



**Commentary on Presentation  
by Professor Sandford Borins Entitled  
“The New Liberalism and Canada’s Public Service”**

**by Elena Mantagaris**

I would like to make some comments focussing upon the themes of information technology and integration, e-consultation, and the public service labour force raised by Professor Borins in his paper “The New Liberalism and Canada’s Public Service”.

For the first theme, the following is a specific example of how linking information technology with the concept of information integration (clustering) can, in fact, provide significant benefits to the public, transform how the public service works, and respond to the needs of Canadians.

In the face of crisis on September 11, 2001, federal public servants rose to the occasion by using the Internet as a vehicle to bring together (or cluster) accurate and up-to-date information for Canadians regarding the events in the United States, the arrival of airplanes in Canada, security measures being implemented, etc. Where previously, information would have resided in various locations, departments and areas of authority, the public service clustered and organized relevant information on behalf of Canadians. Through a single link entitled “Fighting Terrorism”, located on the Canada Site ([canada.gc.ca](http://canada.gc.ca)), the public service demonstrated that it could work horizontally by pulling together information from various jurisdictions, that it could provide information and services that responded to immediate and specific concerns amongst Canadians, and that it could provide that information and service in a timely manner. Previously, Canadians would have had to navigate the maze of departmental jurisdictions to get complete information related to the crisis.

Whereas television coverage was focusing on how our security was being compromised, the federal public service was working to demonstrate how it was securing our country and, thus, still relevant in the lives of Canadians. This was no small feat in an era of cynicism towards the public service and when governments are constantly being accused of not moving quickly enough to respond to the priorities of Canadians. Technology provided the means to integrate authoritative information from across jurisdictions under the heading of a single electronic link.

International delegations seeking to learn how the federal public service uses technology to provide better service to Canadians were impressed with the speed with which the “Fighting Terrorism” link was launched and the fact that the public service broke through traditional departmental silos to bring together relevant information in a holistic manner. While this innovative approach may have contributed to raising confidence in government amongst the public, it also proved to the public service itself that technology and the concept of information clustering across jurisdictions could present an opportunity to work in new ways and provide better service delivery to Canadians.

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On the issue of e-consultations, there are some broad cautionary points worth raising. While many of its proponents have touted the benefits of using the Internet to engage in electronic consultations with the public on any number of policy issues, e-consultation differs significantly from information clustering and service delivery in terms of potential cultural impact. E-consultation has been described as a modern form of direct democracy, one that responds to the demands of populists seeking direct public response as guidance. However, technology will not fix the democracy deficit and waning interest in public institutions we are experiencing in this country. Nor will it necessarily improve the quality of debate surrounding any contemporary issue of interest to the

public. It must always be remembered that the Internet is primarily a communication and information tool. IT may expedite service delivery and information integration, but it does not automatically result in a better democratic interaction or inevitably bring clarity to the policy-making process.

We can establish as many on-line consultation sessions as we want between government and the people. However, the consultation process will be all but meaningless if, as a society, we fail to first educate and encourage citizens to pursue the knowledge with which to make informed and reasoned contributions to public debate. A liberal democratic society must constantly promote a culture that encourages and values responsible public engagement as a worthwhile activity, particularly if technology is going to allow citizens to grow even closer to the political and policy decision-making processes. More simply put, e-consultation is not an enlivening of democracy, but it is in fact a tool that demands a public clarification concerning the very values of democracy. This would include the necessary rights and responsibilities of all citizens. Only then will e-consultation begin to meet the idealistic expectations it is built upon.

Another point to be considered with respect to e-consultation is the potential impact on our parliamentary system. What we need to ask ourselves at this juncture is the following: If the public service is going to directly engage Canadians in the development of public policy, what is the purpose of the MP or MPP? An MP/MPP is supposed to represent his or her constituents, but the Internet allows for direct interaction between the public and the public service. In that context, why have an MP/MPP at all? The potential for a more robust e-consultation process in the future raises crucial issues about the very structure of a parliamentary democracy and requires that we re-examine roles, responsibilities, authorities and accountabilities between the citizen, and our elected and non-elected government officials.

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Finally, on the issue of the public service labour force outlined in the paper, the growing use of contractors and consultants in the public service does not necessarily mean a less loyal and committed work force.

To link the public service with new liberalism may mean transforming a public service labour force to be more dynamic and fluid in how it defines itself and how it determines membership. The public service needs to commit itself to engaging individuals who are dedicated to the public good regardless of their employment status with the government. New liberalism should seek to blur the distinctions drawn between public servant, elected official, consultant and individual. However, this must coincide with a rigorous debate concerning the very values of a liberal democracy. We are all citizens and all have a stake in effective and responsible government. As such, we are all, in effect, public servants within our democracy. There will always be structural demands that require a dedicated cadre of public servants. However, union membership should not be the sole identifier of a public servant. If we are going to explore institutional reform, which is the title of this panel, we need to first re-affirm the very life of our democratic values and responsibilities as citizens, and affirm that there is a need for creativity and innovative thinking. Public institutions should be both porous and durable enough to allow for influences from a variety of people, so long as those influences ultimately respect the fundamental life of a democratic society.