

School of Public Policy & Governance

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Can Ottawa Regain its Leadership in Government IT?

Notes for Comments at the “Reform by Formers” Panel at the
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Purpose

It is a pleasure to share a panel with Mel Cappe, former Clerk of the Privy Council and Jodi White, former Chief of Staff to Prime Minister Campbell. We have been asked to reflect on IT reforms in the federal government during the early 1990s to see if there are lessons that might be relevant to the conference theme “make the shift to Government 2.0.” We have been asked specifically to comment on the role of individual leadership, the role of central agencies, and the interaction between elected officials and public servants.

What does it mean to make the shift to Government 2.0? The best definition that I have found for Government 2.0 is:

“harnessing new models of Web-based collaboration to reinvent the way governments develop policy, partner across institutional boundaries, and engage their constituents.”¹

To be provocative, I will pose the question “Can Ottawa regain its leadership in government IT?” If the answer is yes, the shift to Government 2.0 can be made more effectively than if the answer is no.

In my remarks, I will distinguish between three broad areas of government IT: 1) back office systems; 2) front office systems; and, 3) knowledge management and policy networking.

IT priorities in a line department

Let me start with my recollection of the view of a line department two decades ago. I recall my first conversation with Mel Cappe when I arrived at Consumer and Corporate Affairs in 1987.

Mel was the policy ADM and he came into my office and said “Deputy, with respect, I know you PCO guys haven’t learned how to type but I’m sure you support our department’s aspirations to be innovators

¹ This definition comes from the social networking site SocialText, which has launched a Government 2.0 project to “equip subscriber organizations with the insights required to harness new models of Web-based collaboration to reinvent the way they develop policy, partner across institutional boundaries, and engage and serve their constituents.” http://www.socialtext.net/wiki-government-and-democracy/index.cgi?government_2_0, October 26, 2008. Although neither the Treasury Board of Canada nor Wikipedia provide definitions the term was popularized in the early 2005 book by William Eggers called *Government 2.0: Using Technology to Improve Education, Cut Red Tape, Reduce Gridlock, and Enhance Democracy* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, January 2005) and Don Tapscott refers to Government 2.0 in his 2006 book with Anthony Williams, *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything* (Penguin, updated 2008).

and leaders in fulfilling our legislated mandate. We therefore ask that you learn how to use the computer terminal we have installed beside your desk. Here is your password; please don't forget it." So I spent many evenings during my first few months at CCA with *Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing* and I still use passwords built from the one Mel gave me.

I don't recall the back office systems for finance and personnel being a huge priority, partly because we knew that central and common service agencies were reviewing how best to tackle them. On the other hand, developing front office systems to transform the department's program delivery was crucial for several bureaus. During the late 1980s the department introduced leading-edge technology in patents, trademarks and corporate names.

But it was in the third area of government IT, the one that has subsequently been given a variety of names including knowledge management and policy networking, that I found most intriguing. Developments in networking hardware and software seemed to offer immense possibilities for improving executive management in the federal government. Mel and I (and most of the executive team at CCA and then at TBS) were early adopters of outline and presentation software, of management by e-mail, and of the first PDAs, including those early hand-helds with modem connectivity. In those pre-BlackBerry days we could use our Sharp Organizers for taking notes in meetings with the Clerk (and even composing e-mails to be sent later through a modem) without looking like we were multi-tasking with wireless messages.

With respect to relations with the centre I remember the central agencies as being broadly supportive of departments trying within the constrained resource available to become world leaders in IT innovation for program delivery. Canada was way ahead of the Americans and most other countries in automating its patent and trademark processes and, with NUANS, I believe we were the first country to implement automated corporate name search.

Treasury Board, TIMS and PS 2000

I was reassigned to the Treasury Board in 1989 and Mel came soon after. One of our mandates from the Clerk, Paul Tellier, was to have the Treasury Board Secretariat and the Office of the Comptroller General look at enterprise-wide policies through the lens of Public Service 2000 reform. Recall that the two dominant themes of PS2000 were empowerment and innovation. With the help of Andy Macdonald, the Comptroller General who chaired TIMS (Information Management Sub-Committee), and Richard Paton, Deputy Secretary of Administrative Policy and their dedicated staff we made it much easier for departments to get on with their IT innovations. (I might note that although we made it possible for mid-level managers to purchase PCs, we still treated mobile phones as a privilege that required handset-by-handset approval of Treasury Board ministers!)

The perennial issue of how much to do at the enterprise level and how much to do at the business-line level was always present, of course. In retrospect, we may have tilted too far in the line-of-business direction for back office systems. While we helped reduce the number from 40 or so to 5 more-or-less-shared systems, we did not set the stage for a unified system for personnel management or finance. Other governments have subsequently gone much farther and some would claim that mandating common systems can facilitate much-needed administrative process reform beyond IT. I do not think this is an area where the federal government could claim to be a world leader.

I think we made good progress in those pre-internet days with knowledge management and executive networking through SEN (the senior manager e-mail system) and ConnEXions (an early attempt to create a central bulletin board for managers to share files and comments.)

We probably did not take seriously enough the challenges of information management policy – either in assuring maintenance of government records or in working through the full implications of Access to Information. I understand that you still have some challenges in these areas today.

Where we were leaders

But we aspired to be the best in the world in many aspects of government IT. And, arguably, we were, despite – or in some cases partly because of – the constant pressure of expenditure restraint.

In 1990 no other major government had all its executives connected through a seamless e-mail system. In 1993 we were the first national government to have an enterprise CIO. Mel and many of you in this room did so well with Government On-Line that by the turn of the century Canada was number one in Accenture's rankings of e-government and service delivery.

These achievements were supported by ministers in governments of different political stripes. All the Treasury Board Presidents I served encouraged those IT initiatives in the early 1990s: Harvey Andre from Calgary, Gilles Loiselle from Québec, Jim Edwards from Edmonton and Art Eggleton from Toronto. And I understand that Lucienne Robillard from Montréal was crucial to the GOL initiative later in the decade.

The challenge of Government 2.0

But then the environment changed. By 2006, when our Blue Ribbon Panel on Grants and Contributions took a detailed look at the relevant IT and administrative processes, we were surprised to find how far the federal government lagged behind some other jurisdictions in some crucial areas.

Our Panel had visions of the federal government doing for grants and contributions what the Canada Revenue Agency had done for income tax filing and on-line information, recognizing that processing a grant application requires more managerial judgment than processing tax returns. CIO Ken Cochrane and his colleagues were very helpful to the Panel in outlining the kinds of process reviews that would be necessary across government. It was clear that virtually no process change to improve grants and contributions administration could be implemented through improved IT alone. The changes had to include all those who signed off on the application and all those who were involved in communications, including the Minister's office. The government has embarked on a comprehensive approach to improving grants and contributions administration, but it will be a long road.

Over the last year I have been struck by the challenges the federal government faces in using Web 2.0 techniques in knowledge management and policy networking.

I am coordinating a project funded by the Canada School of Public Service and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council to develop a Public Policy and Governance Portal to help connect government analysts with experts in Canada's universities and think tanks. We have almost completed a powerful Web 2.0 platform built on Microsoft Office Sharepoint Server 2007. This is the kind of social networking and knowledge management platform that Mel and I could only dream of in the 1990s.

But public servants today find it more difficult to be early adopters of new technology than we did during the Public Service 2000 era when all managers were encouraged to innovate and to do what they could to move the federal government to a leadership position.

The difference in the environment can be summarized in two words: risk aversion. We noted this in our Blue Ribbon Panel report and Jodi White's Public Policy Forum noted it in the *Destination: Excellence* report. The Clerk reiterated the theme in his 2008 *Report to the Prime Minister on the Public Service*. To quote his report:

"We need a better balance between risk taking and accountability. This requires reducing the current web of rules that saps initiative and stifles innovation. Effective organizations have robust and effective risk management systems. This means creating an environment that encourages the reasonable use of discretion by managers and employees within a framework of risk management and accountability for the results."

When I say that risk aversion is antithetical to making the shift to Government 2.0 it is not a partisan comment. Just as the environment of innovation and empowerment was fostered by governments of different stripes, the tightening of rules has been overseen by governments of both major parties.

Three reasons for hope

To close on an optimistic note, let me suggest three reasons why the environment might improve in the next few years.

The first reason is that there are pendulum swings in public management philosophy. Fashions change. Although we pushed the pendulum a fair way in the innovation-empowerment direction in the early 1990s and the pendulum came back hard in the accountability-control direction over the last few years, it should soon be ready to move back in the direction that rewards leadership and innovation. Indeed, the Head of the Public Service is calling for such a shift.

The second reason is the combination of fiscal restraint and demands for government action brought on by the world financial crisis. Both conditions could shift the management focus away from an obsession with process compliance and reporting and toward an imperative to innovate and actually get things done. Let us hope that this is one of the silver linings of the current turmoil.

The third reason for hope is young people – as the Net Generation becomes more politically and bureaucratically important, the aspirations for the kinds of innovation associated with Government 2.0 will receive more attention from ministers and public service leaders.

So I hope the answer to my question "Can Ottawa regain its leadership in government IT?" is "We are sure going to try."

Thank you.