From Venting to Inventing:
Dispatches from the Frontiers of Participation in Canada

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Overview

When citizens feel alienated, cynical and disconnected from their governments, discontent is a natural response. At the same time, this discontent can generate new kinds of engagement between citizens and governments – venting can become inventing. In Canada, citizens' desire for increased participation has sparked significant citizen-led initiatives for change.

From Venting to Inventing examines three case studies, all reflecting citizen initiatives which have emerged over the last decade as a response to three deeply rooted concerns: a perceived lack of democracy, a challenge to government inaction, and a deep desire to strengthen and expand civic space**.**

This project builds on the work undertaken in *Learning to Engage: Experiences with Civic Engagement in Canada*[1]. In undertaking to respond to the key questions of the Commonwealth Foundation's *Civil Society in the New Millennium Project*, *Learning to Engage* looked at three key links in civic engagement:

- Citizens' access to government
- Citizens' access to resources
- Citizens' access to each other

From Venting to Inventing looks primarily at ways citizens are creating to engage one another, and tries to assess the extent to which they are succeeding in strengthening their voices in governance at local, national and international levels. It examines three experiments with citizen-led initiatives to expand and redefine democracy. In each case, citizens have worked to have stronger, more effective voices in decisions made in their respective communities. These cases are not closed. They are dispatches from the frontiers documenting new ways of engaging civic space. Their applicability goes far beyond Canada.

The first case examines efforts in 1990 to establish direct democracy at the municipal level in Rossland, British Columbia. This study takes places in the context of a broader movement to create permanent structures which empower citizens at local levels. It is part of the larger struggle between competing forces of indirect and direct governance, between our parliamentary legacy and our "homegrown," North American impulse to more direct democracy.

The second case involved Web Networks, an internet-based network for activists, created in the late 80s. Web Networks continues to provide on-line space as well as tools for alternative organizations to build their capacity as social change agents. The Internet has emerged as a potent technology for transforming civic space. This study was selected to examine the ways that the Internet is shaping citizen participation – and vice versa – and its impact on civil society.

The third case examines the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) as an example of the ways that large summits involving governments, NGOs and

[1] *Learning to Engage: Experiences with Civic Engagement in Canada* was prepared by Miriam Wyman, David Shulman and Laurie Ham for Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) as Canada's National Report for the Commonwealth Foundation's *Civil Society in the New Millennium Project*. It can be found at www.cprn.org.

citizens and parallel people's summits are redefining both the context and manner in which decisions are made. The rise in "summitry" over the last decade (including Rio, Cairo, Beijing, Seattle, Quebec, Genoa, Kananaskis) raises important questions about the extent to which citizen-initiated efforts around these events expand democracy in lasting ways. Since Rio was the summit meeting which redefined participation, it is an important model from which to draw insights related to citizens and governance. [2]

Analysis of the cases is focused on an assessment of the extent to which these experiments have become permanent features of the political terrain in Canada. The central questions of the project include:

- How are citizen organizing to strengthen their voices in political decisions?
- How are citizens attempting to rebalance relationships of engagement with their governments?
- How are citizens' efforts translating into better institutionalized commitments to increased citizen involvement in governance?

In all three cases, the answer to these questions appears to "Yes…but." On the positive side:

- Citizens in Rossland won the right to initiate and ratify municipal laws, and used this new tool to press their local government to adopt bold measures in water quality and environmental safety.
- Through its training and programming efforts, Web Networks made it possible for citizens to use information technology to engage each other on important local, national and global issues.
- Canadian civil society organizations used the preparations for the Rio Summit to gain unprecedented access to the levers and resources of policy making and to create widespread networks with one another.

At the same time, these achievements are tempered by some of the less successful outcomes of these initiatives:

- Citizens in Rossland are making relatively little use of their referendum opportunity to participate in municipal governance.
- Web Networks' effectiveness was hindered by financial difficulties due, in part, to the fact that they misgauged the real needs of communities – and perhaps, more importantly, by the inability to recapture the vision and excitement of their early days and apply them in the new and vastly changed electronic world.
- The "Rio Way," for all its strengths, could not withstand subsequent shifts in events and players which led to a withdrawal of resources and access over the past decade. More

[2] The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), or Rio plus 10, took place in Johannesburg, South Africa in August, 2002.

importantly, it was overtaken by enormous changes in the global corporate trade agenda which seems to have overtaken concern for sustainable development.

In all three cases, a number of fault lines are evident. There is a clash between the new tools and their use. There is a clash between the desire for greater diversity in participation and the disunity that results before unity can emerge. And, there is a clash between the rhythm of innovation and the rhythm of democracy.

Each of these cases has much to say about the ways that citizens are trying to strengthen their voices in decision-making, to achieve more balanced relationships with their governments and to create more permanent features of the political landscape. There is no question that "[C]itizens want a deepening of democracy to make it more direct and participatory."[3] However, citizens are not the only players and too often, their efforts with respect to governments are unrewarded.

In each of our cases, citizens have clearly demonstrated their willingness to come together, to identify the common good and to take action. There are countless such cases around the world. Citizens are organizing in creative and committed ways to strengthen their voices in political decisions and to are working hard to rebalance relationships of engagement with their governments.

Are these efforts translating into better institutionalized commitments to increased involvement in governance? Unfortunately, the answer is an unequivocal no. When we began this study, we were hoping to find that if citizens were active, democracy would be strong. These studies are telling us something else. What we see is a stark picture of the chasm between citizens and governments.

We have seen that citizens are doing many – if not all – of the right things. And, it is not enough. Civil society alone does not create strong democracy. What we have found is that democracy can be weak even when citizens are active. Even when civil society is active, engaged and energized, there must be a framework that entrenches their engagement in the governing and decision making institutions of their lands. It seems that this is where the most important change must take place. Only with changes in the ways that citizen involvement is institutionalized will democracy be strong.

These experiments emerged from a period of civic innovation. All grew out of the sense that something different was needed to strengthen citizens' voices in governance – and all three experiments demonstrated that something different was possible. Nevertheless, they have not been able to reverse the weakening of democracy in Canada. For all their efforts at inventing, Canadians are back to venting.

[3] Barry Knight, Hope Chigudu & Rajesh Tandon. *Reviving Democracy*. London: Earthscan Press, 2001, 164.

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To speak today of the defense of democracy as if we were defending something which we knew and had possessed for many decades or centuries is self-deception . . . we should be nearer the mark . . . if we spoke of the need not to defend democracy but to create it.

Richard Swift

1. Introduction

> In healthy belonging, we have respect for one another. We work together, cooperate in a healthy way, listen to each other. We learn how to resolve the conflicts that arise when one person seeks to dominate another. In a true state of belonging, those who have less conventional knowledge, who are seemingly powerless, who have different capacities, are respected and listened to. In such a place of belonging, if it is a good place, power is not imposed from on high, but all members seek to work together as a body. The implication is that we see each other as persons and not just cogs in a machine. We open up and interact with each other so that all can participate in the making of decisions.[4]

Vanier speaks to how people, organizations and institutions should operate. He has spent much of his life creating environments in which people with varying abilities can find a place of belonging and participation. And for many others, including people who, like us, have been working to democratize relationships, families, communities, organizations and institutions for close to 30 years, they continue to ring true. What also continues to ring true are the many obstacles to realizing these ideals.

When citizens feel alienated, cynical and disconnected from their governments, discontent is a natural response. At the same time, this discontent can generate new kinds of engagement between citizens and governments – venting can become inventing. In Canada, citizens' desire for increased participation has sparked significant citizen-led initiatives for change. The purpose of *From Venting to Inventing* is to examine three kinds of situations which have emerged over the last decade reflecting citizens' desire to strengthen and expand civic space.

Over our many years of public involvement work, we along with our colleagues, friends and clients have spent innumerable hours venting – talking about the obstacles, the seemingly endless and insurmountable problems to creating and sustaining a culture of engagement. We are more than ready to find (or help create) examples that go beyond to venting to inventing, to creating and sustaining new kinds of relationships that put citizens' interests and concerns at the center.

The state of the world does not seem good these days. This study offered us an opportunity to reflect on our experience and to think about what we could say to others who, with us, wish the world were a gentler, more cooperative, more humane and more sustainable place. We were hoping to find ways to persuade ourselves, and perhaps others, that our work – work in which the personal and professional are so deeply enmeshed – is making a difference.

The examples in this study were selected for the following reasons:

- They look at the efforts in which citizens take an active role in decision-making, to put themselves in the foreground, rather than in a more passive or background role.

- They have been underway long enough that participants could take a critical look at themselves and their efforts.

- They offered the potential to be taken up as models by others and we were interested in the extent to which this has been the case.

[4] Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1998), 58.

- They continue to be relevant from the standpoint of issues and processes.

They are connected to the relatively new discourse taking place these days about "citizen power," "local democracy," "e-democracy," "people's summits," and "civic space," all of which suggest new images, understandings and possibilities for the ways in which citizens engage with each other and their respective governments. These empowering ideas are emerging from a civic and political environment that offers pulls and pushes and contradictory messages. Citizens want to be more involved in decisions that affect their lives and their communities. In Canada, there are people inside government advocating for good consultation and increased involvement. At the same time, decision-making processes are increasingly centralized, and political agendas seem far more driven by trade opportunities than by citizens' concerns.

It is easy to understand citizens' discontent, distrust and wavering commitment to traditional institutions and processes. It is precisely this discontent that has the potential to give rise to new alternatives. One of our big questions is whether creative possibilities for new forms of engagement can come from the expression of frustration – can we move from venting to inventing?

Citizens' desire for increased participation has sparked many citizen-led initiatives for change. This report examines three case studies, all reflecting citizen initiatives based in Canada which have emerged over the last decade as a response to three deeply rooted concerns: a perceived lack of democracy, a challenge to government inaction, and a deep desire to strengthen and expand civic space. Each of them presents challenges to the Westminster model of government, one Canada shares with many Commonwealth countries.

The Westminster model is rooted in elitism and still bears the hallmarks of non-disclosure, broad definitions of confidentiality and a fundamental lack of government trust in its citizenry. This model makes a clear distinction between "decision-makers" and "citizens." Citizens' role is largely confined to "vote, play and pay": vote for your elected officials, play by the rules or laws they establish, and pay the bill through your taxes. Elected officials and their employees, public servants, are meant to make and implement decisions.

Citizens do have some opportunities that go beyond voting. Government can initiate referenda, hold legislative hearings, create royal commissions, initiate surveys, opinion polls, town hall meetings, focus groups, convene And, these do reflect considerable effort to be more consultative. Nonetheless, they remain limited in scope and effectiveness, largely because they are driven by the government's agenda rather than by the concerns of citizens. And citizens' efforts to capture government attention are often frustrating and frustrated.

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- Citizens' access to each other

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The *Civil Society in the New Millennium Project* was launched to focus on civil society organizations, in particular the relationship between citizens, civil society organizations, the state and other major actors in society.[6] It locates citizens as an important locus of power and comes to understand that the basis for substantive democracy is a "new compact" which must exist between citizens, the state and non-governmental organizations.[7] This new relationship requires that governments harness the capacities of their citizens in the effort to create a strong civil society that works together with a strong state.[8]

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The first case examines efforts in 1990 to establish direct democracy at the municipal level in Rossland, British Columbia. This study takes places in the context of a broader movement to create permanent structures which empower citizens at local levels. It is part of the larger struggle between competing forces of indirect and direct governance, between our parliamentary legacy and our "homegrown," North American impulse to more direct democracy.

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The third case examines the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) as an example of the ways that large summits involving governments, NGOs and citizens and parallel people's summits are redefining both the context and manner in which decisions are made. The rise in "summitry" over the last decade (including Rio, Cairo, Beijing, Seattle, Quebec, Genoa, Kananaskis) raises important questions about the extent to which citizen-initiated efforts around these events expand democracy in lasting ways. Since Rio was the summit meeting which redefined participation, it is an important model from which to draw insights related to citizens and governance. [9]

This is a national, participatory research project involving literature research, interviews with key informants, consultation with a project reference group, and preparation and dissemination of a project report. A consistent protocol was developed for documenting and analyzing each case,

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[6] *Citizens and Governance: Civil Society in the New Millennium.* London: The Commonwealth Foundation, 1999, 8-9.
[7] Miriam Wyman, *Thinking about Governance: A Draft Discussion Paper.* London: The Commonwealth Foundation, March 2001, 7.
[8] *Citizens and Governance*, 10.
[9] The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), or Rio plus 10, took place in Johannesburg, South Africa in August, 2002.

including the context and history for each, the objectives and purpose of each initiative, as well as the impacts and outcomes.

Analysis of the cases is focused on an assessment of the extent to which these transformations have become permanent features of the political terrain in Canada. The central questions of the project include:

- How are citizen organizing to strengthen their voices in political decisions?
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The report is organized in the following way:

2.0 Case Studies

2.1 Direct Democracy: Rossland, British Columbia

2.2 Building On-line Capacity for Social Change: Web Networks

2.3 Joint Summitry: The "Rio Way"

3.0 Analysis and Conclusions

2.1 Direct Democracy: Rossland, British Columbia

Context

> Shouldn't political legitimacy in a democracy start at the citizen level, the community level, and work its way up until it reaches national Parliament?[10]

The concept of direct democracy is rooted in the notion that all citizens should have the opportunity to participate personally in making vital governing decisions. In a referendum, a policy question or proposed law is submitted directly to the electorate rather than dealt with exclusively through a council, legislature, or Parliament. An important variation on the referendum is the initiative, which is common in many American states. This method allows voters to petition for new laws thereby shifting the referendum process into the hands of citizens themselves.

Interest in direct democracy is not new to Canada; it has always competed with the parliamentary legacy of Great Britain. For example, during the debates which formed the Canadian union in the 1860's, the British Colonial Office refused repeated requests from Nova Scotia and Quebec to submit the question of confederation to a referendum. Indeed, Britain itself never held a national referendum until 1975, over 700 years after the founding of its Parliament.

By the early 20th century, discontent with the parliamentary system had spread to Western Canada. Demand for direct democracy was fueled by the feeling that the mainstream parties and institutions of Central Canada were ignoring the needs of farmers, workers, and municipalities in the West.

In response to pressures from farmers' movements and their critique of parliamentary government, each of the western provinces enacted direct democracy legislation. Between 1913 and 1919, the provincial legislatures of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba passed legislation that allowed for both referenda and citizen-originated initiatives.

This wave of direct democracy came to an abrupt halt in 1919, when the Privy Council in Westminster declared the Manitoba Initiative and Referendum Act unconstitutional on the grounds that it usurped the authority of the Lieutenant Governor (the Crown's representative) in the legislative process.

Despite this setback, direct democracy remained an important part of Western Canadian politics, particularly in British Columbia. British Columbians used a 1916 referendum to win voting rights for women; and in 1937, they held a referendum on a proposal for universal health insurance (although the measure was stalled in the provincial parliament for many years afterwards).

A renewed call for direct democracy appeared in the late 1980's, reaching a level of intensity not seen for nearly seven decades. This wave of populist sentiment was prompted by a general dissatisfaction with the parliamentary system, and a particular frustration with the exclusionary, elite-driven process of constitutional reform known as the Meech Lake Accord (1987-1990).

In a fascinating parallel with the first wave of direct democracy, Western-based municipalities and parties led the call for more participatory governance. A new political force, the Reform

[10] André Carrel, *Citizens' Hall: Making Local Democracy Work*. Toronto: Between the Lines, 2001, 9.

Party (now called the Canadian Alliance), made the use of referenda and initiative central to its party platform, and a small municipality in British Columbia captured the attention of the national media when its citizens began to conduct the most extensive experiment in direct democracy in Canadian history.

In the light of the on-going tension between direct and indirect governance, it is useful to look at the experience of Rossland, British Columbia. In 1990, a "Referendum" or "Constitution Bylaw" was passed, giving voters new powers of direct democracy and making it possible for citizens to initiate referenda on municipal matters. Rossland made dramatic and highly-publicized changes to the relationship between citizens and local government. It is time to see what lessons it offers to frustrated, disillusioned citizens who are seeking to improve the ways they engage with their governments.

The Story

Rossland is a town of approximately 4 000 people located in the western province of British Columbia. All council positions, including the mayor's, are part-time and pay less than $6 000 a year.[11] Councillors are as much citizens and residents as they are politicians, and they hear what people are unhappy about when mailing a letter at the post office or walking on Main Street.[12]

In the early 80s, André Carrel was brought to Rossland from the Yukon because the mayor and council were looking for a "new broom."[13] The city administration had been essentially unchanged for twenty years and the status quo was becoming a liability in the eyes of council members who were ready and willing to transform the vertical, hierarchical power structure to one that was more horizontal and decentralized.[14]

Carrel quickly began to promote changes in both administration and council policy. While Council focused on keeping taxes down (Rossland's residents were paying some of the highest property taxes in the region), Carrel focused on creating a budget that actually reflected the needs of the town.

It was not easy. Council members were wary and disagreed about what and how to change. Citizens were essentially spectators, with no effective ways to be involved. Pressure inside as well as outside city hall finally led to the resignation of the mayor and one councillor. A mid-term by-election returned a former popular mayor to office and opened the door to some dramatic changes in Rossland's municipal politics.

The idea for the referendum bylaw did not emerge from a groundswell of citizen action following the chaos and frustration of a paralyzed city hall. Instead, it came from a person in the right place at the right time. Carrel was an "activist administrator and a man who thinks about what he does."[15] He felt that local citizens were as effectively shut out of decisions in Rossland as all

[11] Mella Pyper, publisher of the *Rossland Record* community newspaper, personal communication, August 12, 2001.
[12] Ibid.
[13] André Carrel, 23.
[14] André Carrel, Personal communication.
[15] Barker and Leo, Introduction to Carrel, 1.

Canadians had been during the Meech Lake debate.[16] This debate was characterized by secrecy, authoritarian decision-making and over-emphasis on rational planning and technical knowledge at the expense of responding to citizen needs and desires - precisely the concerns which characterized the impasse in Rossland.[17] Council essentially challenged Carrel to come up with ways to change its mode of governing.

Carrel responded with a discussion paper influenced by the referendum process of his native Switzerland. In it, he proposed that the citizens of Rossland have the political capacity to initiate, approve or reject city bylaws through referendum. Carrel took his proposal to city council where the "right time, right mood and right combination"[18] came together in a real sense of possibility.

The Constitution Bylaw has two central features. The first is that voters can force the withdrawal of a bylaw before its final passage. The second is the elector initiative which calls for council to enact a bylaw or amendment to a bylaw. In each case, the referendum is initiated by a petition to city council signed by 20% of the registered voters. Council is then bound by a majority vote in the referendum.[19] In each case, consultation and dialogue are essential to negotiate bylaws that meet citizens' needs as well as the town's fiscal requirements.

The Constitution Bylaw itself was, appropriately enough, decided through citizen referendum in which sixty-five percent of the electorate participated. On June 1, 1991, the Constitution Bylaw became law in Rossland, "empowering citizens to give effective and binding policy direction to their municipal council on any issue, at any time."[20]

Impacts and Outcomes

Magnusson[21] notes that:

> From local networking, and more significantly from the local action that becomes feasible when the resources of a municipal government are available, come the sort of mutually supportive activity that breaks down barriers between people and enables them to discover common concerns and joint remedies.

Does the Rossland initiative bear this out? Has the sharing of political power beyond the electoral ballot box strengthened democracy in Rossland, British Columbia? There are many things to consider in responding to this question.

To begin, it is useful to look at the issues that have gone to referendum as well as how these were initiated. Those bylaws which council members and citizens felt warranted decisions by referendum included the expenditure of significant amounts of money, as well as changes to the structure, funding and provision of community services.

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[16] The 1987 Constitutional Accord, commonly referred to as the Meech Lake Accord, was an agreement between the prime minister and the ten premiers on constitutional amendments which would bring Quebec into the Canadian constitution. The accord was roundly rejected.
[17] Carrel, Personal communication.
[18] Carrel, Personal communication.
[19] Carrel, 48.
[20] Ibid, 148.
[21] Warren Magnusson, "The Constitution of Movements vs. the Constitution of the State: Rediscovering the Local as a Site for Global Politics," in H. Lustiger-Thaler (ed). *Political Arrangements: Power and the City*. Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1992, 87.

The following initiatives were *approved* using the referendum process:

- Establishment of a Water Quality Reserve, funded by an annual $100 parcel tax to be applied to every property.
- Expansion of municipal boundaries, increasing the size of the community sevenfold, though it includes only fifty new residents.
- Construction of British Columbia's largest slow sand water filtration and first ozone water disinfection plant, a $4 million project.
- Rebuilding the city's raw water intakes, a $250,000 project.
- Returning the city's fire and recreation services from regional control, restoring full municipal autonomy over them, and gaining more effective control over program expenditures.[22]

Only one initiative has been *denied* using the referendum - the bylaw proposal to increase the salary of city council members was turned down on three occasions. Four referenda were initiated by citizens - the council stipend (three times) and the decision to expand municipal boundaries. All others were council initiated. [23]

It is also important to look beyond the referenda themselves. The Constitution Bylaw seemed to give people a stronger sense that their time, opinions and input mattered. According to the former editor of *The Summit*, the (now-defunct) community newspaper, there was both a touch of the absurd as well as a sense of pride when 100 or more people would turn up to talk about the local sewer system.[24] The referendum seemed, at least initially, to create an incentive for people to become informed, to become involved in public meetings and to help shape both the present and also the future of their community.

The Constitution Bylaw's greatest strength may be at the symbolic level. It reinforces the idea that "participation in one's community is a redemptive act"[25]; it shares accountability and responsibility for the present and future direction of the city. Because it prompts people to get informed and involved, it nourishes the spirit of democracy and transforms institutions into more effective instruments of democracy.[26] Responsibility for important decisions becomes shared.[27] Citizens can launch a referendum petition if a new idea proposed by Council does not strike them as benefiting the community as a whole. And it is not so easy for citizens to direct all their frustration at city councilors. In addition, citizens no longer have to wait until the next election to convey their concern or displeasure.

According to Keenan, the Constitution Bylaw has also empowered city council members to take more risks in their proposals.[28] Sharing responsibility and accountability for decisions allows for greater creativity and loosens some of the constraints that often exist at the institutional level. Knowing that people will ultimately decide on an initiative encourages councillors to "think outside the box" and also provides a sense of shared responsibility for major decisions. This seems borne out by the eleven council-initiated referenda .

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[22] Carrel, *Citizens' Hall*, 38.
[23] Ibid, 149.
[24] Jason Keenan, former editor of *The Summit*, personal communication, August 11, 2001.
[25] Jeffrey Berry, Ken Portney and Ken Thomson, *Rebirth of Urban Democracy.* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1993, 5.
[26] Ibid, 5
[27] André Carrel, personal communication.
[28] Jason Keenan, personal communication.

Nonetheless, the Constitution Bylaw has not led to the flowering of civic engagement that its proponents had hoped for. Five citizen petition initiatives have failed due to the inability to collect enough signatures.[29] Three of them - a petition to submit the Official Community Plan to referendum, a petition to limit the width of downtown sidewalks, and an initiative to revoke parking restrictions at the Rossland arena - appear to be the kind of local, day-to-day issues that can be seen as indicators of citizens' interest in becoming more involved members.[30] Yet there was not enough apparent interest in the community to focus attention and expend energy on the nitty-gritty details of local life. The only petitions capable of exciting the community were the salary increases of politicians and a city expansion with the potential to increase taxes. As of summer, 2001, there had not been a referendum in three years.[31] What does this suggest with respect to the issues that inspire civic action?

According to Carrel, this evidence should not be interpreted as a sign that people only care about financial matters. He likens the Constitution Bylaw to the programming feature of a VCR – it's a useful tool, but most people do not bother using it.[32] In other words, there is great comfort in having it available and little need to use it in the absence of a big or "hot" issue.

Initially, local councillors hoped that providing a tool to encourage engagement would result in the flourishing of local democracy. While there has certainly been evidence of increased involvement, it has not happened at the scope or scale necessary to transform the patterns of the community.

One can posit a number of reasons for this. In Rossland as in many other places and situations, it is difficult to change established patterns. Citizens, for all their interest in having a say in local decisions, are busy with their everyday lives and accustomed to delegating this responsibility to local officials.

There are also a number of elements to be considered that are, on the one hand, particular to Rossland, and on the other, very familiar to those who study citizen involvement.

Language: Some members of the community have been critical of the manner in which bylaws are announced in the paper.[33] Some felt that the language of announcements was overly technical and that they did not understand clearly what was at stake. People will not mobilize around an issue they cannot understand.

Local media: Rossland was left without a local newspaper paper in 1994 when Conrad Black's media empire bought the paper and forced *The Summit* to close. Residents were then dependent on Conrad Black's *Trail Times*, which served five towns in the area with a staff of 1.5 reporters and 3 advertising salespeople. Such a small reporting staff was clearly unable to cover the daily stories and events that sustain the democratic ethos of a community.

A new local paper, *The Rossland Record* was created in the Fall of 2000 to remedy the lack of community information by creating a new local paper, the *Rossland Record*, in the Fall of 2000. A testament to grassroots initiatives, the paper is produced in Mela Pyper's basement.

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[29] Carrel, *Citizens' Hall*, 149-50.
[30] Ibid, 150.
[31] André Carrel, Personal communication.
[32] André Carrel, Personal communication.
[33] Mela Pyper, personal communication.

Community newspapers provide important spaces and forums where people "meet." Media play an important role in informing the public and generating debate. They also play an important watchdog role: objective, non-partisan local media often play a key role in exposing abuses of power and can help councillors remember to "check their egos at the door" when entering city hall to conduct community business.

Community culture: According to Pyper, there is still a tendency towards closed-door meetings and hidden agendas in Rossland, again hardly a unique situation. She also describes Rossland as a very "male town" with a lot of "male energy."[34] It is situated in the mountainous regions of British Columbia and is home to many skiers and participants in "extreme sports." Could these factors mitigate against concern with small, day-to-day affairs? Could they contribute to a community culture that reserves its political will for larger threats to community well-being?

André Carrel makes it very clear that Rossland's constitution was designed to work in Rossland. Nonetheless, the essence of the Constitution Bylaw "is not the mechanism for holding referendums; it is the idea of citizen empowerment."[35] He suggests that large cities could be subdivided into smaller municipalities in which referenda could work – a possibility, however, that runs contrary to the current trend toward every large municipal corporations.

The story of the Constitution Bylaw in Rossland illuminates a number of familiar themes. The time was right for change. Politicians and citizens recognized this. An astute administrator took up the challenge, made a proposal and found ways to make it work. Political vision, political will, and incentive came together to strengthen citizens' voices in local decision making. While it is clear that these are central to citizen empowerment, it is also clear that they are all too rare.

The point of this story, however, is that it *is* possible to identify tools that help to empower citizens. The Rossland Constitution Bylaw is one such tool. What others might there be? Are there some less legislative or technical "fixes" waiting to be proposed?

And, over and above the questions about particular tools, large questions remain:

- How to orchestrate empowerment when some of the key ingredients – time, person, place, need, political commitment, vision - may be missing.
- How can the stage be better set for citizen empowerment?
- What does it take, in a very practical sense, to begin to build a culture of involvement?

There are many cookbooks, but no infallible recipes.

Future Directions

The Constitution Bylaw itself has not radically renewed democracy in Rossland. The bylaw still exists, though it is not currently being used. Nonetheless, it is clear that the majority of citizens in Rossland feel very protective of this tool - Mela Pyper says she would "fight tooth and nail to keep it." This avenue for citizens to have voice and take action gives her a sense of security.[36] The Constitution Bylaw provides a sense of empowerment and there is potential to build on it.

[34] Mela Pyper, Personal communication.
[35] André Carrel, 42.
[36] Mela Pyper, Personal communication.

In the Constitution Bylaw, we can see the larger struggle to balance the competing forces of direct and indirect governance. The use of referenda and initiative has been relatively infrequent in Canada. Critics of the Rossland experiment raise doubts about how much citizen involvement is genuinely created through direct democracy. Voter turnout for referenda is often low when the novelty wears off, and the role of money in politics is just as great in organizing a petition drive as in a regular election.

But changes in the political temperament of Canadians have created new pressures for public input into political decision-making. While views differ as to the future direction of this shift, it is widely agreed that Canadians have grown less deferential toward parliamentary traditions and more inclined to have faith in their own judgment as citizens. No less than eight referenda were held at the federal, provincial and territorial levels in the 1990's, and public opinion surveys show that the majority of Canadians want to expand the use of initiative and referendum.

Nevertheless, by the end of the decade, defenders of the parliamentary system still had the upper hand as federal and provincial first ministers tightened their grip over policy-making. Proponents of direct democracy began to explore new avenues for popular sovereignty. In the 1890's, Canadians moved West to create these opportunities. As we shall see in the next case study, the 1990's saw frustrated citizens move to a new frontier called cyberspace.

2.2 Building Online Capacity for Social Change: Web Networks

Context

> The real power of the Internet lies in *the collective* – the vital, thrilling inter-connection of people and ideas that happens online. The juice that makes the Internet hum is the direct result of people talking, sharing, collaborating, aggregating, and playing…Activists use tiny, unsophisticated Web sites and e-mail lists to take on big companies and big governments. But the scale of the technology and the price tags attached to it aren't what drive the success and failure of any of these ventures. The common thread…is that people, connected online, produce interesting and unprecedented results.[37]

How do people come together to affect change? How are connections sustained over time? How is information shared? In recent years, advances in computer technology have created new and exciting possibilities for citizen engagement. People are using new information technologies to share information, to find communities of interest, and to make their voices heard at all levels from local to international. They are doing this in small and quiet ways as well as in large and noisy protests. This involvement is grounded in the knowledge that information *is* power.

The Internet is a powerful tool for civic engagement. It is a relatively inexpensive and efficient means of transmitting information and it does not require a particularly labour- or cost-intensive infrastructure.[38] And it offers information from many perspectives, uncensored by governments and mainstream media.

In the old days - before the Internet – non-government organizations (NGOs) worked hard to get information about the work of others who shared the same social and political values. Networking and sharing information took place through journals, directories, and events at all levels from local to international. Creating and distributing print information demanded great effort and expense. The impact of the Internet in bringing together social change agents and their work cannot be overestimated. With a computer, an Internet connection and minimal skill, anyone can have access to an enormous range of information. The Internet permits ready identification of virtual communities of individuals and organizations who can collaborate and share information, resources and goals:

> Along with using e-mail and mailing lists as communication and organizing tools, activists are turning to Internet sources for quick research, building Web sites to distribute information about their own causes and campaigns and applying Web skills in innovative attacks on corporations and others judged to be enemies of ecology and democracy.[39]

The worldwide web community offers meeting spaces and information sources for citizen action from many positions on the political spectrum and from countries around the world. Local and global coalitions are being formed at an astounding rate. Kalpana Sharma links increased global protests against undemocratic activities to the capacity generated by the Internet for global

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[37] Mark Surman and David Wershler-Henry, *Commonspace: Beyond Virtual Community*, (Canada: FT.com Financial Times, 2001), 2-3.
[38] See Rory O'Brien, *Civil Society, the Public Sphere and the Internet*, at http://web.net/~robrien/papers/civsoc.html.
[39] Mark Meisner, *Alternatives Magazine*. See http://webspirs1.micromedia.on.ca:8590/western.

communication. The ensuing online conversations highlight the common interests of different groups. She writes:

> [Recent] expressions of protest are also part of a much more coordinated effort by environmental groups world-wide, human rights groups, those fighting for workers' rights and peace groups on a range of issues. The Internet and e-mail have greatly facilitated such coordination across continents. The anti-globalization protests, in a sense, provided all these disparate groups an opportunity to come together and register their protest on issues that are organically linked.[40]

Canada is home to Web Networks, a non-profit organization established in 1987 to foster progressive political change by serving the needs of the activist community. Web Networks set out to enlarge civic space by making it easy for social change agents to communicate. From the beginning, Web Networks' mission has been an ambitious and far-reaching attempt to meld technology and social action:

> Web Networks aims to contribute to building a self-reliant online community based on nonprofit enterprise, cooperation and mutual aid which can support, maintain and defend principles of social responsibility, ecology and economic justice. To these ends, Web Networks provides appropriate and innovative communication technologies and resources. Web Networks also seeks to foster healthy and productive work environments in nonprofit organizations.[41]

The Story

The idea for creating a Web-based project to serve the non-profit sector was conceived in a serendipitous meeting at *Fate of the Earth*, a 1985 conference which essentially launched Canada's environment movement. Three *Fate of the Earth* activists proposed that a national online network - similar to "EcoNet," an environmental activist network based in the US - be established to make it easier for environment and development groups to work together. With seed money provided by Environment Canada and an initial membership of less than 300, Web Networks began operating in May 1987 as part of the Ontario Environmental Network (OEN). It was the first and only non-profit computer network committed to serving the needs of non-profit and social change organizations in Canada.[42]

Two critical developments made this possible. The first was that social and political change agents were making the connections between environmental issues and international development.[43] The second was that these issues were making their way onto the agendas of the United Nations and its member states, including Canada. The lynchpin was the publication of the Brundtland Commission's Report, *Our Common Future*, which put "sustainable development"[44] on the international agenda. As a result, the United Nations was persuaded – largely through the

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[40] Kalpana Sharma, *The Hindu*, August 5, 2001. See http://www.hinduonnet.com/stories/13050611.htm.
[41] Maureen James and Liz Rykert, *Working Together Online*. Toronto: Web Community Resource Networks, 1997, 151.
[42] Karri Munn-Venn, Case Overview: Web Networks (Canada) [Online]. See: http://www.apc.org/english/ngos/business/buscase/webnetworks.htm
[43] Peter Padbury, 2001. Personal communication.
[44] The Brundtland Commision defines "sustainable development" as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." See Shridath Ramphal, *Our Country, The Planet*. Washington, D.C., Island Press, 1992, 141.

efforts of a Canadian businessman, Maurice Strong - to convene a global summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil that would bring countries together to undertake an integrated approach to environment and development. Web Networks benefited from Canada's new commitment to promoting sustainable development at home and abroad. And the organization went on to become a major international player linking countries and organizations who recognized the importance of the sustainability agenda.

The initial plan was for Web Networks to be a self-sustaining, non-profit business based on a fee-for-service model, while simultaneously providing a communications center for the social change community.[45] According to Richard Yampolsky, former Chair of the Web Networks Board of Directors, Web Networks was a "visionary organization" whose primary intent was to create online space for non-traditional or alternative organizations.[46] The thrust of its work was to train people in the non-profit sector in using the worldwide web to access, use, create and disseminate information through computer networks. In keeping with its community roots, Canada's first national social change network made its first home in the basement of a community church!

As Web Networks was, itself, taking shape, its founders were sharing their vision for Internet-facilitated social change with others around the world. In 1987, GreenNet in England began collaborating with the (American-based) Institute for Global Communications (IGC), then known as PeaceNet/EcoNet. [47] This new relationship resulted in the sharing of electronic conference material and also facilitated the growing realization that transnational electronic communications could serve global as well as local communities working towards progressive social change. The new relationship proved so successful that, by 1989, Web Networks was working with networks in Sweden (NordNet), Brazil (IBASE), Nicaragua (Nicarao), Australia (Pegasus) to exchange information and ideas at the international level. This culminated in the creation, in the spring of 1990, of the Association for Progressive Communication (APC) whose mandate was to "co-ordinate the operation and development of this emerging network of networks" and to "making the Internet serve the needs of global civil society."[48]

APC's goal was to facilitate the empowerment of groups and individuals working for peace, international development, environmental protection, women's rights and human rights through the use of information and communication technologies. There are three aspects to this empowerment: learning to use computer technologies; enabling the creation of strategic communities; and developing initiatives that contribute to "equitable human development, social justice, participatory political processes and environmental sustainability."[49] APC was Web Networks, writ very large.

By this time, Web Networks had become an independent, non-profit business serving the international development and environmental movements as well as the broader social change community. Web Networks did not limit its work to citizens and social activists; it also worked with governments, most notably in providing all of Cuba with dial-up Internet access which was too expensive through Europe and unavailable through the U.S. as a result if its embargo. Kirk Roberts recalled working at the Academy of Sciences in Havana which where a huge board mapped the intricate labyrinth of Cuba's government computer network. Arrows at the top of the

[45] Munn-Venn [Online].
[46] Richard Yampolsky, 2001. Former Chair, Board of Directors, Web Networks. Personal communication.
[47] Rory O'Brien and Andrew Clement, *A Brief History of the APC*. See http://www.apc.org/english/about/history/index.htm.
[48] Ibid.
[49] *APC Secretariat,* 1997. See http://www.apc.org/english/about/history/rio_92.htm.

chart pointed upwards to the word "Web," Web Networks, which was then housed in a "rinky dink office at the corner of Spadina and Richmond streets in Toronto."[50]

The cost of this service was high and was absorbed by Web Networks in spite of its own growing financial problems. While not fiscally prudent, it was entirely in keeping with its mandate - empowering citizens through access to new networking technologies.

In 1989, Web was renamed Non-profit Innovations and Resources for the Voluntary sector (NIRV) Centre to focus on activities in the emerging information and communications technology sector for NGOs, including training, desktop publishing and hardware supply. This decision was considered crucial "in order to keep [the organization] afloat financially."[51]

The emphasis on non-hierarchical structures of power extended to the organization itself which was managed and run by five staff members and a six-member community-based Board of Directors. The conscious decision to favour community members was seen as a way for NIRVCentre to increase its accountability to the group it most wanted to serve – the broader community of social change agents.

Through the early 1990's, NIRVCentre continued to grow. It worked with social change organizations including social justice groups, social services, women's groups and unions to develop online capacity. By 1995, membership had grown to 4000[52] and staff numbers had expanded to meet the organization's mounting demands. In addition to seminars and workshops, projects and services grew to include website creation, database development and construction of online workplaces.

Membership growth seemed to reflect the growing recognition of the Internet's potential to create new spaces, tools and capacities that could help realize social change goals. This was particularly evident at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) where APC, with considerable help from NIRVCentre, played a historic role.

For the two years leading up to UNCED, APC worked together with the United Nations to provide access for NGOs to official summit information, allowing several thousand civil society groups to strategize internationally. This increased capacity for global and national dialogue resulted in important modifications to United Nations' resolutions.

During the Earth Summit itself, the APC established two on-site communication centers to monitor both the official summit and the NGO Global Forum (the "alternative summit") and to communicate with activists around the world. This allowed NGOs to hold important discussions, build coalitions and lobby governments in their home countries. These services, in addition to training participants in new computer technologies, were provided free of charge.

The communication that the Internet made possible was staggering for all involved. O'Brien and Clement write:

> That computer networks make it easier to share information among multiple groups around the world is fairly evident now. But in the early 1990s, it was not so well recognized. To enable civil society organizations to make effective use of networking technologies, the APC had to provide a global, affordable,

[50] Yampolsky, Personal communication.
[51] Yampolsky, Personal communication.
[52] Munn-Venn [Online].

> reliable infrastructure, but it also had to promote the technology to ensure a large enough online community for sustained NGO interactions…These factors, in combination with the networking impetus provided by the Earth Summit, contributed to global civil society's rapid adoption to the new communication technologies.[53]

APC, with the assistance of NIRVCentre, was able to provide similar services to the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. This was a landmark opportunity to focus on training and support for women's NGOs which was part of both Web's and APC's mandate.

Despite its remarkable work, by 1996 it became clear that NIRVCentre's current business model was not providing the resources needed to sustain its work. The organization faced a crippling debt of $1.6 million and they were forced to contend with prospect of bankruptcy. Financial pressure can easily strain relations between staff and Board members. And at this time, some staff members felt that community members were not providing the financial support the organization so desperately needed. Yampolsky recalls heated discussions where community members were accused of hypocrisy for seeking their own technical support from the private sector, rather than from NIRVCentre.

NIRVCentre had to find a way out of its financially precarious predicament. In June 1996, once again renamed "Web Networks," it sold its technical department to Open Text Corporation.[54] This business deal allowed the organization to totally erase its debt and leave it with $200,000 in operating capital. Web Networks retained its name, legal status, Board of Directors, client-base and two staff members who were charged with the task of rebuilding the organization.[55] It was only one year before the promising partnership between Open Text and Web Networks was abandoned, a result of incompatible visions. Web Networks resumed its role as an Internet Service Provider.

Since 1997, the organization has continued to provide the nonprofit sector with tools and services to increase capacity in technological proficiency and effectiveness. The Web Networks site provides information on current news alerts, events, action campaigns and information needs, as well as access to social change networks including Women's Web (serving the Canadian's women's movement), Eco Web (connecting Canadian environmental groups), Faith and Justice (for Canada's faith related organizations working for social justice), International Development and Union Net (providing links between union and labour organizations across Canada). Information about workshops, conferences and other activities is posted, providing opportunities to share knowledge, information and strategies.

In 1997, Web Networks published *Working Together Online*, a manual for building effective working communities online, written by Liz Rykert and Maureen James, social activists with enormous online expertise.[56] The manual focuses on "people not wires"[57] and helps citizens to develop Internet networking skills to build community capacity. Online conferencing, online fundraising and online project co-ordination are a few of the issues addressed in the manual.

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[53] O'Brien and Clement, Ibid.
[54] According to Yampolsky, the sale of a cooperative organization to a publicly traded corporation was unprecedented.
[55] Munn-Venn, Ibid.
[56] Liz Rykert and Maureen James, *Working Together Online*. Toronto*:* Web Networks, 1997.
[57] James and Rykert, 148.

Currently, Web Networks focuses on three main areas of work: acting as an Internet service provider; training people and organizations in using the Internet; and developing websites for community organizations.

The centrepiece of Web Networks is its Community Resource Centre, a worldwide web-based "information and action clearinghouse." The Community Resource Centre serves as an electronic portal to relevant resources for the social change sector in Canada. It allows people who work for change to find out about others working towards similar social and political goals, and to connect with one another. The Centre has been hugely successful in linking and strengthening the activist community in Canada and around the world.

Impacts and Outcomes

Throughout Web Networks' many incarnations, one theme has been constant: increasing access to information and enabling participation in social change movements. To what extent has Web Networks been able to accomplish this? How can such intangibles be assessed? Again, there are many things to consider in responding to these questions.

There is little question that Web Networks was brilliant and pioneering. Visionary leaders recognized the potential of the Internet for social change and found ways to realize it. In less than 15 years, electronic communication has become commonplace. Web Network's "Messenger" software – a name, regrettably, not copyrighted – first allowed NGOs around the world to communicate with one another online, even before the existence of the worldwide web.

The timing was right. EcoNet, GreenNet, IGC, APC – electronic communication was literally "in the air" and, in a sense, it is no surprise that Canadians were part of this revolution. The Canadian government had decided to take a leading role in the upcoming Earth Summit, and support for Web Networks was a perfect opportunity to shine a spotlight on its commitment to widespread participation, across Canada and around the world.

Web Networks has had an important effect on sustaining energy and developing political will. As social change agents find one another and learn more about the diverse groups of people who are also working toward societies that are more just and fair, they find inspiration as well as kindred spirits in their difficult work.

Web Networks' efforts to connect people working on similar issues highlights key aspects of Internet communication - a sense of interconnectedness, a growing sense of a global civil society, and a borderless ethos.

According to Kirk Roberts, emerging technologies can be "extremely democratizing tools" in the hands of non-profit organizations, especially since the non-profit sector has "…a mandate to communicate, a need to network, and a history of co-operation."[58]

In addition to these 'soft' accomplishments, many others are real and concrete.

Founding APC: According to Kirk Roberts, one of the most significant initiatives of the organization was its role as a founding member of APC in 1990. Brian Murphy reminds us that in the early days of Web Networks and APC, the Internet as we know it didn't exist. Most hosts used by activist networks were stand-alone systems and there were no commonly used protocols

[58] Ibid.

for automating the sharing of data and the delivery of email between users. Many hosts even had 'human gateways' - people who would actually cut and paste messages between their own network and the remote network in another country. In the late 1980s, technicians (often self-taught) travelled from one part of the world to another, installing the software and writing programming code to allow disparate NGO computer systems to "talk" to each other and so send email and share information.[59] This was the work that underpinned NGO participation, first in UNCED deliberations and now in all issues affecting the lives of people, communities, societies, and nations.

Real-time conferencing: Web Networks was the first organization to establish real-time Internet conferencing. This allowed groups working for progressive social causes to strengthen their ability to mobilize and engage others.[60] The confidence this created reverberated throughout the United Nations Earth Summit, where NGO involvement reached unprecedented levels. Although Web Networks was in no way solely responsible for the events in Rio, its founding membership in the APC and the active involvement of Canadian NGOs at the Summit leaves little doubt to the significant role it played.

The Earth Summit: Web Networks accomplishments in Rio are real and concrete. These can be determined, at least in part, by the final documents of the conference which were strongly influenced by NGO participants around the world. Equally real are the connections forged among NGOs during preparations for and participation in UN conferences and parallel summits.

Training: Web Networks trained hundreds of individuals, enabling NGOs around the world to work together with an immediacy that had never before been available to so many. Whether it assists community members in becoming familiar and comfortable with computer technology, or whether it is a lifeline for social change agents carry out important dialogue, the organization has brought a new level of sophistication to the art of democracy. Web Networks' work in developing countries, with women in particular, and onsite at major conferences, has created a generation of skilled Internet users who, in turn, continue to train others.[61]

C4LD: Citizens for Local Democracy (C4LD) emerged in Toronto in 1996 as a face-to-face and online community opposing the amalgamation of Toronto's 5 boroughs into one mega-city. With incredible speed, thousands of citizens came together. They attended weekly meetings, participated in rallies and joined the C4LD online community to mobilize, organize, and strategize. Citizens used the Internet as a means of mobilizing public opinion to block the amalgamation bill in the Provincial Legislature.[62] A website was established which became the "virtual headquarters" of the movement. Web Networks was instrumental in this movement.

Liz Rykert, who later co-authored *Working Together Online*, created and maintained the e-mail listserv and forums that were central to C4LD's work. Her work on behalf of C4LD catapulted her into the world of online community building. Her social work career now involves working

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[59] Brian Murphy**.** *Mike Jensen and the Code that stitched together the APC: The pre-Internet days and early efforts at linking APC nodes*. www.apc.org/english/about/history/index.hstml.

[60] For an in-depth examination of how the Internet is affecting global activists, see *Human Rights and the Internet*, Steven Hick, Edward F. Halpern and Eric Hoskins (eds). London: Macmillan Press, 2000.
[61] For examples, see 'Networking for Change' and 'Women Working with ICTs', two post-Beijing studies as well as the Women in Sync series at www.apcwnsp.org
[62] For a detailed account of this campaign, see Julie-Ann Boudreau, *The MegaCity Saga: Democracy and Citizenship in this Global Age*. Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2000.

with governments to promote citizens' online participation in governance and she has become an internationally renowned leader in the development of online consultations. And it is no exaggeration to say that C4LD changed the face of local politics in Toronto.

Model: Web Networks remains committed to nonprofit service to civil society, building citizen capacity through information technology and commitment to progressive social movements. These principles are models for other citizen-led initiatives such as *rabble.ca*, the Canadian media web site, published by longtime women's and social justice activist Judy Rebick. And, in the small world way that people find one another, two members of the Management Committee of *rabble.ca*, were part of Web Networks in the 1990s.

These enormous successes have taken place alongside enormous challenges.

Financial sustainability: The most significant challenge faced by Web Networks throughout its development has been the lack of adequate financial resources to support its efforts and initiatives. The organization has struggled to avoid bankruptcy and has restructured and redefined its work in order to become financially viable. The shortage of financial resources also limited the organization's capacity to develop human resources. As if that were not difficult enough, the small staff was unable to undertake the marketing and sales needed to build a sound financial base.

Visibility: Those who were involved in the explosion of Internet technologies among social activists in Rio knew Web Networks. Despite its claim to being "Canada's Online Home for Social Change," those newer to the movements are having trouble figuring out just what Web Networks does.

Perception: Somehow, non-profits sometimes feel that products and services created by the private sector are better – and therefore more highly valued - than those created within the non-profit sector. This bias helped to make life difficult for Web Networks.

Competition: Perception was reinforced by competition from public service providers. Yampolski admits that one of his greatest frustrations as Chair of Web Networks was the inability to convince others to support the organization in the face of deals and services promised by the private sphere. If the Internet is free, why should people have to pay for access? This became a particularly difficult question as the fees for private service providers dramatically undercut the fees that Web Networks needed to support its community development work.

Pace of change: The field of information technology is changing at an incredible rate. Both Yampolsky and Roberts stated that the provision of Internet services to social change actors was, early on, an exciting and sustainable initiative. In short order, private service providers were doing what had previously only been done by organizations like Web Networks. Not only was Web no longer unique, it could not compete with networks like *Hotmail* which provided free Internet access, which they could do because of advertising support. This struck a severe financial to the organization, and continues to undermine Web Networks' efforts to be economically sustainable. Although the organization has a core group of supporters, Roberts argues that the highly competitive environment bred by the private sector makes communities fickle; this, in turn, makes it challenging to build loyal relationships.[63]

Betting on the wrong horse: As new technologies were emerging, Web Networks felt they had to choose between synchronous and asynchronous technologies. Synchronous conferencing refers

[63] Kirk Roberts, Personal communication.

to the ability of many people to communicate with one another online simultaneously. Asynchronous technology – the way current email systems operate - means that people can communicate with one another whenever they are available. At the time, doing both did not seem to be a viable option and Web Networks made the wrong choice in opting for synchronous rather than asynchronous technology.[64]

The saga of Web Networks is that of a pioneering, visionary group of individuals struggling in a rapidly changing Internet environment. This struggle has been characterized by enormous effort and good will alongside major successes. Web Networks was the first Canadian organization to open the Internet for civil society. Through its progressive and innovative approaches to information technology, it has changed the way social activists view online space. The organization has been a pioneer and leader in demonstrating the value of the Internet in expanding democratic dialogue.[65] Its influence continues to be diffuse and non-hierarchical – a mirror of the values of the Internet community itself. Web Networks paved the way for Canadian activists and its impact is ongoing.

At the same time, successes for social movements have come at a high cost to the organization. Again, there are many familiar themes. The time was right. Visionary leaders were ready and willing. Initial funding was available. And potential was enormous, and readily recognized, particularly among NGOs around the world where opportunities to come to together for extended discussions and strategizing were limited and costly. Web Networks most significant impact may well be the enormous sense of possibility it generated.

At the same time, the challenges were huge. Technology was changing so quickly that it was almost impossible to keep up, let alone make all the right decisions. Competition from the private sector undermined significant sources of income for what was, essentially, a tiny non-profit organization. Living out democratic principles proved more difficult than anyone had imagined, especially with financial constraints. With the best of intentions and an unprecedented business arrangement, the organization has been unable to recapture its vision.

Future Directions

There is little question that Web Networks will continue. It will change as technological needs of the community change. Financial sustainability remains an issue, as does broader community support. The network continues to provide services and Internet access for social change groups. What seems most compelling in an Internet age is not so much the future of a particular organization than the future of citizen activism.

The Canadian government sees the Internet as central to new relationships with citizens, and has committed to providing Internet access for all Canadian citizens. According to former Finance Minister Paul Martin, "Canadians are among the world's most active and e-franchised citizens….. and they will insist that their governments not fall behind."[66] Governments in Canada are working to resolve the internal coordination required for online service delivery and are

[64] Kirk Roberts, Personal communication.

[65] Online organizing was instrumental in halting the Multilateral Agreement on Investment. The Internet continues to be instrumental in mobilizing civil society as events in Seattle, Quebec, Genoa and Porto Alegre clearly demonstrate. See *Human Rights and the Internet*, edited by Steven Hick, Edward F. Halpern and Eric Hoskins (London: Macmillan Press, 200) for an in-depth examination of how the Internet is affecting global activists.

[66] Paul Martin, Remarks, *Common Boundaries National Conference*, Ottawa, March 29, 2001.

struggling with such issues as e-voting, privacy and security, record-keeping, and the changing role of elected representatives.[67]

And Canadians *are* becoming more technologically adept. Internet access in Canada has increased from 23% in 1996 to a projected 70% at the end of 2000.[68] This situation is mirrored in many countries. While there are serious issues related to Internet access, there is no question that people here and around the world are sharing information and concerns and using the Internet to organize and mobilize. Is the Internet helping to strengthen citizens' voices? The answer must be an unequivocal yes.

At the same time, important questions are surfacing which deserve careful attention:

- Does the Internet help strengthen communities, or does it increase fragmentation and polarization?
- Does the Internet offer a new kind of space for public deliberations of the common good?
- What effect does direct access to governments (both elected officials and civil servants) have on both citizens and governments?
- Does the Internet allow for the maintenance of "a delicate workable balance between the requirements of institution building and grassroots participation…?"[69]
- Does the Internet make for the "virtualization of community at the expense of geophysical community?"[70]
- How is the Internet changing relationships between local people, issues and events and global issues and events?

The role of Web Networks in mapping new terrain for democracy cannot be underestimated. By committing itself so passionately to the marriage of computer technology and social action, it has demonstrated that citizens care about their world and will embrace new ways to make their concerns known. It has married venting and inventing.

[67] Miriam Wyman, *Thinking about Governance: A Discussion Paper*. London: The Commonwealth Foundation, 2002.
[68] Angus Reid survey, July 2000.
See www.angusreid.com/media/content/displaypr.cfm?id_to_view=1061.
[69] Patrick Heller, "Moving the State: The Politics of Democratic Decentralization in Kerala, South Africa, and Porto Alegre," in *Politics and Society,* Volume 29, Number 1, March 2001, 133.
[70] Stephen Dohery-Farina, *The Wired Neighbourhood*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996, 27.

2.3 Joint Summitry: The Rio Way

Context

> The idea of world civic politics signifies that embedded in the activities of transnational [activist groups] is an understanding that states do not hold a monopoly over the instruments that govern human affairs but rather that non-state forms of governance exist and can be used to effect widespread change.[71]

There have been an unprecedented number of global summits in the last decade. Increasingly, they take place in tandem with parallel gatherings of activists who are concerned that current policies focused on expansion of global trade are compromising democracy. They are articulating alternative visions for a world that puts citizens' concerns and interests at its center.

In 2002, government leaders and activists again find themselves taking different positions at two global summits. The leaders of the G-8 countries met in Kananaskis, Alberta to talk about poverty alleviation as well as further expansion of trade. In Johannesburg, South Africa, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD)- "Rio Plus 10" - will mark the tenth anniversary of the historic conference on the environment and development held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992.

Both conferences highlight many of the questions and issues which divide citizens and governments at local, national and international levels. The G-8 summit was deliberately small and held in a remote location, intended to limit the presence and the role of activists, both local and global. "Rio Plus 10," originally intended to assess progress on Agenda 21, seems destined to be a non-event from the standpoint of real progress on sustainable development, "a far cry from the 1992 meeting."[72]

Canada was the country that defined "The Rio Way," a process characterized by accountability, transparency and openness between the federal government and a broad range of NGOs and stakeholders. Over the last 10 years, "The Rio Way" has become a memory of what is possible and a painful recognition of how much has changed. We have moved from a model of joint summitry in which concerns were shared and addressed together, in imperfect though promising ways, to parallel summitry where citizens increasingly feel that they have no choice but to voice their opposition outside government events.

Governments are too often seen as part of the problem rather than as an integral component of the solution to what ails the world. According to Maude Barlow, chairperson of the Council of Canadians, "[t]he activists have simply given up on lobbying or trying to get the governments to listen to them and have chosen to put their bodies on the line for what they believe in."[73] Young activists are not alone in calling for direct action and non-violent civil disobedience. Citizens feel unable to participate actively in decisions that affect their lives, their communities, their livelihoods and the sustainability of the planet, in spite of their desire, willingness and ability to do so. They are concerned about the secrecy with which agreements (particularly trade agreements) are negotiated and the fact that these agreements are often negotiated by people who are not elected and are, therefore, not accountable to citizens and governments. They understand

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[71] Paul Wapner, *Environmental Activism and World Civic Politics*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996),7.
[72] "Conflict awaits Earth summit," *The Globe & Mail*, August 23, 2002, A11.
[73] Maude Barlow, "Summing up the Summit: An FTAA Notebook," *Canadian Perspectives.* Ottawa: The Council of Canadians, 2001, 7.

that trade agreements have profound implications for the political, social and economic status of communities around the world, and are deeply concerned about the expansion of corporate power in the absence of the responsibility and accountability required to temper it.[74] It is all too clear that the Earth Summit which put sustainable development at the center of the international agenda has been eclipsed in 10 short years by corporate globalization and the agenda of the World Trade Organization, established in 1995.

Citizens are claiming and expanding civic space through their actions and communication with one another, largely aided by the Internet which allows for quick, inexpensive and uncensored communication. What is missing, however, is the deliberate and careful cultivation of relationships between governments and NGOs that characterized the Rio process and that held such promise for joint summitry.

The Story

In 1987, *Our Common Future* reported on the work of the Brundtland Commission, the World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Prime Minister of Norway. The Brundtland Commission focused attention on sustainable development, development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations. Grounded in evidence from governments and from concerned citizens and NGOs around the world, the report made clear the connections among environment, economy and society, and painted a bleak picture of the earth's future if current development policies and economic trajectories were unchanged. The concern generated over its findings led to proposals to hold an "Earth Summit" to discuss common strategies and possible solutions to pressing concerns. The United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED) - the "Earth Summit – took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992.

As the Web Networks case study indicated, the late 80s saw growing links between the environment and development movements as they came to recognize shared concerns.[75] This was further supported by the new approaches put forward in the Brundtland Report. Canadian NGOs in all sectors quickly recognized the need to mobilize in preparation for the "big event." Environment and development groups were joined by First Nations organizations, women's groups, labour organizations and youth representatives to build coalitions representing the full range of voices on issues related to environment and development.[76]

The federal government also organized itself well. Three "lead" departments had responsibility for preparing position papers and negotiating positions - the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Canadian International Development Agency and the Environment Canada. Prime Minister Brian Mulroney named the late Arthur Campeau to coordinate the activities of the three departments in what was to be a "trilateral environmental approach."[77] Campeau was an influential intermediary between the departments, the NGO community and the Prime Minister. His encouragement resulted in an early meeting between the Prime Minister and a number of NGO representatives, setting the stage for continued facilitate government-NGO dialogue. [78]

[74] Menon, Viany, "World Inc. under siege." *Toronto Star*. July 29, 2001, B1&B3.
[75] Dr. Robert Slater, Personal communication
[76] Peter Padbury, Personal communication
[77] Peter Padbury, Personal communication.
[78] Dr. Robert Slater, Personal communication.

Canada's preparations for UNCED were directed by Jean Charest, Minister of the Environment. Charest was considered the ideal minister to lead the Rio agenda - young, bright, fully bilingual, and knowledgeable.[79] Under Charest, strong commitments were made to funding the preparatory process and to ensuring that the voices and expertise of the NGO community were represented and respected. Approximately 2 million dollars was earmarked for the Canadian Preparatory Committee alone.

Charest was also responsible for identifying how Canada would approach UNCED. The "Rio Way" embodied openness, transparency and accountability in the way that the government departments involved conducted their affairs with one another as well as with citizens. Campeau and others within government shared Charest's commitment to both environmental issues and the "Rio Way."[80] Government officials joined NGO meetings; NGO representatives were invited to government meetings; there were places on government delegations for NGO representatives to international preparatory meetings and to the Earth Summit itself; and at the Earth Summit, Charest met daily with NGOs.[81] The "Rio Way" reflected the way in which government officials in Environment Canada wanted to engage civil society in preparing for the Earth Summit and after it.

The government undertook an organized and collaborative effort to work with representative NGOs from all sectors as an effective way to develop their positions and also as a way to create a Canadian NGO consultative forum - "one-stop shopping" - for the government.[82] The Canadian Participatory Committee was seen as a way to integrate the many voices in the NGO community. This was intended to help the government gather information while effectively and efficiently "managing" conflicting perspectives and voices.

An NGO coordinator within the UNCED Secretariat helped facilitate communication within the growing network of relationships, a challenging job. There was a tremendous amount of logistical work to be done in order to ensure the integration of the views and positions of so many different actors. And perhaps more important, such a high level of mutuality was not the usual way of conducting government business, nor was it a familiar way of working for the NGO community itself.[83] Everyone was charting new territory.

Four meetings of the United Nations Preparatory Committee were held before UNCED. At the first meeting in 1990 in Nairobi, Kenya, NGOs were part of the official delegation and the government made a commitment to ensuring that NGOs would be part of the Canadian delegation for *all* of the Preparatory Committee meetings and for the Earth Summit itself.

Government efforts were well matched by NGO efforts. Canadian NGOs played a very significant role within Canada and on the world stage. Under the auspices of the United Nations Association of Canada (UNAC), the Canadian Participatory Committee for UNCED (CPCU) came together across sectors in unprecedented ways, quickly recognizing that sustainable development was a good way to connect all their concerns. The environment community, with funding from Environment Canada, was represented by the Canadian Environment Network which worked through its extensive network of caucuses across the country. The development

[79] Dr. Robert Slater, Personal communication.
[80] Tim Leah, Personal communication.
[81] Elizabeth May, Personal communication
[82] Dr. Robert Slater, Personal communication
[83] Dr. Robert Slater, Personal communicatoin.

community, with funding from CIDA, was represented by the Canadian Council for International Cooperation. Other sectors worked out appropriate representation.[84]

Meetings were convened within sectors and people worked hard to develop and articulate positions which were then communicated across sectors and with government departments. To the extent that time and resources permitted, public consultations were held. National as well as international meetings and conferences were convened to solicit broad NGO input. Meetings – of NGOs as well as of NGOs and government - were often convened on very short notice. Preparatory Committee meetings typically lasted for 4 to 5 weeks, and NGOs worked out ways to share the available NGO seats on the "official" delegation. Few undertook this as part of their paid work; many, if not most, worked for up to 3 years on a voluntary basis, often alongside full-time jobs and family commitments. They provided insights, advice and information to the government and worked tirelessly to help draft position papers and policy documents.[85]

Each country was required to prepare a national report outlining ways that the goals of sustainable development might be met and including their positions with respect to environment, development, trade, population, consumption, and natural resources (forestry, fisheries, mining). NGOs were directly involved in the process of writing Canada's national report, including our environmental weaknesses, strengths and goals. This report was drafted by a multi-stakeholder committee notable for its open and deliberative approach. This meant the report itself was an honest account, far from a "whitewash" or false celebration of Canada's environmental record.[86]

NGOs also helped shape the discourse as well as the language of the text which Canadian officials used as the basis for their negotiations at Preparatory Committee meetings.[87] Government staff were often new to their assignments and valued the experience and input of their, often more experienced, NGO colleagues. Everyone knew how important the issues were and recognized the unprecedented opportunity to shape the international agenda.

While NGOs were working through CPCU to influence Canada's agenda for UNCED, Canadian NGOs were also deeply involved at the international level in two major areas – developing online capacity so that NGOs around the world could be involved in preparations for UNCED and in organizing the NGO Forum, which ultimately drew more than 14,000 people to discuss and debate all aspects of Agenda 21.[88]

Canada played a key role in the Earth Summit and returned from Rio with a sense of excitement and mission. Under the continuing leadership of Jean Charest, a Projet de société was quickly launched to create and implement a national sustainability strategy for Canada. Many of the same participants were fully prepared to devote time, energy and resources to ensuring that sustainable development would be the path of the future for Canada.

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[84] For example, the National Action Committee (NAC) on the Status of Women was invited to hold the "women's seat" and consult with women's groups across the country; they did not feel that they had the time or resources to do so. The Women and Environments Education and Development (WEED) Foundation recognized the importance of this opportunity and offered to take on the task and to provide regular updates to NAC and to other interested women's groups in Canada.

[85] Peter Padbury, Personal communication

[86] Elizabeth May, Personal communication.

[87] Peter Padbury, Personal communication

[88] Lest we think that negative view of protestors is a new phenomenon, *Time* magazine referred to the Global Forum as a "sideshow" and "ecological Woodstock" in its June, 1992 issue, 43.

Only a few short months later, a federal election was called. The government of Brian Mulroney was soundly defeated, and with it, went the Canadian government's commitment to Agenda 21.

Impacts and Outcomes

> The Earth Summit was an unprecedented event… Never before have so many representatives of civil society gathered together to address their own responsibilities in respect of environment and development issues, as they did at the '92 Global Forum in Rio. These epoch-making first attempts at global democracy must be repeated and they must be strengthened.[89]

The Earth Summit was far from perfect. Nonetheless, our work then was exciting and hugely promising. Canada was seen as a leader on the world stage with respect to its negotiating capacity and its involvement of NGOs.[90] New links were being made on issues that literally affected the survival of the planet. Sustainable development held hope for being the key to a new, shining future. The sense of possibility, of real opportunity for change, was unprecedented. Involvement was proving to be successful. These were heady times.

As readers will no doubt recognize by now, a number of elements contributed to this success. The concept was right; the idea of sustainable development captured the imagination of leaders in government, in business and industry, and among people on the ground. There was a widespread sense of urgency, which prompted leaders in all sectors of society to devote time, energy and resources to the Earth Summit and its demanding preparatory process. And, indeed, resources were available; the Canadian government was prepared to spend millions of dollars in make its presence felt in Rio and beyond.

And the outcomes were significant. Key documents and agreements include:

- Agenda 21, a comprehensive blueprint for global actions that "provided the basic foundations and guidelines for the transition of the world community to a sustainable development pathway"[91];

- The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, a series of principles defining the rights and responsibilities of States with respect to environment and development;

- Two legally binding conventions – one on climate change and one on the eradication of biologically diverse species – were signed by representatives of more than 150 countries.

The text of Agenda 21 is stronger and goes further than anticipated, a clear result of input from a broad range of stakeholder groups, often modeled by Canada. Negotiations on its 40 chapters took place both at both formal and informal levels – "in working groups, plenary sessions, in

[89] W.H. Linder, Preface, *The Earth Summit's Agenda for Change.* Geneva: The Centre for Our Common Future, 1993, v.
[90] According to Tim Leah, Canada' arrival at Preparatory Committee Meetings with one quarter of its delegation comprised of NGO representatives often seemed absurd to other delegations.
[91] Canadian businessman, Maurice Strong, who headed the 1992 summit, made these remarks in a speech to a U.S. Senate Committee. Cited in an article in *The Toronto Star,* "Outlook bleak for eco-summit," August 25, 2002, A1&A16.

corridors and over coffee."[92] A section of Agenda 21 is devoted to strengthening the role of major groups and moving toward real social partnerships in support of common efforts for sustainable development. This section, in particular, is a tribute to the solidarity of a global women's caucus[93] initiated at the first preparatory committee meeting by the Women's Environment and Development Organization, headed by Bella Abzug and Mim Kelber. The women's caucus met daily to strategize about how best to ensure that women's roles in environmental management and decision making were recognized. It extended its reach so effectively that chapters of Agenda 21 were created to recognize the importance of 8 major groups - women, children and youth, indigenous people, NGOs, workers, business and industry, the scientific and technological community, and farmers.

According to Maurice Strong, Secretary-General of the conference, "Agenda 21 constitutes the most comprehensive and far-reaching programme of action ever approved by the world community."[94] No one now questions the links between environment and development, even though there is ongoing disagreement about how to minimize environmental degradation while promoting equity and fairness on a global scale.

In addition to these accomplishments, it is easy to point to others.

Global civil society: NGOs vastly expanded their capacity for organizing and networking. The Web Networks case study illustrated the explosion in asynchronous communication among civil society groups. Thanks in large part to the Internet, networks formed at the Earth Summit continue to operate even more widely today and their influence continues to be felt. Civil society organizations around the world negotiated their own series of treaties and agreements to guide their actions and efforts toward creating a just and sustainable world; these set out relationships with one another as well as between NGOs and governments. In the process, global civil society became more consciously aware of itself and of its capacity.

NGOs at the United Nations: Until 1992, the UN had clear and rigid requirements for allowing NGOs to participate in its processes. In response to overwhelming pressure from governments - including Canada - from NGOs around the world and from Maurice Strong, the UN made arrangements to allow national NGOs to participate in the Earth Summit process and in the subsequent creation of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. This openness to NGOs has continued, though not without legitimate concern about limited access to international mechanisms of power.[95]

NGO relationships with government: UNCED was a watershed in terms of building relationships between the federal government and Canadian NGOs. This was, in part, a function of the dedication and commitment of the individuals involved. It was also a matter of familiarity. A number of key players in government and the NGO world had worked together in the past; these established relationships made it easier to broaden and deepen the networks.

Time was also a factor. The UNCED process unfolded over a 3-year period, with a number of very long meetings.[96] People came to know one another and to spend social as well as business

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[92]Theodora Carroll-Foster (Editor). *A Guide to Agenda 21: Issues, Debates and Canadian Initiatives.* Ottawa: International Development and Research Centre, 1993, 8.
[93] Sharon Capeling-Alekija, Introduction, *Agenda 21, An Easy Reference to the Specific Recommendations on Women*, New York: United Nations Development Fund for Women, 1992, 2.
[94] Foreword, *Earth Summit '92*. London: The Regency Press Corporation, 1992, 9.
[95] Rittger, p. 131.
[96] It is not unusual for preparatory committee meetings to extend over a 3- to 5- week time frame.

time together. There were many opportunities to people to come to value and respect each other's experience and expertise.

Institutional capacity building: Following UNCED, federal government departments as well as a number of Canadian institutions, including the Canadian International Development Agency, the International Development Research Centre, the International Institute for Sustainable Development and the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, were given additional responsibility for promoting sustainable development in all of their operations.

The Rio Way: The greatest impact of UNCED, however, remains the "Rio Way." The conscious effort to promote accountability, transparency and openness represented a new paradigm in Canadian decision-making. Even with its many disappointments and frustrations, the Rio Way was worth the effort. It brought promise close to reality, if only for a brief moment.

It is no surprise that the Earth Summit had its share of challenges, during and after.

Who is an NGO? In the preparations for UNCED, governments - including Canada's –defined the NGO community to include business and industry. While there was often tension between business and industry representatives and other NGOs, there was also much fruitful discussion. Nonetheless, business and industry delegations were well-financed and able to lobby extensively for their issues and concerns. Their influence matched their dollars and their economic concerns which too often overwhelmed larger concerns for equity, society and environment.

Real sustainable development: Although many NGOs were heartened by the extent of discussion across sectors, there was a deep sense of disappointment at the Earth Summit's inability to adequately address key issues related to sustainable development. These included North American consumption patterns relative to the rest of the world, global economic reform and need to limit free trade, the role of transnational corporations, the environmental impact of nuclear energy, and the need to carefully regulate and limit biotechnology.[97] Unfortunately, there is, all too often, a huge gap between what governments are willing to discuss and what NGOs feel it is essential to address. These issues continue to block progress and have been the focus of global protests since 1992.

Conflicts within the NGO community: While the NGO community recognized the importance of the Earth Summit and cooperated to a remarkable extent, there were often deep and difficult disagreements. There were concerns over who was best suited to representing particular constituencies. There were concerns that some constituencies were given far more money for consultations and discussions than others. The development community had a long-standing funding relationship with the Canadian government and was able to make allocations to development organizations across the country. The environmental community was in a very different position. Individual organizations had to apply for funding, which generated both competition for limited funds and much frustration. Some constituencies were more deeply committed to consultation than others; this often made it difficult to meet tight timelines.

Distance: Presaging summits to come, the Earth Summit took place at a conference center north of Rio de Janeiro while the Global Forum, which drew thousands of activists from around the world, was given a site in the heart of Rio's downtown. The distance was huge - in kilometers and in time. While some allowance was made for NGO participants to attend particular sessions of the Earth Summit, it was very difficult to participate in both.

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[97] Pratap Chattergee and Malthius Finger, *The Earth Brokers: Power, Politics and World Development.* London: Routledge, 1994, 39.

Reporting: The successes of the Earth Summit were not so much in the "hard news" of numbers, targets and commitments, as they were in the building of relationships and networks and the creation of processes for discussion among diverse interests. This made reporting particularly challenging. Processes are difficult to describe, use many words and require patient readers. Media need action and sound bites – talking heads, even those talking in new and different ways, rarely make headlines.

The months following the Earth Summit posed a new set of challenges.

Organizational fallout: For many NGOs, participation in the Earth Summit was a double-edged sword. While they clearly proved their ability and their willingness to make significant contributions, they often did so for a pittance. Organizations were not provided with funds for replacement staff, nor did individuals receive per diem allowances. There were large financial consequences and some did not recover.

In addition, enormous effort was required to sustain energy and participation over the course of preparations, the Earth Summit itself and subsequent reporting. The exhaustion affected many organizations, making it difficult to carry out the reporting, the followup and publicity needed to sustain momentum.

Lack of institutional memory: Following the Earth Summit, the Canadian government continued its leadership role. It worked closely with NGOs on early plans to shape the UN Commission for Sustainable Development and moved to name a Commissioner for Sustainable Development within the government itself. At the same time, staff assignments began to change. People who had worked on little but UNCED for several years took on new positions, leaving little institutional memory inside government. There was much less shifting in the NGO community, where roles and positions were somewhat more stable. This was a source of much frustration as the carefully developed relationships with government began to disappear.

Change of government: A major blows to sustaining progress on Agenda 21 came when the Liberal Party, under the leadership of Jean Chrétien, defeated the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney. The new government's early commitments to environmental issues quickly vanished; Liberal election promises such as a 20 percent reduction in greenhouse gases by 2005 and the creation of a strong independent Environment Assessment Agency have been abandoned "without so much as an apology."[98] It looked as though the new government could not acknowledge, let alone continue working on, good ideas that came from a different political party.

Economic retrenchment: The "Rio Way" has also been undermined by extensive budget cutbacks. Beginning in 1995, the government responded to a severe recession with dramatic cuts to government spending. This has had enormous impact on the government's policy-making apparatus and its willingness to experiment with initiatives to deepen and strengthen democracy. In fact, decision making has become increasingly centralized.[99] As one example, the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, a model for the world of multi-stakeholder discussion, "died a slow death"[100] due to intensified government control and financial cutbacks.

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[98] Elizabeth May, "A non-Tory misses Brian Mulroney," *Globe and Mail* (June 22, 1998).
[99] Donald Savoie. *Governing from the Centre: The Concentration of Power in Canadian Politics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.
[100] Elizabeth May, Personal communication.

The Earth Summit marked a sea change in the ways that citizen activists and the Canadian government related to one another. In spite of the many challenges, everyone involved extended themselves on behalf of what was clearly perceived to be a greater good. UNCED raised enormous expectations for ongoing relationships at home and was a model for other countries.

Ten years later, the Brundtland Report remains a compelling document whose aims and objectives for sustainable development seem even further from fulfillment. The Rio Way remains a compelling, though very distant, goal.

The Earth Summit reflected much of what we know works. Leadership, broad cooperation, political commitment, resources, and a shared sense of purpose were major contributors to Canada's efforts at UNCED. It is hard not to wonder why those efforts remain unmatched. The questions that divided people and nations in Rio are even more pressing, and there are even greater divisions over how best to address them.

Future Directions

The more we learn, the more we want to know. Was the Rio Way a "one-time mistake"?[101] How can governments think beyond electoral terms and embrace the long-term thinking that sustainability requires? Can citizen organizing be successful without government partners? Should citizens be entirely self-organizing entities? What kind of support can governments expect when their priorities do not match those of citizens? Is summitry destined to be a no-win situation? What are the alternatives?

The story of "Rio plus 10", the WSSD, is a very different one. In Canada, citizens – inside and outside organizations - still want to be involved in decision making. The federal government insists that its processes are open and that it has undertaken "a substantial range of initiatives…to engage Canadians in preparations for the WSSD."[102] And newspapers are reporting daily on all that the WSSD cannot possibly accomplish, given its unfocused agenda and the reluctance of governments to commit to implementing solutions.

Increasingly, activists and activist organizations are pressing for the expansion of democracy outside institutional settings, in the realm of grassroots and global organizing. Global civil society made huge accomplishments at the Earth Summit and at the Global Forum. Those successes now take place outside formal, institutional politics, where coalitions are being created to protest the globalization agenda, an agenda that began to rear its head in Rio.

Today, it is Porto Alegre rather than Rio de Janeiro where global civil society comes together to works for change. At the World Social Forum, held in January 2001, hundreds of thousands of activists gathered to discuss how to "transform globalization from a site of experts-only oligarchy into an arena of genuine democracy."[103] The networking continues when everyone goes home and people reconvene at the next summit, where NGOs are no longer welcome guests at the table. Government and its citizens exist as two solitudes.

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[101] Dr. Robert Slater, Personal communication.
[102] Letter from David Anderson, Minister of the Environment, to the Women's Network for Sustainability, in response to its concerns over the lack of opportunity for consultation with respect to the WSSD, June 3, 2002.
[103] Naomi Klein, "The battle of the global gatherings," *Globe and Mail.* January 24, 2001, A15.

Can either side afford to allow this impasse to continue? Are broken glass, tear gas, arrests, rubber bullets and a fortress mentality the face of democracy in the new millennium? What has happened to the "Rio Way," a way that is messy, contentious and often frustrating, yet also filled with possibilities for democratic governance. Patrick Heller writes:

> Decentralization contributes to democratic deepening if and when it expands the scope and depth of citizen participation in public decision making. Expanding the depth means incorporating previously marginalized or disadvantaged groups into public politics. Expanding the scope means bringing a wider range of social and economic issues into the authoritative domain of politics (shifting the boundaries from market to demos). Democratic decentralization in other words means redistributing power (the authority to make binding decisions about the allocation of public resources) both vertically (incorporating citizens) and horizontally (expanding the domain of collective decision making).[104]

The "Rio Way" was a landmark experiment with power sharing which demonstrated what is possible. It allowed citizens to be involved at unprecedented levels, and allowed governments to take a leadership role in creating more substantive forms of democracy. This is not the case with recent Summits. While citizens in Canada continue to find ways to engage one another, their relationships with their governments are badly skewed.

[104] Patrick Heller, "Moving the State: The Politics of Democratic Decentralization in Kerala, South Africa, and Porto Alegre," *Politics and Society* Volume.29, Number 1, March 2001, 140.

3.0 Analysis and Conclusions: Not a Happy Ending

> ….citizens are now calling for an increased voice in decision making as they question whether voting, legislative hearings, and other mechanisms allow for the full and legitimate expression of their issues and concerns.…Citizens want a meaningful role to play in their own governance.[105]

From Venting to Inventing carries forward the work of *Learning to Engage* by examining three innovative efforts to redefine the links between citizens and governments over the past ten years:

- The efforts in Rossland to establish direct democracy at the municipal level.
- The accomplishments of Web Networks in providing space and tools online to organize for social change.
- The work of civil society organizations to create new relationships with the Canadian government at the Rio Summit and beyond.

All of these are complex stories with many turns, twists and differing perspectives. The people we spoke with still feel deeply involved and hold strong feelings. There remains much room for thinking and analysis. For the purposes of this study, analysis is limited to an assessment of the extent to which these transformations have become permanent features of the political terrain in Canada and focuses on three questions:

- How are citizen organizing to strengthen their voices in political decisions?
- How are citizens attempting to rebalance relationships of engagement with their governments?
- How are citizens' efforts translating into better institutionalized (and more permanent) commitments to increased citizen involvement in governance?

The answer to these questions appears to be "Yes…but." On the positive side:

- Citizens in Rossland won the right to initiate and ratify municipal laws, and used this new tool to press their local government to adopt bold measures in water quality and environmental safety.
- Through its training and programming efforts, Web Networks made it possible for citizens to use information technology to engage each other on important local, national and global issues.
- Canadian civil society organizations used the preparations for the Rio Summit to gain unprecedented access to the levers and resources of policy making and to create widespread networks with one another.

At the same time, these achievements are tempered by some of the less successful outcomes of these initiatives:

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[105] Rajesh Tandon, cited in Wyman et al., *Learning to Engage*, 2.

- Citizens in Rossland are making relatively little use of their referendum opportunity to participate in municipal governance.

- Web Networks' effectiveness was hindered by financial difficulties due, in part, to the fact that they misgauged the real needs of communities – and perhaps, more importantly, by the inability to recapture the vision and excitement of their early days and apply them in the new and vastly changed electronic world.

- The "Rio Way," for all its strengths, could not withstand subsequent shifts in events and players which led to a withdrawal of resources and access over the past decade. More importantly, it was overtaken by enormous changes in the global corporate trade agenda which seems to have overtaken concern for sustainable development.

In all three cases, a number of fault lines are evident. There is a clash between the new tools and their use. There is a clash between the desire for greater diversity in participation and the disunity that results before unity can emerge. And, there is a clash between the rhythm of innovation and the rhythm of democracy.

Clash between tools and their use

In all three cases, there was a tension between the promise of new tools like citizen initiative, on-line organizing and NGO summitry for advancing issues in the political arena and how they are used. In the case of democratic initiatives in Rossland, British Columbia, citizens seemed unable to take full advantage of a tool that was created to allow greater involvement in decision making. The referendum is being used narrowly and in reaction to initiatives rather than as an opportunity to invent them.

In Canada, at this point in time, many municipalities are facing the challenge of having their democratic processes and social objectives curtailed by narrow economic agendas. Cities are increasingly faced with amalgamations, downloading of services and the primacy of economic goals. There is a sense that society exists to serve the economy, with citizens as mere taxpayers. It is significant that, at the end of the last decade, the chief proponent of the referendum in Canada was the Canadian Taxpayers Federation.

According to André Carrel, the biggest issue preventing a more successful application of the "Referendum Bylaw" goes beyond Rossland, B.C. He had assumed that if you provided citizens with the tools, democracy would flourish. Carrel now appreciates that this assumption is rather naïve. The tools themselves are not enough, it is the scope with which they are used.

The Internet has become a tool for cultivating political and social change; it provides an arena in which citizens are expressing their priorities about the society they want. Even with disparities in access, the Internet is playing an important role in linking and strengthening citizens' voices. There has been a massive expansion in it use and it has become an important research tool.

While we can find virtually everything we want to know (and much that we may not!), our concern focuses on the role of the Internet in bringing people together and in building coalitions. It is hard not to be concerned that the development of ever smaller communities of interest, like the increasing number of specialty television channels, can be fragmenting rather than unifying.

On the matter of rebalancing relationships with government and finding a more permanent role in governance, the picture is less clear. Frustrated by the actions of their governments and by the sense that their voices are not being heard, citizens are finding strength in connecting with others. The online communities that result make it easier for citizens to communicate across geographic boundaries, a particularly important consideration in Canada which is sometimes said to have "more geography than history." The challenge here is whether the Internet can mesh citizens' desire for transformation with political will. In other words, can the Internet help ensure that governments take citizens' voices more seriously?

Citizens are certainly making their concerns known. Governments in Canada, for their part, have undertaken significant commitments to providing services online and are beginning to struggle with what e-government (not to mention e-governance) really means. Some Members of Parliament are making major efforts to identify the issues and to involve citizens in working toward solutions. However, more are not. According to a survey by the Centre for Collaborative Government, some parliamentarians are electronically adventurous, though they are a minority. While 58% have functional websites, only 27% of those sites used interactive tools, such as online feedback forms, that allow constituents to express their views.[106] There is not much engagement going on online.

Clearly, the Internet is on its way to becoming a more permanent mechanism for increasing citizen involvement in governance, though it has not yet rebalanced citizen-government relationships. It is too soon to know how this story will unfold. The questions, however, should remain front and centre as the story continues.

According to government officials, politicians and civil society participants, the Earth Summit was an unprecedented time. There is little question that it included a broader range of voices than any summit to that point. It also held out great hope for achieving more balanced relationships with government and for beginning to establish mechanisms to sustain broader involvement in governance. Unfortunately, its outstanding successes were not sustained.

This leaves us with conflicting feelings. There is, on the one hand, wistfulness about the expectations, hope and energy that characterized the new and exciting relationships at both national and international levels. On the other hand, there is enormous frustration that these new relationships were not nurtured and sustained.

The contrast between the Earth Summit and this year's G-8 and WSSD is huge. Plans for the WSSD have been characterized by limited NGO involvement, and, even more importantly, by little apparent government commitment in Canada and elsewhere.[107] The G-8 meeting was deliberately located in an inaccessible location and appeared openly hostile to any NGO or citizen involvement. It seems that NGOs and the government are now essentially "two solitudes"[108] with the government lamenting NGOs' extreme positions and NGOs insisting that the government no longer deserves the public's trust or support.

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[106] Study by The Canadian Press, 2002, cited in *The Globe & Mail*, July 22, 2002.

[107] A mere 6 weeks before the start of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, only 2 Heads of State had committed to attending. This changed as the Summit drew nearer, though expectations for its success continued to be limited. See Alanna Mitchell, "World leaders non-committal on Earth summit," *The Globe and Mail*, May 27, 2002.

[108] Dr. Robert Slater, Personal communication.

Clash between diversity and agreement

In all three cases, there has been a clash of expectations, particularly in terms of dealing with the "noise" that often accompanies greater diversity in participation.

Citizens in Rossland like the opportunity to make their voices heard, and there is no question that they feel that the referendum gives them a stronger voice in decision making. However, there is not yet a sense of how to use the referendum initiative proactively. The purpose of the referendum initiative was to expand the capacity for democratic participation over a wide variety of issues. What we see in Rossland is that the referendum bylaw has been used narrowly – to block salary increases. That is used primarily as a veto tool suggests that the issues go well beyond the tools themselves. The challenge – for Rossland and for other communities that seriously want to involve citizens - is to help citizens shift from veto to transformation.

This challenge is echoed in the ways that cities in Canada are currently struggling to obtain more independence. The municipal power movement also seems narrowly focused, primarily on ways to increase revenues; it is not yet able to link the need for a new deal for cities to a new deal for citizens as well. A larger view would benefit both cities and citizens. If citizens in Rossland were able to take a larger view and relate more closely to the issues facing cities - large and small - across the country, their perspective on the potential of the referendum might change. In addition, they might be in a position to help other cities make direct democracy part of the new deal for cities that is currently under discussion.

Web Networks has been enormously successful in increasing the number and diversity of voices engaged in social change as well as in establishing the Internet as a permanent mechanism for increased involvement in governance. This continues to be evident in the anti-globalization movement, where civil society actors, including many who were active at Rio, continue to create new spaces for expressing their dissent with current government policies and decisions. By bringing people together from different sectors of civil society and from different cultures and regions, the Internet increases diversity exponentially. Since lack of diversity in numbers and backgrounds continues to plague many social change movements, the diversity achieved via the Internet should be valued and celebrated.

Governments, for their part, recognize the need for more and diverse voices and yet have difficulty in accommodating them. They typically prefer to limit consultation to a finite number of stakeholders, most often "the usual suspects." When more open processes are used, they tend to be narrowly defined with focused agendas and tight time frames. This is likely a key reason that citizens and NGOs felt Rio was a huge success while governments were less positive. The "Rio Way" is complex, messy, time-consuming and demanding. Transparency, openness and accountability are not overnight phenomena. They are achieved through ongoing negotiation and struggle, and require great commitments of time, energy and, most important, trust. While the Internet has enormous capacity to make this possible, how – and whether – trust is built goes well beyond the technology.

Hearing more voices is important. It is a naïve hope that we will hear similar things when we hear from more people who are not just like us. It should not be surprising that increasing the number and diversity of voices actually increases the diversity in viewpoints and perspectives:

> Diversity strengthens our communities….The greater the diversity within a community, the greater potential there is for resiliency as the "toolbox" of skills, knowledge, and experience will be large enough to provide needed solutions to a variety of problems.[109]

Moving toward shared perspectives and finding common ground takes time and effort. This has been elusive in all three cases. This argues not only for encouraging diversity but also for plans and structures that actually bring a broader range of people to the table and that allow them to understand each other and work together.

Clash of rhythms

Finally, all three cases illustrate the tension that exists between the accelerating rhythm of innovation, which promises instant reactions and shortcuts to decision-making, and the rhythm of democracy which demands time for reflection and deliberation, patience and persistence. This is not an argument for slowing down political processes or for avoiding citizen involvement. Far from it. It does, however, highlight the need for careful, thoughtful attention to the time needed for people to attend to one another's concerns and to develop a big picture.

The creators of the Referendum Bylaw in Rossland quickly realized that the tool itself was not enough; its success was contingent on a context that values and promotes consultation and deliberation. Direct democracy does not mean fast democracy; it takes just as much time and effort as indirect democracy. Citizens need time to learn about their community and the issues affecting it. They need time to connect with each other to discuss their concerns and to find potential solutions. They need time to contribute to and read their local paper, to attend town halls and information sessions, to meet over coffee to talk about proposed changes. It did not take long to gain the right to initiate a referendum. Learning how to use it well and to weave its political and social implications into the fabric of a community will take much longer.

In the case of Web Networks, its creators had sufficient vision to recognize the potential of the Internet for social transformation. While the technology itself promises instant communication and sets up expectations of equally rapidly response and change, the Internet does not make coalition building any faster. Nor does it change the realities of NGOs who are still faced with trying to do too much in too little time with too few resources. The fact that we can share disagreement faster does not lead to agreement.

The Rio Summit demonstrates how productively people can come together to share decision making. Internet technology played an important role in supporting and facilitating this work. Over the course of a two- to three-year period, broad coalitions were built, a full range of stakeholders was engaged, and a powerful agenda was negotiated. However, once the summit was over, many civil servants were reassigned, resulting in a serious lack of institutional memory and bringing significant initiatives to an abrupt end. Further, the best ideas emerging from the Earth Summit were eclipsed by a change of governments and the apparent inability (or unwillingness) to champion the work of political competitors. The sense of innovation and possibility that characterized The Rio Way were overtaken by political realities.

In spite of the clash of rhythms, there is no going back. Citizens want a greater role in decisions that affect their lives and communities. The Internet is here to stay. And people are eagerly taking up communication technologies to strengthen their voices and to act on their concerns.

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[109] Lorna Heidenheim, "Diversity in a Healthy Community," in *Update*, The Newsletter of Ontario's Healthy Communities, Summer 2002, 2.

The late 80s and early 90s, the period of these case studies, was characterized by an enormous sense of possibility. People and institutions seemed willing to experiment with new forms of governance and there seemed to be a great willingness for citizens, NGOs, governments and the private sector to come together in new ways to tackle important social and economic issues.[110] Significant efforts were underway to rebalance relationships that had been seriously out of whack. Citizens and governments were looking for ways to become more equal dance partners.

This was quite a different state of affairs from that described in *Learning to Engage*, in which citizens, from the mid 90s to the present, were able to influence decisions only to the extent of the governments' willingness to allow them to do so. *Learning to Engage* demonstrated that there was tremendous capacity for inventing new kinds of relationships and there was an emerging sense that citizens and governments could pull in the same (or at least a more similar) direction, even though, to use a familiar feminist metaphor, citizens were the ones consistently dancing backward in high heels![111]

From Venting to Inventing was undertaken to examine the extent to which more equal relationships were possible and whether we can recreate that sense of possibility. We found that the ground was, again, shifting under our feet.

The last 10 years have marked an equally great shift in quite a different direction. There is not much dancing going on at all these days. Government in Canada is increasingly centralized, voter turnout is at a record low, and citizens are withdrawing from electoral politics.[112] The world agenda seems dominated by concerns for corporate global trade. Citizens find themselves less and less able to participate in decision-making, and their protests make this very clear.

Protesters (as well as their less vocal supporters) are far from disengaged or apathetic. Far from it. In what Kingwell calls "perhaps the first major acts of organized transnational citizenship," protesters are "as globally minded as anyone on the planet, and as savvy. The difference is that they were acting as citizens, not merely as brokers of interest."[113] Citizens are arguing not against a global world, which is an irreversible fact of life, but in favour of a more just, equitable and ecologically sustainable form of globalization, one that puts citizens not corporations at its heart.

Each of these cases has much to say about the ways that citizens are trying to strengthen their voices in decision-making, to achieve more balanced relationships with their governments and to create more permanent features of the political landscape. There is no question that "[C]itizens

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[110] In Canada, for example, the National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy brought a full range of stakeholders together for intense deliberations over issues directly related to sustainable development. See www.nrtee-trnee.ca

[111] There is an enormous literature from the early 1990s which portrays civil society as the primary engine of democracy. Key titles include: Amitai Etzioni. *The Spirit of Community*. New York: Touchstone, 1994; Miguel Darcy Oliveira & Tandon, Rajesh. *Citizens: Strengthening Global Civil Society*. Washington DC: CIVICUS, 1994; Putnam, Robert D. *Making Democracy Work*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

[112] There is, likewise, an enormous literature documenting the weakening of democracy in Canada. See, for example, Luc Juillet & Gilles Paquet. *"The Neurotic State", How Ottawa Spends: 2002-2003*. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2002; Savoie, Donald. *Governing from the Centre*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999; Simpson, Jeffrey. *The Friendly Dictatorship*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2001.

[113] Mark Kingwell. *The World We Want*. Viking Press, 2000, 20-21.

want a deepening of democracy to make it more direct and participatory."[114] However, citizens are not the only players and too often, their efforts with respect to governments are unrewarded.

We began with three questions:

- How are citizen organizing to strengthen their voices in political decisions?
- How are citizens attempting to rebalance relationships of engagement with their governments?
- How are citizens' efforts translating into better institutionalized commitments to increased citizen involvement in governance?

In each of our cases, citizens have clearly demonstrated their willingness to come together, to identify the common good and to take action. There are countless such cases around the world. Citizens are organizing in creative and committed ways to strengthen their voices in political decisions and to are working hard to rebalance relationships of engagement with their governments.

Are these efforts translating into better institutionalized commitments to increased involvement in governance? Unfortunately, the answer is an unequivocal no. When we began this study, we were hoping to find that if citizens were active, democracy would be strong. These studies are telling us something else. Citizens are finding places for themselves outside traditional politics. Inadequate use of referenda, increased use of the Internet, erosion of "The Rio Way" and global protests tell us part of the story. These co-exist with a historic decline in the most basic form of participation, voting. And here, there has been steady erosion. Only 67 percent of registered voters cast a ballot in the 1997 federal election, the lowest figure in a federal election since 1925.[115] In the 2000 federal election, voter turnout was the lowest in Canadian political history. Since 1988, there has been a drop of 16% in the number of eligible voters who actually cast their vote. What we see is a stark picture of the chasm between citizens and governments.

During the 90s, there was vastly increased emphasis on civil society. The language of social capital, active citizenship, and the spirit of communities, made its way into popular discourse. We were persuaded that a strong civil society would produce a domino effect, a chain reaction that would deepen democracy.

As Knight puts it, to close the gap on the demand side of governance, "citizens need to display activism, leadership, association, commitment and engagement."[116] We have seen that citizens are doing many – if not all – of the right things. And, it is not enough. Civil society alone does not create strong democracy. What we have found is that democracy can be weak even when citizens are active. Even when civil society is active, engaged and energized, there must be a framework that entrenches their engagement in the governing and decision making institutions of their lands.

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[114] Barry Knight, Hope Chigudu & Rajesh Tandon. *Reviving Democracy*. London: Earthscan Press, 2001, 164.
[115] Paul Howe and David Northrup. "Strengthening Canadian Democracy," *Policy Matters*, July 2000, Volume 1, Number 5, 24.
[116] Knight et al, 165.

Citizens continue to demonstrate their commitment; it is long past time for governments to demonstrate theirs:

> Governments could demonstrate their commitment to meaningful engagement by establishing performance guidelines, ensuring regular reporting and budgeting, and providing for an auditing function. These mechanisms would provide a clear administrative framework for holding governments accountable.[117]

It seems that this is the where most important change must take place. Only with changes in the ways that citizen involvement is institutionalized will democracy be strong.

These experiments emerged from a period of civic innovation. All grew out of the sense that something different was needed to strengthen citizens' voices in governance – and all three experiments demonstrated that something different was possible. Nevertheless, they have not been able to reverse the weakening of democracy in Canada. For all their efforts at inventing, Canadians are back to venting.

[117] Wyman et al, 75.

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APPENDIX I

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