

WORLD E-PARLIAMENT CONFERENCE, GENEVA (10 OCTOBER 2007)

Session 4: Are legislators and citizens ready for new technologies?

Ross Ferguson, eDemocracy Programme Director, Hansard Society

Years after the analogy was first shared, parliamentary politics is still characterised as a 'spectator sport' and a failed one at that. Critics say that politics is a game that few get to play, where many are left looking on without knowing the rules and being unable to follow the play.

Effective Parliaments are at the core of vibrant representative democracies. But our Parliaments are underperforming, particularly in their engagement with citizens.

This presentation deals with the issue of how underperforming Parliaments might be reinvigorated by mobilising information and communications technology, and seeks to answer the question of whether legislators and citizens have the appetite and are prepared for the shifts in political life that contemporary ICT heralds.

*

I want to start with citizens. I will take the British as my test-case subjects.

The UK woke up to the issue of citizen engagement - or more precisely, citizen disengagement - following the 2001 general election. Voter turnout was 59% - the lowest it had been since 1918. Turnout at the previous general election in 1997 was, in turn, down on 1992.

In 2005 the general turnout rose by 2 points, but amongst the youngest voters the turnout dropped a further 2% to 37%.

Electoral turnout is only one measure of the health of a polity. Perhaps a more credible measure is to look at political awareness and participation between elections.

The Hansard Society has carried out an annual Audit of Political Engagement with the Electoral Commission since 2004. This research is interesting because it takes a reading of the British public's 'political pulse'.

Amongst the data revealed in the latest Audit (covering 2006/2007) is that only 34% are satisfied with the political system in the UK, and only 29% say that they are satisfied with their elected representatives in general.

69% of people want to play an active part in the politics and policy making. However, only 39% of people believe that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to do so, and only 33% think that when people like them get involved that it has an impact.

So the picture presented here is of a rather downbeat, but crucially, not apathetic political culture.

*

Interestingly, at the same time as turnout is dropping in the UK, access to ICT is increasing in the home and the workplace.

There are an estimated 33 million internet users in the UK, and more mobile phones in the country than there are people. 2 in 3 homes have a digital TV service.

The largest demographic group of internet users are 18 - 24 year-olds. Yet, the online world is not just the domain of the young and male.

In its 2007 report on the country's communications market, Ofcom confirmed what had been suspected for a while: women aged 25-34 spend over 20% more time online than their male counterparts. 'Silver surfers' also account for an increasing amount of internet usage, with nearly 30% of total time spent on the internet accounted for by people over the age of 50.

Social networking and shopping sites dominate the Top 20 sites most visited by UK web users. 17 million people do their banking online, which is 2 million more than those who do it over the phone.

Businesses in Britain have realised the need to quickly adapt to the internet. In 2006, British advertisers spent over £2 billion in online advertising; this was double the global average.

And, as a provider of information and services, the UK Government has also gone to lengths to invest in the web. Although the money the government has spent on its service-orientated sites has been criticised by industry experts, the fact that 6 in 10 web users have accessed the sites in the last 12 months suggests that the government is doing something right.

*

The dip in political engagement and the rise in access and use of ICT are coincidental developments. But of course, when we look at the way citizens are using ICT for leisure, commerce and to access public services, it is natural to wonder how the public would respond to opportunities to engage with politics and politicians online.

The Hansard Society set up its eDemocracy Programme in 1997 to specifically study the impacts of ICT on engagement and political processes.

Since these early days the Programme has sought to analyse who it is that is using online engagement sites when they are launched by political institutions, what they get out of the experience, and what it is they like or do not like about the sites.

Over the course of its ten years the Programme has taken particular interest in parliamentary sites. But since 2005 we have also been carrying out analysis of the demographics, attitudes and behaviours of citizens on engagement sites owned by central government, under the auspices of the Digital Dialogues initiative (www.digitaldialogues.org.uk).

So far we have captured 18 case studies, and I want to share three findings that have stood out to me and which I think are particularly prevalent in respect of our discussion here today.

*

Firstly, across the case studies, users consisted of a mix of demographics. They were a range of ages, ethnicities and genders. In general, men were more likely to use the sites than women; those between the ages of 25 - 55 years old were the most active - but only just. For example, in cases such as a consultation on the European Youth Parliament and one on the family courts system, there were more women than men taking part.

The vast majority of users regarded themselves as regular internet users. And most of these people accessed the internet from home.

The second finding is perhaps the most important.

In terms of previous political engagement, some of the users had voted in an election, and some had contacted their Member of Parliament in the past. But efficacy was low and most felt disconnected from central government, saying that 'people like them' were not involved or listened to when the government made decisions.

For the majority of users taking part in a case study was their first formal interaction with the policy making process.

Taking just three of the forum-based case studies demonstrates, for example:

- in the DWP's Welfare Reform Forum, 83% had never participated in a government or parliamentary consultation before;
- in the Communities and Local Government web forum on its local government White Paper 82% participated in a consultation for the first time;
- and in the Food Standards Agency web forum on the regulation of food businesses, 59% took part in their first consultation.

The catalyst for these individuals was that the opportunity to engage was made available online.

The third factor I want to highlight is that 78% of users said that they would engage with the government online in the future. A similar number said that they would recommend online engagement to others, and in responses to open-ended questioning, many suggested that the rate of their involvement is likely to increase as opportunities to engage online become more widespread and regular in their occurrence.

This is exciting data. Firstly, because it demonstrates an interest in engaging online; secondly, because it suggests that online engagement can convert

passive citizens into active citizens; and thirdly because it is very recent data, and I believe it captures a recent positive trend in demand from citizen users.

Although it is gathered from government case studies, the data reflects findings from parliamentary case studies.

For example, in summer 2006, the Defence Select Committee held an online forum as part of its inquiry into the education of children in military families. 90% of the users had never participated in a parliamentary consultation previously, and 75% had never contacted their MP before.

*

Having covered the interest of citizens, I would like to now close with some observations about the use of technology-based engagement tools by Parliaments and their Members. Or perhaps not so much their use as their disposition.

If Parliaments are to up their performance, they have to be better at communicating.

Better communication is partly about parliaments making information more accessible and improving its distribution. A parliament should relate its work to the concerns of those in the 'outside world'; and work with - rather than against - the media to communicate effectively with the public.

However, in our contemporary societies effective communications are increasingly moving from a transmission model to one of interaction, in which consumers of information can also be its producers, viewers become users.

Such a conceptual approach is a departure from the conventional communications methods and policies employed by our parliaments.

What this amounts to is that, in respects of being better at engagement, Parliaments need to innovate. And unfortunately that is not something Parliaments have a good reputation for.

*

Parliaments have variously approached internet-orientated ICT as, first, a set of administrative tools that help manage knowledge and staff; second, a means of publishing and distributing information in the public domain; and, finally, as a facilitator of citizen engagement.

However, in the UK and other Parliaments these three areas have not been pursued in a coherent, strategic manner.

It would not be true to say that Parliaments have not been innovative around engagement and use of ICT as its facilitator.

In the UK you could point to a number of examples. 1996 saw the first website to be launched by an MP; in 2003 an MP held the first online constituency surgery; and in 2006 a select committee became the first to accept inquiry submissions via mobile phone.

But again, these practices have never truly progressed in the corporate or Members' minds beyond their value as PR exercises.

At a Member-level, most parliamentarians have not accepted the clear-and-present danger of disengagement.

Disengagement has not, by their reading, affected the 'bottom line' of politics: votes are still cast, governments formed and their programmes scrutinised by Parliaments before they go out and become the laws and services of people's everyday lives.

Yet, from the data we have seen that people are not satisfied by this approach to representation.

They want something more. Something more tangible and more involved.

There has long been an aspiration that runs something like:

The public - in any parliamentary democracy - have a right to expect a parliament which communicates its work promptly, clearly and usefully, but also one that reaches out to all citizens and invites participation and interaction.

Well, today that aspiration can be delivered on through the mobilisation of ICT. It can save Members time, it can make them more visible and less remote. We have known this for a long time, but we have yet to have a Parliament who takes the theory puts it into practice.

Of course, meanwhile, citizens are using the technology to educate themselves, to deliberate and to organise. They use the technology to talk with the media, with business, even with government. So why not their parliamentarians?

My point is that, today, the parliamentarian who does use ICT is a relevant and an effective parliamentarian.

*

If there is no political leadership for better engagement for the benefit of representation, should it then be a concern for parliamentary officials? Should

they promote engagement for the benefit of more effective and efficient law making and scrutiny?

Yes – they should. I will simply that surely Parliamentary staff, as professionals – want to advise and support Members as best they can.

*

It is said that an innovative organisation is one that is adaptive, agile, able to learn quickly about the environment around it, sense opportunities and be in a position to mobilise resources when required.

However, such an organisation also needs to have a sense of stability, continuity and purpose.

Parliaments have the latter qualities in spades. But on the former qualities they are sorely lacking.

That has to change if our Parliaments are to continue to play their pivotal role in representative democracies.

Our Parliaments are certainly beneficiaries of innovation and engagement, but I think they can and should also be the crucibles.

Thank you

*