

# Submission to the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy

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This submission discusses the broader issues of digital engagement, the public's relationship with Parliament and its inter-connectivity (or lack of) with the law-making process.

I work with parliaments and governments around the world to help them understand and take advantage of new digital and social media: I make democracy 'work better' (sometimes referred to as 'democratic strengthening'). This is not easy, not least in the UK where the majority of us distrust politicians, don't want to get involved and express increasing disappointment in our systems of governance.

Digital and social tools create an opportunity to make democracy more relevant, accessible, engaging and visible: to break down the walls and silos and to get ordinary people involved in the decisions that affect their lives. But for this to happen our institutions have to change. They have to undergo significant cultural transformation. Nothing about this is digital but it is made possible by digital as a disrupting force. The challenge is significant but the price of failure is extremely high: the public already views Parliament as out of touch and decreasingly relevant.

The UK Parliament is a world-leading legislature in terms of digital engagement and the use of digital media.<sup>1</sup> It can be proud of what it has achieved and should be acknowledged for the vision to do this. However, there remains a considerable gap between what we have today and what could be described as an 'open parliament', where citizens feel fully able to engage and contribute at will and are properly resourced to do so.

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<sup>1</sup> Global Centre for ICT in Parliament (2012). World e-Parliament Report. UNDESA: Rome. [www.ictparliament.org/WePReport2012.html](http://www.ictparliament.org/WePReport2012.html)

## It's about much more than digital

Digital technology clearly and demonstrably can change the relationship between citizens and their legislators.<sup>2</sup> However, technology is a tool. It is not a solution in its own right. And it is dangerous, naïve and limiting to assume that much can be achieved if the scope of the question relates purely to the digital side of the equation. The New Zealand Government puts it succinctly when they say:

*ICT is not just about technology – it's about the ways in which information and technology are used to deliver better services and enhance trust and confidence in government.*<sup>3</sup>

- \* **Digital technologies can act as a disrupter or an enabler. They can be revolutionary or evolutionary. However, if one simply applies new digital media to a flawed process the result is most predictably going to be a flawed digital process.**<sup>4</sup>

It is critical to understand how digital integrates into the overall process. What is the most effective blend of on- and offline tools and processes that can most effectively engage people in creating and sustaining real and active change? Change such that they begin to believe their voice counts and the system is taking notice.<sup>5</sup> Above all the 'technology' has to be appropriate for the audience: participatory budgeting can be done online in Reykjavik but it's more effective done in person in Lima (shown below):



- \* **Engagement increases when the process is accessible, appropriate and authentic. Whilst digital enables this to happen it does not happen simply because the process is digital.**

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<sup>2</sup> Williamson, A. (2011). Disruption and empowerment: Embedding citizens at the heart of democracy. *Journal of eDemocracy and Open Government*; Williamson, A. & Fallon, F. (2011). Transforming the future parliament through the effective use of digital media. *Parliamentary Affairs*. 64(4). 781-792.

<sup>3</sup> New Zealand Government (2013). *Government ICT strategy and action plan to 2017*. Wellington.

<sup>4</sup> Williamson, A. (2014, Jan). *Digital Democracy is About Much More Than Digital*. Politics First.

<sup>5</sup> Good examples of this include NHS Citizen ([nhscitizen.org.uk](http://nhscitizen.org.uk)), Sciencewise ([sciencewise-erc.org.uk](http://sciencewise-erc.org.uk)) & Betri Reykjavík ([betrireykjavik.is](http://betrireykjavik.is))

## If the process is broken, new tools won't fix it

The legislative process currently includes a number of opportunities for public engagement. None of these are particularly well understood or well patronised.

The public can provide input to Parliament via the Public Reading Stage, Committees and directly via Members (in both Houses, though the value of interacting with the House of Lords is grossly under-estimated by the public<sup>6</sup>).

However, at all of these stages it often is only possible to deal with a fait accompli. By the time draft legislation reaches Parliament there is limited opportunity to challenge or amend it. The Commission needs to focus on the earlier stages of the bill drafting process and on the pre-legislative scrutiny stage too.

This is before we even consider the complexity of the legislative process itself, the lack of a clear 'audit trail' to cross-reference amendments to original (or indeed final) copies of bills and the clearly articulated frustrations even Members face in following what is happening to a complex piece of legislation as it passes through both Houses. One MP described the process thus:

*You have an amendment book which doesn't list the amendments in numerical order so you can't find them then you have a list of amendments... which doesn't list them in either numerical order or the order which they're in the amendment book... you end up with a mess of papers...<sup>7</sup>*

This leads on to the further challenges presented by such things as secondary legislation and highlights the importance of public input at a post-legislative scrutiny stage.

**\* Processes must be re-designed, refined and improved to make them more open and accountable. Digital plays a strong role in supporting this but more important is the design of the process itself.<sup>8</sup>**

## Delivering services in the digital age

It is tempting to look elsewhere for examples. The Estonian government is a standard reference. The UK is not Estonia. And the UK Parliament is not the Estonian Government; you are not starting from a zero-base and you lack many of the small scale opportunities that existed there. Parliaments too are strange and rather unique entities, they have a unique role and are effectively a collective of Members. Structurally and philosophically they resemble little else. This makes other parliaments a more useful reference point<sup>9</sup>. Particularly noteworthy here

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<sup>6</sup> Foreman, E. & Williamson, A. (2013, Apr 19). How to make your campaign a success. The Guardian.

<sup>7</sup> Allen, B. & Williamson, A. (2011). Parliament 2020: Visioning the future parliament. Hansard Society: London. P.24.

<sup>8</sup> Nielsen, M. & Williamson, A. (2013, May). Strategies for building and sustaining successful user engagement. International Conference for E-Democracy and Open Government 2014. Krems, Austria.

<sup>9</sup> For example, the Social Media Guidelines for Parliaments that I authored and which are published by the IPU. The English version is here: [ipu.org/PDF/publications/SMG2013EN.pdf](http://ipu.org/PDF/publications/SMG2013EN.pdf)

(given their scale and maturity) are the European Parliament, Brazil and Chile, though many other parliaments have innovative digital engagement practices, including Denmark, South Korea and Ecuador as well as the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales.

There is also a question of 'IT' versus 'Web services'. It's apparent in a number of parliaments that 'web services' have grown in parallel, driven from a communications not an IT perspective. This has been entirely appropriate where IT services have been highly structured and 'traditional'. But things are changing, as evidenced by projects such as the Government Digital Service. This suggests opportunities for re-integrating web and IT services in a way that allows them to remain responsive, agile and user-friendly.

- \* To retrench citizen-centric web services into a technocratic IT regime would be regressive and regretful, they must remain agile and responsive, delivering quick wins and high-value to the public as well as to Parliament.**

## Moving towards an open parliament

One of the key challenges for those of us who are trying to engage a broader public in parliamentary democracy is that the process often appears closed and opaque to people. The language is off-putting, the procedures cumbersome and unfriendly and it's impossible to see what's going on. Digital can't fix the first problem (though it can help), it should improve the second (otherwise it's pointless) but it can significantly impact on the third: the internet has created a channel to support a paradigm shift towards the concept of an 'open parliament'. It should now be possible for anyone and everyone to see everything relating to parliamentary business in an easy to access and user friendly way.

- \* Digital is a key enabler of public transparency and transparency helps increase trust and limit corruption.**

This doesn't simply mean providing digitised versions of existing documents but ensuring that content is machine readable, correctly tagged and indexed so that it can be found, matched, verified and re-used by third-parties: build it open and encourage others to use it, mash it up and repurpose it!

Though there is and will remain a tension between the need to write legislation in a legally and technically correct way it must also be accessible to the public. In a digital environment it is much easier to conceive of ways to provide better plain-English summaries and commentaries, which are directly linked to original content.

## Serious democratic tool or an opiate for the masses?

Not all digital adds value and it can even be negative if it creates an expectation but fails to deliver. A good example to make this point is e-Petitions. Introduced (against some resistance from Parliament) by the Coalition Government and replacing the 10 Downing Street e-Petition. This demonstrates some very limited successes but overall the ability of the public to achieve any real change through the process is low. The process as implemented does not lend itself

well to a modern citizen-centric democracy; too many gatekeepers within Parliament are able to (and regularly do) disrupt it. Compare this to the National Assembly for Wales where the process is more focussed on the quality of the petition (not the quantity of signatures) and petitions are managed by a Petitions Committee. Other good examples include the Finnish citizen's initiative that can enact a bill in the Eduskunta.<sup>10</sup>

It is naïve and wasteful to be technologically deterministic, yet so many of the decisions relating to digital media are just that. It is wrong to introduce new methods to engage unless at the same time processes are also reviewed and modified as necessary. It is wrong to introduce new apps and web-assets if resources are not put into educating and stimulating public demand, especially through education (both for young people and just-in-time learning for citizens – most of us interact with Parliament because we feel strongly about an issue; there is an immediate requirement and lack of knowledge is a significant barrier to engagement).

**\* Digital does not change our motivation to engage, it only lowers the barriers to access.**

Without appropriate citizen knowledge and education digital engagement is simply another channel for the usual suspects, a digitally savvy sub-set of the existing political class.<sup>11</sup>

## **Need to understand the cost/benefit equation over the long-term**

There is a cost to digital engagement: where democracy has been poorly served, improving it rarely costs less. It could be that there is a contra-saving to be made through an improved process but inevitably there is a short term operational cost. Though relatively easy and therefore tempting to calculate, this is the wrong measure of value.

**\* The true measure of value is the cost-benefit of better legislation, better public understanding and greater engagement. Ultimately, it is an increase in public trust in Parliament.**

Increasing scrutiny and input into the legislative process and widening this process so that it is accessible to people with a wider range of knowledge and experiences can reduce the overall cost of delivery because it can lead to better legislation. And the earlier problems and errors are found the less it costs to fix. This holds true for legislation as well as civil engineering and IT systems! Ultimately, the cost of poorly drafted legislation can be measured later in terms of legal challenges and re-drafting (The Transparency of Lobbying, Non-party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration bill (now Act) is a topical case of poorly drafted legislation that is likely to create operational difficulties when implemented but it is not alone).

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<sup>10</sup> See: [www.vrk.fi/default.aspx?id=706](http://www.vrk.fi/default.aspx?id=706)

<sup>11</sup> Williamson, A. (2013). From tools to strategy: Putting citizens at the centre of our democracy. EuroPCOM 2013, European Parliament, Brussels, Belgium; Williamson, A. (2013). Social media for parliaments (Keynote). Association of Parliamentary Libraries in Canada. Ottawa, Canada; Williamson, A. (2013). Using Social Media to Strengthen the Relationship Between Congress and Citizens (Keynote). Andean Regional Parliaments Workshop, Lima, Peru.

**\* What must be considered is the opportunity cost of failing to adopt more citizen-facing digital assets and the social return on investment that can result from greater democratic cohesion.**

The Official Report makes an interesting example; in written form its use is limited but as an XML product available in machine-readable format new opportunities arise for communities (wanting to monitor their local MP), activists (wanting to monitor an issue) and to integrate what happens in Parliament into the classroom.<sup>12</sup> Take these examples of Kevin Rudd's apology to Australia's indigenous people recorded in the House of Representatives' Hansard. Which one offers more opportunity for sharing and education?

<p>Wednesday, 13 February 2008 HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES 167</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>SPEECH</b></p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>Date</td> <td>Wednesday, 13 February 2008</td> <td>Source</td> <td>House</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Page</td> <td>167</td> <td>Proof</td> <td>No</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Questioner</td> <td></td> <td>Responder</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Speaker</td> <td>Rudd, Kevin, MP</td> <td>Question No.</td> <td></td> </tr> </table> <p><b>Mr RUDD</b> (Griffith—Prime Minister) (9:00 am)—I move:</p> <p>That today we honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history.</p> <p>We reflect on their past mistreatment.</p> <p>We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations—this blemished chapter in our nation's history.</p> <p>The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia's history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future.</p> <p>We apologise for the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians.</p> <p>We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country.</p> <p>For the pain, suffering and hurt of those Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry.</p> <p>To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry.</p> <p>And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.</p>	Date	Wednesday, 13 February 2008	Source	House	Page	167	Proof	No	Questioner		Responder		Speaker	Rudd, Kevin, MP	Question No.		<pre> -&lt;debate&gt; -&lt;debateinfo&gt; &lt;title&gt;APOLOGY TO AUSTRALIA'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES&lt;/title&gt; &lt;page.no&gt;167&lt;/page.no&gt; &lt;type&gt;Motions&lt;/type&gt; &lt;/debateinfo&gt; -&lt;speech&gt; -&lt;talk.start&gt; -&lt;talker&gt; &lt;page.no&gt;167&lt;/page.no&gt; &lt;time.stamp&gt;09:00:00&lt;/time.stamp&gt; &lt;name role="metadata"&gt;Rudd, Kevin, MP&lt;/name&gt; &lt;name.id&gt;83T&lt;/name.id&gt; &lt;electorate&gt;Griffith&lt;/electorate&gt; &lt;party&gt;ALP&lt;/party&gt; &lt;role&gt;Prime Minister&lt;/role&gt; &lt;in.gov&gt;1&lt;/in.gov&gt; &lt;first.speech&gt;0&lt;/first.speech&gt; &lt;name role="display"&gt;Mr RUDD&lt;/name&gt; &lt;/talker&gt; &lt;para&gt;—I move.&lt;/para&gt; &lt;/talk.start&gt; -&lt;motion&gt; -&lt;para&gt; That today we honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history. &lt;/para&gt; &lt;para&gt;We reflect on their past mistreatment.&lt;/para&gt; &lt;para&gt;We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations—this blemished chapter in our nation's history. </pre>
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**No one left behind. Or are they?**

Digital is not a panacea for many reasons but one critical reason is that it leaves behind those who lack access to it, the ability to use or the skills to be an effective user. There are many reasons for being offline but it is sufficient to point out that you are less likely to have the internet if you are old, poor, poorly educated, have a disability or live in a remote rural area. Beyond this, there appears to be a distinct gender gap in British political life and, of itself, digital does nothing to address this.<sup>13</sup>

**\* New engagement methods must not further disadvantage those who are already marginalised and excluded.**

**Where are you heading?**

Parliament has begun to change and has indicated in its strategic plan that greater engagement is needed. Education and Outreach has been significantly enhanced. This follows

<sup>12</sup> Williamson, A. (2013). The official report as an engagement tool in the future (Keynote). British-Irish Parliamentary Reporting Association, Cardiff.  
<sup>13</sup> Williamson, A. (2011, Sep 1). The gender imbalance online seems to be the result of wider political exclusion, not digital exclusion. British Politics and Policy at LSE. London School of Economics.



on from the Puttnam Commission<sup>14</sup> and, subsequently, the Wright Committee, which noted that the engagement agenda must shift “towards actively assisting a greater degree of public participation”.<sup>15</sup> Positive words but progress has been slow and it is clear that institutional and cultural barriers remain.

- \* How can Parliament connect with communities and individuals that remain highly dis-engaged from the democratic process? There is no easy answer, no one-size-fits-all solution.**

There are economic constraints too, so we have to know the marginal cost/benefit of each new connection. This will remain challenging and requires a long-term approach to educational support and outreach and easy access to the tools people use (not what Parliament wants to use). It also requires third parties to act as intermediaries and mediators in the process, so that Parliament needs to develop good processes to work through others, not always insisting on delivering content and engagement itself.<sup>16</sup>

- \* You can't try to own the conversation: Parliament needs to step outside its comfort zone and engage with people where they are, when they want to talk in the ways they want to engage.**

## Benchmarking Progress

It's important to establish a credible and measurable set of objectives. A good starting point for this would be to adopt the principles contained in the Declaration on Parliamentary Openness<sup>17</sup>, which can be summarised under the following four primary headings:

1. Promoting a Culture of Openness  
Parliamentary information belongs to the public.
2. Making Parliamentary Information Transparent  
Parliament shall adopt policies that ensure proactive publication of parliamentary information, and shall review these policies periodically to take advantage of evolving good practices.
3. Easing Access to Parliamentary Information  
Parliament shall ensure that information is broadly accessible to all citizens on a non-discriminatory basis through multiple channels, including first-person observation, print media, radio, and live and on-demand broadcasts and streaming
4. Enabling Electronic Communication of Parliamentary Information  
Parliament shall ensure that information is broadly accessible to all citizens on a non-discriminatory basis through multiple channels, including first-person observation, print media, radio, and live and on-demand broadcasts and streaming.

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<sup>14</sup> Puttnam, D. (2005). Parliament in the Public Eye, Hansard Society Commission

<sup>15</sup> House of Commons Select Committee (2009), Rebuilding the House, HC 1117. p.6

<sup>16</sup> Williamson, A., M. Korris, et al. (2011). Connecting citizens to Parliament: How Parliament can engage more effectively with hard to reach groups. London, Hansard Society.

<sup>17</sup> See: [www.openingparliament.org/declaration](http://www.openingparliament.org/declaration)