



E-DEMOCRACY IN BELGIUM AND CANADA: A VIRTUAL MIRAGE?  
On enhancing citizen participation through information and communication technologies

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## INTRODUCTION

In many western societies, democracy is assumed to be in a deep crisis. As traditional forms of political participation are declining, populist right-wing parties are flourishing, and feelings of remoteness towards political institutions seem to have found fertile soil, the legitimacy of representative democracy is considered to be at stake (Coleman and Gotze 2001: 4; Van Audenhove *et al.* 2005: 1).

With the advent of the internet, and its fast and pervasive dissemination, a potential panacea was found to reshape the troublesome state-citizen relationship. The internet, with its inherent interactive nature, would create a new sort of public sphere where people could freely discuss and engage in thorough deliberation. Bringing government closer to the people, the internet revolution would ultimately result in better and more widely accepted policy formation (Chadwick 2006a). Whereas twentieth-century mass media turned political deliberation into one-way conversation and performance, the internet would create new, electronic ties between government and citizens, enabling the public to participate more directly, continually and actively in policy making, thereby reinventing representative democracy as we know it (Coleman 2004: 1).

Besides these cyber-evangelist views, however, also more pessimistic predictions were spread. Davis (1999: 168-186), for instance, stated that the mere existence of communication technologies would not transform the political inactive into political animals. On the contrary, new communication technologies were assumed to contribute to the further atomization of society (and a further loss of social capital), because true interactivity on the web was considered to be non-existent.

Despite these conflicting perspectives, the threefold combination of a “crisis of democracy”, a simultaneous rise of internet penetration and “a significant turn in democratic theory towards a more deliberative view of active citizenship” (Blumler & Coleman 2001: 7), made a more participatory style of democracy desirable and, at least to some degree, feasible. In this research paper, *we will investigate to what extent government agencies are employing new information and communication technologies to enhance citizen participation in policy making.* As such, we will particularly focus on e-democracy as a mean to strengthen and enrich representative democracy. Hence, only government initiated programmes will be

treated. Besides studying the Belgian situation, also the state of e-democracy in Canada, a long-time forerunner in e-government, will be part of the research framework. Because of the fact that mainly secondary sources will be employed, the major contribution of this paper lies in its comparative design: if the Canadian approach seems to reshape the relationship between representatives and represented successfully, it might act as a beacon to the further development of e-democracy in Belgium.

To answer the abovementioned research question, the structure of this paper unfolds as follows: first, we will try to shed some light on the rather vague and fragmented field of e-government. The main concepts of the field will be defined, and different perspectives on the usage of ICTs by governments will be distinguished. Second, we will demonstrate that until today a mainly managerial approach towards the usage of ICTs by governments is dominating, thereby greatly marginalizing the democratic potential of the net. As a consequence, the greatest challenge towards a further realisation of e-democracy lies in finding areas of convergence between e-government and e-democracy. One of these possibilities to “bring e-democracy back in”, is the strengthening of representative democracy by implementing different forms of government initiated e-consultations. In the fourth part of this research paper, such a ‘framework of e-participation’ will be presented. This framework will then be used as a blueprint to compare the Belgian and Canadian situation in part five and six of the working paper. As a conclusion, some possible paths of further research will be presented. But first things first: what do all these e-buzzwords emerging in the slipstream of the internetboom exactly mean, and how do they relate to each other?

## **THE CONCEPTUAL VAGUENESS OF A FIELD**

With the internet quickly penetrating almost every sphere of live, an amalgam of “e”-prefixed and “online”-suffixed concepts (like e-mail, e-card, and Online Banking) sneaked into peoples’ everyday vocabulary. Within the public sector, words as e-governance, e-government and e-democracy became increasingly popular, all referring in one way or another to the beneficial effects of new communication technologies on the relationship between governments and their constituents (Tuzzi *et al.* 2007: 33). Yet, being in a quick phase of development, and being subject of different research disciplines, the field of e-government appears to be rather fragmented, lacking universally accepted definitions and structural clarity (Medaglia 2007; Yildiz 2007). While some scholars use “e-government” as

a catch all phrase, covering e-administration as well as e-democracy, others try to underline the unique characteristics of each individual concept by introducing the more neutral term of “e-governance” as umbrella. E-governance then refers to the impact of ICTs on the traditions, the institutions and the processes which determine how power is executed, how citizens get a voice and a vote, how decisions need to be made (Van Audenhove *et al.* 2005: 6; Riley 2003: 3). As such, e-governance considers the usage of ICT in the administrative *and* in the political-democratic realm, embracing both e-government *and* e-democracy (Van Gompel *et al.* 2007: 10; Tuzzi *et al.* 2007: 33). In the next few lines, we will further examine both of these key concepts, present a figure of the field, and explain why the distinction between e-gov and e-dem seems preferable, at least in theory. First, we will present a brief outline on e-government. As e-democracy is the main subject of this research paper, we will examine that side of the e-governance concept more thoroughly.

#### *E-government*

E-government, defined in the simplest of terms, contains the employment of digital technology, particularly the internet, to enhance the access to and delivery of government information and services (Edminston 2003: 20; Jaeger 2003: 323; Layne & Lee 2001: 123). Today, however, the ambitions of an electronic government reach far beyond the initial stage of merely presenting information on an official website, or the simple translation of already existing services into cyberspace. When implemented properly, e-government policies need to improve public service delivery qualitatively, by presenting (new) services faster, better, and more accurately. Also the realisation of a more customer-centred and tailored service delivery, the put into practice of a transparent and more accessible government, and the achievement of cost reductions by streamlining administrative processes, are considered as overall objectives of a progressive electronic government (Bekkers & Thaens 2002: 382; Jaeger 2003: 324; Van Audenhove *et al.* 2005: 8).

In order to realise the abovementioned objectives, governments need to take full advantage of the incredible organizational potential of the internet. With the internet's inherent networking capacity, government agencies are able to build and maintain ties with other agencies and institutions, thereby more easily cooperating and sharing information. As such, not only the front side of government alters, also the administration -the back office- becomes subject of re-engineering, with ‘integration’, ‘cooperation’ and ‘flattening’ being the key words. In this way, e-government appears to be more a question of organisation, than a question of where

which technology should be used. Yet, conflicting with traditions, bureaucratic structure, and legislative task division, this reformation of the administration often appears to be problematic, resulting in what Bekkers named “the battle of the back-offices” ( Bekkers *et al.* 2005; Bekkers 2003; Layne & Lee 2001). Summarizing, we can say that e-government is all about the enhancement of service delivery at the front-end of government through e-services, by the ICT-led innovation, integration and consolidation of back-end processes, referred to as the e-administration (UN 2008: 3).

### *E-democracy*

When we look at the other side of the e-governance equation, we once again see a concept under continuous evolution. When the internet started booming in the early nineties, most of the scholarly attention focused on the internet as a mean to install a “push-button, plebiscitary democracy”(Coleman 2003: 148). This perspective, focussing on direct democracy and ICTs within elections and referenda, is referred to as *e-voting*. Yet, more than simply putting something to vote, new communication technologies also allow for more reflective democratic processes (Korac-Kakabadse & Korac-Kakabadse 1999: 214). Nowadays the debate about technology and policy making is increasingly framed into more deliberative, participatory ways, stressing the importance of aspects as “negotiation” and “consensus” (Van Audenhove *et al.* 2005: 10). So not just counting the heads, as associated with direct democracy.

From this latter point of view, engaging the public in policy making has not to be seen as diminishing the representative relationship. New communication technologies are viewed as enablers to strengthen representative democracy, as the internet makes it possible to grasp at the expertise within the public, integrating the often experience-driven knowledge of citizens into the institutionalised decision-making process (Coleman & Gotze 2001: 12). By enabling the public to engage in policy-making, one hopes to produce qualitatively better policy, share responsibility for policy-making, build trust and gain acceptance for the soon to be implemented measures (Macintosh 2003: 33). The major plus-points of the internet as a tool to realise such a more participatory form of democracy, can be derived from its two-way, interactive nature, which enables citizens to access, produce, distribute, share and debate all kinds of information (Flew 2005: 1).

This latter perspective - contrasting e-voting - is referred to as *e-engagement*, and consists of several levels of state-citizen interaction, known as the ladder of participation (Macintosh 2003: 32-33; Macintosh 2004: 1-4). The first stage of this e-engagement scale is the stair of *e-information*. This stage represents a one-way relationship from government-producer to citizen-consumer. The capability of the internet to present information 24/7 in an orderly and easily retrievable way, are the major advantages at this stage. At first, this ICT-driven information-delivery is supposed to be “passive”, with governments simply presenting information on a website, but one expects that in the future a more “active” delivery of information will be realised: the information-delivery is then linked to a certain profile of interest of the citizen, who is automatically kept up to date with relevant information. With information being a necessary precondition of participation, this stage is also referred to as *e-enabling*.

The second stage of e-engagement, *e-consultation*, contains a two-way relationship in which citizens are able to provide feedback on certain issues that have been put forward by government. In this top-down context, one speaks of *e-engaging*, as the citizenry is engaged to contribute. Especially discussion fora lend themselves to this kind of state-citizen interaction. In the third and last stage, governments use technology to empower citizens. Here, one supports active participation and allows bottom up ideas to influence the political agenda. When citizens are able to set the agenda and shape the conditions of deliberation, the relationship with government transforms into a partnership: citizens are then emerging as equal producers of information, just like the institutionalised actor. In this situation, one speaks of *e-participation*. The participation in this stage, however, mostly appears to be of a rather ‘partial’ nature, as the responsibility and the final decision of policy formation still rests with those who are in power.

As a consequence of all these different interpretations and facets of the e-democracy concept, finding a workable definition proves to be difficult. Simple and straightforward, e-democracy can be defined as ‘the use of computers to enhance the democratic process’ (Riley 2003: 57) or ‘the use of ICT to support the democratic decision making process’ (Macintosh 2004: 1). Yet, these definitions aren’t satisfying, as their vagueness does wrong to the richness and versatility of the e-democracy concept. The Hansard Society (in Chadwick 2006a: 84) has a more thorough approach, and puts forward that “the concept of e-democracy is associated with efforts to broaden political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another

and with their representatives via new information and communication technologies'. An even more complete definition of e-democracy is provided by Kies and colleagues (Kies *et al.* 2003: 10), who manage to enlighten many different aspects of the concept in a single definition :

*“e-Democracy consists of all electronic means of communication that enable/empower citizens in their efforts to hold rulers/politicians accountable for their actions in the public realm. Depending on the aspect of democracy being promoted, e-democracy can employ different techniques: (1) for increasing the transparency of the political process; (2) for enhancing the direct involvement and participation of citizens; (3) improving the quality of opinion formation by opening new spaces of information and deliberation.”*

Having defined both key concepts of the e-governance-field, by now it should be clear that they have very different philosophical underpinnings. Although e-government and e-democracy both strive for the enhancement of state-citizen interaction, the former focuses on efficiency and cost reduction, where the latter considers the enhancement of participation as its core-activity. These two focal points appear to be to a great degree diametrical: where citizen participation proves to be time-consuming and intensive, e-government policies, on the contrary, attempt to realise cost- and time-savings. A theoretical division of the two concepts thus appears to be legitimate. However, in the more recent literature about the usage of ICT by governments, scholars are inclined to see e-democracy as a part of e-government. The reason for this more broad definition of e-government stems from the fact that many programmes on e-participation are initiated by the executive (also the principal e-gov initiator), and not by parliament. While many scholars still state that what the executive does for e-government, parliament should realise for e-democracy, the real task division thus appears to be different.

Given the opposite finality of e-gov and e-dem, in the next part of this research paper we will look if the put into practice of both concepts (by the very same institution) is easily manageable, or rather problematic.

## **A DOMINANT MANAGERIAL APPROACH**

In her article ‘An Anthology of E-Participation Models’, Nahleen Ahmed (2006: 115) puts forward following rather discouraging statement about the put into practice of e-democracy:

*“a study of e-consultations and e-participation in policy-making will inevitably arrive at the following conclusions: (1) Examples of e-participation and e-consultation are few in number, (2) Where they exist, they are still of an experimental nature and not very clearly defined in terms of expected outcomes, (3) The public is not very well informed about these initiatives, and nor is there a clear mechanism for integrating the result of these processes into effective policy outcomes.”*

Despite this straightforward and incredibly bleak prediction, Ahmed seems to capture the existing state of e-democracy quite accurately. Indeed, the most recent United Nations report on e-government-readiness confirms what Ahmed and other scholars have been writing: e-democracy is still very much in its infancy, with most of government attention solely being focused on the initial stage of digital information provision (UN 2008: 61-67). Examples of good practice thus being extremely rare, many scholars conclude that until today the civic potential of the internet has been far more greater than its use (Blumler & Coleman 2001: 14; Grönlund 2003: 63; Hoff *et al.* 2003: 49). In the next paragraphs we will illuminate some of the barriers which interfere with e-democracy implementation.

First, it 's important to recall that the simple provision of technology doesn't automatically guarantees its preferred use. In other words, it's not because the internet is assumed to be an "inherent" democratic medium that it will be used for democratic purposes only. If the internet is considered to fight tendencies as declines in institutional trust and civic participation, it 's necessary that the technology is embedded in corresponding social, cultural and legal contexts (Kubicek *et al.* 2003: 18; Bolgherini 2007: 260-263; Davis 1999). Neglecting these other factors, leads to getting caught in what Bolgherini (2007: 271) named the 'technology trap': an unrealistic overestimation of possible outcomes by focusing solely on the technological side of the e-governance-question. Perhaps it is reasonable to suppose that a narrow technological view of some cyber-enthusiastics has distorted one's expectations towards the democratizing capabilities of the internet. As Fountaine (2001) states in her seminal contribution 'Building the Virtual State': "raw" technology is not the same as "enacted" technology.

Besides this thoughtful step away from technological determinism, it is nevertheless quite remarkable that e-government projects are dealt with at a much more faster pace than e-democracy projects (which leads us to the assumption that problems with the realisation of e-democracy have less to do with the "e" than with its suffix; "democracy"). Indeed, until



today e-governance appears to have been more about “good management” than about “good democracy” (Scott 2006: 348). Chadwick and May (2003: 271-300) have putted this so called “managerialism” of governments to an empirical test by investigating policy statements on e-governance, assuming such statements being reliable predictors of future e-governance developments. To capture the complex interaction patterns between government and citizens, the authors constructed three ideal-typical interaction-models (a managerial, a consultative and a participatory one), showing great similarities with the abovementioned scale of e-engagement by Macintosh.

Analysing policy statements of the UK, the US and the EU, Chadwick and May came to the striking conclusion that the consultative and participatory model were totally absent in policy statements, showing a clear refusal of governments to take citizen input seriously. The democratic potential of the internet thus appears to be marginalized by a dominating managerial approach of governments towards state-citizen interaction, with policies solely focussing on service delivery and efficiency. Regarding this trend, Roy (2006) states that the development of e-governance over the past decade has mainly occurred by the interplay of “service” and “security” dynamics, thereby greatly neglecting the other two e-governance storylines, “transparency” and “trust”.

To realise better service-delivery, governments primarily focused on changing their internal decision-making architecture, with integration and coordination of departments to create shared outcomes. However, the storyline of “security” in a post-9/11 context made it difficult for governments to start exploring the lines of “transparency” and “trust”, keeping agencies rather closed, hierarchical and centralised organisations. Furthermore, the focal point of governments was internally located, not taking -or not wanting to take- into account the changing environment, consisting of increasingly informed and interconnected citizens demanding the same fluid and dynamic informational operating ability of private firms when interacting with government. As such, a sort of clash between the ruling tradition of hierarchy and control, and the expectations of an increasingly open and inclusive society seem to come into play (Roy 2006: 73).

Also Chadwick and May (2003: 293) state that many of the difficulties concerning the involvement of citizen input in decision making are “independent of external (public) factors such as the digital divide”, but are actually much more determined by “the old-fashioned

vagaries of competitive elitism in liberal democratic political systems”. Mahrer and Krimmer (2005: 38) point towards this reluctant attitude of politicians by raising the notion of the “Middleman Paradox”. To them it seems that the very same politicians who should be serving citizen input are opposing it. When asked about the barriers for e-democracy, the Austrian politicians in the research of Mahrer and Krimmer named the same difficulties they mentioned when asked about barriers for e-government, such as the digital divide, privacy, surveillance and security issues. Yet, in the case of e-democracy, these barriers were considered to be insurmountable. Pointed towards this inconsistency, many politicians started a discourse about citizens as being uninterested and unqualified. Some politicians, however, were more explicit, stating that “in the end, it is a question of power”. Although many politicians seem to find greater transparency and better information flows quite reasonable objectives for a more healthy democracy, they are still strong supporters of the representative form of democracy. As such, more direct involvement of citizens is looked upon as threatening, endangering their own political power.

Summarizing, we can say that with many authors explicitly stressing the importance of political will in order to engage citizens (Ahmed 2006: 115; Clift 2004: 28; Davis 1999: 168 ; Riley 2003: 55), with politicians being hesitant to even disapproving, and with governments employing a strict ‘services first, democracy later’ approach guided by security and not by transparency (Clift 2004: 10; Roy 2006), the near future of e-democracy does not appear to be that bright at all. Finding areas of convergence between e-government and e-democracy, to fit democratic goals within an overly managerial context, thus seems to be the principal challenge towards a realisation of the internet’s democratic potential. But is it possible to link e-democracy and e-government in one way or another?

### **LINKING E-GOVERNMENT AND E-DEMOCRACY?**

With e-government being much more developed than e-democracy, several scholars point to the importance of finding areas of convergence between both to realise the internet’s democratic potential (Blumler & Coleman 2001: 5; Ahmed 2006: 120 ; Chadwick 2003; Chadwick 2006b: 196-203; Komito 2005: 42). Yet, given the diametrical philosophical underpinnings of both concepts, and with a lack of political engagement, the integration of e-democracy in the existing framework of e-government appears to be rather difficult. However, several possible paths of convergence are emerging. In the next few paragraphs, we

will follow Chadwick 's article "Bringing E-democracy Back In" (2003, 2006), and put forward some areas where linkages between e-government and e-democracy can be drawn.

The first path of convergence we present arises from the maxim "The customer is always right", and is based on the sort of consumerism that acts as the driving force behind all sorts of e-commerce models. As governments treat their citizens more and more as customers, and as they try to deliver services in an efficient and citizen-centric way (just as their private counterparts do), a more responsive approach towards these citizens is required to meet their increased expectations (Ahmed 2006: 120). In order to improve the services they deliver, governments are thus more or less obliged to gather and integrate user-feedback of the services they deliver (Clift 2004: 16). Especially internet enabled feedback mechanisms appear to be highly appropriate in this respect. As a consequence of this "service-consulting" executed by the government, the citizen-customer will get a voice in the design and the delivery of services (Chadwick 2006b: 200). This e-enabled ability of citizens to influence the delivery of services then can act as a sort of stepping stone towards a more inclusive government. It will convince citizens that interacting with governments is beneficial, that their individual intervention can be effective (Komito 2005: 42). With citizen participation being greatly dependent on the anticipated political efficacy (Kubicek *et al.* 2003: 39), this perception of governmental listening ability (Coleman & Gotze 2001: 19) and the fact that something is done with the input, is thus not so innocent as it seems. From this perspective, increasing citizen satisfaction and trust by incorporating citizen input in service-delivery can act as a bridge between traditional e-government projects and future e-democratic attitudes (Clift 2004: 16).

The second area of convergence stems from the transformation of the bureaucratic back office. This approach suggests that the internet is reshaping the traditional, hierarchical bureaucracy into a more open, interactive and networked structure. When the static silo-(or stovepipe-) structure of government is overthrown, the reasoning continues, agencies will be able to tackle problems that cut across existing agency boundaries. In short, they will work more efficiently. Sharing information, coordination and collaboration with other government agencies will then become increasingly necessary (and normal), thereby transforming agencies into more outward-looking than inward-facing systems. As agencies become more outward-looking, the boundaries between internal information processing and its external users is expected to blur. Government agencies will become increasingly transparent, sharing

their information with all relevant stakeholders, and will develop a more collaborative ethos (Chadwick 2003: 451; Chadwick 2006b: 198; Roy 2006: 75). In this way, e-democratic values become integrated in a structure shaped by e-government.

A third link between e-government and e-democracy takes into consideration the context in which e-government technologies are designed. Since the design of technology is not neutral (as it determines to a great extent which behaviour can be displayed online), a debate has emerged concerning the assets of open-source software. The collaborative and voluntary ethic behind open source software is not only assumed to result in technically better software, but also in socially and politically progressive software, injecting the public sector with democratic values. Moreover, these technologies are also expected to be more flexible, transparent, and -not unimportant in a dominant managerial context- cost-effective to maintain. The British Department for Work and Pensions, for example, launched a system running on Linux, an open source operating system. Besides this for some futuristic third path of convergence, Chadwick's fourth suggestion to integrate democratic values sounds rather realistic.

The fourth possibility Chadwick proposes is the most logical and straightforward one. It's about incorporating the views of citizens more fully into the already existing policy making process. Indeed, in the last few years, e-government has been gradually evolving in a more interactive process with the organization of e-consultations, most of the time conducted by the executive. This fourth link between e-government and e-democracy thus focuses on the consultative part of the e-democracy-concept, and can be seen as a compromise between the demand of citizens for a more inclusive government, and the devotion of politicians towards representative democracy (and the position they occupy in that system). However, as mentioned earlier, the art of e-consulting is still of a very experimental nature, confronted with many uncertainties. In the next part of this working paper we will closer examine the e-consultation phenomenon.

## **A FRAMEWORK FOR E-CONSULTATIONS**

In the previous parts of this working paper, we defined e-government and e-democracy, tried to clarify how both concepts relate to each other, and pointed to the assets of and barriers to their introduction. Our major conclusion was the lagging behind of e-democracy practices

because of a dominating managerial approach towards state-citizen interaction. However, we also mentioned some emerging areas of convergence between both concepts. Especially the organisation of e-consultations appears to be realistic, as (though embryonic and scattered) examples in several countries demonstrate. In the next part of this research paper we will break a lance for e-consultations as a (first) step towards a more inclusive government. Where the previous parts of this paper were overly theoretical, here a more practical approach will be provided, though a 'how to'-guide shouldn't be expected. The article "Characterizing E-participation in Policy Making" of (2004) will act as our guideline. Macintosh constructed a framework of e-participation which enables us to compare different e-democracy practices. First, we will use the framework to explain the advantages, the difficulties and the challenges governments are confronted with when executing e-consultations. Afterwards, the framework will help us to interpret aspects of the Belgian and Canadian situation.

#### *Level of participation*

Earlier, we defined the e-consultation concept as a two-way relation in which citizens provide feedback to government. Important to note in the case of e-consultations is that it is the government who decides which issue is debated, who sets the questions and who manages the debate. Citizens are merely invited to contribute, as they can not set the agenda. By organizing e-consultations, the government thus wants to engage its citizenry, enabling deeper contributions and supporting deliberative debate on policy issues (Macintosh 2004: 2). When we remind the scale of e-engagement - on which e-democracy initiatives can be plotted- e-consultations are more inclusive than simple e-information, but less than forms of e-participation.

#### *Stage in Policy-Making Cycle*

The next dimension of Macintosh's framework treats the "when" of e-consultations. When should citizens be engaged? To answer this question, it is useful to look at the policy-making cycle (Macintosh 2003: 34; Macintosh 2004: 3; Kubicek *et al.* 2003: 4) which goes from an "agenda-setting phase" over "analysis", "policy creation" and "policy implementation" to "monitoring". After monitoring, one loops back to the initial agenda-setting phase. Of course citizens can be consulted in every stage of the policy-making cycle. However, most of the examples of consultation are situated in the first phases of the policy-making process. Also literature seems to recommend the initial stages to engage citizens, since in these stages knowledge of legalistic terminology isn't required and decisions aren't already taken. Citizens

then feel they really can have a stake in the outcome of the policy. Also important, politicians don't feel threatened or attacked in these initial stages (Janssen 2006: 13). The last stage of the policy-making cycle, the monitoring of the outcomes of the policy, also shows great opportunities for consulting, and links practices of e-democracy to processes of e-government. One just needs to think of the evaluation of service-delivery and the "the customer is always right"-adagio.

#### *Actors*

When we take into consideration the actors of e-consultations, we need to answer two related questions. The first one being "who should be engaging?". The second one being "Who should be engaged?". As the main part of the present practices shows, it is especially the executive who organizes e-consultations, thereby literally putting parliament in an off-side position (Riley 2003: 55; Chadwick 2006b: 199; Van Audenhove *et al.* 2005: 36). Yet, many scholars explicitly argue that consulting is a matter representatives should take care of. Especially Coleman (2003: 149) is convinced that parliament must be the central player, as it is the function of the legislative to articulate the voice of those who elected them. If parliament still wants to play its role, instead of being a creature of the executive, Coleman continues, it should take the potential of the internet to reconnect with its constituents as a major opportunity. Concluding, we can say that what government does for e-government, parliament should realise for e-democracy, otherwise the legislative will become increasingly disintermediated (Van Gompel *et al.* 2007: 232; Chadwick 2003: 450-451).

Having made a stance for parliamentary initiated e-consultations, by now we can take the target group of consultations into consideration. Especially the type, the size and the selection-process of the audience are important matters. Dependant on the issue at stake, people with practical experience or just with geographical similarities could be targeted, or, their could be no targeting at all, and everyone could be allowed to have its say (Macintosh 2004: 4; Coleman 2004: 3). As a consequence of the type of selection process one chooses, the question of representativeness comes into ones mind, especially with respect to the digital divide. Coleman and Gotze (2001: 15) state that because of the fact that consultations are held in order to *inform* politicians, one should be more concerned with recruiting a broad range of experience and interests, thus bringing together groups of people who normally don't interact, and less concerned with representativeness. Another major challenge for the put into practice of consultations concerns "scale". How can government handle all the responses of citizen,

how can the voice of a citizen be heard and not be lost in a mass debate? Specific methodologies taking care of new technologies combined with supporting policy measures could act as a stepping stone (Macintosh 2003: 17). Which brings us to the next question.

### *Technologies Used*

The next question that will be addressed is the “how” of e-consultations. Which technologies can be used? And what are the major advantages of these technologies? With respect to these questions, it is important to note that within the category of e-consultations, one can distinguish between simple “feedback”, which can be gathered by polling and thus represents a black-white yes-no position towards an issue, and “consultation”, which allows much more deliberation and debate between participants, thus providing governments with a more thorough explanation of citizen opinion towards an issue. Obviously, both categories require different technical tools. “Feedback” can be gathered through online surveys, online opinion polls, or even SMS text messages. “Consultations”, however, are in need of online discussion fora. Macintosh (2003: 50) distinguishes two forms of consultation-related online discussion fora: “issue-based fora” and “policy-based fora”. The former refers to broad policy issues that have been put forward by policy-makers, interest groups or experts, and allow them to gauge opinions and solicit ideas and priorities. The latter category contains fora organised around issues that relate directly to a draft policy. Government then gets indications of how far participants agree with the proposed measure, and participants can make suggestions concerning adaptations.

When we return to the difference between simple “feedback” and thorough “consultation”, it quickly becomes clear that the latter is much more difficult to realise, as it asks a great deal of thought about how to design, how to moderate and how to analyse the interactive process. However, when governments really want to involve citizens in policy-making, and don’t regard it as mere window-dressing, organizing e-consultations seems to be an essential starting point.

### *Rules of Engagement*

This dimension of e-consultations is occupied with the issues of “registration” and “managing participants’ expectations”. Which personal information is required in order to be able to register and participate? How should one behave on the discussion forum? What is exactly expected of the participants? In order to answer these questions pro-actively, governments

need to make ‘privacy statements’, and need to develop ‘guidelines for e-consultations’. Such rules of engagement do not solely concern citizens, however. Also governments should engage. They could commit oneself to the delivery of feedback, being transparent, tell in advance what will be done with the input, etcetera.

#### *Duration and Sustainability*

This dimension answers following questions: for what period of time lasted the initiative? Was it a one-shot initiative or is it a matter of everyday practice for the department?

#### *Accessibility*

This dimension is intimately intertwined with the question concerning “who” participated. It considers how many participants became involved, and which channels were used. Because of the digital divide, it is recommended that besides online practices, also traditional offline possibilities are provided, thus resulting in a multi-channel strategy (Kubicek *et al.* 2003: 40).

#### *Resources and Promotion*

Besides the financial aspect of e-consultations, another major challenge of e-engagement initiatives concerns “promotion”. Ahmed (2006: 115 ) states that governments far too often do not take the trouble to market the consultation initiative. Macintosh (2003: 11; 2004: 5) advises to identify external partners who could help raise awareness. She also proposes “tell a friend e-cards” and clickable logos to advertise the initiative on related websites.

#### *Evaluation and Outcomes*

Whyte and Macintosh (2003) suggest that every e-engagement initiative should be evaluated from three different perspectives. A political perspective, questioning the way government experienced and initiated the consultation; a technical perspective, concerning the design of the ICT’s; and a social perspective; taking into account the contributor’s side. Also the provision of feedback of what happened with citizens’ input, is highly recommended.

#### *Critical Factors for Success*

This key dimension concerns background factors that can explain why a consultation became a success or not. It takes political, economical, legal, cultural ... factors into account.



## **E-DEMOCRACY BEYOND THEORY: IS THE BUZZ WORTH THE FUSS?**

Having presented the strengths and the challenges towards the put into practice of e-consultations, we will now turn to the practical side of this working paper. Besides the situation in Belgium, also the state of e-democracy in Canada will be scrutinized. Each case will be treated separately, but as we follow the same structure throughout both cases, in the end a comparison shouldn't cause too much trouble. For each country, we will present a brief outline on the development of e-governance policy, take into account the attitude of politicians as well as citizens towards e-democracy, and investigate practices of consultations at the federal as well as the provincial (in Canada) and community (in Belgium) level.

### **CANADA**

#### *An Outline on E-governance experience*

Being a early forerunner in the realisation of e-government practices, as demonstrated in the 2001 and 2002 Accenture benchmark studies (Charih & Robert 2004: 377), Canada truly appears to be an important player in the field of e-government. However, in the latest e-government readiness report of the United Nations, the success of the once world-leader diminishes, finishing at a disappointing seventh place (UN 2008: 20).

The e-government story of the Canadian government started in the mid nineties with the "Connecting Canadians"-initiative, which build on the foundations of the in 1994 published "Blueprint for Renewing Government Services Using Information Technology" (Snijkers 2003: 193). In 1999 the Connecting Canadians' flagship-project was launched: with the *Government On-line* (GOL) web portal one wanted to share information more widely and transform service delivery by clustering online services around citizen's needs and priorities, independent from existing government structures. In order to meet these objectives, and to realise integrated service delivery, a revision of the administrative machinery appeared to be recommended. However, such forms of cooperation between different departments approved to be very difficult to realise. So, a radical overhaul of the government structure as a consequence of the issues put forward by the GOL-project did not appear to take place (Roy 2006: 113; Charih & Robert 2004: 378). Well aware of this problem, the Canadian Government launched a new project in 2005, "*Service Canada*", in order to realise a more horizontal and cooperating ethos. Nevertheless, a minority cabinet, many uncertainties, upcoming elections and much reluctance, have slowed down the project. Moreover, the focus

on “security” in a post 9/11 context, made information sharing and transparency easily questionable, spreading a “culture of secrecy” (Roy 2006: 111) further decreasing the political willingness to engage citizens in policy making (Roy 2006: 124). All of this leading Roy (2006: 199) to the conclusions that “*Canada is lagging in terms of political willingness and experimentation in ways to digitally refurbish both existing representational mechanisms and more novel and participatory ones*”. Or, as stated elsewhere: “E-democracy is by and large absent”.

However, despite this bleak conclusion, Riley (2003: 76) states that many different departments have been conducting online consultations in one form or another. Even in 2001, The Privy Council Office and Treasury Board of Canada presented a document titled “Consulting and Engaging Canadians: Guidelines for Online Consultations and Engagement”. Also the Public Works and Government Services Canada presented an “Online Consultation Technologies Report”, and the independent Crossing Boundaries think tank under supervision of Don Lenihan was invited to contribute to the Public Engagement Initiative in New Brunswick. So, is e-democracy by and large absent in Canada, as Roy states? Is it merely spin and no action? In the remainder we will try to find out.

#### *Stakeholders’ attitudes*

As much of the realisation of e-governance depends on the decisions of those in power and the preferences of citizens (Roy, 2006: 283), in this section we will take the attitudes of both stakeholders into account. The outline above provided already a glimpse on the stance of politicians towards e-democracy. Even politicians who first widely defended e-democracy practices (as Paul Martin and Reg Alcock), once in office, proved to be far more fixated on managing and steering services, and not on actually realising a more favourable government structure able to incorporate citizens’ views. Which led Roy (2006: 128) to the cynical conclusion that “*the rhetoric (of politicians on e-democracy) implies major cultural shifts and structural realignments, whereas the actions undertaken most often represent the smallest possible deviation from tradition.*”

Citizens however, appear to be much more inclined to have a more direct say in policy making. In the summer of 2005, a representative telephone survey on democratic engagement reached over a thousand Canadians. Results showed that Canadians wanted to have a more direct say in policy making, and wanted to have more opportunities to influence government

decisions. However, the survey also showed that one in four Canadians never engaged in any of the questioned forms of political participation (like signing a petition, joining a demonstration and so forth). So, it seemed to be that when asked, Canadians wanted to have a more direct say, but when they were asked if they actually participated, only very few of them proved to be doing so. The Canadian media interpreted the results into the direction of a public that only wants an effortless say, but the research team that conducted the survey came up with another, more positive, explanation. Indeed, maybe Canadians wanted to participate, but it could be that they just didn't use the traditional means proposed in the survey because they thought of them as ineffective. When studied in more detail, Canadians appeared to be engaging in community and interest groups, and were not venting their emotions and opinions through party affiliation and other more traditional practices (Lenihan *et al.* 2007: 41-44). New pathways towards participation to incorporate citizens' voice thus need to be explored, as suggested by the research team. Can e-consultations be of any help?

*Practices of e-consultations: the Federal Level*

An extremely interesting example of online participation is the e-consultation held by the House of Commons' Subcommittee on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. It was the first (and the last) online consultation held by a parliamentary committee in Canada and it became a real success. The report "*Listening to Canadians: A First View of the Future of the Canada Pension Plan Disability Program.*" presented by the Subcommittee summarizes the course of the consultation (Longfield & Bennett 2003: 1-13).

In 2002 people visited MP's and their assistants, pointing towards shortcomings of the Canada Pension Plan Disability program. In order to realise a better program, the Subcommittee decided to combine the traditional work of a parliamentary committee with methods that would allow all Canadians to participate. As a consequence an e-consultation was conducted. The online consultation consisted of an issue poll (a questionnaire), the possibility to share stories and the possibility to propose solutions. In June 2002 a website was launched, containing information. Six months later, on the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, the consultation part of the site was put into practice. Thirteen weeks later the webpage was requested 190.000 times, 1.500 diverse people completed the issue poll, 135 people shared their stories, and 28 people (and advocacy groups) provided solutions. The primary goal of the Subcommittee was to integrate the e-consultation into the more traditional parliamentary proceedings, and it did so by continually comparing the views of the

participants with the opinions of the expert groups. In the end, citizens and experts were brought together in a meeting to discuss the recommendations that could be included in the report (Longfield & Bennett, 2003: 1-13; Sheedy *et al.* 2008: 40-41).

As already mentioned, the consultation was quite a success. With 1.700 participants, the report could be based on the most wide consultation of views ever by a Canadian parliamentary committee. Moreover, the participants were diverse, the solutions and the stories provided consisted of extremely insightful first-hand knowledge, and the participants responded in a constructive and open way. The report ends by stating that ‘online consultations represent the next step in the path towards greater participation by citizens in Canada’s democracy’ and recommends that “the House of Commons should put in place an overall framework or suggested course of action to guide any future e-consultations”. Indeed, the Subcommittee was enthusiastic about the achieved results, and thought of a new role for parliament as mediator between public and government, supported by new communication technologies. After all, the consultation added an important degree of legitimacy to the final report (Longfield & Bennett 2003: 1-13; Sheedy 2008: 40-41).

However, as Roy (2006: 134) mentions, the online consultation by the Subcommittee largely remains an exception, as the Canadian parliament is further marginalized by the e-government movement: consultative claims are mostly made by the executive and are, as a consequence, conducted in the light of service delivery, with measuring customer satisfaction as being the holy grail, and trying to frame consultation outcomes in the most positive manner. Also the federal consultation web-portal, *Consulting With Canadians*, appears to be more image- than performance-based (Roy 2006: 133). The introductory lines of the website state that “*the Government of Canada is committed to finding new and innovative ways to consult with, and engage Canadians*”. Yet, the reality of the portal appears to be less promising: technologically primitive, hardly kept up to date, and an incomplete list of current consultations illustrate the absence of political and organizational willingness to actually engage citizens to have their say in policy making. So, despite the successful pilot consultation held by the subcommittee and its recommendation for replication, no further parliamentary action was undertaken at the federal level.

*Practices of e-consultations: the Provincial Level*

In many respects, the provincial situation reflects what's going on at the federal level. However, there is some evidence of a little bit more oxygen for democratic renewal at the provincial level, as electoral reforms and other forms of citizen engagement demonstrate (Roy, 2006: 139). These forms of democratic renewal point to a more fertile soil for the future integration of e-consultations in the policy-making cycle. However, parliamentary initiated e-consultations don't appear to belong to the provincial repertoire. In the next few lines, we will shortly address this somewhat more 'fertile soil' with examples of two different provinces, British Columbia and Ontario

In British Columbia (2001), as well as in Ontario (2003), the overly optimistic representation of the province 's budgetary situation by the Conservative leaders in the months preceding the upcoming elections, was framed by the Liberals as a lack of transparency towards the constituents. When in both provinces the Liberals took office after the elections, different solutions for the lack of transparency and cooperation in either province were put forward. In British Columbia, where the first-past-the post electoral system was fiercely discussed, a citizen panel made a proposal about alternative models, which led to a binding provincial referendum that, unfortunately, dismissed the proposal.

In Ontario, however, the Liberals wanted to expand public engagement via citizen's juries and other consultative mechanisms. Despite troublesome beginnings due to the budgetary context, the government of Ontario started with a democratic renewal program. The first online consultation targeted the public servants of the province. It became a success, and demarcated the beginning of a cultural shift within the Ontario Public Service. Citizen engagement through new communication technologies became one of the four pillars of the province 's e-government program, and many ministries launched pilot e-consultations ever since. In 2004, the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing conducted five consultations with online components on a range of issues. Despite a modest uptake of the online channels, the experiments were regarded as sufficiently encouraging, so an expansion of activity should follow.

## **BELGIUM**

### *An Outline on E-governance experience*

A turning point in the history of Belgian e-governance development was the foundation of FEDICT, the Federal Public Service on Information and Communication Technologies. FEDICT was established in 2001, became operational in 2002, and maintains a threefold core task: developing a common e-government strategy across all departments, developing an e-society, and promoting Belgium as an ICT-knowledge region. Until 2007, Peter Vanvelthoven (SP.a) was State Secretary for the Computerization of the State, and carried the political accountability of the department.

Despite many realisations, like a recently renewed federal web portal (with hardly any possibility for interaction), the tax-on-web initiative, the Crossroads Bank for Social Security, the Crossroads Bank for Companies and the electronic ID-card, the focus of the department appears to be strictly e-government. Moreover, the e-society pillar of the department focuses solely on problems of access, familiarity and knowledge of ICTs, and leaves practices of e-democracy out of the question. As such, it appears to be that e-democracy is not an issue at all at the federal level of government.

In this respect, it is interesting to look at the different coalition agreements of the last few legislatures, on the federal and the regional (Flemish) level. As such, we can look at the promises on the one hand, and the realisations on the other. The Federal coalition agreement of 2003, titled 'A creative and Solidarily Belgium' was a further establishment of the claims made in 'A Bridge to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century' of 1999. The Liberals of the Open Vld and the socialists of the SP.a kept forming the government, this time without the green party Groen!. The new coalition agreement wasn't peculiarly different considering the participation topics than the previous one, and as such could be read as a continuing plea for more citizen input and a more participative democracy. The agreement showed the intention to make referenda juristically lawful, and expressed the desire to strengthen citizenry with a petition right, although recognizing the limitations constructed by the constitution. The agreement also stated that "no mean should be neglected to strengthen citizen participation". However, only very few e-initiatives, like Kafka and Plan 2004, were launched, and they can be characterised as experimental and scattered.

The Flemish Coalition agreement of 1999 ‘A new project for Flanders’, realised by the Purple-green coalition and led by Prime Minister Patrick Dewael showed a passion for change, just like its federal counterpart, especially when we look at the stance towards citizen participation: *“In anticipation of the introduction of the binding referendum, a consultative referendum will be held to engage citizens more in policy making.”* However, a narrow interpretation of the constitution by the State’s Council, prevented the realisation of this intention. Yet, with the ‘Colourful Flanders’ project, a large scale internet based consultation was realised, and became successful. The “Forum for European e-Public Services” even named it one of the “best practices” in Europe. The Flemish coalition agreement of 2004, formulated by CD&V/NV-A, SP.A/Spirit and VLD /Vivant, pulled back to a more conservative roots. Despite of the fact that the subtitle of the agreement mentioned ‘more participation’, nowhere in the agreement evidence of any intention towards the incorporation of citizen’s views in the policy making process can be found.

#### *Stakeholders’ attitudes*

Under the authority of the Flemish Parliament a stakeholders analysis on the topic of “e-democracy in Flanders” was conducted among a representative sample of the Flemish population and among national, regional and local politicians. The conclusions of the survey organized by VIWTA (Flimisch Institute for Scientific and Technological Aspect Research) stressed the limited basis for e-democracy for both groups of stakeholders, even though within each group a certain proportion appeared to be supportive of e-democracy initiatives. In the next few lines we will explore these results in greater detail, present confirming results of another population survey, and call upon the experiences of Flemish parliamentarian Sven Gatz (Open VLD) who submitted a resolution on ‘smart legislation’.

When we look at the results of the citizen survey, it becomes increasingly clear that there is a enormous discrepancy between the desired and actual participation possibilities: 64% of the citizens believes that they have too little say in policy making. Especially at the local level they want to be more involved. When it comes to the appropriateness of ICT to enhance participation in policy making, citizens who have internet access strongly believe in its added value to inform on policy making, but this appropriateness decreases when we further climb the ladder of participation: non-internet users drop out at the consultation level, and both ‘have’ and ‘have-nots’ are very sceptical about deliberative processes. As such, believe in and experience with more active e-democracy tools is by and large missing. 19 percent of the

citizens can be labelled as “*cybercitizens*”. They are interested in politics, male and have enjoyed higher education. These citizens are the early adopters. 42 percent of the citizenry is “*pragmatic*”: they are open to forms of e-participation, but they first need hard proof of its actual additional value. 39 percent, finally, is not interested in forms of e-participation at all. This category is labelled as “*passive citizens*” (Van Gompel *et al.* 2007: 85-136).

Another population survey on e-government and e-democracy measured the relative importance citizens attach to either of them. When asked, the majority of the Flemish respondents preferred use of the internet for e-administration (52%) over use of the internet for participation (16%) (Kampen *et al.* 2005, 2005: 137). Summarizing, we can say that although citizens seem to want to have a more direct say in policy making, especially at the local level and on matters concerning them directly, only very few citizens believe in e-democracy tools as a suitable solution for more active forms of participation. However, with most of the citizens categorized under the label “*pragmatic*”, they seem to anticipate until e-tools have proven to be really valuable. To convince these citizens, Van Gompel and colleagues (2007: 231-233) advise the elaboration of profound methodologies, the development of cases that prove to be successful, a focus on consultation, and parliament as the principal driver of action.

When we take the stance of politicians into consideration, the majority appears to exist of strong proponents of representative democracy (66%). However, quite some politicians (43%) share the opinion that citizens can assert too little influence at policy making. With regard to ICT and participation, two third sees a major role for ICT in the delivery of information, and once again two third more or less acknowledges the possibilities for feedback and consultation processes. Yet only 12 percent sees interactive internetfora as “*helpful*” tools: practical experiences with interactive internet tools appeared to be most of the time negative (due to abusive language of participants), and they think of discussions as manipulated by interest groups. The perception of interactive e-tools thus appears to be completely negative. A typology of politicians ends up with 36% being “*cyberpoliticians*”, 17% being “*pragmatic*”, and 47% being “*sceptical*”. Although politicians acknowledge the assets of the internet for citizen participation, at the moment the barriers for more active forms of participation seem to strongly outweigh the benefits, resulting in the use of e-tools as marketing-communication instruments and not as potential pathways towards participation (Van Gompel *et al.* 2007: 163-188).



Flemish Parliamentarian Sven Gatz (Open VLD), who submitted a resolution on 'smart legislation' and is a rabid advocate of citizen participation, stresses four related reasons he thinks of as causal for the limited support e-democratic initiatives receive. First of all, many politicians feel threatened when citizens become engaged. They are afraid to end up in an offside position. A second reason covers the "controllability" of participative processes. When it is assured that participation adds value to the existing system rather than starts overthrowing it, when it is guaranteed that things "don't boil over", politicians will be inclined to be more supportive, Gatz argues. In order to realise this "controllability" precondition, practical as well as methodological barriers need to be conquered, constituting a third precondition. But even when all of this is accomplished, one major issue would still prevent the structural realisation of e-participation: the Belgian Constitution. Article 33 of the Belgian Constitution (an original article from 1830) states "*All power emanates from the Nation. This power is exerted in the manner established by the Constitution.*". The Belgian State council interprets this article very strict, and as such prohibits binding as well as non-binding referenda and the like. As a consequence, Gatz reasoning continues, only very loosely organized exercises of participation can be executed, and no structural changes can be made.

#### *Practices of e-consultations: the Federal Level*

Despite the relatively successful "Kafka"-initiative on administrative burdens executed by Federal State secretary Vincent Van Quickenborne (Open Vld), in the light of this working paper it appears to be more interesting to treat the consultation held by the department of Sustainable Development (PODDO). In 2004 as well as in 2008, the PODDO organized a broad e-consultation on a preliminary draft of its action plans for the period 2004-2008 and 2009-2012. The goal of the consultations was to gather as much reactions as possible. The fact that a consultation was organized, stems from the Royal Decree of 9 January 2000. Also other preconditions, like the announcement of the consultation in seven different dailies and the availability of the draft in libraries as well as city halls, are specified in the RD.

Van Audenhove and Colleagues (2005: 53-56) evaluated the "Plan 2004"- consultation and came to the conclusion that despite a very costly promotion campaign the amount of realised feedback during the three-month consultation period was extremely disappointing. They also questioned the aptitude of such a broad consultation in the late "Policy Creation"-phase of the policy making cycle. The design and the set up of the consultation website was made by the administration of the PODDO itself (though executed by an extern company), and was not

very interactive nor attractive due to short planning and realisation time. Registered citizens could only react at certain paragraphs of the draft. The reactions were not published on the site and also no discussion forum was provided.

In 2008, however, as the RD demanded, a new large scale e-consultation on the draft of the Sustainable Development Plan 2009 was organized. It lasted from May, 1 until June, 30 and could be reached at [www.plan2009.be](http://www.plan2009.be). The goal of the project was the same: one wanted to improve the draft, and reach as much people as possible. An interview with Bart Vandermosten, spokesperson of the consultation project, learnt us that only a glimpse of the budget of 2004 was available, that there was too little time to fully prepare the consultation, and that no methodology of online consulting was taken into account. Despite the fact that much effort was undertaken to realise the consultation, the view of Vandermosten was quite bleak: with 60 percent of the Plan 2004 still in progress, he considered the risk of the new plan and the new consultation to be “a plan to make a plan” and “a consultation to conduct a consultation”. One of the reactions on the draft illustrates the incompetence of the consultation to realise its goals:

*“I think of this consultation as a wrong way to receive feedback from the citizenry. There is too much text to read, and above all, the text is written in a dull way. It seems to me that this consultation is executed to become the approval of the citizenry, rather than a sincere attempt to actually hear our opinion.”*

#### *Practices of e-consultations: the Community Level*

As we stated in the introductory lines, the “purple” regional government led by prime-minister Patrick Dewael appeared to be quite eager to incorporate citizen’s view into policy making. In the 1999 coalition agreement “A new project for Flanders” more citizen participation was described as a “must”, as a signal of a radical break with the past. The “Colour note” about the future of Flanders, published in 2000, incorporated the “Colourful Flanders”-project, which was a large scale internet based consultation process. It wanted to stimulate the debate on the future of Flanders and to involve as many people as possible (Janssen, 2006: 18). The project started in March, 2002 and lasted for one year and a half, until 2004, when elections made an end to the “purple” legislature. For that period of time, the website of the project gathered 13.300 contributions, and 18.500 citizens became registered

members receiving a newsletter (Van Audenhove, 2005: 49). Besides a generic, online debate on 21 issues for the 21<sup>st</sup> century (put forward by the pact of Vilvoorde), also 14 thematic debates (each lasting 4 till 6 weeks, with a real life event to initiate and end the debate) were held.

Clearly, the Colourful Flanders project was a consultation: 14 issues were put forward and the government wanted to receive feedback from its citizenry. Davy Janssen (2006: 20) described the project as a ‘deliberative eConsultation’ because it also intended to stimulate debate among its participants. When we look at the terminology of Macintosh, we can speak of an “Issue Based Forum” in the “Agenda Setting Phase” of policy making. Concerning the operating website, we can say that the homepage had 14 tabs leading to the specific topics, a news section, and a section with links. Each of the specific topic-pages had links to press articles, a section with different points of view concerning that topic, an information archive, and, most importantly, a discussion forum. The discussion forum was structured as an asynchronous thread, so people could read all the reactions, know the history of the debate, and were able to respond, or could just launch a new idea.

With the amount of responses in mind, the pilot-initiative can be labelled successful. However, how this input was embedded in the remainder of the policy-making cycle, largely remains a questionmark. Van Audenhove and colleagues (2005: 50) do mention the fact that some short summaries of relevant feedback was provided to parliament and responsible ministers, but they also stress the lack of concreteness and usability of these outlines. Janssen (2006: 28) states that no evaluation of the project was undertaken. An interview with Stef Steyaert, researcher of the VIWTA, further clarifies this matter. He considers the lack of exact methodological know-how as one of the major problems concerning the realisation of e-democracy. Where face-to-face participative initiatives can build on a rich arsenal of methodological principles, the methodological arsenal for e-democratic exercises remains by and large empty. Steyaert goes on as follows:

*“I think of the Colorful Flanders project as something that started from a true concern. Yet the problem was that the organizers really didn’t had a clue about how such an e-consultation should be conducted. So they worked very casuistic, they tried a lot of different things. There was no overarching methodological concept. In the end, these issues made the evaluation of the project very difficult, because how should they evaluate?”*

With the elections of 2004 reshaping the regional political landscape, the political basis for the further elaboration of e-democracy disappeared and large-scale internet based consultations do not appear to be in the pipeline.

## **CONCLUSION**

In this working paper we investigated to what extent government agencies are employing new communication technologies to enhance citizen participation in policy making. Looking at the situation in Canada and Belgium, and comparing the status of e-democracy in these countries with a bulk of theoretical and empirical contributions, we can confirm that an overtly managerial approach towards state-citizen interaction is dominating. New communication technologies are for the most part deployed for e-government purposes only, as they need to improve service delivery, realise cost-reductions, and make the administrative machinery work more efficiently. Practices of e-democracy, launched to involve citizen opinion in policy making, are few in number, scattered, and still of a very experimental nature, lacking universally acknowledged methodologies.

This “services first, democracy later” approach can’t be explained by factors as the digital divide (because both spectrums of the e-governance field have to deal with that), but has more to do with the system in which the new practices are introduced. E-democratic programmes are not realised upon a tabula rasa, but need to match pre-existing values, norms and habits. The components of direct democracy put forward by practices of e-democracy seem to be at odds with the ruling elements of representative democracy, as such explaining the reluctant attitude of politicians, who fear to be set in an offside position once forms of e-participation become institutionalised. As a consequence, the realisation of e-democracy appears to be difficult. The put into practice of government-initiated e-consultations, however, seems to provide a good compromise between the public that wants to have a say on the one hand and politicians who adhere representative democracy on the other. However, as e-consultations are almost exclusively conducted by departments of the executive, the input citizens ought to be giving is limited to “customer satisfaction”- tests, yes-no opinion polls and the like. As such, we can conclude by stating that, indeed, by now “government” surely is online, but “democracy” is only “virtual” in the most imagery sense of the word.

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