As an individual and a member of Parliament I believe that the Internet will change everything, including the way that we govern and are governed. We have probably only just witnessed the beginning.

In 1982, the great management teacher, Professor Russell Ackoff, said, "Change has always been accelerating. This is nothing new and we cannot claim uniqueness because of it. There are, however, some aspects of the change we are experiencing that are unique. First, although technological and social change have been accelerating almost continuously, until recently this has been slow enough to enable people to adapt, either by making small occasional adjustments or by accumulating the need to do so and passing it on to the next generation. They young have always found it easier than the old to make the necessary adjustments. Newcomers to power have usually been willing to make changes that their predecessors were unwilling to make. In the past, because change did not press people greatly, it did not receive much of their attention. Today it presses hard and therefore is attended to. Its current rate is so great that delays in responding to it can be very costly, even disastrous. Companies and governments are going out of business every day because they have failed to adapt to it, or because they have adapted too slowly." (Ackoff, Russell A, Creating the Corporate Future?)

We are now in the midst of a revolution. The information age and fast developing communications and information technologies are driving our lives and careers in unimagined ways. Our economy and society are literally being transformed by the changes wrought by the global information industry.

Change will accelerate as internet connections increase in developing countries and the internet delivery is delivered by broadband. The feature of "always on", with no more need to "dial-in", will redefine the use of the Internet in ways we don't even yet imagine. When wireless and pervasive computing makes its full impact, the changes will accelerate further. Wearable computers, new personal devices, intelligent appliances, and the wired, artificially intelligent internet houses and offices will inexorably alter our lives.
The barriers to consultation with the whole community on difficult and vexing policy issues are being removed by a lower cost of the transmission of ideas, inexpensive storage of information, data-mining tools and the advent of practical artificial intelligence tools. Provided that issues are communicated in common terms, there ought to be no barrier to the ordinary citizen contributing ideas and energy to the political process.

The energetic Canadian author, Don Tapscott, wrote, "We are at the dawn of an Age of Networked Intelligence— an age that is giving birth to a new economy, a new politics, and a new society. Businesses will be transformed, governments will be removed and individuals will be able to reinvent themselves - all with the help of information technology."

A New Democracy?

Today in Australia, there is widely expressed public contempt for parliamentarians. Similar sentiments are expressed in most countries with a free press.

There is contempt for a parliamentary system in which televised highlights focus Government and Opposition Leaders perpetually at war. Almost all reform is met by negativity and/ or carping from the other side.

The institution of Parliament is one that is steeped in tradition and symbolism. The Westminster system as we know it today has a history which dates back four hundred years and is the descendant of a much older manifestation, which has its roots in the medieval tradition of baronial counsel and consent. (J Goldsworthy, The Sovereignty of Parliament, Clarendon Press Oxford p 28)

Today, Westminster parliaments may be considered to be excessively adversarial. The Westminster institutions, which are premised on an ideal of adversarialism as the key to reaching informed outcomes and compromise between all sides of a debate, had almost fully matured by the mid-18th century. As they prepare to enter the 21st century, the systems are showing signs of stress.

While our economies, societies, corporations, education systems and executive governments are all moving from the industrial age to the information age, many of our parliamentary practices remain mired in the pre-industrial age. Surely in 2001 we are entitled to ask whether the trial-by-combat approach is appropriate for a knowledge-based economy?

Truth is usually better found through collaboration than confrontation.

Parliamentarians have the power to reform the processes of Parliament. The processes as we know them are intended to ensure certainty and accountability, however these systems are a product of a period predating the advent of modern telecommunications, when the printing press was the dominant form of communications technology. The ability of present day processes to function and deliver what they should is being fundamentally called into question.

The social researcher and commentator, Hugh McKay, wrote in July, "This is a time of widespread disengagement from many of the issues that cry out for debate; the electorate
simply isn't paying attention" The opinion polls merely show that if you ask a question, you'll get an answer.

As democrats do we continue to accept this situation or do we strike out in new directions to renew our democracy?

Given that members of Parliament are now able to gain access to the entire world via the Internet using laptop computers in the chamber, and the government is becoming increasingly open by including its own publications on the Web it would seem to be a time for change. If the process does not change, in a few years when the Internet is in practically every household there will be an irresistible push for a high-tech Swiss model of direct democracy on public policy issues. Several years ago, an independent candidate for the American presidency, Mr Ross Perot, scored almost 20 per cent of the vote on that platform.

The 21st century provides us with a phenomenal opportunity to revive liberal political life. Even central bankers are excited. Alan Greenspan, Chairman of the US Federal Reserve has said, "The flood of investment in technology which we have seen over the past few years will lead to a once or twice in a century phenomenon that will carry productivity trends nationally and globally to a new higher track?"

So, too, in political and civic life there is the opportunity to lead the nation to a "higher track"

The public doesn't believe their political leaders "Listen." They want political leaders to hear and respond.

Parliamentarians can legitimately say that very few people send them their views.

The people might respond with, "I would, if I thought they would listen."

In a knowledge economy and society, the ideas of our people are our most valuable resource. How much of this is lost when discussions and ideas are not transmitted to those with the power to implement change?

How many people have their most creative ideas under the shower rather than at meetings? How often have you been to a dinner party where over a few bottles of wine the group has come up with 'the solution?' Today, most of these ideas are lost because they are never transmitted.

Even if the general public sends in ideas, they are lost because there are not sufficient resources to properly analyse the merit of the idea. Of course, in many cases, ideas are not given sufficient weight because they come from people not connected to the political process or a business/ trade-union/ NGO community. Most of us say we believe the little people have wisdom too, but we haven't built the tools to deal with large-scale transmission of their ideas. Most political and government offices would be easily overwhelmed by an substantial increase in innovative ideas from the community? Each politician and their staff are so appointment and deadline driven now they could not cope with an increased demand for analysis and response.
In a knowledge economy, the fundamental resource is the intelligence, knowledge and wisdom of your community. As the Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, has said, “We’ve heard a lot about ‘knowledge nation’. Knowledge of itself is a very important commodity. It is indispensable. It is part of the very essence of our being as humans. But knowledge itself is not enough. Unless a nation has a capacity to convert knowledge into income and jobs, it cannot fully fulfil the human needs of our modern society. And the goals of government must there be to create to the maximum extent possible what I’ve often described in the past as a ‘can-do’ community.

The knowledge and creativity of the people can be harnessed through some creative and sensible use of Information Technology. However this needs major reform in the way information and knowledge is utilised in the departmental structure of government. Most policy suggestions from outside organisations and individuals are processed within a single department or agency; many ideas, which have application across government, are not given sufficient attention across government.

I believe that a single cross-departmental database for government policy-making can be created both at every level of government? Federal, State and Local level. Who knows, in time maybe the databases of all three could be merged. Simple data mining, and increasingly advanced intelligent agents, should be able to find synergy between ideas sent to disparate departments and agencies.

In that environment, cost-benefit analysis would more accurately identify reform which have high benefits across government with costs more rationally allocated across the governmental budget.

If we called the project ‘Harvesting the Knowledge of Australians for Australia’, who knows what enthusiasm we would unleash. The public could be encouraged to send their ideas in by email/web; faxes and typed letters can be scanned pretty accurately to text. Handwritten ideas are more labour intensive but as they may come from an older but wise population segment, means could be found to transcribe the ideas. Call centres and voice-recognition systems could increase the flow of spontaneous ideas.

Importantly, in many cases, contributors with synergistic ideas could be invited to meet together to further develop their ideas. It wouldn’t be hard to give them access to relevant budget materials and existing programs to help them better develop their ideas before public service resources would be applied to them.

Who knows precisely why so many Australians volunteered to help in the Olympics? I don’t think the passions demonstrated are restricted to sport. If the object of the exercise is contributing to the development of our nation, if ideas are seen to be valued and there is visible action (which may include the convening of like-minded citizens) there may be a genuine flourishing in public participation.

This new invigorated democracy would give us the opportunity to ask everyone their opinion and views on any issue. This should not lead us down the track of the referendum on every issue. John Stuart Mill warned against simple majoritarian rule? minorities need to be protected, complex issues sometimes dictate decisions based on experts’ advice. The Ross Perot vision of the electronic town hall constituted by a yes/no
question immediately after the television news conjures up nightmares rather than a
dream.

We mustn't be afraid to share the complexity of decision making with the public. While
the television news and modern newspapers seem incapable of portraying complexity,
the web and email allows us to give the knowledge and information to the community on
complex decisions. Not all will participate, but how much stronger would our society be
if 5-10% of the population studied and participated in complex problem solving?

Governments and parliamentarians need to alter their methods of consultation. Today,
most governments produce discussion papers that they advertise and ask for
"submissions." In today's busy world most of us don't have the time to finish the
newspapers much less read and respond to difficult technical concepts in a discussion
paper.

We need to ask people questions in their own language and we should permit greater
informality in their response. I understand that in Sweden, there are experiments with
storytellers rewriting government documents and legislation. As far as possible options
papers and discussion papers should be accompanied by a video presentation whether on
tape or the web. I have received an excellent submission to a parliamentary inquiry from
an illiterate man who sent me a video in his case showing graphic evidence of the truth of
his testimony.

By way of further example - imagine the sunsetting and remaking of a set of
environmental regulations requiring food shops to safeguard the environment by keeping
a grease trap (serviced regularly), an air emissions filter and a prescribed system for
recycling food scraps. Most food shop operators work very long hours and, today, are
very unlikely to contribute to the regulatory process. Imagine if we could send the
thousands of food shops a single page by email/fax or hard copy? in one paragraph
setting out the reasons and the direct impact? and asking two questions - Have the
regulations disrupted their business in any way? Is there any way you can think of
achieving these objectives better. You may only get a handful of responses but one
extraordinary insight from someone deeply immersed in running a food business might
revolutionise the way the issue is handled in future.

To conclude, open policy making processes are inherently beneficial as they recognize
that any individual in society no matter how busy with their work or family
responsibilities has something to contribute to society's decisions. In my experience,
bureaucrats with power often oppose them as they disrupt existing power structures and
information flows. The results may be unpredictable but I believe the risks are worth
it.

The new opportunities in politics were well summarized in a speech by Australian author
Bryce Courtney, who said: "Dare your genius to walk the wild unknown way."

The Virtual Discussion on Parliamentary Oversight, sponsored jointly by the
World Bank and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association held over four
weeks in February 2001.
The primary focus of the forum was intended to be on the relationship between Parliament and the Executive within the broader context of the processes of democratisation, globalisation and the growth of information technology. The discussion also looked to other factors, which have inexorably altered what was at one time a clear and unchanging relationship.

Online discussions ranged from the technical and technological to the philosophical and theoretical to the comparatively analytical, drawing on the participants different backgrounds and experiences or views of Parliament.

Sadly, the forum did not grow to become the enlivened exchange of firmly held, robust opinions that the moderating team had envisioned it might become. Despite more than 1,000 subscribers signing up to the service, by the end of the fourth week fewer than fifty participants in the process had made active contributions. We can only surmise that most people seemed to be content to sit on the sidelines to watch and listen to what others had to say.

Some of the letters, received privately by the moderators, indicate that there may have been many 'off topic' or interpersonal exchanges going on 'off-list.' We hope that this was the case, since one of the functions of such a forum is to foster stronger, more permanent ties, between individuals and organisations around the globe, long after the initial discussion is ended.

The lack of participation or interest from MP's, scrutineering experts, legislative drafters and the like was extremely disheartening. In all, over two thousand emails were forwarded on to MP's and Parliaments, political parties, Commonwealth and non Commonwealth Agencies as well as to members of Public Accounts committees around the globe, informing them about the forum and inviting them to make a contribution.

The lack of participation from those groups for whom these issues are supposed to be most vital and relevant is cause for concern and dismay. The explanation is partially cultural - a lack of cross pollination between MP's and experts in this field with IT and email. A small number of responses 'declining to attend due to prior engagements' were a clear pointer to this problem, although they were in the minority.

In the information age, governance is fast becoming one of humanity's most critical issues. The emerging gap springing up between groups of people who set the technological pace and traditional institutions such as Parliament, should have ensured a rapid fire exchange between participants in the forum about the implications for structural change and the future limitations and checks on Parliamentary power and oversight. For some, the intellectual terrain of the forum, which dealt with abstract theory and hypothetical concepts, as much as it cross referenced actual practice and experience, may have seemed too dry. At least one contributor highlighted the importance of stepping away from the realm of high theory and abstraction and localising the discussion in order to be better contextualise the concepts and their comparative qualities, by ensuring they related back to specific instances in the real world.

There can be no doubt that new technologies are empowering; They are enabling. However it seems that if we take what's being called 'the Field Of Dreams' approach - that if you build it they will come, despite the large amounts of publicity expended on the
forum, we cannot be assured that these technologies will foster democracy and enthusiastic participation in civil processes any better than did their predecessors, the ordinary post, the telephone and the printing press.

Even at the best of times, text is not the most efficient means of conducting a conversation and for the one fingered typist, the technical, individual and cultural limitations of a forum conducted in text, online and in English may have played a large part in the decision to take a back seat and allow others to drive the conversation.

It was unfortunate that despite such a concerted mail out and accompanying publicity campaign the forum did not result in a more active rate of participation.

One response, from an independent member of the Victorian Parliament, complained that she was too immersed in the minutiae of her daily existence as a politician to lose precious time to being involved in the discussion, not even to the extent of taking an interest in and reading what others had to say. As a Liberal member of Parliament with a keen interest in Parliamentary oversight and the rule of law, I was surprised to find myself mistaken in thinking that one of the primary concerns of an independent member of Parliament would be the appropriate and orderly exercise and management of Parliamentary scrutiny, power and control. At the same time as I identified with her feelings of being overwhelmed by information and the demands on my time and my energies as an MP, I was singularly unimpressed at her seemingly extremely superficial approach towards the ethical responsibility inherent to exercising the balance of power in a parliamentary environment.

In contrast, another letter, which was also sent to me privately and which came from a subscriber in a western African state explained that although the author would not be making a contribution to the list, he would be watching the forum with intense interest. The writer outlined his fears of possible reprisal or retribution in the workplace, as well as personally, if he were to contribute his views openly to the forum, owing to the political constraints in his country.

His note highlighted the ironical fact that those least free to participate in open exchanges about democracy, transparency, government processes and the limits of parliamentary power are usually those for whom these issues are most critically significant.

The two letters could not speak to more radically different positions.

It is my view that open discussion reinforces the freedom that we each enjoy and embrace. Simultaneously, it de-emphasises the fragility of democracy and of the civil rights to freedom of expression as well as freedom of association, that so many of us take for granted. Within the elected community, the parliamentary sector and the public sector I am of the view that there is an obligation to at least consider the bigger picture from time to time and to take the opportunity to be reminded of the end-limits to the framework inside which we operate.

Although the reasons why things did not go exactly as planned with the forum are indefinite, one of the drawbacks may have perhaps been the relative shortness of its lifespan. The list operated in competition with many, widely known and longer established lists speaking to substantially similar issues. These lists, devoted to subjects
such as e-democracy, digital opportunity and the digital divide are often launched on the backs of other similar listservs from which a new community or branch has emerged, rather than being developed from scratch as this one was. These lists enjoy the patronage that longevity and word of mouth can bring to such a subject area and enjoy the luxury of having no termination date.

As a follow-up to the discussion on Parliamentary Oversight which formed part of the World Bank Institute's program of capacity building of parliaments, another forum aimed at helping people to more effectively contribute to national governance, will be launched focusing on the crucial role that parliaments play in the formulating of policies to reduce poverty, in general, and in their role in the PRSP process in particular.

To sign up, please send a blank email to:
join-parliamentarians@lists.worldbank.org

Or go to the following site to sign up on the Web:
http://vx.worldbank.org/cgi-bin/lyris.pl?enterparliamentarians

In closing, I would like to thank the CPA and the World Bank, particularly the technical support team Raja Gomez, Laura Dillon and Ronald Kim, for offering myself and my adviser this unique opportunity to participate in a global event.

Of all the contributions received the following constitute my favourite passages:

"Our civilisation is unable to do what individuals cannot say. And individuals are unable to say what they cannot think...How are citizens to enter into public debate if the concepts which define our society and decide the manner in which we are governed are open neither to understanding nor to questioning?" John Ralston Saul “Doubters Companion” 1995

Parliament exists because the process of direct representation and involvement is too complex. If, through technology, this complexity can be reduced, then the role of parliament should also change. - Ian Dennis,

'The state of any democracy is that of fairness.' Ayana Dasi quoting John Stuart Mill.

For those who are interested several other resources exist for continuing the dialogue that our forum barely touched on:

On 21 June 2001 comes the Electronic Government Forum, which this year will be held in London. The conference will address issues raised in the 'Future Government Forum' online debate. Also on the agenda are: skills shortages, capital expenditure and other barriers to e-Government; and an evaluation of web-enabled outsourcing and service management models. Full details and online registration facilities are available at:
http://www.electronic-government.com

e-Government in Europe: 30-31 May, Brussels, Belgium. Event featuring case studies from Estonia, Austria, Finland and a vision of the future of e-government at a pan-European level. See: http://www.access-conf.com/

Hosted by Trinity College, Dublin. Topics to include e-government portal and transaction sites, security issues, and web-enabled knowledge management. See: http://www.tcd.ie/statistics/eceg2001.html


DIGITAL GOVERNANCE: A web portal for information on e-government and e-democracy in the developing world has been set up by Vikas Nath, founder of KnowNet (http://www.knownet.org), an initiative encouraging the adoption of new technologies by developing countries. Digital Governance is at: http://www.digitalgovernance.org/

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