
Experiments with E-Democracy at the Quebec National Assembly

by Jean Bédard in collaboration with David Bolduc and Bernard Plourde

This document considers the state of e-democracy and presents an analysis of two on-line-consultation pilot projects conducted at the National Assembly by the Committee on Institutions in 2000 and 2002.

Democratic institutions in the majority of Western societies today are passing through a crisis of confidence because participation in elections and political life generally has declined. This growing indifference on the part of the citizenry is well documented, and it is spurring public bodies to seek innovative ways to bolster the confidence of the population in their elected representatives.¹

"Cyber-optimists" see the advent of new information technologies as extending a lifeline to our democracies. E-democracy has been perceived as a means of reviving the citizens' interest in public affairs and of revitalizing democratic institutions, whose ways are deemed less and less suited to contemporary realities.² Expectations were very high in the 1990s, but they have since been dashed. E-democracy is progressing more slowly than predicted. Even its most fervent advocates have been compelled to admit that it does not suffice merely to juxtapose "democracy" and "information technologies" in order to bring about an overnight revolution in democratic processes.

What exactly do we mean by "e-democracy"? In the larger sense this term refers to the use of information technologies by democratic agents (governments, Parliaments, the media, political organizations, citizens/electors) in governance and in political processes.³ In this article the notion of e-democracy will nonetheless be lim-

ited to citizen participation in the parliamentary process. In the Quebec context its other facets (electronic voting, online campaigns, online government, etc.) fall under the jurisdiction of organizations that are distinct from the National Assembly, such as the chief electoral officer, the government, and political parties.

Below we reflect on e-democracy and its possible consequences for the institution of Parliament in Quebec. More concretely we look at two experiments that the National Assembly has conducted in holding electronic consultations. The lessons drawn from these can guide the institution in bringing desirable adjustments to future exercises as well as in making unavoidable choices regarding citizen participation and the integration of information technologies into the proceedings of Parliament.

Parliament and the Challenge of E-Democracy

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines three levels of interaction between the citizen and the state:

- **Information.** A one-way relationship in which the state produces information and transmits it to the citizen.
- **Consultation.** A two-way relationship in which the citizen has the opportunity to make his or her views known.
- **Active participation.** A partnership between the state and the citizen, who is directly and actively involved in the process of policy formulation and development.⁴

This classification applies equally well to relations between the citizen and Parliament. These three levels of

Jean Bédard is Coordinator for Administrative Affairs at the National Assembly. David Bolduc is project manager on the Internet team and Bernard Plourde is Internet webmaster.

activity provide a yardstick with which it is possible to measure the degree of interaction achieved in the various e-democracy projects.

The very first step in e-democracy is the democratization of information. Like the majority of public bodies the National Assembly is well advanced in this area. Its internet site contains a sizable quantity of information on the Members, on current and previous debates, and on the various activities conducted by the institution.⁵ Indeed, in this respect the Assembly may be compared advantageously with many other Parliaments in Canada and around the world. We would note briefly that the website of the Parliament of Quebec distinguishes itself through its impressive historical section, the promptness with which it is updated, its video bank, and especially the fact that all parliamentary debates are indexed, thus making it possible, for example, to locate every speech made by any given Member with just a few clicks.

There is no doubt that internet technology has made a swift democratization of parliamentary information possible in Quebec.

A small group of citizens far from Parliament can now obtain information at the same time as a major lobbying firm established in the capital. We should make clear, however, that the quantity of public information produced by the Assembly has varied little during the past twenty years. What has changed with the arrival of the internet is the ease of access to this information. With a simple click a citizen can find out whether his or her Member has spoken on a subject of personal interest or locate all that has been said about a bill or about any other subject. Previously he or she would have had to go to a public library and pore over the *Journal des débats* (Hansard) for days to obtain the same result.

Although the databank that is the Assembly website must be continually enriched, and a number of improvements remain to be made in the way it is organized, the democratization of parliamentary information is an accomplished fact. Accordingly, we are now turning our attention to the second level of interaction: consultation.

With regard to the third level of interaction, that of "active participation," no proposal to achieve it in relations between Parliament and the citizens is now being examined. We must not neglect to give due consideration to this question, however, since the gradual integration of new information technologies into the consultative process could eventually raise citizens' ex-

pectations regarding opportunities to interact with Parliament.

The Assembly's Experiments in 2000 and 2002

Since parliamentary committees stand at the heart of exchanges between parliamentarians and citizens, it seemed natural to conduct our first experiments with e-democracy in that setting. These experiments were so conceived as to take account of the Standing Orders of the Assembly, which govern the conduct of proceedings in parliamentary committees. This cautious but proven approach had the advantage of integrating the new medium in the proceedings of Parliament rather than the reverse. The online-consultation project was thus defined as an extension of a general consultation conducted by a parliamentary committee.

Our first experiment with an online consultation, which was authorized by the Speaker of the Assembly in answer to a request from the chairman of the Committee on Institutions, was held from June 21 to September 18, 2000, to investigate the impact of the proposed Free Trade Zone For the Americas.

The consultation website was designed as a questionnaire that the user was invited to fill out by answering nine questions drawn from a reflection paper produced by the committee and entitled *Quebec and the Free Trade Zone For the Americas: political and socioeconomic effects*. An open-ended question not directly related to the reflection paper was added to allow internauts to give their views on any other facet of the Free Trade Zone For the Americas (FTZA) that they deemed pertinent. A hyperlink in the home page of the Assembly website led directly to a description of the committee's terms of reference and then to the questionnaire itself. Respondents were asked to register and to identify themselves formally (name, address, telephone number, etc.). The completed questionnaire was submitted to the clerk of the committee as a standard e-mail, and the respondent received an automated confirmation of receipt by e-mail.

The main objectives of the exercise were to encourage participation in parliamentary deliberations by citizens and small organizations and to help parliamentary committees to carry out their work by giving them an additional consultation tool.

A further objective consisted in demonstrating that using the internet would allow reductions in costs and in the time needed to receive, transmit, and process submissions.

Pursuant to the Standing Orders of the National Assembly, one of the requirements for participating in a general consultation is to submit 25 copies of a brief to the

committees secretariat. It was decided after due consideration that citizens who took part via the internet would be deemed to have submitted opinions rather than formal briefs, since the prerequisites were not the same for these two forms of participation.

Twenty-five valid opinions were received on the internet as against 39 "paper" briefs. Four of these opinions distinguished themselves by virtue of their more fully developed content, and two were selected to be transformed into briefs in order to allow their authors to appear before the committee on September 28, 2000.

On the whole the pilot project was carried off without difficulty, and the very same committee renewed the experience two years later.

The second online consultation was held from October 17 to December 20, 2002, on the reform of the electoral system. Committee hearings were to have been held in March of the current year, but the consultation could not be completed owing to the dissolution of the National Assembly. We can nonetheless highlight a number of interesting aspects of this online-consultation process.

The online consultation assumed essentially the same form in the Assembly website as had that of the pilot project on the FTZA. An introductory page outlined the committee's terms of reference, and a separate page presented a questionnaire that was to be filled out on line. The questionnaire contained a number of questions drawn from a reflection paper entitled *Reforming the electoral system in Quebec*.

The statistics on the number of visits to the site tell us that the consultation home page was visited 4,867 times for an average of 74 hits per day. The reflection paper was consulted 1,711 times.

Thirty-eight citizens submitted their opinions electronically. For the purpose of comparison we should note that the committee received 160 briefs, 32 of which were to have been presented during meetings of the committee. The opinions received were summarized and distributed to the Members in tabular form. One internaut who also sent a brief in traditional form was to have made a presentation during the public hearings.

Unlike the first consultation, this one allowed citizens to download the questionnaire in Word format in order to fill it out off line and send it to the committee by e-mail at a later time.

The results of these experiments with online consultations were generally satisfactory.

Although we had initially been somewhat fearful that we would face an avalanche of replies, in fact we did not. On the contrary, given the visibility of this consultation and the considerable interest surrounding the subjects it

covered, it is reasonable to conclude that the rate of participation was low. In hindsight, however, that is not surprising. After all, internet technology has existed for only a few years, and people do not instinctively take part in a general consultation organized by the Assembly merely because they possess a computer. The current procedure for transmitting briefs has been well established for decades, and most participants seek above all to meet parliamentarians in person.

In the long term, however, it is more than likely that a growing number of individuals and groups will learn to use this medium to make their views known to the Members. In witness of that we can cite the difficulties encountered by the American Congress, which is seriously beset with an avalanche of e-mails.⁶

The potentially prejudicial effect of mass e-mail sendings remains an abiding concern to those responsible for online consultations.

With regard to the quality of the opinions submitted, most were quite brief (two pages) and contained little substantiating information. The internet is a medium that favours speed and "spur-of-the-moment reactions" (somewhat like an open-line show), whereas matters examined in committee are complex and require reflection in depth. It was evident in the majority of cases that the reflection paper had not been read. A number of participants exhausted the subject after having made only two or three comments.

Fostering large-scale participation in parliamentary deliberations through internet technology has its limits. One thing is certainly clear: The great majority of citizens who wish to take part in online consultations are not experts in the subjects under study. That is perfectly normal, since experts are accustomed to availing themselves of the formal procedure in order to be invited before a committee. It must nevertheless be borne in mind that general consultations serve not only to seek the views of experts and those of the main socioeconomic groups but also to solicit opinions from the general population. From this point of view accessibility and quality of debate are not mutually exclusive; they can coexist and even complement each other. Thus, online consultations supplement traditional briefs as a means of expressing one's views during a general consultation.

We believe that certain improvements ought to be made. The questionnaire absolutely must be made more user friendly. During both consultations the online questionnaire was designed to mirror faithfully the contents

of the reflection paper. The objective was to encourage internauts to refer to the paper in order both to better inform them about the subject and to focus the debate on common points of reference. The risk inherent in this method resides in the fact that the reflection paper was not at all adapted to be read on the screen. As a result, during the consultation on the reform of the electoral system internauts who reached the page containing the questionnaire were faced with 22 data-entry fields for answers to some fifty questions!

The visual dimension of online consultations must also be thoroughly revised. Right now the visual first impression is clearly not very appealing. We should note that in the context of the pilot project there was no justification for an investment in this respect. During future consultations, however, greater effort must be made to render these pages easier to navigate.

Finally, a process for evaluating such consultations, if carried out systematically, would surely help the participants in these projects to better identify those aspects that need to be improved. It is particularly important to solicit comments and suggestions from the Members themselves; that could not be done during the first two consultations. A questionnaire should also be designed to collect the opinions of internauts regarding the online consultation.

Outlook For the Future

Certain experiments under way at other Parliaments herald an increased use of new information technologies in the parliamentary field in the relatively near future.

General consultations. Citizens can take part in consultations in a variety of ways. Besides the transmittal of an opinion or a brief by e-mail, participation in a discussion forum run by a committee appears to be emerging as a vehicle that will make it possible to integrate internet technology with the parliamentary proceedings. Some Parliaments and governments have already tried this approach, albeit with mixed results. The British government and the Swiss and French Parliaments have instituted such forums.

Presenting petitions. A few Parliaments, among them the Australian federal Parliament, have begun under certain circumstances to receive electronic petitions. Before we make any recommendations to parliamentarians in Quebec about this possibility, however, we must analyse all aspects of the question, both technological (the authenticity of the signatures) and procedural.

Clause-by-clause consideration of bills in parliamentary committees. The idea here is to allow citizens to make their opinions known during the legislative pro-

cess by giving them the opportunity to draft proposed amendments, clause by clause, to each bill. To our knowledge only one Parliament, the Chilean Senate, has undertaken a pilot project of this kind.

In general, the greater the degree of interaction that is achieved through an e-democracy project the more significant are the changes that must be made to the rules of parliamentary procedure to accommodate it. Since any alteration in the Standing Orders can have unexpected consequences for the balance of forces among the political groups within the Assembly, it is crucial that we proceed with extreme caution.

Prudent and methodical though we may be in our approach, we remain convinced that pressure will increase in the years to come to undertake new experiments with e-democracy. Indeed, to ignore information technologies as a means for bringing citizens closer to the institution of Parliament would itself entail certain risks.

With the arrival of new information technologies a growing number of institutions – whether they be ministries and government agencies, the media, or any number of other organizations in civil society – have developed the capacity to create new venues for exchange and expression. Although these changes attest to a flourishing social life and must therefore be welcomed, they may well alter the traditional role of Parliament.

The National Assembly stands at the heart of democracy in Quebec. It is the place where the great issues of the day are debated and where the will of the people is expressed through their elected representatives. Parliament cannot remain on the sidelines in respect of what other organizations, such as ministries and civil agencies, are doing in their relations with the citizens; if it did so, it would risk seeing its role in the development of policies and legislation marginalized.

A major constraint on all e-democracy projects consists in ensuring the equal treatment of those citizens who use the internet and those who continue to rely on traditional vehicles. Under no circumstances should the Assembly favour the technologically sophisticated in our society to the detriment of those who have yet to embrace new technologies.

Unremitting vigilance in this regard is imperative, for it is in the minutiae that inequities will make themselves felt. Our experience during the consultation on the FTZA offers a good example: Citizens who sent their briefs by the traditional route were obliged to assume the costs of photocopying themselves, whereas the two internauts whose opinions were converted into briefs paid nothing.

From another point of view the most important technical obstacle to the development of e-democracy is com-

puter security. This consideration did not receive priority during the first two online consultations for the following reasons:

- No computer system is 100% secure. To have awaited the creation of such a system before launching the online-consultation project would have been tantamount to developing nothing at all;
- We thought it important to gain experience with what an online consultation ought to be and ought not to be before creating costly information-security architecture.

Security mechanisms have been evolving rapidly during the past few years. The issue of security (the integrity and authenticity of information), with respect to protecting both personal data and the Assembly's computer network, will occupy an increasingly pre-eminent place in future consultation projects.

Conclusion

Our first two experiments with online consultations were successful notwithstanding a modest rate of participation. These encouraging results have convinced us of the validity of an exercise that consists in anchoring the introduction of information technologies in the parliamentary process and in avoiding overly ambitious megaprojects that can lead to unforeseen consequences. The problem is not so much to adapt democracy to technology as it is to adapt technology to democracy.

Although these forays in e-democracy were favourably received by Members and participants, we note that the furthering of e-democracy does not appear to have a high priority for either group. They find these developments interesting, but at present they discern no urgent unfulfilled need for e-democracy. We may thus expect that any initiatives of this kind which are undertaken in the years to come will be more in the nature of experiments than a true integration of these technologies into the proceedings of Parliament.

One thing is certain, however: Internet technology is here to stay, and its expansion into the majority of the spheres of human activity (including democracy) will continue. The earliest statistics on visits to the Assembly website go back to April 1997, when it was visited 6,700 times in one month. In November 2002 the number of monthly visits exceeded 130,000. The Assembly administration is duty bound to prepare itself for future changes and to adapt its methods of work to the new technological realities, as it did in the past with the arrival of television.

In the final analysis, it is those who make up the Assembly, that is to say the Members themselves, who will dictate the evolution of e-democracy in its participative form at the Parliament of Quebec.

Notes

1. Several books and articles have been published on this subject, the most influential of which is probably that of Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000).
2. Pippa Norris, "Democratic Divide?", American Political Science Association: "*Media Virtue and Disdain*," August 31-September 2, 2000.
3. This definition is to be found in the site of Steven Clift, an expert in e-democracy: <http://www.publicus.net/articles/edemresources.html> (accessed on March 12, 2003).
4. OCDE, Public Management Policy Brief: Engaging Citizens in Policy Making: Information, Consultation, and Public Participation, Paris, OCDE, 2001.
5. As at March 10, 2003, the site had nearly 35,000 files representing about 110 gigaoctets. Besides text files there are a constantly growing number of audiovisual files.
6. In 2002 Senators' offices received, on average, 55,000 e-mails per month. (E-Mail Overload in Congress: Managing a Communications Crisis, Congress Online Project, 2002; <http://www.congressonlineproject.org/email.html>) (accessed on March 12, 2003).