Citizens to Netizens: Grass-Roots Driven Democracy and E-Democracy in South Australia

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ABSTRACT

This article explores whether information and communication technologies (ICTs) are being used to their full capacity by government agencies in South Australia to engage citizens in interaction with the government. It surveys government and private sector Web sites to determine “best practice” for civic engagement and describes several innovations that offer promising models for e-democracy. In South Australia, it appears that the movement towards innovative e-inclusion is driven from the bottom up—from Local Government Councils, the arts industries, and the education sectors, in the main. The State Government has a well developed e-presence, but much of it is concentrated on the provision of information rather than the fostering of e-democracy. The article examines these trends and questions whether the government is giving the appropriate priority to the citizen-state relationship in an era characterized by rapid economic growth and change.

Keywords: citizen access; community; computerization of society; digital divide; electronic democracy; IT in public administration; online; online government; political campaigns; virtual community building

INTRODUCTION

The developments in information and communication technology (ICT) promise to transform the relationship between citizens and government agencies as much as they have changed business practices and entertainment patterns for all Australians. Such is the extent to which this relationship could be reordered that the impact of e-democracy’s initiatives may be as significant a reform as the spread of democratic governing institutions in the 19th century. If this is the case, current South Australian policy suggests that it will be a less significant leader in this revolution than it has in the past. For while South Australia was certainly a leader in the early adoption
of democratic initiatives, there is less evidence to suggest that this pace has been maintained in recent years. Indeed, it will be argued below that although there have been a number of (commendable) developments that, on their own, have fostered greater interactivity between citizens and the agencies of the State government, these have lacked the overall coordination that would be required to constitute a clear commitment to e-democracy.

Even a brief summary of South Australia’s early history shows that it was more broadly shaped by democratic acts and initiatives than any other of the Australian colonies. Unlike every other former British colony, South Australia’s foundation was a product of legislation rather than direct settlement. The South Australia Act of 1834 (UK) laid the foundations for the democratic style of governance that the new colony would eventually adopt. Although it took some time for the formal introduction of all the key institutions outlined in the Act, by 1857 South Australia had a bi-cameral Parliament that included a House of Assembly (lower house) with suffrage extended to all adult male British subjects (including Aboriginal men).

This reform was consistent with the early introduction of a number of parallel democratic initiatives. South Australia was either the first or among the first to use the secret ballot, have an elected town council, separate Church and State, introduce industrial reforms, and legalize trade unions. By 1894, the South Australian Parliament was the first in the world to give women the right to stand as candidates for election, and one of the first few to give women the right to vote. As Chris Sumner has argued, South Australia’s early political initiatives placed it “at the forefront of democratic reform” (Sumner, 2003, p.22), with a constitution among the most democratic in the contemporary world.

Through the twentieth century it is fair to say that the passion for democratic reform in South Australia was less evident. For much of this time, political initiatives were focused principally upon securing economic growth through periods of war and depression. Most of the first 60 years were dominated by conservative political groups that saw little need for reform. While the governments of the final four decades reflected the more progressive social mood of the times and introduced a range of overdue social reforms, there was little more than piecemeal attention given to democratic reform. Other than changes to the electoral laws that saw the end of the property qualification to vote for the Legislative Council (the upper house of the State Parliament), the introduction of proportional representation in the Legislative Council, and the ensuring of one-vote-one-value for House of Assembly elections, there is little that any government could point to as constituting institutional reform. Rather, the changes that did emerge came from the broader revolutions that were occurring across society. These reflected the changing nature of the
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