Report on E-Democracy Talk by Professor Stephen Coleman[*]

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The Jubilee Room at the New South Wales Parliament was recently the venue for a most interesting address by Stephen Coleman, Cisco Professor of e-Democracy at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford. The Institute is devoted to the study of the societal implications of the Internet and seeks to shape research, policy and practice in the United Kingdom, Europe and around the world. The Institute's recruitment of Professor Coleman as the Cisco Visiting Professor of e-democracy was designed to take forward a critical component of this area, which will be the base for developing a set of research proposals and for holding a variety of forums and lectures to engage with policy and practitioner communities. His address was well attended by a broad cross section of members of parliament, Parliament House staff and academics. The Australasian Study of Parliament Group was well represented including the National President, the Hon. Kevin Rozzoli.

Professor Coleman commenced his address by stressing that Internet technology, indeed any technology, should not be seen as an end in itself. 'It is not a driver of systems' he said, 'but a tool. We must recognize that the Internet has become a part of our life and if parliaments do not embrace it they will be increasingly seen as nineteenth century institutions of continually declining relevance.'

He pointed out that in the twenty first century the Internet will continue to grow in influence and be in customary use by all generations as those who are uncomfortable with it fade away. This process will be complete in fifty years. Parliaments will have to become e-parliaments in a world of e-democracy. In all considerations of its use, however, it is essential for the 'e' in e-democracy to come second.

There are, as he sees it, two very significant elements which are shaping today's parliaments the first of which is the emergence of a range of interactive technology. In the past most forms of information dispersal were one-sided, newspapers, radio, television, in other words they do not afford the reader, listener or viewer the opportunity to engage spontaneously in a dialogue. By contrast electronic interchange of information provides a forum in which for everything that is said there is an opportunity to speak back. Coleman referred to this as 'intertextuality'.

The second element was is the disconnection of government and parliaments from the community. The public currently feel cut off from the practice of democracy and feels its opinions are not accorded any value. The community at large does not know how to speak to the parliament and its parliamentarians, and governments do not know how to listen to the community voice. He referred to this as the 'dialogue of the deaf'.

Fortunately these circumstances also offer the opportunity to do something and in pursuing their objectives the Institute has developed three lines of research. Firstly to ask the public what it wants? What do they have? What would they like? The overwhelming response to a survey conducted by the Institute showed the public wants to use technology to converse with their parliament, to open discussion on what is working, or not working, and what needs to be done in the future to improve their living amenity.

The second line was to examine a range of parliaments to see what they were offering in terms of Internet and related facilities with a view to determining how further additions could be made to what was available. Their research indicated that only one parliament of those surveyed did not have a website. The content of these websites however varied considerably, from those with interactive features to those that simply reproduced material previously available in paper form. It was evident in most parliaments the potential was largely untapped.

The third line was to survey members of parliament to ascertain what they saw as their needs and their attitude to a more comprehensive interrelation with electronic capacity. In investigating their needs they identified three quite distinct roles, as a representative of their constituents, as a party activist, and as a legislator. Each role presents a different parameter of need and while most members tend to be strongest in one area they still need to address the demands of the other two.

Professor Coleman then turned to the potential use of the Internet in the field of policy development and the drafting of legislation. Linking the demands of this area directly with the element of disconnection between parliament and people he identified a major problem in the United Kingdom that has arisen from the fact that voting is non-compulsory. He quoted the following statistics in relation to the last three general elections which revealed a serious decline in the number of people voting in elections. The first time Tony Blair led his party to victory 71.3% of the population voted, on the second occasion this fell to 59% and at the third, with a

level of discontent running against the government, the percentage only rose 2% to 61%. Thus four in every ten eligible voters are no longer bothering to cast a vote. The percentages are even worse for the under 30-age group. In the first election the response was 51%, the second 39%, and the third down to 37%. Other statistics reinforcing this disengagement are that only 2% of the population will join a political party and only 15% said they were concerned about who governs. Despite this, surveys also revealed that 85% of the population has at least one political conversation each day and 15% said they spent a lot of time talking about politics.

In the 1990s the United Kingdom government decided to investigate how they might participate in e-democracy. In 2002 they positively embraced a policy of active engagement to move the agenda to one of 'everyday participation'. In the next few years they established interactive sites, through the UK Parliament for on-line consultations in twenty specific policy areas in which it was intended to introduce legislation. In March 2000, for example, they established a committee to consider legislation in the area of domestic violence. An analysis of policy input up until that time revealed it was confined to police, health and community workers, and peak bodies. There was no involvement of women who had actually suffered abuse. An on-line forum was set up and promoted through women's agencies both government and non-government running over a period of one month during which they received one thousand pieces of information from women who had suffered or were suffering domestic violence. This information was of great value to the committee and guided subsequent legislation in a number of significant areas. While the identity of the women remained anonymous information afforded by an independent and confidential registration process showed most of the women had never communicated with a member of parliament previously, never visited parliament, never been on-line or were particularly computer literate. Nonetheless, given the opportunity they were anxious to have their say. In other words a target group was reached who would otherwise be shut out of the normal process. In another area, that of biogenetic research there were two existing and competing lobby groups, the moralists and the scientists, neither of whom were interested in consultation believing their view was the only valid one. The on-line forum produced a third group, the disability group, who eventually dominated the debate. It was also noted that in this case most participants went on-line between 11 pm and 6 am, that is, they were a section of the community who because of their suffering found it difficult to sleep and spent this time at their computer reading material and responding. An important element of e-democracy therefore is the capacity to make comment at a time that suits the commentator.

Finally Professor Coleman said e-democracy should not been seen as some kind of ongoing referendum process, or simply a letterbox. It is in fact a sophisticated interchange mechanism for the public point of view. It is particularly valuable in fields where the public has specific expertise. Clearly there are areas where the public is not, in general, well informed and is therefore unable to comment, however, it is particularly useful in areas of social issue and areas having direct

impact on the community such as the environment, public transport, public health care and education.

Professor Coleman then took questions and some of his responses are worthy of particular note. Asked how the institutions of government could insure a two-way process which made respondents feel there their contribution was heeded he confirmed the ongoing validity of the process depended on respondents seeing evidence of this, that even if their views were not ultimately acted on, institutional feedback should show the process of consideration and the reasons for not taking up the suggested action. It is important to sustain this input which provides an entirely different quality of input to that received from lobbyists who often present a very narrow view and one not necessarily representative of the entire client group, for example, the view of a peak body rather than rank and file.

In response to another question he agreed that overload was a real problem, however it seemed to him, in any democracy, members of parliament and governments, that is, the democratic institutions, cannot say they are too busy to talk to the public. There is thus a need for both the channels for communication and the protocols to facilitate the ordering and prioritization of on-line material. Of primary importance is the need to filter public input by identifying its source, that is, who does it come from, what is the status of the correspondent and so on. Prioritisation protocols may be established that would, say, give preference to a members own constituents, their fields of special interest, or matters of regional or party significance. A member should not have to accept everything in the flood of material that will at times come across the screen.

He then went on to say that the more you open up the process, that is, widen the scope of those who may wish to join the dialogue the more necessary it is to shift the locus from the individual member to a broader and better resourced group. He recommended reading the report entitled 'Members Only' compiled under the chairmanship of Lord Putnam which investigated ways and means of doing this. He also stressed the value of websites such as that conducted by the BBC which is run on a shoestring budget and is an excellent example of how to operate a system that includes an on line forum. Now produced in forty three languages it has a bigger interface with the community than all the newspapers in United Kingdom put together and is the world's largest website of its kind.

When asked about the constraints of the voluntary element of democracy, for example, voluntary voting versus compulsory voting, at a time when so many people seemed disinterested he replied it was an essential essence of democracy that people had the right to choose whether they wished to participate or not, and if they did the degree of their involvement. The challenge was to raise the level of participation by making public capacity for involvement more relevant and meaningful.

Another question related to the value of free to air broadcasting of all parliamentary proceedings on a dedicated civics channel which in the down time could broadcast educational and documentary material on subjects of current interest. He completely endorsed this saying that it was the right of every person to be able to access the debates of parliament and that in the long run the cost was of negligible consequence in the delivery of a stronger democracy.

Another question touched on the use of technology in the Chamber and in particular electronic voting. Professor Coleman said that there was some reluctance on the part of the UK Parliament to proceed in this area, which was another example of culture and ritual prevailing over the benefits that could be brought to bear by technology.

A further question went to whether Members were involved in any real time discussions with constituents. Professor Coleman said that some MPS had conducted on line 'surgeries' (constituent interviews) but that they were less than successful because they were not run by trained moderators.

When asked can e-democracy be driven by and dominated by particular activity groups he said 'Yes, but so can all other processes'. It is simply something we must always bear in mind.

So where does this leave us? He contrasted the concept of Direct Democracy, as practiced in ancient Greece where every qualified citizen participated with our form of representative or indirect democracy driven by a more complex world. He said desirable though the former is there was really no alternative to a representative democracy in which we delegate decision making to an elected group even though it must by its very nature be always distant.

E-democracy, however, may be a way of moving us to a more 'direct representation' in which everyone who wishes to do so may have a say (the benefit of direct democracy), without going down the path of endless plebiscites, thus getting us away from the cut-off mode inherent in existing relationships. Thus we keep the institutions we need, elected officials, majority government and so on, but enhance them by new technologies. We need to ask ourselves 'do we want to participate even if we don't necessarily get our own way'. He believed people principally wanted to know they are being heard. Parliament must show its response and even where it doesn't take up an issue explain why it didn't. This produces a narrative from the public that is otherwise unavailable.

Those attending the address felt it was of great value, clearly and tellingly presenting a balanced case for better harnessing computer technology the needs of parliament and therefore democracy.   ▲