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of Parliament**

**Parliament 2020:
Visioning the Future of
Parliament**

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

The aim of the Parliament 2020 project, a comparative study of five nations led by the UK Hansard Society, is to envision how evolving communication technologies could support a more effective Parliament and a more engaged public in the future. As part of the Canadian component to the Parliament 2020 project, the Library of Parliament retained Nanos Research to consult with a range of stakeholders, including parliamentarians (from the Senate and the House of Commons), parliamentary staff (from the Senate, the House of Commons and the Library of Parliament) and first-time voters to gather ideas and feedback on the implications of a digitally-enabled Parliament.

The consultations dealt with the following topics:

- communication;
- engagement;
- information needs;
- resources and culture; and,
- transparency and accountability.

The questions for the Canadian consultations were designed to be comparable to those used in the UK study. A new section on transparency and accountability was added to address specific issues in Canada.

Readers should note that the findings of qualitative research cannot be projected to the populace or to a group but do provide an understanding of the potential context and nuance of opinion. This research project was completed in accordance with the standards of and registered with the Marketing Research and Intelligence Association of which Nanos is a Corporate Gold Seal member.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following are key takeaways from the three portions of the research related to the topics of communication, engagement, information needs, resources and culture, as well as transparency and accountability.

Communication

1. Parliament should use understandable language and digestible policy information when communicating with the public.
2. Parliamentarians would benefit from learning how to best apply new technologies in a non-partisan way. Overtly partisan messages had an adverse effect particularly on youth, though parliamentarians and parliamentary staff also expressed concern that partisan communication negatively affected all of Parliament.
3. Two-way communication could be improved, both online and offline. Further work should be done to discern the most effective ways to collect input from the public on the types of information they commonly expect to find when contacting their MPs or Senators or when visiting the Parliamentary website, as well as the best ways to disseminate information to the public using new technologies. There were a number of opportunities identified by participants to gather user-generated intelligence through the parliamentary website.
4. The parliamentary website should be more user-friendly to the average visitor. Participants in all three groups indicated that it would be difficult to navigate the website without knowing in advance what to look for and where to find it.
5. Parliament should be more proactive in communicating using new media. Parliamentarians considered media coverage as the primary way that Canadians learned about their activities and placed more value on CPAC (the Cable Public Affairs Channel) as a key vehicle for communicating with the public as it provided an unfiltered (though selective) view of their work. Some parliamentarians acknowledged that CPAC's viewership is only representative of those who were already politically engaged. Consultations with first-time voters confirmed that a reliance on the traditional media channels, like CPAC, was not sufficient in terms of making younger Canadians aware of Parliament's activities as they placed a high value on the ability to choose from a multitude of sources.

Engagement

6. Developing a more robust civics school curriculum would positively affect engagement. The Canadian public's general lack of engagement in the political process was seen as endemic and symptomatic of a low priority placed on educating the public at the primary and secondary school levels on civic affairs.
7. Parliament should continue to assist educators and the public in understanding parliamentary processes and procedures by conducting interactive presentations and stimulating informational materials.
8. The parliamentary website is a major opportunity for trust-building with the Canadian public. The website should use new media tools to gauge the information needs of the public that visit the site, as well as strengthen its positioning as a steward for up-to-date, reliable parliamentary information.
9. Parliamentarians, youth and parliamentary staff were cautiously optimistic of the internet and mobile devices' ability to positively affect democratic participation. While the appeal lay in the ability to have a variety of voices engaging in a dialogue, all three groups felt there were risks involved when relying on these technologies. Participants in the three groups were generally concerned about the reliability of the information.

Information

10. Many parliamentarians felt that there was a time lag between committee meetings and publishing of committee proceedings. The time lag and difficulty finding information was highlighted. Parliamentarians articulated a desire for 'self-serve' applications targeted at both parliamentarians and the public on the website, whereby all recordings from



proceedings would be easily accessible and archived on the parliamentary website, with playback and download capabilities.

11. Email notifications that alert parliamentarians and members of the public about new legislation, votes or amendments to bills would be valuable.
12. All records available through the parliamentary website should be searchable and indexed thematically throughout the entire document, with tags by broad topics, people and dates.
13. Parliament could invest in video technology to support Members' communications with constituents and organizations and to decrease travel costs.
14. Paper and digital records must coexist and be equally integrated. Both formats were viewed as important. Digitizing documents can support information organization and easy transfer, while paper records are valuable for archiving purposes.

Resources and Culture

15. Parliament should assess what can be done to meet the public's expectations related to the speed of response and intimacy from elected representatives. Those consulted acknowledged that a new era in technological sophistication and online engagement presented a challenge to Parliament to meet this demand. While a number of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff felt that the legislative process and the research needed on issues could not be accelerated by technology, newer digital technologies allow Parliament to inform the public faster than ever before.
16. Parliament should be a leader in adapting new technologies. While several of the participants felt that Parliament did a reasonably good job at adapting new digital technologies, there was agreement that the institution was more reactive than proactive in its approach to new technologies.
17. Resources should be allocated to support and train parliamentarians and staff to properly employ digital technologies in a consistent manner.

Transparency and Accountability

18. Bilingual messages were nearly unanimously viewed as crucial when communicating through social media.
19. Multilingual communications were viewed as growing in importance by many participants. Several youth participants and parliamentarians felt that changing demographics would necessitate additional translation capacities in Parliament.
20. Transparency and accountability are contingent on the attitude toward these ideals. Many felt that if information was readily accessible in the public domain that this would hypothetically make Parliament more accountable. However, consensus was that technology was not the deciding factor – accountability and transparency depend on the political will to be accountable and transparent.

VARIATIONS ON KEY THEMES

The table below shows key themes which emerged from the consultations and illustrates the emphasis placed on certain viewpoints. Parliamentarians, parliamentary officials and first-time voters were in agreement on the level of importance attributed to the following ideas: educating the public and outreach, access to information, understandable language, transparency and accountability, and interactive communication. Parliamentarians and parliamentary staff placed an equally low priority on the modernization of procedures (first-time voters were not prompted in this issue).

Emphasis differed on the following issues: greater use of new technologies, diversity of representatives, and proactive engagement. Parliamentary staff were more likely to place a higher priority on the greater use of new technologies. Proactive engagement was less of a priority for parliamentary staff than it was for parliamentarians and first-time voters, though this could be ascribed to the attitude of parliamentary staff that engagement initiatives depend more on the will of parliamentarians to engage. First-time voters discussed the importance of diversity in Parliament, though parliamentarians and parliamentary staff were not prompted in this issue.

Issues	MPs and Senators	Parliamentary staff	First time voters
Greater use of new technologies	☆ ☆	☆ ☆ ☆	☆ ☆
Modernizing procedures	☆	☆	-
Interactive communication	☆ ☆	☆ ☆	☆ ☆
Diversity of representativeness	-	-	☆ ☆
Educating the public and outreach	☆ ☆ ☆	☆ ☆ ☆	☆ ☆ ☆
Proactive engagement	☆ ☆ ☆	☆ ☆	☆ ☆ ☆
Access to information	☆ ☆ ☆	☆ ☆ ☆	☆ ☆ ☆
Understandable language	☆ ☆ ☆	☆ ☆ ☆	☆ ☆ ☆
Transparency and accountability	☆ ☆ ☆	☆ ☆ ☆	☆ ☆ ☆

Key:

☆ ☆ ☆

Crucial

☆ ☆

Important

☆

Unimportant/low priority

-

Not mentioned



Parliamentarian Interviews

METHODOLOGY

Nanos Research consulted with 30 parliamentarians to gather ideas and feedback on the communication needs of members.

Thirty interviews were conducted between November 2009 and December 2009 with MPs and Senators representing diverse regions across Canada. An initial email was sent by the Parliamentary Librarian to all parliamentarians (from both the House of Commons and the Senate) introducing the project and its aims. Nanos Research then followed up with an email requesting that those interested in participating in the interviews confirm their availability with a Nanos researcher. Interviews were scheduled and conducted in-person or over the phone by pairs of Nanos analysts. The interviews dealt with the following topics:

- communication;
- engagement;
- information needs;
- resources and culture; and,
- transparency and accountability.

The questions for the Canadian consultations were designed to be comparable to those used in the UK study. A new section on transparency and accountability was added to address specific issues in Canada.

Participation by Demographics

Sixty percent of the interviews were conducted with Members of Parliament, while 40% of the interviews were with Senators. Two thirds of participants were male (67%), and one third were female (33%). Parliamentarians representing various regions of the country participated, with 40% representation from Ontario, 20% from Prairie provinces, 17% from Atlantic provinces, 13% from the British Columbia/Territories and 10% from Quebec.



COMMUNICATION

It is important to note that there were some differences in how MPs and Senators communicate.

MPs have comparatively more opportunities to communicate with the public (whether through media coverage, advertisements, householders newsletters or ten percenters), while the Senate had more limited opportunities to communicate. MPs were more focused on communicating with their constituents, while Senators tended to communicate with more broadly defined groups across a range of constituencies. There were, therefore, different communication needs for MPs and for Senators. Of note, some parliamentarians also mentioned that there was an important distinction to be made when asking how parliament communicates. Parliament, they said, did not communicate, per se, to the public; instead, it was parliamentarians that communicated to the public. For members of both Chambers, partisanship was a problem and less partisan communications were a priority.

For MPs, the vehicles that were considered the most valuable for communicating with the public were CPAC, the parliamentary websites, and ten percenter mailings, which refers to flyers that MPs have the ability to send to households outside their riding, equivalent to 10% of the households in their own constituency.

MPs generally felt that parliamentary processes and procedures supported their ability to communicate with the public.

MPs were likely to identify ten percenters as an effective way for Parliament to communicate with the public. Nearly half of those who highlighted this example pointed to this being beneficial when used ethically but also liable to have deleterious effects on Canadians' impressions of their elected representatives when misused for partisan gain. This was one of very few instances where opinions were divided along party lines, whereas opinions could not easily be divided by party lines on many other issues. Readers should note that at the time of the interviews, there was controversy about the overtly partisan use of ten percenter flyers.

For Senators, the vehicles that were considered the most valuable for communications with the public were CPAC, the parliamentary website and committee work.

Senators emphasized their committee work as a tool for public outreach.

A number of Senators indicated that communications did not appear to be a priority for the Senate. Some Senators felt that the Senate was challenged in its capacity to communicate especially compared to Members of Parliament. While a number of Senators believed CPAC was very valuable for the House of Commons, they felt there was insufficient coverage of Senate committee proceedings.

In general, a great deal of attention was paid to two key communication vehicles for Parliament: CPAC, the Cable Public Affairs Channel (and its televising of proceedings), and the Parliamentary website.

A. CPAC

Many parliamentarians considered coverage of parliamentary proceedings through CPAC (Cable Public Affairs Channel) to be an effective means for Parliament to communicate with the public, as it reflected current issues.

However, CPAC's broadcasting of the House of Commons' Question Period was viewed with ambivalence. Several participants identified Question Period as an efficient communication tool for Parliament, but others thought it contributed to a distorted view of Parliament by the public. It also put the onus on the media to contextualize key issues. Therefore, many felt that



Question Period did not help Canadians understand what Parliament actually did, leaving it effectively to the media to define what Parliament does.

Several participants believed that the broadcasting of more committee proceedings from both Chambers would do a better job of helping Canadians understand Parliament.

Senators were more likely to identify CPAC as only somewhat effective for Parliament, as Senate proceedings were broadcasted sporadically. Having Canadians view the work that was done in both Chambers was considered valuable. Another problem identified by some parliamentarians was that the viewership of CPAC is representative only of Canadians who are already politically engaged.

B. WEBSITE

The majority of participants believed improvements needed to be made to the website, as it was an important tool for publicizing the work of Parliament.

The parliamentary website that houses information for the House, Senate and the Library was considered functional but not user-friendly. The resources and materials available to the public need to be simplified to support their dissemination and Parliamentarians generally felt that more work needed to be done in the service of making policy matters digestible and improving the search function of the website.

Acknowledging that looking for information was issue-based, it was important that policy information was articulated concisely and was easily accessible by searching tags by broad themes, dates and persons.

This was especially true for parliamentarians' needs. A majority found the parliamentary website lacking for their search needs, as well as for the purposes of referring the general public and media to current news on issues. Some suggestions for improving the parliamentary website included: archiving audio from committee hearings, providing downloadable clips that could be archived on the site and rewound, as well as video podcasts of proceedings. Extrapolating from current trends, many felt that the website needed to respond to the evolving information landscape more aggressively.

There were not enough interactive features on the website and information was one-way.

The lack of interactivity was problematic for parliamentarians. At present, the parliamentary website seemed geared to those with specialized knowledge. It does not seem to address, in a holistic way, what kind of information Canadians expected to find when visiting the Parliamentary website, and neglected to ask them. Parliamentarians indicated that the website was a missed opportunity.

Parliamentarians felt that the website should be integrated as part of the engagement strategy and reach out to Canadians who have a lower level of knowledge of Parliament.

The website was considered unorganized for the purposes of the average visitor and it did not reflect the technological sophistication of visitors. Information needed to be organized in a way that was intuitive, easy to find, and classified by broad topics. It would also be beneficial to do an analysis of needs in consultation with Canadians.

A number of parliamentarians saw value in assigning a task force of parliamentarians, outside technicians and experts to assess the changing communications needs of Parliament.



ENGAGEMENT

Engagement was viewed as a defining challenge for Parliament and parliamentarians.

Education was viewed as essential to increasing citizen engagement and nurturing democracy in Canada.

Nearly all parliamentarians surveyed said that curriculum across the country was sorely lacking in a sustained national approach for educating about Canadian politics. One parliamentarian pointed out that having elementary or high school teachers with proficient knowledge in Canadian politics was a challenge due to political science not being considered a ‘teachable’ subject for prospective students at teachers’ colleges.

Engagement was also perceived as an obstacle because participation from the public was usually issue-driven.

This further enforced the view that engagement needed to be part of a broader, sustained effort to educate the public on how Parliament worked and the ways in which the public could influence legislation.

Some suggestions to nurture engagement were:

- Regularly make available the proceedings of committees to the public in a variety of useable formats (audio and video live streaming, downloadable content on the website, and CDs or DVDs).
- Have MPs and Senators make more visits to schools and have interactive presentations.
- Members needed to be more visible to the public and do a better job of explaining legislation and policy decisions.
- Blogs or videos could showcase the activities and personalities of Parliament (such as Maclean’s Capital Diary or a documentary series on a national network).
- More video technology to allow parliamentarians’ voice and face to be the record, not just the transcribed text, could be leverage to increase engagement.

Staff and parliamentarians would benefit from understanding how to best use new technologies.

When asked whether they thought the use of the internet and mobile phones would have a positive, negative or neutral impact on representative democracy, many parliamentarians conceded that the internet and mobile phones have increased participation from the public and that was positive.

However, respondents were more likely to be neutral or cautiously optimistic of the impact that these communications tools would have on representative democracy. Most respondents were reticent to say that the effect would be unequivocally positive. The dominant view was that, on the positive side, the tools improved communication with the public and increased responsiveness from Parliamentarians and their staff.

The doubts centered on two key themes: the reduction of quality, in-depth information and the potential for misuse of the technologies.

Some of the risks identified were associated with viral dissemination of information that was factually incorrect or not vetted, the gradual deterioration of parliamentary language in exchange for clichés, and the potential influence of fringe groups who proposed policy using social media. Though mentioned less frequently, some felt that reading about legislation and policy from a small mobile device was not conducive to truly understanding the content. For these reasons, relying on digital technologies to improve representative democracy was seen as problematic. Parliamentarians recognized that the internet and mobile phones will continue to supplant the traditional modes of communication so a strategy must be developed.



INFORMATION NEEDS

There is a growing demand for parliamentarians to respond quickly to public queries and, therefore, timely, readily accessible and accurate information was the primary concern of parliamentarians.

When the public contacts parliamentarians, they expect up-to-date and complete information. Many parliamentarians felt that, at present, there was too much of a lag on providing the records of committee proceedings. While several acknowledged that the notion of 'speed' was not conducive to the decision-making process, parliamentarians felt that the sped up news cycle necessitated that parliamentarians and their staff have greater access to information and more sophisticated research capabilities from their offices. This involves, for example, having records of committee hearings in a variety of useable formats and improving the indexing of entire documents. Several parliamentarians indicated that they and their staffers relied on Google for searching for information, as they found the parliamentary websites difficult to navigate. While the majority of parliamentarians were satisfied with the content of information they received through the Library of Parliament, greater accessibility to that information from their offices would allow them to monitor progress on issues more effectively. Some parliamentarians also suggested that it would be helpful to have the search capability to access a variety of databases and information sources.

Some parliamentarians believed that a challenge for Parliament was not access but information overload.

To combat those effects, they underlined the need for concise reports and a better integration of paper and digital sources.

Improved technical resources and support were also considered important.

Some participants felt that having wireless internet in the Chambers was needed to respond to the changing technical environment. Many use laptops and there should be a greater effort to allow access to a secure wireless network.

When asked how the needs of staff were likely to change, most agreed that staff needs are identical to, or are an extension of, the parliamentarian's.

There will likely be more digital communication with the public and staff will need to be well-equipped to respond. Staff and parliamentarians communicate frequently through their mobile devices and it was suggested that further budget provisions would be needed to ensure that staff in Ottawa and in the ridings could coordinate and have access to laptops and Blackberries. In addition, the increased volume of digital communication was seen as an issue that needed to be addressed more thoroughly in terms of considering new policies and increasing resources for staff and training.

RESOURCES AND CULTURE

The majority of parliamentarians surveyed felt that, given the limited resources, it was unrealistic for Parliament to reform its processes and procedures to reflect the public's increasing expectations.

An increased volume of requests meant not enough time to meet expectations without a significant increase to staff resources. Processes and procedures in Parliament were not instantaneous and most felt that rigorous study could not be replaced. Issues would not become less complicated with the help of digital technology.

Those who said it was a realistic expectation felt that members and staff had a duty to provide the public with reliable information that was timely and relevant.

While they acknowledged that certain processes take time regardless of the technology used, parliamentarians have the ability to inform the public faster than ever before. Many felt that Parliament must change because the public's needs were changing. It was the responsibility of Parliament to manage expectations and provide a framework for democratic engagement that took current technology opportunities into account.

When participants were probed on whether they believed the culture of Parliament as an institution needed to change, there was a mix of opinion.

A slight majority felt that Parliament, as an institution, was resistant or overly cautious of new technologies, but as individuals, they felt they were open to change and using a variety of technologies in their offices or for personal use. One participant said there was a tendency toward inertia in Parliament as an institution. The process of adapting and integrating new technologies was considered slow and cumbersome. On the other hand, a slight minority felt that Parliament was ready to implement change, but only after careful consideration.

There was a sharp difference of opinion on the resource implications of increasing digital technologies.

Some thought that this would not have major resource implications, while others thought it would require a tremendous increase in resources. Those who felt it would not require major resources felt that it was more about the political will to make the change. Those that thought it would have major resource implications pointed the need for new funding and training of staff.



TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Parliamentarians placed a great deal of importance on interacting using social media in a fully bilingual manner (French and English).

However, some participants believed that sending out bilingual communications on all messages should be optional for communicating with certain constituencies (on a request basis). In addition, translation requires an additional level of coordination and resources for Parliamentarians.

When probed as to whether there was a need for communications in other languages, there was no agreement on the proper course to take.

Those who were in favour of including languages other than French and English felt that changing demographics in the country would necessitate new language capabilities in Parliament. Several pointed out that many Members of Parliament already did communicate in languages other than French and English at their own cost in order to better serve their constituencies or communities of interest. Another argument in favour of additional language capabilities was that new Canadians needed to be encouraged to participate in the political process for the process to be inclusive. Low voter turnout has been an issue of concern for parliamentarians, and it is, therefore, critical to engage Canada's diverse population.

While there was no clear consensus on multilingual capacities, arguments against the addition of languages other than French and English revolved around concern that the two official languages in Canada were not utilized as well as they could be.

A few participants also said that Parliament did a poor job of including the indigenous languages of Canada and that this required more attention. Other participants said that, while some essential services or documents could be translated in a variety of languages, there was a reasonable expectation that new Canadians learn to speak one or both of the official languages.

Technology was not viewed as the deciding factor in making Parliament of the future more transparent and accountable.

Most parliamentarians were optimistic that digitally enabling Parliament has the capacity to make Parliament more transparent and accountable to Canadians, but only if there was a will in Parliament to commit to the objectives of transparency and accountability.

Parliamentary Staff Facilitated Session

METHODOLOGY

As part of the Canadian contribution to the Parliament 2020 project, the Library of Parliament identified the need to understand the knowledge, views and perceptions of senior parliamentary staff on the future of Parliament. To that end, Nanos Research conducted a facilitated group discussion with 15 senior Parliamentary Staff from the House of Commons, the Senate and the Library of Parliament on December 4th, 2009. The invitation was extended to approximately 30 potential participants. Potential participants were selected based on involvement the Parliamentary Information Management committee which is a committee with representation across all three organizations. Some who were not “senior managers” were selected because of a demonstrated interest in the workings of Parliament.

The discussion was conducted in a bilingual manner, where participants expressed their views in the official language of their choice. The moderator asked all questions in both languages. The purpose of the session was to discuss the future of Parliament as it relates to communication, engagement, information needs, resources and culture, as well as transparency and accountability.

The questions for the Canadian consultations were designed to be comparable to those used in the UK study. A new section on transparency and accountability was added to address specific issues in Canada.

Parliamentary Staff Facilitated Group Participant Profile

Organization	Number of Participants
House of Commons	3
Senate	8
Library of Parliament	4



COMMUNICATION

Parliament must respond to the public's expectation of receiving information as quickly as possible.

Many participants felt that Parliament does a good job of providing timely information to the public about what happens in debates. The public can go on the internet and view the debates from that day. There is still the possibility to improve. If there was a new technology where information could be instantaneous, it was believed that it would make Parliament more effective. It was also noted that Parliament was not as good at getting committee proceedings out to the public as quickly as possible. It would be a good investment of resources to get the public debates and committee proceedings out to the public as quickly as possible.

Information must be provided in a way that is easily understandable to the public.

Participants felt that communication from Parliament to the public should be clear and easy to comprehend. Language which is overly complex or archaic acts as a barrier to public understanding.

Parliament should research new means of engaging in two-way communication with the public.

Some participants expressed that, currently, Parliament was engaged in one-way communication with the public. This was done primarily through the parliamentary website and information packages available to the public about the parliamentary process.

Some participants felt that there should be a greater effort to engage in two-way communication through social media on the parliamentary website, while others questioned whether they, as parliamentary staff, were “gatekeepers” to this type of technology since these types of social media (e.g. blogs and Facebook) are readily available and widely used by many parliamentarians. These participants were also likely to believe that parliamentary staff should only pursue the use of social media on the parliamentary website if there is a will by parliamentarians to do so.

Parliament should continue to reach out to the public in order to make them aware of how they can engage with parliamentarians and the parliamentary process.

Parliamentary staff identified two kinds of information which they communicated to the public: an account of the activities of Parliament (debates and committee minutes) and an explanation of the parliamentary process. The objective of providing this information is to enable the public to engage with Parliament. One participant reasoned that, on the continuum toward public action, the first step is awareness, then knowledge and understanding, then reaching a position, and then action.

Several problems with the parliamentary website were identified by participants; however it was believed that resolving some of these issues would be a challenge given the competing needs of stakeholders.

Parliamentary staff viewed the parliamentary website (parl.gc.ca) as the primary way the institution of Parliament communicated with the public. Participants explained that parliamentarians had other resources to communicate with the public, including CPAC, media and ten percenters (flyers that MPs have the ability to send to households outside their riding, equivalent to 10% of the households in their own constituency). One of main issues is that the parliamentary site is geared towards Parliamentarians and not the general public. The website does not address the public. Currently, the parliamentary website is mostly a resource for parliamentarians. One of the key challenges to improving the website is to balance the differing needs of Members of Parliament, Senators, parliamentary staff and the public.

ENGAGEMENT

Education was viewed as critical to engagement; participants believed that Parliament had to play a supporting role in education but could not lay the foundation.

Participants believed that their role in education was supportive. Parliamentarians and parliamentary staff can assist with public education about Parliament by going into schools to explain the process and providing easily understandable information packages. It was noted that there is a great deal of misinformation about parliamentary procedures and an effort should be made to assist educators.

Many participants believed that the political nature of Parliament presented challenges to adopting new forms of communication.

Many participants admitted that many decisions involving new means of communicating with the public were political in nature and depended a great deal on the will of parliamentarians. It was the opinion of many participants that parliamentarians controlled the procedures of Parliament and that they may be reluctant to take on the risks associated with new technology.

Parliamentary staff indicated that one of the key things they must avoid is being accused of being partisan. One participant explained that Parliament already struggles with the reporting of its activities. To give a clear sense of what has been done in a non-partisan way is a challenge. Some participants felt that research could be conducted on how to best apply these new technologies in a non-partisan fashion.

Research needs to be conducted to assess the public's information needs and how they want to be engaged.

Some participants believed that Parliament is currently basing many of its views about engagement on preconceptions about how they believe the public wants to be engaged. Parliament needs to do more research to find out what the public is looking for, how they can find it, and how the parliamentary website is currently not meeting their needs. Also, more research should be done on how parliamentarians want to communicate in the future.

Parliament should be providing notifications that the public could register for alerts on specific issues as well as providing understandable timelines on the process of how a bill becomes a law.

The length of time for legislation to get through Parliament was viewed as a barrier to public engagement, as some legislation can take over two years to pass. It makes it difficult for people to get engaged and follow an issue. It is easy for those that understand the process, but getting others involved can be a challenge. One possible way to improve engagement would be to provide the public with the ability to sign up for email notifications about what is happening in committee. Another possibility would be to provide visual timelines on the status of legislation online.



INFORMATION NEEDS

Information collected in the House and Senate should be collected in both paper and electronic formats.

Participants identified gaps where some information was only collected in paper formats, while others were only collected electronically. Some participants believed that all documents that were tabled to Parliament should be tabled electronically. This would allow for a rapid dissemination of information to the public. It was also noted that electronic formats should not replace traditional forms of archiving information. It is critical to assess what kind of record Parliament wants to leave in the future. Currently, there is not a proper classification system for electronic records. There is a need to leave a tangible record that is accessible to future generations.

Parliamentary officials need to be cautious when rushing information to parliamentarians.

Some participants felt that staff needs to be careful when considering how the information they are preparing is going to be used. Some Parliamentarians may ask for something quickly which they will use in their social media information feeds. The onus is on staff to ensure that all information is reliable and this may be difficult in an environment which demands the quick turnaround of reliable information.

Parliament has an obligation to ensure that there is reliable information in the public domain to counter any misinformation that exists.

Participants believed that, if individuals in civil society were spreading incorrect information about the parliamentary process, Parliament had a responsibility to ensure that there was reliable information to counteract it. One participant noted that this is what initially drove Parliament to begin posting parliamentary voting records online. Many participants could see the value in producing videos and putting them on YouTube. Participants believed that there were already a number of informational videos produced by average citizens on YouTube, which explained the parliamentary process. Some participants believed that the preexistence of materials on a site like YouTube meant Parliament has a responsibility to ensure they post content which is more reliable and accurate.

RESOURCES AND CULTURE

Parliament is at a crossroads between new and old ideas; more staff needs to be trained in communicating using new technology.

Participants noted that Parliament is at a critical juncture between new ideas and old ideas. There are resource implications to this paradigm shift. Staff are currently proficient at providing information using the old methods (reports to committees, information notes); however, few have the skills and resources to meet the demand of the new, fast-paced environment.

Many of Parliament's processes and procedures cannot and should not be accelerated.

Some participants believed that although there were ways to accommodate the increased demand for quick information, there were structural restraints to increasing the speed of information delivery. It is the responsibility of Parliament to provide information which is authoritative and reliable. Therefore, attempting to expedite the flow of information comes with some risks, because if the process is accelerated without an increase in resources the quality of the information about Parliament and its processes could suffer.

Participants believed Parliament was generally receptive to new technology, but there are several relatively simple initiatives that could be implemented to improve processes.

Participants believed that Parliament had done a good job at implementing new technologies in many instances. The use of Prism (a technology management system where large documents are able to be tagged and easily searched) was one example given by participants. Some participants noted that, in other instances, Parliament has been slow or cautious in adapting new technologies, like electronic voting and eConsultations. Although it was noted that there were a number of technological initiatives which would be undertaken to increase the efficiency of Parliament, it was Parliamentarians who would have to demonstrate the will to implement these initiatives.



TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Communicating in both official languages was viewed as critical by Parliamentary officials.

Participants were unanimous in their belief that all information must be presented in both official languages. Participants also noted that some information should be presented in languages other than English and French depending on the content or issue. Some participants recognized that the importance placed on providing the exact information in both official languages could present a challenge to Parliament using newer social media tools, since these types of communication are intended to be more spontaneous than traditional forms of communication.

The use of language by Parliament should be dependent on the issue being examined.

The use of language often depends on the needs of target communities that have a vested interest in a topic. Some examples given by participants were the use of Aboriginal languages when a committee is exploring the Northern fisheries or the use of Braille for topics of particular interest to the visually impaired.

Participants believed that digital technology had the potential to make Parliament more transparent and accountable.

It was the belief of many participants that new digital technology has the potential to be a very positive vehicle for both transparency and accountability. Transparency was viewed as a key driver towards greater accountability for Parliament. For example, processes that allow information to be tagged with keywords will allow for greater accessibility by the public to follow the legislative process. Even though these technologies have great potential towards transparency and accountability, it was also noted that it is the nature of politics to have information which is privileged in some circumstances.

First-Time Voters Focus Groups

METHODOLOGY

As part of the Canadian contribution to the Parliament 2020 project, the Library of Parliament identified the need to understand the knowledge, views and perceptions of first-time voters on the future of Parliament. To that end, Nanos Research conducted four focus group discussions on December 7th and 8th 2009, in Montreal and Ottawa respectively.

Participants were between the ages of 18 and 25 years old, and they had never voted in a Federal election but intended to vote in the next election. Groups were equally divided among males and females. The two groups in Montreal were conducted in French while the two groups in Ottawa were conducted in English. The focus group discussions dealt with the following topics:

- communication;
- engagement;
- resources and culture; and,
- transparency and accountability.

The questions for the Canadian consultations were designed to be comparable to those used in the UK study. A new section on multilingualism, transparency and accountability was added to address specific issues in Canada.



WORD CLOUD

Participants in the focus group discussions were asked to write three words they associated with Parliament. The following word cloud represents the responses given by the participants. Readers should note that the size of the font in the word cloud represents the frequency that word was used to describe Parliament, the larger the font, the more frequently a word was used. “Important” was the most frequently used positive word, while “confusing” and “corruption” were the most commonly used negative words.



IMPROVING PARLIAMENT

Participants were also asked to imagine that they had been tasked with the job of building a stronger Parliament in the future. Some participants believed systemic change (for example, the wider use of direct democracy or constitutional reform) would build a stronger Parliament, while others believed Parliament should work harder on ‘the most important issues’. Some participants believed that Parliament should strive to communicate more clearly with the public, while others believed that Parliament should use more interactive forms of communication.

COMMUNICATION

First time voters felt that information presented by Parliament must be comprehensible to average citizens.

Some participants expressed that they generally had difficulty understanding information about the activities and procedures of Parliament. The difficulty that participants had is indicative of the challenge of reaching this demographic group. Participants felt that communication from Parliament to the public should be clear and easy to comprehend. They believed that language which is overly complex or archaic presents a barrier for the public to understand.

Improvement to the parliamentary website should be made to make it more user friendly.

A minority of participants in the first time voters focus groups had visited the Parliamentary website, however those who had visited the site felt that information was very difficult to find. These participants believed that there should be a more user friendly site, which citizens could use to collect basic information about Parliament. Some participants said that if Parliament integrated a blog into their current site, it would give people the ability to discuss directly with parliamentarians online.

Parliament should use a variety of methods to get their message out into the public.

The first time voters believed that Parliament had a responsibility to go out and engage the public in a variety of ways. Some examples used by participants for parliamentarians to engage the public were going out to schools to speak, using traditional media sources, as well as new interactive social media.

Participants believed that the media was the primary way Parliament communicated with the public. In the eyes of participants, this meant that most of the information they received about Parliament came through a 'filter'. Participants felt that Parliament should use as many approaches to communicating with the public as possible; these could include traditional media (newspaper, radio and television) and newer social media (Facebook, YouTube and blogs). Participants valued the ability to choose which information source they could use to access information about Parliament.

There were two opposing points of view surrounding Parliament or parliamentarians using social media websites which are already widely used by the public, like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Some participants believed that Parliament should be using all of the tools that are at its disposal to communicate and engage the public, while others were less receptive to Parliament using these types of social media. This lower level of receptiveness might have been the result of their personal disinterest in the activities of Parliament.

Participants were untrusting of many of the communications efforts by Parliament, which they labeled as 'spin'.

Many participants expressed an overall disinterest in following the communications from Parliament. Participants said that, at times, it could be very confusing trying to comprehend the messages coming from Parliament because of the partisan nature of the Canadian parliamentary system. Participants were distrustful of the various political parties, which they believed were only trying to impress voters. Participants were also wary of 'spin' by the media, which is why they believed it was so important for Parliament to use a variety of methods to get their messages out into the public (noted above).



ENGAGEMENT

First time voters believed that education was critical to engagement and that more needed to be done to better educate the public.

Although many participants said that they had “tuned out” stories related to Parliament, they also thought there should be greater public education of its role. Many participants believed that they did not receive a strong educational foundation in the role and processes of Parliament. Several participants mentioned that political studies courses in secondary school were often optional and in some cases not offered. The majority of participants believed that in order for them to engage in the parliamentary process, they would have to be better informed.

Many participants believed that Parliament could play a role in better educating the public, either through parliamentarians speaking at schools or making it essential for there to be more civics included in curriculums across the country.

There were high levels of cynicism towards Parliament among participants in first time voters focus groups.

Participants were generally cynical about the intentions of Parliament. Many participants believed that Parliament was ‘out of touch’ with the rest of the population. Some participants believed that the parliamentary process was intentionally confusing, in order for Parliamentarians to hold on to power.

Many participants felt that digital technologies could have a major positive impact on participation by the public.

Participants believed that the spread of digital technology, such as the internet and mobile phones, could have major impacts on the number of people who would be willing and able to engage in the political process. Many participants believed that people from their generation, who had grown up with many of these new digital technologies, may be more receptive to using these digital technologies to engage in political activities. As new technologies continue to emerge, participants believed that there would be more opportunities to let their views be known. Participants noted that, as the amount of information expands through the internet, people would have to become more careful of what information they decided to trust. Of note, participants generally trusted government websites more than they trusted other types of websites.

RESOURCES AND CULTURE

First time voters said that they expected parliamentarians to reply quickly to inquiries, even those sent through social media tools.

Participants recognized that newer social media had created an expectation about the level of intimacy and the speed of response from their members of Parliament. Several participants noted that Barack Obama's election campaign ushered in a new era of political engagement and that there were implications for the Canadian Parliament. Participants felt that Parliament had all the necessary tools at its disposal to become more responsive to inquiries by the public.

Participants felt that parliamentarians should strive to improve links to their communities.

Participants wished to view parliamentarians as 'regular people'. They wanted to identify with their parliamentarians and wished to see their parliamentarians as active members of their community who worked hard to represent their various points of view. Participants made a link between a parliamentarian's presence in the community and the level of trust they would have in that parliamentarian.

Participants believed that Parliament was receptive to new technology, though it tended to lag behind the rest of the population.

Most participants believed that Parliament was generally receptive to the use of new technologies, although many participants noted that they did not consider parliamentarians to be early adopters of new technology. Participants believed that Parliament was only likely to adopt new technologies if the rest of the population had already adopted it.



TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

First time voters believed that all communication from Parliament should be in both official languages.

Participants in both Ottawa and Montreal were nearly unanimous in their belief that all information presented by Parliament must be presented in both official languages. Some participants believed that Parliament should also make a greater effort to present information in languages other than English and French.

Access to information, transparency and accountability were critical elements of Parliament and participants felt that parliamentarians should strive to improve in all of these areas.

Participants placed high levels of importance on having access to information about what was happening in Parliament. Although they believed that digital technology had the potential to make Parliament more accountable, they believed that it was more dependent on Parliament's willingness to be transparent. They believed that being more transparent would eventually lead to making Parliament more accountable. If Parliament put more information out into the public domain, participants felt that there would be multiple external groups and organizations which could refute or validate that information.

