Service, Security, Transparency & Trust: Government Online or Governance Renewal in Canada?

Jeffrey Roy, University of Ottawa, Canada

ABSTRACT

The objectives of this article are twofold: first, to examine the main conceptual dimensions of electronic government (e-government); and secondly, to critically assess both the current responses and future prospects of Canada’s public sector. The first sections of the paper are primarily conceptual as they delve into e-government’s meaning and scope by presenting a set of major thematic challenges driving public sector reform. The paper then provides a critical assessment of recent reforms and new initiatives undertaken by the Government of Canada. Building on this analysis, the article aims to sketch out the major issues and challenges likely to confront Canadian governance. Of particular interest is whether or not a sufficient balance exists in focusing on dimensions of e-government and e-governance in order to adapt effectively to a more informational, digital, and interdependent world.

Keywords: citizen; collaborative; digital; electronic; governance; government; security; service; transparency; trust

INTRODUCTION

The objectives of this article are twofold: first, to examine the main conceptual dimensions of electronic government (e-government); and secondly, to critically assess both the current responses and future prospects of Canada’s public sector. In order to be more precise on the scope of this paper, the following definition of e-government is useful as a starting point:

The continuous innovation in the delivery of services, citizen participation, and governance through the transformation of external and internal relationships by the use of information technology, especially the Internet.

This definition helps to underscore the links between government and governance in such a context, and the fluid nature of roles and relationships both within the public sector and across various stakeholders externally. The latter term — governance
— may be defined in a general way as the manner and mechanisms by which resources are coordinated in a world where power and knowledge are increasingly distributed (Paquet, 1997). The rise of electronic governance (e-governance) denotes processes of coordination made possible or even necessary by the advent of technology and, in particular, the spreading of online activities (Allen et al., 2001).

This starting point has been extended as of late by many groups suggesting that e-government is more simply and holistically about achieving good government. This perspective underscores the widening canvass of e-government as digital technologies and online activities permeate most all aspects of the public sector. For some, e-governance is distinguishable from e-government in that the former comprises a more fundamental sharing and reorganizing of power across all stakeholders and the citizenry, whereas the latter is more focused on modernizing existing state processes to improve performance with respect to existing services and policies (Peristeras et al., 2002; Riley, 2003). For others, and more in line with the definitions adopted above, e-government must be viewed as encompassing both administration and democracy (Bertelsmann, 2002).

Despite rather fluid terminology, such viewpoints offer a useful guide for the conceptual review provided by the first half of this article. Section two explores e-government from a primarily internal perspective, examining the governance of online service delivery and homeland security as two distinct but quite related facets of e-government. Section three examines more outwardly rooted governance themes related to transparency and trust and their connection to broader debates concerning democratic reform. The interdependence of such inward and outward considerations also matters due to the holistic context of a public sector encompassing both internal and external dimensions.

Section four then undertakes a critical assessment of e-government in Canada. Building on this analysis, section five looks forward to sketch out the major issues and challenges likely to confront Canadian government. The purpose of this discussion is less a definitive blueprint of what the future will yield and more some informed guidance as to how the public sector in Canada is likely to evolve. Of particular interest is whether or not a sufficient balance exists in focusing on administrative and democratic adaptation, internally and externally, in line with the emerging contours of a more informational, digital, and interdependent world.

SERVICE & SECURITY

Remarkably new by any historical measure, the rapid emergence of e-government around the world and the specific nature of its current evolution can be viewed as stemming from two separate yet interrelated episodes over the past decade — on the one hand, the rise of the Internet and electronic commerce (e-commerce) during the 1990s; and on the other hand, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. While their origins are quite distinct, they share many contemporary governance challenges.

With respect to e-commerce, growth and expansion are linked to an online population that has now surpassed half a billion people worldwide. Yet, despite progress in most regions of the world, this group remains relatively concentrated in the developed world within the most advanced economies of Asia, Europe, and North America (Geiselhart, 2004). This concen-
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