

THE LOW ROAD TO DEMOCRATIC REFORM:

CONSTITUENCY OFFICES, PUBLIC SERVICE PROVISION
AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

A report to the Democratic Reform Secretariat of the Privy Council Office of Canada

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ABOUT THE TEXT

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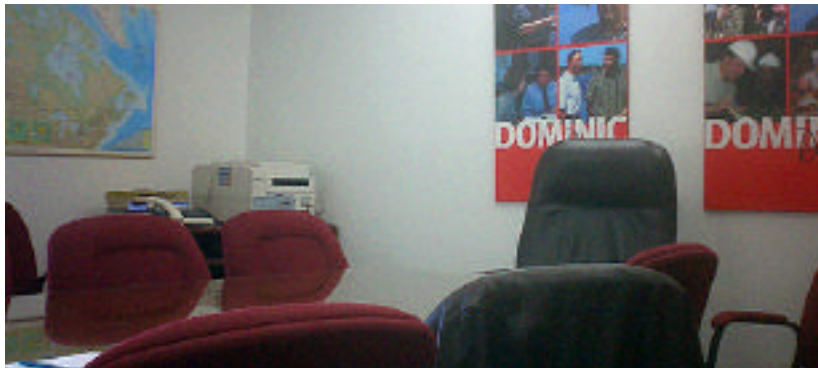
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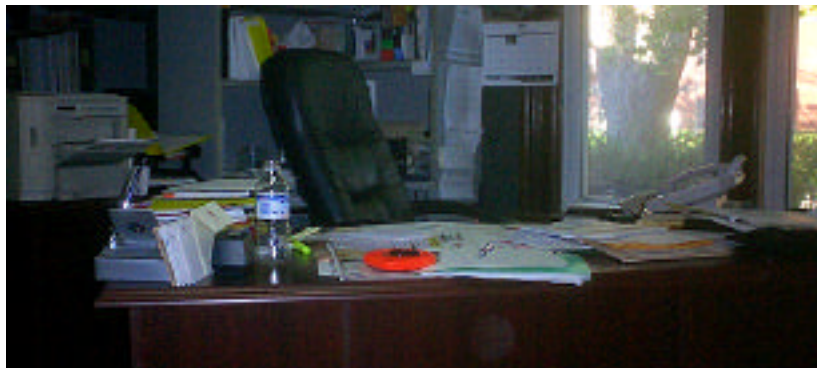
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MEETING AMANDA K.



IN JUNE 2004, IN THE MIDST OF THE FEDERAL ELECTION, I MADE a final detour along the road to St. John's, Newfoundland. It was late in the day, and I hadn't called ahead but I wanted to visit one more office. This was the third office I would visit on what ultimately would become a four month tour across Canada – a journey that would soon become known as 'The Constituency Project'.

I arrived shortly before closing. Sitting behind the front desk was a woman in her forties named Amanda K. I started to tell my story. I was a student from the London School of Economics and I was visiting Newfoundland to pilot a research project about the role of constituency offices. I had sent a letter several weeks before notifying their office that I might visit. No, I didn't need to speak to the MP. I wanted to speak to her or anyone else who worked in the office. I had a questionnaire. It would probably take twenty or thirty minutes. I left Amanda's office almost two hours later.

She was surprised. No one had ever come to ask her about her work, much less her opinion about the relationship between the day-to-day, local politics that played out in her office and the 'big politics' in Ottawa.

In every way, Amanda was a model of discretion and even-mindedness but her insights were also penetrating and sometimes raw. She spoke plainly about the people who came to her office and their needs. Some were bewildered by a programme or service. Others were angry about a gov-

ernment policy. She wished she had a nickel for every time a member of the public reminded her who paid her salary. But she also said that many people were nervous about approaching her or her boss. Rightly or wrongly, they felt their problem was too small and "hated to be a bother." Some were at the end of their rope, and others were just plain frauds.

In short, Amanda got to meet everyone in her community who didn't fit the forms, policies or procedures prescribed by government protocols. Her office was the bureau of last resort, the government's unofficial help desk and judging from her bulging filing cabinets, business was good.

"You know, the worst thing is when you have to call a constituent and tell them that you've tried everything and there's just nothing you can do. It might be a student loan that's about to be collected, or a hearing that's gone wrong. It might be a family custody issue or a bankruptcy or a problem with taxes. **You try and help because they've turned to you having tried everywhere else. They might not be blameless, but you think they deserve a chance. And then you find out there's nothing you can do. The trouble is that doesn't compute in most people's minds. To them, government is rich and all-powerful and by comparison what they need is something very small.** And you can't help but think – especially in some cases – that you've failed them and any confidence or faith they had in what you do – not as a party, but as a government – is gone."

For most Canadians government works well, but there is also a grow-

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ing sense that it could work better. As the recent 2005 *Portraits of Canada* survey explains, more and more Canadians are expressing doubts about their electoral system. They remain unswayed by federal-provincial squabbling. They value the honesty and ethics of their representatives above all else and they're increasingly impatient with poor service from any level or department of government. Fully fifty-five percent of Canadians believe that significant changes to our political institutions are needed to make them more open and democratic.

Travelling across this country and speaking with people like Amanda K., I've had the unusual opportunity to look at our parliamentary system from its periphery, from what I call the "root system." [From these travels, one lesson is clear: in an age when all politics are personal, meaningful reforms to our democratic institutions require a clear understanding about how people experience politics.](#) What's at issue is the relationship between citizen and state – a relationship that's increasingly under stress. On this subject, I was happy to find an untapped source of expertise among the constituency assistants who staff the local end of parliament and who are among a small élite of frontline workers in government who help to broker this relationship.

This report details my thinking and research to-date. It explains why democratic reform deserves to be considered from the bottom-up and why 'low

road' political spaces like constituency offices may ultimately give us greater purchase in understanding and addressing the growing disconnect between citizens and their government. It concludes with a series of scenarios – four short stories that suggest how constituency offices might evolve – as well as a list of recommendations and proposals for future research.



Nova Scotia



Quebec

Report

TAKING THE LOW ROAD

THE THING ABOUT CANADIAN SOCIETY IS THAT IT JUST KEEPS changing. We constantly astonish and challenge ourselves with our ability to metabolise new ideas, new fashions, new people, new mores. What was unthinkable for one generation becomes completely acceptable to the next. It's not so much that change is good – individually we may agree or disagree with the direction or momentum of any range of issues – so much as that within our society *change itself is embraced*.

Few policies adapt well to new circumstances. Old laws and regulations are constantly falling out of fashion and out of date. This is why our democratic infrastructure places such a heavy emphasis on the creation and amendment of various codes. The presumption of change is the natural bias of our political system.

We protect this bias with its opposite: the appearance of permanence and the ballast of constitutional guarantee. To the average person reading the daily newspaper, with the exception of the occasional crisis, nothing much seems to change. Like the passenger on a high speed train, it's difficult to gauge how fast you're travelling by simply looking out the window. Even our parliament buildings are a temporal fantasy, designed to anchor a future politics to a partly mythological past. Constructed anew in 1919, we chose the comforting reassurance of gothic design while Europe, already stuffed with history, went modern.

But permanence is usually an illusion. Part of the reason for Canada's

much-envied success as a country and as political enterprise is surely the adaptivity and accessibility of its political culture and institutions. We began the past century with a vitriolic racism that saw Asian immigrants sent to work camps yet we concluded it with the creation of a Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the appointment of an Asian immigrant to our highest office as Governor-General.

What Michael Ignatieff aptly named the "Rights Revolution" in his 2000 Massey Lecture, has steadily recreated Canada from within, and it has done so with little violence and very few of the confrontations that have accompanied this revolution in other parts of the world. Towards these challenges, we can say that Canadian democracy has proved itself to be both highly resilient and highly adaptive. The state has steadily widened the sphere of access and voice to encompass virtually all those who live within its borders.

Borrowing Stewart Brand's metaphor for how old buildings evolve to serve new uses, Canadian democracy has *learned* over time, and become increasingly well-adjusted to the needs and the interests of its citizens. This *democracy-that-learns* and a robust economy are surely two key reasons why Canadians continue to rank their quality of life higher than do the citizens of any other nation.

But there is also little question that Canadian democracy could become more adaptive still. Public leaders and political scientists have recently



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become alarmed by the public's growing disengagement from the electoral process, by declining party membership, and the high levels of cynicism towards politics that persist. This concern has sparked new initiatives that aim to renew and reform our democratic institutions. It's not so much that Canadian democracy is in crisis – far from it – but a new round of learning and adaptation has certainly begun.

So far, considerable attention has been paid to what I'll call 'the high road to democratic reform.' A high road approach focuses on the formal systems that articulate the shape and function of our political institutions. Reforming the senate, adopting a constitutional amendment, re-balancing the authority of parliament, changing our electoral system, severing ties with the monarchy, creating a new province: each of these objectives may be desirable or even necessary requisites for renewing the public's sense of political engagement. But they are also the least malleable and most change-adverse of the institutions and options available to us. High thresholds of consensus prevent their easy modification and considerable political capital is required to secure significant reform. In this light, Prime Minister Paul Martin's 'democratic deficit' might in fact be an 'adaptivity deficit' that has grown as a consequence of the inability of these political institutions to evolve.

By contrast, the low road invites its travellers along a different path. If electoral systems are to political theorists what cathedrals and sky-

scrapers are to architects, then the triplicate form, the telephone query, and the signage on a government office are the truck and trade of the low road thinker. Their concern is the everyday experience of government. They believe that democratic reform and public service reform are flip sides of the same civic coin. [To the low road thinker, genuine engagement and perhaps the rekindling of a more animated relationship between citizens and their state can only be achieved through participatory experiences, not simply more accurately representative assemblies. This means that the trust gap that has widened within almost every western democracy cannot be wholly addressed through electoral reform alone.](#) Creating a more representative portrayal of political opinion in our legislative assemblies is a worthwhile and laudable goal, but so too is the enrichment of whatever means we have to deepen and sustain an ongoing political conversation between politicians and the citizens they represent.

Notably, constituency offices are one of the few pieces of physical and local infrastructure our political system affords to maintaining this connection. Outside of the parliament in Ottawa and the quadrennial ballot booth, there exist few other formal spaces for a measured and ongoing expression of a citizen's political interests.

In part, this makes constituency offices an interesting and overlooked anomaly within the Westminster system Canada inherited. Arguably, among our political institutions, constituency offices serve as a rare

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amending space where citizens and their representative can exchange views. They may not achieve agreement, but these offices do support the possibility of greater understanding through exchange and a reciprocal kind of political learning. If this sounds either utopian or naïve, I would argue this is because our expectations of a constituency-based politics are much too low. We enjoy the memory and experience of nearly two hundred years of chamber-based parliamentary governance, but constituency offices are a much more recent innovation, barely forty years old.

Alarming, many proponents now calling for electoral reform make virtually no account of how their proposals would affect this local institution and the day-to-day relationship they make possible between constituents and their MP. Against the diminishing returns of a riding-based, majoritarian electoral system, these proposals obviate the value of one of its least appreciated but potentially most important attributes.

KEEP IN TOUCH

It's a rare event that an extension to parliament is invented without any design or debate, yet essentially, the introduction of constituency offices to Canada was a spontaneous act that didn't occur until an enterprising MP decided to create one. Credit at the federal level is shared between Ed Broadbent, who opened an office funded in part by the Canadian

Autoworkers Union in 1968 and Flora Macdonald, who opened her Kingston office with the aid of a part-time university student in 1973.

Herb Grey, until recently Canada's longest serving parliamentarian and a former deputy prime minister, remembers when constituency offices didn't exist. A bachelor still living with his parents when he was first elected in 1962, Mr. Grey remembers shouldering his mother with the burden of answering the phone when he was in Ottawa.

This was not unusual. Prior to the creation of constituency offices and the gradual rise of parliamentary budgets to fund their operation, many MPs relied on family members or secretarial support from their former place of employment to attend to local details and relay urgent messages to Ottawa. It's worth remembering, too, that until recently the parliamentary cycle was closely geared to the agricultural calendar. The farmer-politician could comfortably spend the winter in Ottawa and be back by spring, quite literally in time to sow the fields.

Three factors combined leading to the creation of the current system. Firstly, by the late 1960s air travel in Canada had almost fully matured. Diefenbaker's 1965 whistle stop campaign would be one of the last times politicians regularly used the rails for long-haul travel. Today, daily flights are scheduled to points within a hundred kilometres of the vast majority of constituencies, enabling MPs to leave Ottawa most Thursday nights, spend Friday and often Saturday occupied with constituency affairs

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and return to Ottawa late on Sunday. It's a hectic schedule that is said to take an unhealthy toll on MPs, particularly those outside of Ontario and Quebec. But if a recent poll of New Brunswick MLAs holds true for their federal cousins, then a significant majority of MPs also wish that they had more time — not less — for constituency work. Politicians regularly cite the time spent in their constituencies as some of their most gratifying and productive time in office.

Secondly, a rise in the number of female and non-professional MPs may also have contributed to the demand for federally-funded constituency offices. It's reasonable to speculate that one of the reasons Flora Macdonald opted to create a dedicated constituency office was that she did not have access to the kinds of secretarial or familial support available to her professional, male colleagues. Without those options, the model she had seen in the UK during a visit there in the 1950s was understandably and especially attractive. Her 1972 campaign slogan "Keep in Touch!" was in part fulfilled by opening a small office where constituents could walk in off the street or make twenty minutes appointments to talk about "anything and everything." "We kept seeing people until we got it done," said Ms. Macdonald in an interview with the *Hill Times* earlier this year. In effect, the funding of dedicated local offices helped to even the field with professionals – particularly doctors, lawyers and business people – who continued to draw on local support during their time in office.

Lastly, the creation of a local office realised the desire of some MPs to do more than simply legislate. Ed Broadbent recalls that as part of the 1960s generation that had thought a lot about how democracies could become more participatory, the creation of a local office was an obvious step. "Before constituency offices, MPs were seen as people you sent to Ottawa simply to legislate, not to provide service. I was a young academic then... and I believed that MPs had a kind of service-role to play in addition to their legislative role." [Conveniently, this desire to expand the role of the MP to include advocacy on behalf of constituents coincided with the rapid expansion of the welfare state throughout the sixties and seventies. The growing range of government programmes led to a dramatic increase in the opportunities and occasions for constituents to seek recourse or information from their MP.](#) Today, the citizen and state have even more occasions to exchange information, transact payments and voice opinions. The notion of MPs intervening only on behalf of a constituent in some unusual and dire circumstance has been replaced by the daily chore of casework, with constituency staff regularly navigating and negotiating the system on behalf of citizens. Though his participatory objectives have remained largely unfulfilled, clearly, Mr. Broadbent was prescient in his design of a local office that would serve members of the public and provide assistance in dealing with the government.

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CALL YOUR MP

Thirty seven years after Mr. Broadbent hung his first shingle, constituency offices have become a well-established feature of our political system. Few MPs would want to chance not opening a local office. The optics, much less the utility, of maintaining a constituency office are viewed as overwhelmingly positive. Following the 2003 redistricting that expanded the catchment of many rural and northern ridings, some MPs have elected to open small secondary offices or 'satellites' throughout their ridings. These mini-offices may only open one or two afternoons a week, but for relatively little money, they allow the MP to assert their presence in the community and demonstrate their commitment to local issues.

This mixing of political and public interest is one reason why many constituency offices have acquired a distinctly partisan stigma. Regrettably, the perception persists that an MP's office is a covertly partisan space, run by campaign workers or relatives who have temporarily traded in their lawn signs for a desk job. Many constituency assistants report that callers frequently declare their political affiliation before inquiring or making a request. Clearly, there is a general uneasiness among the electorate about who or what constituency offices are intended to serve. Said one assistant, "Constituents will often apologize, saying I didn't vote for your guy, but... Or, they'll let us know that they're a supporter. Either way, I tell

them it doesn't matter. We're here for everybody."

It is significant that among the more than ninety constituency offices I visited, only two assistants were related to an MP. Only a third had been active in the party, the rest had little or no prior political experience. A surprising number claimed that they had never voted prior to joining the MP's staff and in their role remain happily oblivious to much of what goes on in Ottawa. First and foremost, constituency staff work for the person, not the party, much less its platform or policies.

Broadly speaking, constituency staff fall into one of two camps: lifers and flyers. Lifers treat their constituency work as an end in itself, and will typically work until the office is closed following the MP's resignation or defeat. They are disproportionately women, unlikely to consider themselves political and report very high levels of satisfaction with their work. Many treat their involvement with a constituency office as a vocation. I was routinely told by lifers that this was the best job they had ever had.

Flyers are typically younger and have completed a university degree. They will spend anywhere from six months to two years in a constituency office, but their real objective is to get to Ottawa. Flyers want to strategize. They are more likely to be male and derive considerably less satisfaction from their interactions with constituents.

Of the two groups, the lifers are considerably more common. They are the backbone of the constituency system, but their perspective and rela-

tionship to the parliamentary system is also more interesting. They offer a very different window onto politics, one that opens directly onto the point of interface between people and the workings of their government.

One mystery is why constituency assistants are so enthusiastic about their work. The pay is unremarkable. Constituency assistants make between \$28,000 and \$35,000 a year. There is little job security and almost constant harassment from the public. But against these factors, a strong majority of constituency assistants are deeply passionate about their work. Their reasons are surprisingly simple and refreshing. Constituency assistants enjoy one of the few jobs that fuse public service, relative autonomy and a creative license. Their primary task is to help the public on behalf of the MP. In that role they are empowered to take whatever actions they deem necessary and appropriate to bring about a successful resolution to an issue or dispute. It is an occupation that requires an equal mix of tenacity, ingenuity and good humour. Successful constituency assistants derive a real sense of accomplishment from solving problems and offering good service, but also from helping the public to learn more about how ‘the system’ works.

In many respects, the best constituency assistants are quiet innovators. They make the forms fit the function, which almost all will define as reducing harm and injustice in their communities. Consequently, it seems fair to think of constituency assistants as the human face of gov-

ernment, representing and advocating on behalf of their constituents back to government departments in a way that is analogous to the relationship between Canada’s legal aid system and its courts.

Frequently, constituency assistants see first hand the errors, contradictions and inadequacies of existing government policies and systems. Their work deals with the natural failure of policy or programme design to meet every need or match every circumstance. By collaborating with their colleagues in government, they help to ensure that the spirit of the law as well as its letter is present, blunting what can appear arbitrary, negotiating where there is room. As a result, many of the constituency assistants I spoke with expressed a considerable degree of empathy and sophistication towards the needs of their constituents, but also to the reasonable limitations of government. Ideology of any sort appears poorly suited to covering the range of everyday demands that arrive at their door. Indeed, it’s interesting to consider how the structural logic of the constituency system — a structure that exposes parliamentarians to the unvarnished needs of citizens — could be amplified to exert a kind of moderating function on the country’s political discourse and long-term evolution.

Curiously, the willingness of MPs to provide services — or what more accurately could be called ‘service remediation’ — has yet to translate into more proactive forms of engagement. Constituency staff will accept

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petitions, manage crises and protestors, and schedule private meetings, but by and large, overt forms of political activity are handled reluctantly and with suspicion. Many constituency assistants express discomfort when asked to discuss or explain legislation and are loathe to engage in wider-ranging political conversations. This aversion to ‘talking politics’ and uneasiness about political issues may in part explain why staff express so little enthusiasm for devising more participatory strategies for their communities. The task of staging public discussions or ‘town halls’ is the one chore that is widely unpopular, largely because many assistants believe they are futile. Says one staffer, “We schedule public meetings, but only a handful of people come. It’s hard to see the point.”

To constituency assistants managing the concrete demands of casework, spending valuable time staging unpopular public events feels wasteful. The goals aren’t precise and the outcomes are unclear. More importantly, the perceived risks attached to public meetings are high. MPs and their staff must worry about security, poor attendance, potential gaffes, occasional protests, and negative press. For these efforts, there appears to be little return, either electorally or in the form of new insights or a better appreciation for the needs of their community. So long as they can claim cover by hosting a few obligatory events each year, constituency staff will choose to go back to their desk and get on with the ‘real work’.

The general failure of constituency-based public conversation

deserves closer study. Because the cost of sustaining this dysfunctional performance is low, few are prepared to invest much political capital in a solution, or in better strategies. But it’s also worth noting that the successful conception, marketing and execution of any kind of public event requires both a special confidence as well as a distinct set of skills. It’s interesting to wonder what a constituency-based politics might be like if constituency staff were to acquire these skills and invest as much time on public engagement as they do currently on casework.

BUSINESS IS BOOMING

For now, however, Canada’s constituency offices hardly need more to do. Business is booming, especially in urban ridings where constituency offices have acquired considerable expertise in navigating and interpreting the labyrinthine and lengthy immigration process.

Since the closure of many regional immigration offices in the mid-nineties, the constituency and immigration systems have become deeply intertwined. Undeniably, the MP’s office has become the front office for Canada’s immigrants. Lengthy delays and the high stakes of immigrating mean that virtually every prospective immigrant will seek the assistance of an MP to expedite, vouch for, or inquire about a file. A second phase of The Constituency Project will attempt to quantify the exact

amount of time being spent by constituency staff handling these and other queries, but anecdotal evidence suggests that at least a third of all staff time in urban ridings is occupied by issues relating to immigration. In effect, Immigration Canada has successfully downloaded a considerable expense onto the parliamentary system. This capture of constituency staff has occurred not by design, but simply as a consequence of the inadequacy of the ministry's own support services and the central role of the immigration process in Canada. In this respect, it's clear that constituency offices play an important role as a 'bureaucratic backstop', stepping in when systems start to fail. As a kind of political and bureaucratic DEW line, constituency offices are unparalleled. It should always raise alarm bells in a minister's office when the constituency offices start to call.

More generally, there appears to be mounting dissatisfaction with the ways in which many public services are delivered. But the message to government should be that sizeable investments in 1-800 numbers and web sites alone won't do the trick. After exhausting other avenues, constituency staff stress how relieved their constituents are to finally 'reach someone real'. In contrast to other government systems where 'clients' are assigned file numbers and speak with a different representative each time they call, working through a constituency office is a vastly more personable experience. This 'personability', the fact that a constituent can expect

to deal with the same assistant each time they call, and the opportunity to meet face to face, are three principal reasons why the assistance offered by constituency offices is increasingly popular. I suspect that terms like 'social capital' do little more than gesture towards the increase in confidence, trust and capacity that gets built through basic and decent exchanges like these, but they should be the object, not an accidental by-product of public policy and public systems design.

Former and long-time assistants also report that today, constituents are likely to be better informed and more adversarial than previous generations. They describe a public that is less deferential and increasingly skilled at articulating their claims. Armed with information, they also come armed with heightened expectations. As one Quebec assistant said, they think we are "*le department des miracles*". Explaining the limitations of what they are permitted to do, much less the relevant department or jurisdiction is complicated and most offices will go to great lengths so as not to appear that they are 'passing the buck.' While citizens are prepared to wait their turn, they expect regular updates on the progress of their query and a detailed rationale for a process that creates any delay. Citizens expect the government to be able to understand and speak in 'natural language'. The era of waiting patiently for *Monsieur Eaton* to send a hockey sweater in whichever colour and approximate size has surely passed.

THE LOOK OF THINGS

In contrast to the grandeur and beauty of parliament, most constituency offices are remarkably banal spaces. The speed with which they're assembled, the impermanence of their mission and the assortment of furniture they acquire lends most offices a slightly shabby, scruffy appearance. I have frequently and, I think, not unfairly described the standard constituency office as having all the charm of a dental clinic. My point is that they are serviceable, but hardly welcoming spaces.

They have also been on the move. No longer will you regularly find your MP settled within the civic annex of post offices, libraries, town halls, court houses and government buildings that cluster and define the central core of most Canadian towns and cities. Instead, an MP's office is more likely to be found at a busy transit junction with bright signs and ample parking. What the MP needs is the best low-rent building in town, comfortably nestled among traffic magnets like video stores and pharmacies. Inside, a faded portrait of the Queen, a bank calendar, a framed copy of the Charter, a flag, posters from various government departments, certificates and photographs belonging to the MP all try to signal a connection to something more profound.

Jane Jacobs wrote in the *Death and Life of Great American Cities*, that

“the look of things are the way they work is inextricably bound together.” What she means is that form and function are inseparable. But what precisely is the function of a constituency office and what does its current form tell us? Is it a private and local workspace for the MP, a service point for inquiries, a meeting space, a protest site, an incubator for new projects and initiatives, a space intended to convey the seriousness and dignity of the office or a space intended to appear accessible and friendly? The sophistication and complexity of this brief would challenge even the best architect. MPs, with little time and few resources, are ill-equipped to think beyond the most minimum standards of desk space and security. Consequently, they may be reinforcing public perceptions of their role as remote authority figures or service providers and diminishing the opportunities for different kinds of engagement that could come with a more creative use of space.

A few MPs are becoming alert to other possibilities. The office of one Quebec MP doubles as a local art gallery. Another has refused a desk altogether, and instead welcomes his constituents to an open concept office and comfortable chair near a window. A third operates a mobile office that travels into northern Saskatchewan on a regular circuit. Hitched to a pick-up truck, the converted mobile home is wheelchair accessible and out-fitted with a pamphlet rack and Canadian flag. Though unusual, these innovations appear to be popular with

constituents, who appreciate their distinctiveness and the extra effort made by their MPs to make their offices focal points for their communities.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

Perhaps the core lesson that the constituency system can teach the rest of government is that rich or poor, citizens need to *feel heard*. Even when nothing else can be done, constituency staff are unanimous in their conviction that listening actively to a citizen as they vent, or again patiently explaining a procedure produces its own rewards. Effectively, constituency assistants are uniquely placed to validate the concerns of their constituents, and this validation carries with it tremendous democratic force.

Ironically, the broader 'high road' debate about democratic reform centres around the concern that people are increasingly disinclined to validate their government and its priorities through formal means like voting. Little has been said about what government can do to better validate its citizens. Perhaps this can be as fruitful an exercise.

If relieved of their service burden, specifically as the *defacto* front line for major ministries like Immigration and Citizenship and the government's Employment Insurance and Student Loan programmes, I suspect that a much stronger, responsive and articulate constituency-based

politics could emerge. Good service provision is something that the rest of government can learn. What constituency offices are uniquely poised to do is deepen and enrich this country's political conversation. This will mean going much further than the consultation exercises that fail to engage their participants in anything more meaningful and lasting than a brief interview. It will begin by reorienting the constituency system as a conduit to parliament, rather than to the bureaucracy.

To achieve this, MPs and their assistants will need to learn new skills and re-imagine themselves as 'advocate-facilitators' and 'co-learners' rather than as fixers, experts or as representatives of an elusive and poorly defined public will. Accountability and transparency are indispensable to the vitality and health of any democracy. Our parliamentary system is based on the belief that both are best served through open exchange and dialogue. I am convinced that this next phase in Canada's political evolution must be animated by the acquisition of 'soft skills' and that constituency offices offer a ready infrastructure for a more civic, deliberative approach to parliamentary democracy.

I also suspect that the next generation of political actors will feel themselves better disposed to a model that places greater emphasis on local action and engagement. Having skirted the major national parties, many are opting out of formal politics altogether. Instead, we see talented and public-minded young people directing their energies to grassroots organ-

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isations and the citizen sector, becoming social entrepreneurs who are more interested in creating networks of influence, learning and action than in capturing political parties for the exercise of power.

This abstention may come to be one of the most disruptive events in the evolution of our political system. If so, then the big question is having secured the vote through suffrage, the voice through the Charter, through what do we secure the commitment and interest of subsequent generations to parliament?

The erosion of trust between citizens and their representatives cannot be addressed by remote or abstract means. Perhaps today's imperfect constituency offices, undignified by either the solemnity or permanence of state architecture, foreshadow a future, more fractal politics where greater emphasis is placed on cultivating our ability to speak with one another.



Quebec and Manitoba

RECOMMENDATIONS



1. CONSIDER THE CONSEQUENCES OF ELECTORAL REFORM

Many of the proposals for reforming Canada's electoral system have had little to say about how the constituency role of the MP would change. Most assume that it is a negligible or secondary issue that could be resolved once a new system is in place. But there are some anomalies that clearly warrant review. For instance, it's possible that under a mixed-member system where an opposition bloc is formed principally through its proportionate share of the vote, the majority of its MPs, drawn from the party's list, would serve without either the responsibilities or opportunities incumbent on government MPs who had won their local ridings. This would surely create an odd imbalance among MPs within the House, between those on the government benches who continued to fulfil their local obligations, and an opposition who had virtually none.

The government should carefully consider how mixed-member proportionality and other electoral models might affect the responsibilities and ongoing relationship MPs currently have to their electors.

2. REVIEW PARLIAMENTARY CIRCULARS

Currently, MPs can take advantage of two parliamentary mailing programmes: multi-page householders which are sent semi-annually to all

constituents and one-page 'ten-percenters' which may be forwarded to ten percent of a riding at no cost each week. The government may wish to review the effectiveness of these programmes. It may also wish to consider how the quality and value of these publications might be improved and whether guidelines on partisan messaging are necessary.

3. PROMOTE CONSTITUENCY OFFICES

There is considerable anecdotal evidence that a majority of Canadians are unaware of their MP's local office or its purpose. It would be interesting to investigate how a public awareness campaign might affect the range of concerns and constituents who regularly seek assistance from constituency offices and their MPs.

4. REVISIT LOCAL ALLOWANCES

The government may wish to review whether the relationship between an MP and their community could be strengthened by re-introducing a limited version of the discretionary budgets that were eliminated during the 1990s. Many MPs – specifically in Quebec where MLAs enjoy small local allowances – regret not being able to use similar monies to support local initiatives and events.

RECOMMENDATIONS

5. INCREASE STAFFING

Constituency staff, especially in urban ridings, are nearly unanimous in their desire to see staffing levels rise. Many constituency offices would be well-served by an additional full-time staff member. If the government is to continue to see services delivered or processed with the assistance of constituency staff, it might reasonably wish to create a formula that would fund additional staff positions relative to the significantly higher volumes of casework performed in certain ridings. The funding of a part-time civic engagement officer also merits consideration.

6. ORIENT MPS

New programmes designed to help familiarise new constituency staff with the systems and procedures of government have been very popular and should continue to be strengthened. This kind of programming should also be extended to include MPs who currently receive an orientation to parliament, but not to the many complexities of setting up and managing their local office.

7. SUPPORT PUBLIC DIALOGUE

For most MPs, town hall meetings and public consultations remain a necessary but much lamented duty. Yet few realise that there is a special skill set involved in the creation of effective and popular public meetings. MPs should be encouraged and supported in developing effective and popular strategies for staging regular public dialogues on both short and long-term issues.

8. CREATE COST-OF-LEASING ALLOWANCES

MPs currently receive a global budget which they allocate between their local and parliamentary offices. This longstanding tradition respects the autonomy of the individual MP, allowing him or her to concentrate resources as they are needed and where he or she sees fit. While the spirit of this system should be preserved, the growing disparity in the cost of leasing comparable office space among Canada's towns and cities is difficult to ignore. To be sure, both rural and urban offices have their own unique costs. Rural MPs, especially in northern ridings, face the added expense of running part-time satellite offices in addition to their central constituency office. Meanwhile, MPs in Canada's largest cities must compete with premium retailers for accessible, store-front

RECOMMENDATIONS

locations. The government may wish to address this disparity by introducing a funding formula which takes account of the cost of maintaining multiple offices in ridings exceeding a specific geographic size and which sets a leasing allowance relative to the average retail leasing rate in urban ridings.

9. REVIEW PROCEDURES FOR TRANSFERRING INCUMBENCY

The destruction of constituency files pending the defeat of an incumbent MP is both a wasteful and regrettable practice. Following an election, new constituency assistants must routinely reinitiate cases, though there is little recourse to the records and correspondence that are lost. Unfortunately, the destruction of files is often motivated by bad politics and the desire to deprive successors of any advantage irrespective of the interests of constituents. Because the privacy of constituents must be respected, a simple waiver could be signed when new files are opened. This waiver would entitle and obligate the current MP to transfer the file to their successor. The government is strongly encouraged to review its procedures for transferring incumbency between outgoing and incoming members of parliament.

10. EXPERIMENT WITH CO-LOCATION

The government is encouraged to consider a pilot programme that would co-locate MPs with their provincial colleagues and, possibly, city councillors. In addition to sharing quarters with their elected peers, the programme might also experiment with trial leases in public buildings like libraries and community centres.

CONSTITUENCY SCENARIOS

The four scenarios that follow are fictional. Their purpose is to test a range of policy choices, preferences and events which otherwise could not easily or empirically be explored. In effect, they are stories about how Canada's constituency system might evolve. Each scenario begins with a disruptive event — be it a massive breach of privacy or the continued decline of voter participation — and attempts to tease out the implications and consequences. Collectively, they are a sample of possible, even plausible futures, though obviously, they are neither intended to be exhaustive nor predictive. Their proper use is as a tool to widen our discussion of the vital and still unfolding role of constituency offices in Canada's political system. In whatever way, they may also help demonstrate the value of storytelling to the development of sound and forward-thinking public policy.

THE PERMANENT OFFICE

A SCANDAL ERUPTED WHEN IT BECAME KNOWN THAT LOCAL staffers did not destroy all of their constituency files following the defeat of their candidate in the recent federal by-election.

It had been a particularly acrimonious contest. The by-election was called following the sudden resignation of the Yellow Party incumbent, Transport minister Jim Spruce. It had been discovered that Spruce had failed to disclose his interests in a company that was awarded significant government contracts by his ministry.

The new Yellow party candidate, Sheila Mapletree, lost by only a handful of votes and it soon became clear that the party expected that an upcoming general election in the spring would put things right. They weren't prepared to lose any momentum in the intervening six months.

When an MP loses his or her seat, the expectation is that all of his or her constituency files will be swiftly destroyed. Over the course of two or more terms, the number of these files in each office can easily reach almost ten percent of the residents of the riding. Occasionally, outgoing MPs will hand over files to their successors, but typically this will only occur among members of the same party.

Predictably, outrage followed when a CD containing a scanned archive of the office files of Jim Spruce and a database correlating known voter preference to inquiries made to his office over the course

of his incumbency suddenly surfaced in the press. The only good news was that the files hadn't yet found their way onto the internet.

Newspapers concealed the identities of the constituents but continued over the course of a full week to print excerpts from the archive that included many incendiary comments and notes made in the margins of hundreds of dossiers. The public was especially appalled to learn that noted on each file was a three-star scoring system. Three stars indicated a confirmed Yellow Party voter. Two stars indicated that they were likely Yellow Party supporters. An 'X' indicated that they were known to vote for the opposition.

Using tactics like geographic profiling that had long been a standard practice among retailers, Mr. Spruce combined many data sources – including his star system – with sophisticated GIS software that allowed him to gauge voter preference and create street by street maps of his constituency. 'Filegate', as it fast became known, exposed the local underbelly of federal politics.

Canadians were enraged and the governing Yellow Party was soon engulfed by calls for several senior resignations. Constituents across the country demanded to see their files. At one Toronto office, three hundred constituents arrived en masse three days after the story broke, demanding that their files be handed over before police arrived and dispersed the crowd.

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As the scandal grew, new leaks from other constituency offices soon emerged. Both opposition parties who had been vociferous in their attacks on the government were soon embarrassed when two of their lead critics were discovered to be using similar 'electoral management' systems. One Quebec MP was discovered to mark each file with an "F" or "S", denoting federalist or separatist support.

Not surprisingly, a poll commissioned one week after Filegate found that confidence in federal politicians had plummeted, quickly reaching a new low. Only seven percent of the electorate believed that their 'MP was fundamentally trustworthy, deserving the respect of his or her community'.

The following week, the government with the support of all parties, launched an inquiry to be directed by the office of the federal Privacy Commissioner. The commissioner was given sweeping powers to seize and examine constituency files in any MP's office and was told to submit a report within ten months that would set forth new guidelines for the conduct of MPs and the management of personal and confidential data by their offices. It was the first significant examination of the country's constituency system which for nearly forty years had evolved without any oversight.

Most MPs expected that the new standards would be tough, but they never expected the recommendations that were to come.

After travelling the country, receiving nearly four hundred public submissions and examining the files of 138 MPs, the Commissioner announced that only two percent of the files were found to contain objectionable or partisan commentary. More alarming, however, was the discovery that nearly one-third of MPs used some form of tracking software or maintained active electoral databases. Data captured in constituency offices was routinely being transferred to campaign offices: a direct breach of the long standing prohibition against mixing public and party affairs.

As the report stated, "[The advent of computer technology and the easy transfer of data has rendered the presumption that constituency work and partisan activities be conducted from separate venues, naïve and obsolete.](#)" The Commissioner concluded that the transfer of data represented an unacceptable hazard and a long term threat to the integrity of parliament. To restore public confidence, he proposed nothing less than a complete overhaul of the constituency system.

He recommended the creation of a new agency of parliament. 'Constituencies Canada' would operate as an arm of Elections Canada and take charge of the country's federal constituency offices. All employees, with the exception of a local personal assistant and another in Ottawa, would be federal public servants. Existing constituency staff would be able to join the public service in a one-time intake fol-

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lowing the completion of a special three week training course. Effectively, the Commissioner was recommending the federalization of Canada's constituency system. Under his plan, MPs would no longer choose the location of their offices. Instead, permanent facilities would be leased or purchased in every riding. A committee of parliamentarians working with Constituencies Canada would ratify the selection of new offices.

A new code of conduct for MPs and their assistants was also recommended. When questioned about his plan, the Commissioner said that he had taken ministerial offices as his model, where political staffers and public servants work side-by-side. His chief concern was the integrity of parliament and he was convinced that nothing less than the division he proposed was necessary to remove the possibility of further misconduct. *"This is a question of church and state. Our system has evolved in such a way that it confuses the role of the MP and his or her staff. It forever encourages them to turn their proximity to political power to partisan advantage. My recommendations go a long way to eliminating this risk."*

Former MPs recognized that this was not the first time government had moved to consolidate parliamentary staff into the public service. In the 1960s, a parliamentary secretarial pool was created in Ottawa. MPs who had traditionally hired secretaries as and from where

they had seen fit, now drew assistance from the pool. Now the principle was being extended across the system.

Moreover, constituency files were to be kept indefinitely. Though explicitly excluded from the Freedom of Information Act, case files would remain in the constituency office irrespective of the incumbent for a period of seven years after which, all files would be transferred to an archive facility in Ottawa. A special provision in the recommendations barred any other government department from accessing the files. Only the MP and Constituencies Canada could access the files without the consent of the constituent who would retain legal ownership.

The Commissioner expressed real concern that under the existing system, every change of incumbent led to the destruction of several years worth of records. These records, containing case histories and correspondence on behalf of the constituent with government departments, represented an almost incalculable loss of public investment and information. He cited many former and sitting MPs who regretted the existing practice and said that he was disappointed to learn that election night had also meant bonfire night for MPs who failed to win re-election. *"This is an indecency and an affront to the continuity of good government. It is a practice that needs to be stopped."*

Few MPs were pleased with the report. Many took it as a direct chal-

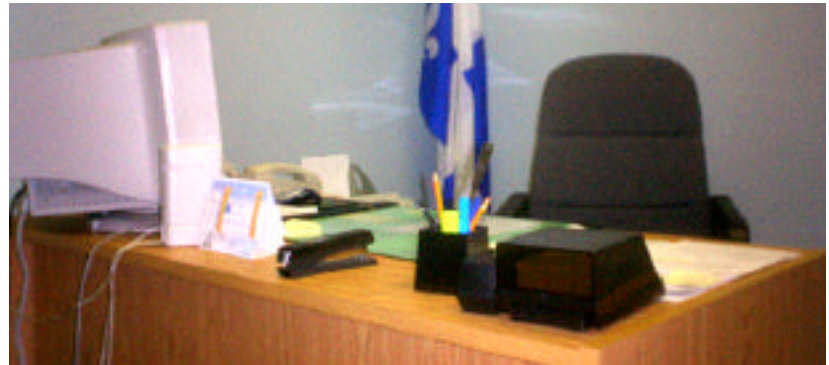
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lenge to their authority and autonomy, while others complained that it would only further bind their hands, making it difficult to advocate on behalf of their electors.

Still, in the wake of the scandal, MPs were in a poor position to resist the report's recommendations. It was adopted by the House, 268 – 40. ■



Quebec



Quebec

THE CIVIC CLUSTER

IN APRIL, A REPORT PRODUCED BY THE URBAN AFFAIRS Alliance landed on the desk of the Minister for Infrastructure and Communities. He hadn't commissioned it, but an aide recommended that he take a look. One night during a lengthy debate in the House, he pulled the report from his briefcase and began to read. Twenty minutes later, he motioned for a page. "I need you to make a copy of this, then take it to the Minister for Democratic Reform".

When the page returned, the Minister took out his pen and started making notes to his staff in the margins. The report was an unusually comprehensive document. It detailed the slow disappearance of public buildings in Canada's towns and cities. Libraries, post offices, government offices, community centres: Canada's stock of civic infrastructure was ailing after years of under-investment. Similarly, in the case of new investment, the situation was even worse. Across the country, the construction of new public buildings had failed woefully to keep pace with new commercial and residential development.

Much has been made of Canada's transformation from a rural to an urban society. But in some ways, this caricature is misleading. Though it is true that most Canadians now live in cities, the character of these cities is resolutely sub-urban, not urban. The single family home on a quarter-acre plot is the desired Canadian domus. More than sixty years of residential construction and the doubling of the country's population

confirms as much.

During this time, few, if any new cities had actually been founded. Instead, towns turned into cities and cities swelled to fill whole regions. Several waves of amalgamation had even eliminated old towns yielding super-cities that combined several administrations. Sometimes this made sense, but it was not always clear exactly how. Increasing the efficiency of government – not its presence or responsiveness – was most the frequently cited rationale.

Of course, the reverse had once be true. **Throughout the nineteenth century and early into the twentieth, the construction of government buildings and public amenities was a matter of special pride and had often preceded private development. Ambitious town fathers would stake out prime land for future schools, hospitals, court houses, administrative buildings, police stations and post offices.** Sometimes foolishly grandiose buildings were attempted in a virtual wilderness to signal the founding of a new town or to lure the railway. Together, these buildings formed the nucleus of any settlement. Now schools were the only meaningful piece of civic infrastructure that by necessity was keyed to growth. The promise of a new grade school was gold to developers planning a major housing tract. There were no new centres of civic purpose or activity, only annexes, subdivisions and extensions that had slowly connected the most heavily populated parts of the country into one vast and uninterrupted

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commercial drive.

The report explained how the public realm was dematerialising and becoming increasingly dispersed. While the country grew more and more suburban, various levels of government, ignorant of any grand design, had quietly begun rolling up the public carpet. Just as the major banks were still trying to shutter branches and get out of the real estate game, governments were adopting similar tactics by transferring services from storefronts to the internet and toll-free lines.

Even a recent budget had called for the transfer of tens of thousands of civil servants to cheaper suburban headquarters. The Minister was frustrated with the decision of Public Works. There would be savings on paper, but what were the hidden costs? While his department was trying to promote high-density planning and better public transit, his colleagues elsewhere in government were busy exiling a well-paid resident population beyond city limits.

But it was the chapter titled, “Civic Realism: The Value of Public Performance” that caught the Minister’s eye.

“Our cities and towns are poor stages for the performance of citizenship. A vital citizenry enjoys not only the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, but also enjoys the means to publicly enact these privileges. They go about this performance on the streets and in the shops as they make their way to the check-out line and as they pass a police station or

post a letter. The street ballet of daily life should never be overt or conspicuous, but participation in it helps to bind a society to itself and its purpose.”

This looked a bit complicated, but as the Minister turned the words over in his head he began to believe that they made a good deal of sense. The report seemed to say that democracy was as much a performance as it was a set of formal protocols; that the shape of our towns and cities influenced the citizens we’d become.

He looked over to the Minister of Democratic Reform. Even at a distance he could tell that the minister was also now reading the report.

He thought to himself that he suddenly understood why Tim Horton’s was so beloved. In a sense, it was neither public nor private. It was Canada’s equivalent of the Englishman’s pub, part meeting place, part living room.

The Minister had been growing steadily more interested in the infrastructure necessary to bind communities. When he was in Vancouver, he relished walking along its seawall which, when teeming with people on a bright summer or winter’s day, he believed rivalled the boulevards of Paris. When at home in Toronto and with a Saturday morning to spare, he would spend a few hours wandering among the stalls of Toronto’s Kensington and St. Lawrence markets. A few people would recognise him, but most simply nodded or said a quick hello as they passed by. He ranked these quiet, aimless mornings as one of the greatest pleasures of public

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life; but he remembered, too, that he had also enjoyed them before he had entered politics and he could tell looking around himself that the people there enjoyed it as well.

The report recommended the creation of a new agency, based on Britain's Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment. CABE had become a potent voice within the British government for improved design standards and greater investment in public spaces. With a mandate to survey across departmental lines, it would have questioned the wisdom of relocating public servants.

It also described an experiment called the 'civic cluster.' Borrowing the logic of the high-tech incubation clusters that from Palo Alto to Dublin had sprung up throughout the nineties, the British government had begun clustering public services and offices towards the centre of major high streets in several test cities. Conveniently, one level of government or another typically owned significant but under-utilized buildings nearby. Aging Victorian court houses, post offices, and libraries were most common, and various levels of government collaborated to repopulate these buildings with newly redesigned services and agencies. In short, everything old was being made new again.

At its most radical, the programme had installed small post offices and day care centres into libraries and small libraries and day care centres

into post offices. One northern town had turned the massive approach to its town hall over to a café, which had strung an awning above the main entrance before setting out a dozen tables and chairs. Inside, a legal aid office sat next to the branch office of the environment agency, which itself sat next door to a performing arts group. It was a jumble, but a creative jumble and those who found themselves staffing these new quarters expressed unprecedented satisfaction with their work. The public liked it too. Across the street the old land registry housed a civic incubator for community organisations as well as the offices of the local councillors and the member of parliament.

The minister looked up from the report and frowned. He'd been running his constituency office out of the same commercial walk-up for the past ten years. It had good parking and a big sign, but besides being cheap, it had little else to recommend it. Across the street sat an old stone municipal building that had been empty for years and was now slated to become the façade for a new condo development.

Years ago, he had tried to convince the local MPP to share a office space, or at least to co-locate in the same building. Like any rookie MP, he soon discovered that there was almost constant traffic between his office and his counterpart's. Most people easily confused federal and provincial responsibilities. His staff would delicately try to steer them to the provincial member's office, but it was always awkward. It felt like they were

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passing the buck and it was even worse when the individual was elderly, or had children in tow or had taken a taxi or the bus and would now need to spend more money and more time simply to walk through the right door. But the MPP had refused. It was nothing personal, she said, but she was newly elected and wanted to stake out her own turf.

The Minister thought about the recent high-tech clusters he'd visited in Kanata and Waterloo. For these fledgling but promising start-ups, proximity equalled innovation, and every province and municipality was clamouring for money to help technology companies locate close to one another and preferably a university. The biotech campus had replaced the industrial park but in his opinion, the most interesting developments weren't these newly built gated compounds, but those companies which had chosen to renovate old breweries and textile mills. They'd snatched up old industrial infrastructure at usually firesale prices and re-purposed it. Maybe government, if it was serious about public service innovation and democratic reform, could do the same.

He got out his Blackberry and tapped a quick note to his friend who was still reading. They would go to see the Public Works minister in the morning. ■



Ontario



Ontario and Manitoba

THE NUMBERS GAME

SEVEN YEARS LATER AND STILL THE NUMBERS WERE DOWN.

Former Prime Minister Paul Martin had made headlines with his promise to eliminate the democratic deficit, much as he had eliminated the federal deficit years before. But the promised turn-around had failed to materialise. Spurring people's confidence in politicians, much less getting them to the polls had proved a much harder task than cutting spending to bring the nation's finances into line. The media's interest in youth voting was fleeting and their attention to the story produced little effect. A campaign to lower the voting age to 16 was equally short-lived. A recent provincial election in Ontario drew only 38% of the eligible voters to the polls and only 16% of those aged 18-30 cast a ballot.

Meanwhile, the auditor-general revealed that government expenditures on focus groups and polling had reached a new high. In fact, when reviewing figures over the previous six years, he discovered that spending had nearly quintupled. Dick Morris' strategy of 'policy-by-numbers' – incidentally, the title of Donald Savoie's latest book – had become notorious during the Clinton Administration. Now 'policy-by-numbers' had come north. The overnight phone poll was fast becoming the tool-of-choice for policy-makers in every branch of the federal bureaucracy.

Like healthcare and US relations, civic engagement was the one issue that wouldn't go away. Only now, with as little as 15% of the electorate regularly producing majority governments, the legitimacy of elected politi-

cians had clearly been compromised. Several politicians argued that the use of focus groups and surveys, while not ideal, at least provided some direction and clarity. *Instead of claiming to be elected with an overwhelming majority, politicians could claim that nine times out of ten, an overwhelming majority supported their party's position.* One group of academics even argued that while elections had become less relevant, conversely, government was itself becoming more responsive. So long as rules were in place to compel the government of the day to release the results of its independent polling, the public could be assured that the government was acting in its interest and with its consent. Said one commentator, "In the land of the indifferent, the random sample is king."

But Canadians were not indifferent when they learned from the auditor-general's report that the government had spent over eighty thousand dollars on a poll to decide the most popular uniform design for Team Canada at the Summer Olympics in New York and another fifty thousand dollars to determine whether an orchestral or vocal arrangement of the national anthem should be played from the podium. Canadians were looking for leaders, even if they refused to elect them.

In a bid to reverse the erosion of popular support, several provinces had experimented with alternative electoral schemes. British Columbia had been a leader, adopting a novel system that awarded each elector multiple votes, but so far the only result had been three minority govern-

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ments in five years. The two major governing parties were now in disarray. A slightly different system in New Brunswick had proved more manageable. With a small assembly, politicians were accustomed to working in close quarters and across party lines. Still, the changes in both provinces had failed to produce significant increases in either voter turnout or public confidence.

The federal government had commissioned several studies on electoral reform, but these provincial precedents tempered party enthusiasm for any of the proposals. Ultimately, the major parties refused to trade away the prospect of a solid majority for a future of perpetual campaigning and coalition government.

Besides, the parties had bigger problems to worry about. Every party was having trouble attracting new talent. In fact, party membership was becoming sclerotic as the baby boomers aged and their children continued to shun partisan politics. As local party infrastructure dried up, nomination meetings were easily high-jacked by special interest or inept candidates. It was a growing source of embarrassment, but eight times in the past year, different party leaders had had to overrule local committees and de-list a candidate.

Finally in April, three months after the release of the auditor-general's report, the Prime Minister was ready to act and called a press conference to announce several new initiatives that she hoped would restore "the

vitality of Canadian democracy."

She announced an immediate reduction in her government's use of polling and focus groups and described measures to rebuild the parties and boost citizen engagement. A new arms-length secretariat, answering to parliament would be created. 'Engagement and Consultation Canada' had, she claimed, a unique mandate: To draw Canadians into a conversation with one another and with their government.

"It's high time the government stopped listening to numbers and started listening to people. But the difficulty is we politicians need you to speak. Opinion isn't enough, and for that matter, neither is a vote. What we need is a much deeper dialogue about our future and the country we want".

Engagement and Consultation Canada would take responsibility for all consultation activities. Every poll, every focus group that the government conducted would be consolidated and directed by the department. A new vetting committee made up of senior civil servants and representatives from each party would review all requests for public consultation and those it deemed significant would be passed along to its research staff.

Though dramatic, this was, by far, the ECC's least interesting function. Its flagship programme, 'Imagine Canada', would begin ramping up to coincide with the country's 150th anniversary in 2017. Five new centres for

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dialogue in each region of the country would be commissioned and built, hosting both the programme and a regional ECC secretariat. These centres, modelled on the Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue in Vancouver, would supply the first piece of civic infrastructure necessary to begin what the Prime Minister hoped would become a sustained national conversation about Canada's priorities and principles. The second piece of infrastructure simply needed some remodelling.

For years MPs had tried with varying degrees of success to host town-halls and other meetings in their constituencies. Inevitably, they could pack a room on lightening rod issues – but the conversation was rarely helpful and frequently polarizing and when the subject turned to more mundane topics, the room quickly emptied. Often times, many people left these meetings feeling more frustrated than when they'd arrived.

In an effort to strike a better note, some MPs would try adjusting the format, introducing guest speakers or creating smaller round tables. Some would spend hours preparing and publishing ambitious schedules that would take them to a different community hall or church basement every Friday and Saturday night. A few even became legendary for their local events, but the majority simply grew resigned and scheduled as few public meetings as possible. After all, most MPs had realised the obvious. Rarely were public meetings actually attended by the general public. Instead, they attracted what derisively were called 'special interests' –

members of the public who had become affiliated with one side of an issue and were there to press their case.

Public meetings too easily had become gatherings of the usual suspects: the old lady harping about a traffic light, angry unionists, fanatical environmentalists, a few reluctant and sullen students completing a class assignment, conspiracy theorists of every possible stripe, the lonely, the aggrieved, the wronged, the pious, and always those one or two people who sat in every meeting readying to dynamite the agenda by asking once again the MP's position on abortion.

How many MPs have sat through meetings like these, listening to "the mad, the sad and the bad," and wondering how it could possibly be worth it? There didn't appear to be much correlation between their patience, or these meetings and the ballot box. Good advertising was a better investment.

But under the Prime Minister's plan and with the assistance of ECC, all this would change. First, the role of constituency offices as service points was largely to be stripped away. The Prime Minister observed that federal departments had quietly been downloading responsibilities to constituency staff. As funding declined and many local offices were closed or consolidated, several departments had grown to rely on the constituency system as their frontline. The Revenue Agency and Immigration and Citizenship Canada had claimed that new orientation and training pro-

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grammes for constituency staff were only a friendly gesture, created to help the constituencies deal with the steady increase in new requests and demands. On the surface, the arrangement appeared to make sense. Constituency offices were evenly distributed across the country and their staff had a special incentive to deliver good, timely, and personable service to citizens. But, this incentive also led to greater interference on the part of MPs who like to be seen as ‘fixers’. This helpful instinct had been held in check by capable and well-staffed departments whose repertoire of programmes had been more limited, but morale at many new government call centres was low and when operators grew impatient they would deflect callers by instructing them to phone their MP.

Constituency staff could tell endless stories of well-meaning citizens who were frustrated and fed up with poor service. Seniors would call their MP having become hopelessly lost in automated voice systems. Most callers were simply relieved to speak with someone real, and then to be able to speak with that same person the very next time they called.

In many ways, the best constituency staffers were seeing their role evolve towards something akin to public service GPs, civic concierges who nimbly helped citizens navigate the system and who could put a local face and a local context to a national programme. They were surprised by the illiteracy and confusion much of the public had about government. Moreover, they were also concerned that they were increasingly being used

as the bureau of first resort, rather than the last, and saw their time consumed by endless passport applications and other bureaucratic duties. Squeezed by the constant pressure of public demand for assistance, few had time for anything approaching civic engagement. The most many could hope to do was push another newsletter out the door, and wait for the phones to start ringing. The Prime Minister hoped to correct this.

Instead of playing helper to the federal bureaucracy, MPs would play facilitator to a much deeper public conversation. Of course, MPs’ offices would still serve and assist constituents in genuine need, but their role as a ‘backstop advocate’ would be reasserted.

In consultation with her colleagues, the Prime Minister learned that many MPs knew little about the parliament they would join, much less how to run what, in effect, was a quarter million dollar a year local business, with all the staffing and management headaches that entailed. Therefore, effective following the next election, every new MP would participate in a one week ECC training course, which would be supplemented with two professional development days each year.

MPs would also receive funding to hire an additional local staffer who would focus on outreach and engagement. His or her primary task would be to deliver a local engagement strategy and serve as a liaison to the regional ECC secretariat. Short courses on improving communications, staging open conversations and hosting public events would be offered

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by the ECC to all constituency staff.

Consultation programming on a range of immediate and long term public issues would be developed by the ECC and would be available for use by constituency offices. This circulating curriculum would offer MPs a ready-made kit of consultation activities and engagement strategies. The MP's outreach co-ordinator would file regular reports back to the secretariat and any findings would be disseminated quarterly to all MPs.

Office budgets would at last be split between rental and operating expenses. Rental allowances would be increased and indexed slightly above each riding's median retail rate. MPs were encouraged to locate in premises that were readily visible and when possible, part of the street life of their communities. They were also encouraged to rent offices that had ample meeting space and could comfortably host events for a dozen or more people.

Lastly, MPs were encouraged to spend more time in conversation with their constituents and less time 'on the sell'. "We need to understand that the nature of political representation has changed, and so has its premise," said the Prime Minister. "When our first predecessors came to parliament to represent their constituents, they were largely representing an agrarian people who lacked either basic literacy or the means to make their voice heard. Today, we live in a very different world. Our population is one of the best educated and most sophisticated anywhere. Our people

do have a voice and choose their means to exercise it. Deference towards MPs, like the deference paid to many professions is eroding and perhaps this is no bad thing. Quite simply, we need to raise our game."

Most MPs were unsure of the Prime Minister's plan. It was ruthlessly attacked by the opposition who mocked the government for building national 'talk shops'. But having persevered and reflecting from the 2017 celebrations, the reinvention of the constituency system had by then been widely acknowledged as a bold and successful step which had both strengthened and reformed the country's system of government. More people had begun to show up at the polls and remarkably, public confidence in government was growing. Few could have predicted the pent-up interest in public conversation. No one had been to the barricades to demand a more 'deliberative democracy' or that MPs change the way they talk or listen. Instead, they'd simply, slowly turned away. Only by looking back might we have seen that perhaps this had been the first clue. ■

THE PUBLIC STORE

IN 1968, A YOUNG GRAPHIC DESIGNER NAMED JIM DONOAHUE sat at his drafting table finishing an ad for the Department of Tourism. He was about to create a logo that would soon become one of the most famous and easily recognized in Canada. When describing his thinking many years later, he explained that creating the ad had been a little bit like writing a good sentence without the period. But he needed a period, some way to draw the ad to a close.

Until that time, the federal government still used its coat of arms on all publications or simply printed the words “Government of Canada” in capital script. Both were unappealing to Donoahue who thought they were too officious for an ad meant to entice visitors.

With a colleague, he started pulling out type specimens, running through several dozen before settling on a font designed by an eighteenth century printer named John Baskerville. They tried a mix of capital and lowercase letters, before deciding that theirs just “wasn’t an upper case country”. Instead, they worked with the letter “a”, increasing the way it rolled along the page, a bit like a wave, lapping against coast, and coast and coast. After three days, Donoahue and his colleague had created their period, a small wordmark that included the new flag and said simply ‘Canada’.

No one had commissioned it, no one paid for it, and no one much seemed to notice when he included it on his travel ad. Countries didn’t have

wordmarks or used logos then, but for whatever reason – maybe because it made good sense in a country still bubbling with centennial pride – the use of the new wordmark started to spread. Many years later, Donoahue would call it the best day of his life – and perhaps in the life of any graphic designer ever – when a friend brought him a photo of the NASA shuttle with his logo emblazoned on the Canadarm extending triumphantly into space.

Unfortunately, it was probably the worst day then when the Gomery Inquiry finally released its report. Buried amongst the lengthy list of recommendations was something no one had expected.

“The inquiry has reason to believe that the federal government’s sponsorship activities have irreparably tarnished the Canada wordmark in the eyes of many Canadians, especially those living in the province of Quebec. We recommend that the government dramatically limit the use of the wordmark, or find a suitable replacement.”

The Quebec opposition crowded. This was an unexpected plum and they immediately tabled a motion in parliament drawing specific attention to Gomery’s recommendation. “Quebecers, like all Canadians, do not need the government reminding them who does what and who bought what. The Canada wordmark has long been a propaganda tool for the image-makers in the Prime Minister’s Office. Now, the only honest thing is for them to remove it.”

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The government rallied and defeated the motion, but not since the great flag debate had so much attention been channelled towards a discussion of the country's graphic identity. Amid the many complexities of the report, the use of the wordmark was one thing the public could plainly understand and everyone, it seemed, had an opinion.

Shaded from the debate, however, was a small working group drawn together from Public Works, the Treasury Board and the Democratic Reform Secretariat. It had been formed several months before and was busy conducting an audit into public perceptions and the experience of government. It had been influenced by the work of Britain's Design Council who only a year before had launched a similar project, called 'Touching the State', and the massive overhaul of Denmark's government identity system in the mid-nineties.

Touching the State looked at the experience of voting, the design of citizenship ceremonies and jury participation, each with an eye to its improvement. In a sense, they were challenging the production values of public experience, noting that the public could not be expected to become engaged as long as the state signalled its own disengagement through needlessly bureaucratic procedures and the evident sterility of so much of its infrastructure.

In many respects, the Danish government had anticipated much of this report and put its insights into play almost ten years before. The 'look

and feel' of the country's public agencies and infrastructure were all submitted for redesign. A new streamlined, contemporary and popular graphic identity system replaced many existing and conflicting schemes. New signage was hung, new decals were applied to state-owned vehicles, new government forms were printed. Even the money and postage changed.

The working group was intrigued by these examples. When Canada adopted its new flag and shortly after, the federal identity programme, the country was at the forefront of modern graphic design. *It's hard now to remember how radical the renaming of government ministries actually was. The idea of a 'Health Canada' or 'Environment Canada' was completely foreign, as was the cool Swiss Modern bilingual graphic template that was stamped everywhere a department had jurisdiction. Soon, even the Coast Guard's boats had been repainted to match the government's new livery.*

The working group, dubbed 'PubDes,' for public design, began by drawing on the government's vast catalogue of publications and forms. Standards were in place to regulate their appearance, but it was exactly this common appearance that they wanted to review. They then set up a series of experiments. They had little money for proper surveys, so summer interns were drafted and set to work diligently impersonating citizens who required one manner of public service or another. They were dispatched to offices, attended public events, surfed the government's web sites and

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fired away at one 1-800 number after another. The interns were asked to describe and rank their experiences, and by the end of the summer, they had gathered impressive logs detailing their many exchanges with an unsuspecting bureaucracy.

They wanted comparators, so they began a photo archive, listing the designs of new public buildings, from opera houses to police stations, around the world. They compared pictures of police cruisers from as far away as Sweden and New Zealand. They collected signage and uniforms and sent requests to the agencies of foreign governments for copies of their national design manuals. They studied the pedestrian navigation systems in airports, and the wayfinding systems aboard buses and subways. And for two years, they lived in a roiling, rich world that had become their own civic design studio.

By the time the deadline for PubDes to submit its recommendations had neared, three things had become clear. Firstly, the government needed to invest more money in design. Compared to exemplar nations like the Netherlands and much of Scandinavia, Canada had fallen far behind. Its design capacity was fledging and only by investing in the design profession as an important competitive advantage within the knowledge economy, would Canada's larger innovation agenda be well-served. Secondly, the Canada wordmark would continue to be used as the federal government's signature. They had considered several alternatives, but despite

Gomery's recommendation, public enthusiasm for the wordmark remained strong. In fact, the Angus Reid Group found "overwhelming support" for the continued use of the Canada wordmark as the Government of Canada's brand identifier. Thirdly, with the exception of the wordmark, everything else was up for grabs. What they wanted was a new set of principles that could help unify and significantly upgrade the public face of government.

Now what they needed was a way to represent and communicate their findings that would resonate with parliamentarians. After debating several options, they decided to make their case on the MPs' home turf. They would create two model constituency offices as a way of demonstrating the transformative power of good public design.

The first design was called 'Improved Basic' and contained a set of recommendations for modifying existing offices. Part of the problem, however, was establishing exactly what 'basic' meant. Like the political spectrum, the majority of offices could be divided into three broad camps. Some MPs worked from sprawling suites in office towers, others in small storefronts, and others still from converted homes. Within these three camps as within the parties themselves, was all manner of variation.

The second design was called "The Public Store". It was intended to challenge every convention, and would probably attract its fair share of sceptics. They drew their inspiration from a recent library conversion in

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Whitechapel, by the young British architect, David Adjaye. The old library had been re-invented as a bright, two story glass box called an Idea Store. It struck some critics as cloying. They objected that it trivialised the purpose and solemnity of a proper reading space. To them, it was a terrible and hopefully passing fad. But others saw it differently and welcomed it as a major addition to their community. They recognized that a book was little more than a container or vessel for ideas. The proliferation of new formats, be they CDs, PDFs, web pages and even iPods, fundamentally challenged the privileged position of folio printing. Instead of building a traditional library and then covering over much of the first floor with computer terminals, Adjaye and his team wanted to provide a local storeroom for accessing tools and knowledge in whatever format they appeared.

PubDes listed four goals for its designs. The new offices were to be more inviting, more active, more accessible and more legible. As they wrote in the forward to their report, “Good public design is about good public thinking. It is not only about appearances, but interactions. The utilitarian modesty that defines much of this country’s public infrastructure disappoints us, as we believe it quietly disappoints many Canadians. This is not a call to create lavish new buildings, but rather to consider the personability and suitability of the spaces we occupy and which represent us. After studying the problem at great length, we believe this country can do better.”

‘Improved Basic’ wasn’t simply a set of ideas for beautifying constituency offices. It began with election night and continued the full way through the cycle of incumbency. PubDes researchers found that the transition of a riding from a former to a newly elected MP presented several problems. Technically, constituency offices and most of their contents belong to the House of Commons. Defeated MPs lose control of their offices almost immediately and moving companies are literally on stand-by after the polls close to supervise the seizure and transfer of parliamentary assets. But even with this system in place, many new MPs reported that it took several months before they were up and running. There could be interminable delays signing a lease, ordering stationary, configuring computers, connecting to the parliamentary intranet, listing new phone numbers, designing and installing new signage and arranging the odd assortment of old tables, sofas, filing cabinets and chairs that arrived at their door.

Against the blizzard of demands placed on new MPs, the task of setting up a proper office often was deferred. If the member was appointed to cabinet, the situation was even worse. Notoriously, some ministerial constituency staff would find themselves still working at folding tables while running up a tab at the local copy shop many months after an election.

PubDes wasn’t interested in prescribing a specific aesthetic for an MP’s office. What they wanted to do was make it easier for the MP to

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think constructively about their office and its role. They hoped to simplify the start-up phase, giving MPs and their staffs the support they needed to create something better. Their solution: An Office In A Box.

It sounded a bit silly, but its utility was obvious to the MPs who were offered an early look. Two days following the vote, newly elected MPs would be couriered a large packing crate containing everything they would need for their first weeks in office. There was temporary signage, basic stationary and letterhead, two cell phones to which the previous MPs' telephone numbers had already been redirected, two laptops with the necessary software preinstalled, and a small multi-function printer and fax machine. A connectivity pack listed the numbers of additional, pre-ordered phone lines, access codes for the government's intranet, the address of their new parliamentary web site, and the numbers of the various hot-lines that would allow constituency staff direct access to the ministries.

The crate also included a guide explaining how to go about selecting and setting-up a constituency. It included several floor plans and photographs of successful offices. PubDes had spent weeks on the road visiting and documenting different offices and spending time with their staffs. Over time it became clear that there were several recurring patterns, and plenty of folk wisdom that was passed between offices. They boiled all of this down into a helpful series of "do's, don't's and things to think about."

Finally, they included a purchasing guide for furnishings. PubDes had concluded that sourcing furniture and other fittings from one supplier could dramatically reduce the costs of outfitting an office – so much so that the constituency offices could afford to replace their furnishings much more frequently. *They playfully crafted a sample of their guide from an old IKEA catalogue, rewriting the descriptions of the products and suggesting how they might be used to enhance the MPs' office space. They even created a series of mock offices which they photographed for inspiration. In the back pages, they listed selections from the catalogue of the government's art bank, upon which, they suggested, all constituency offices be allowed to draw.*

The Public Store was a much more radical and comprehensive proposal. PubDes decided that it would be built around three core components: governance, public services and engagement. First, they began by designing an identity. They imagined the Public Store as being like a kit of parts that could vary in form or function but which would be identified by a common brand. Some Public Stores would be stand-alone shops, others would be added to libraries, community centres, schools, hospitals and other public buildings, much like post offices had been inserted into drug stores years before. Major cities would have flagships, entirely new buildings that would combine many public functions. A few would even boast small

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lecture theatres which would serve well for both public events and the lifelong learning programmes rapidly being developed by colleges and universities. Into this mix, the PubDes team added the constituency office which would always be identified as part of the Public Store brand. Provisions were also included to encourage city councillors and provincial legislators in the same riding to join as well. Essentially, they would be tenants. Elected officials would have no special status in or responsibilities to the Public Store, but it was expected that they would benefit from their proximity to robust government service points and to the civic incubator spaces that some of the larger Public Stores would contain.

The PubDes researchers had concluded that most communities could benefit from an incubation space that would help citizens nurture and refine their ideas for public action. They had visited dozens of community centres, but few could provide citizens with either the expertise or materials to go about creating such things as a public event or a local newsletter. Studies conducted by government throughout the 1990s had emphasised the importance of building social capital and social networks within communities. In this regard, PubDes believed that making Public Stores not only service points but creation spaces was an important innovation. Carefully written guidelines would stipulate the conditions and purposes for which an individual or group could use the facilities. But once vetted, they would enjoy access to a project production space.

Their model was a long ways away from the church basements and Lion's Clubs used by their grandparents. An early mock-up had been labelled "Rec Room 2.0." Sleek computers, wide format printers, digital whiteboards, teleconferencing: It all would be available to local groups and so, to, would be advice and assistance. Helpful staff were on hand to assist with procedural and creative issues. They would help to focus ideas and produce results. In some ways, they wouldn't be all that different from a good resource librarian.

By the end of their study, PubDes had amassed a remarkable collection of ideas and examples for renewing the public realm. A minister touring the team's office had remarked that it looked like a "technicolour windstorm had hit the Queen's Printers." The PubDes space was a mess of books, clippings and photographs and they spent their final weeks drawing it all together. A European publisher that specialised in art and design had heard about their project and suggested that they create a book about their work. Less than a year later, "PubDes: A Pictorial History to a Future Country" appeared.

That October, a young Finnish MP, elated to have been elected only days before, received a giant crate. ■

FUTURE PROJECTS



The Constituency Project is the basis for a much larger programme of work that seeks to better understand how citizens experience government and how innovative participatory mechanisms can be used to bolster and renew parliamentary governance.

THE GLOBAL CONSTITUENCY COMPARATOR

The Constituency Project is the first research project of its kind that attempts to chart the role and relevance of the local end of parliamentary government in Canada. The Global Constituency Comparator would study the relationship between elector and elected in six countries to determine how different electoral systems either inhibit or enhance the citizen's sense of proximity and access to government. It would also compile examples of best and innovative practices among these countries for deepening and developing the ongoing conversation between citizen and state.

THE CONSTITUENCY QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

A second, quantitative phase to The Constituency Project would survey 100 constituency offices to obtain a clearer picture of the work performed by constituency staff. It will track demands on their time as well as their attitudes to government, partisan politics, the public and their work. An

accompanying survey will target MPs and attempt to better gauge the local role they play and their interest in constituency work.

THE TALK SHOP: DIALOGUE AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

'The Talk Shop' would be a national conference designed to explore the role of the MP in creating and sustaining long-term community dialogues. Hosted by Vancouver's Wosk Centre for Dialogue, 'The Talk Shop' would convene parliamentarians and expert facilitators to discuss strategies for engaging citizens in meaningful conversations about public policy and local issues. It would equip parliamentarians with new skills and ideas for building a closer connection to their constituents.

THE GOVERNMENT EXPERIENCE AUDIT

The Government Experience Audit would bring together a team of designers and researchers to examine a series of basic interactions with government, such as the filing of taxes, the replacement of personal identification, the sum of annual mailings to citizens, passport control, and civic ceremonies. The audit would develop a set of measures for analysing these exchanges and develop a methodology for creating more meaningful and engaging interactions with government.