the democratic potential of GOL may prove to be less than it appears. Let us examine this problem in more detail.

Enclosing **the** *information commons***?**

In the context of federal government information dissemination practices in general, one could argue that GOL represents no real sea-change in government openness or transparency. One could argue, in fact, that GOL only makes available in practice information that has long been available in theory. By saving us a trip to the library or government bookstore GOL certainly makes accessing information more convenient, for those with Internet access, but it has not signaled a fundamental shift in government attitudes or practices with respect to disseminating information, particularly that of a politically sensitive or embarrassing nature. Indeed, in conflict with the stated goals of GOL, the federal government has embraced numerous policy and administrative initiatives in the 1990s which have actually *eroded* the informational rights of Canadian citizens. Canada's Office of the Information Commissioner, various access to information advocates, journalists, academics and a handful of politicians have drawn attention to these in the past few years, as part of what has been referred to as the steady enclosure of the "information commons" supporting civic engagement in Canada.[77] Let us briefly examine three such initiatives.

Firstly, since the 1980s, the federal government has increasingly sought to commercialize and commodify its considerable information resources and data collection capabilities. Under pressure to cut costs and raise non-tax sources of revenue, cost recovery policies and information product development and marketing strategies were introduced by many departments and agencies. Beginning in the late 1980s, for example, Statistics Canada began charging cost recovery fees to citizen and business users of information alike for access to many of its data and analytical products, in spite of the fact that these had already been paid for through tax dollars.[78] The commodification of government information in this manner raises access barriers. In a notorious case from B.C., where similar policies were put in place, a Western Canada Wilderness

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[77] See: Information Commissioner of Canada, *Annual Report of the Information Commissioner, 1999-2000*, Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2000; and Roberts, Alasdair, "The Informational Commons at Risk," in Daniel Drache and Richard Higgott, eds., *Recovering the Public Domain: Moving the Boundary Between the Market and the State*, London: Routledge, 2001.

[78] Gutstein, Donald, *E.con: How the Internet Undermines Democracy*, Toronto: Stoddart, 1999; and McMahon, Ronald C., "Cost Recovery and Statistics Canada," *Government Information in Canada*, Volume 2, Number 4 (Spring) 1996, www.usask.ca/library/gic/v2n4/mcmahon.html

Committee access to information request to the provincial Ministry of Environment for natural resource inventory maps was denied on the grounds that the information was already available to the public - as a $30,000 value-added information "product".[79]

Secondly, reports and analysis by access to information advocates in the 1990s describe a tendency on the part of the federal government, and its provincial counterparts, towards a less forthcoming approach to access to information requests. Increasing administration fees have led to a decrease in the number of requests. In Ontario, for example, fee increases for standard requests led to a 50% drop in the number received between 1995 and 1997.[80] In view of the fact that cost recovery recoups only a small fraction of the total cost of such programs, the fees are clearly intended to discourage citizens from making requests altogether, rather than cover their costs.[81] Cuts to departmental budgets for administering access to information requests have also had a negative impact on access to information by increasing processing times.[82] Departments have also adopted a more aggressive and adversarial approach towards Information Commissioners charged with enforcing compliance with access to information laws by increasingly denying access outright, vigorously contesting appeals and resorting to judicial review.[83] Finally, FOI activists, sympathetic legislators, and provincial and federal information commissioners have expressed alarm with respect to the agenda and secretive process adopted by a federal administrative review of Canada's ATIA by senior public servants appointed to the Access to Information Review Task Force, which is due to recommend changes to the Act shortly. Attempts to widen the consultation process to give greater voice to interested stakeholders have thus far been resisted by the federal government[84]. In the aftermath of the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S., government tendencies toward secrecy have been reinforced, and, with some justification perhaps, have been accompanied by purges of sensitive information from government web sites. Nonetheless, one has to wonder how well served the information needs of citizens can be by governments suspicious of access to information requests and openly hostile to those charged with responsibility for seeing that they meet their legal obligations.

Finally, public sector restructuring initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s, which produced a wave of privatization, devolution and outsourcing, have had direct and indirect effects on the informational rights of citizens and the transparency and accountability of government. By creating a more fragmented and confusing system of accountability and governance in general, such initiatives have increased the "organizational opacity" of government, rendering both the development and execution of public policy less rather than more transparent.[85] More specifically,

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[79] Roberts, Alasdair, "Structural Pluralism and the Right to Information," School of Policy Studies, Working Paper 15, 2001, Queen's University, http://www.aroberts.ca

[80] Roberts, Alasdair, "Less Government, More Secrecy: Reinvention and the Weakening of Freedom of Information Law," *Public Administration Review*, July/August, Vol.60, No.4, 2000.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Information Commissioner of Canada, *Annual Report of the Information Commissioner, 1999-2000*, Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2000.

[84] Jack, Ian, "Pressure from top stalls hearings," *The National Post*, August 20, 2001

[85] Roberts, Alasdair, "Structural Pluralism and the Right to Information"

many of the newly created corporations, agencies, and outsourcing arrangements, such as the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, NAV Canada and the Canada Pension Plan Investment Board, have been placed beyond the reach of the federal ATIA, despite little change in the salience of the activities carried out under them to public health or the public interest.

Together with other initiatives, I would argue that the above-mentioned administrative and policy trends have had a corrosive impact on the informational rights of Canadian citizens and are at least if not more indicative of the government's current approach to information dissemination than the rhetoric of GOL suggests. Thus, the problem for Canadian citizens, where policies such as the privatization of air traffic control, food safety and inspection, or the outsourcing of prisons are concerned, is not too much information but, rather, the paucity thereof. For at least a decade now, the federal government has been much less forthcoming in its information dissemination practices than the rhetoric of GOL suggests. Overcoming this deficit will require continued efforts to improve GOL and, equally important, a rethinking of the kinds of government policies and administrative initiatives corrosive of citizen access to information.

In addition to adopting a policy of more active and routine information dissemination, for which the Internet is well suited, the federal government must fully incorporate consideration of the informational rights of citizens into new service delivery arrangements, and abandon its hostile stance towards the ATIA and those who use it. In the absence of efforts to reform government information dissemination practices both on and off-line, GOL will have little transformative impact on the openness and transparency of democratic government in Canada.

The Digital Divide

Finally, the persistence of the so-called "digital divide" poses one of the greatest challenges to cultivating a truly democratic and inclusive form of e-government. As Alcock and Lenihan rightly warn, "insofar as governance becomes more dependent upon information available on the Internet, and participation in Internet-based networks or technology-based interaction with government, the voices of those who do not have access to or familiarity with the technology may be increasingly marginalized in public debate."[86] With the recent shelving of plans for a national broadband infrastructure to ensure high speed connectivity for rural and remote communities, the federal government risks seeing such communities passed over by the benefits of new IT. In the wired world of our near future, this may be tantamount to disenfranchisement. Furthermore, meaningful civic participation in the wired world will depend on more than simply having access to the Internet, broadband or otherwise. It is currently estimated that more than 20% of adult Canadians are functionally illiterate. Ensuring that such access will be meaningful, therefore, will require further work to overcome more recalcitrant social divides impeding full exploitation of these technologies for civic purposes, including race, class, gender, education and literacy. There are no easy technological solutions to dealing with these problems. These latter social divides will only be overcome by political will and imagination, broad social change, and no small amount of conflict and struggle.

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[86] Alcock and Lenihan, "Opening the E-Government File," 18.

Conclusion

Due to the relative novelty of initiatives in on-line government, the observations and conclusions put forward in this paper concerning the prospects for e-government are necessarily tentative and somewhat speculative. Nonetheless, as I have tried to show, the Canadian government's track record of using IT to restructure and reform its internal administration and service delivery dates back to the late 1980s. Sufficient time has elapsed to warrant some preliminary observations regarding the nature and trajectory of its IT-related activities. The brief history of the development of e-government in Canada presented here reveals an overwhelming focus on using IT for the purposes of administrative rationalization and the reform of service delivery. Measured against more expansive visions of e-government, the federal government's foray into "wiring" itself and its citizens has been relatively conservative, falling well short of anything like "digital democracy". Furthermore, even when measured on its own terms as a tool for the fiscally prudent management and delivery of services to the public, there are grounds for concern. While there are clearly cost-savings to be had in terms of IT's capacity to replace labour and overhead costs associated with traditional channels of service delivery, the indirect costs and high degree of risk associated with more ambitious public sector IT projects casts doubt on the conventional assumptions regarding IT investment and fiscal prudence. In addition, enthusiasm for IT's capacity to produce gains in terms of service delivery features such as speed and efficiency must not be allowed to obscure the fact that these can be, and in many cases have been, neutralized by the effect of substantive administrative and legislative changes to programs and services over the last decade and a half in Canada. Finally, even a genuine commitment to the deployment of IT to strengthen ties between Canadian citizens and the democratic process will likely be less transformative than the proponents of e-government suggest in the face of deeper, more historic, and more powerful features and forces within the institutional, economic, and social context of Canadian politics. Conventions of responsible government, neo-liberal public policy, globalization, and economic polarization will continue to exert a stronger influence on the character of Canadian democracy than, say, Moore's Law of computing power.

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