We don't need politicians in charge. With technology, it's time to put citizens first

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Part of Reinventing Parliament, a series examining how to make Parliament relevant again. With thanks to www.samaracanada.com.

Canadians feel disconnected from Parliament, according to an upcoming study from the democratic advocacy group Samara, and no wonder. The first week of the new sitting depressingly revealed that, despite promises of better behaviour, Question Period remains theatre so bad that it should have closed in Poughkeepsie.

Debates are scripted and sterile. MPs appear to be puppets who exist only to bob up and down during votes, with the party whip pulling the strings.

So what is to be done? Maybe nothing.

Rather than fret over how to make the House more relevant and the Senate relevant at all, it may be better to explore how new technologies can put citizens, rather than politicians, in charge.

Citizenville , a soon-to-be-published book by Gavin Newsom, California's lieutenant governor and the former mayor of San Francisco, envisions a truly fundamental transformation of government: from a vending machine, in which taxpayers put in their money and get services in return (with no recourse but to shake the machine in frustration if they don't appear) to a platform, in which virtually all government data is available to all of us, to use as we see fit.
"The tools that have served us well for the past century or so are beginning to erode and collapse," Mr. Newsom said in an interview.

"We get so caught up in reform, which assumes we are using the same ingredients and just shifting them around, when people are looking for a whole new model."

If so, then the real challenge may be not how to reform the House of Commons but how to replace it.

After all, Parliament hasn't really changed much since the 19th century; neither has government, except to get bigger. It continues to embrace what Mr. Newsom calls the broadcast model, in which politicians speak and citizens listen and obey. Every few years fewer and fewer of them vote; otherwise government and the people are solitudes.

This is completely at odds with a world in which digital natives – those raised in the age of social media, as opposed to digital immigrants, who are the rest of us – inhabit a multi-platform world of sharing, listening, watching, talking and acting.

Government, Mr. Newsom believes, should be like that. Every agency and office and department and ministry – protecting only national security and personal privacy – should be forced to hand over everything to the people. Every bit of data that every government has should be public and easily accessible.

People should be free to use that data any way they see fit. They can create apps with it, make money off it, massage it collaboratively to propose ideas that bureaucrats have never dreamed of, even bypass government completely by collectively proposing and implementing solutions to local problems.

http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/we-dont-need-politicians-in-charge-with-technology-its-time-to-put-citizens-first/article8124068/

The digital crowd should use the cloud to reshape government in its image.

"We still have this institutional framework, this hierarchical, top-down broadcast model in government that is anathema to the new roles that people are engaging with day to day in their private lives," Mr. Newsom maintains. "So we have to start looking at a completely new paradigm."

There is much here to object to. Our globalized world, in which challenges and crises can emerge from nowhere, requiring decisions in days or even hours, has encouraged governments everywhere to centralize power, not disperse it.

We live in a time of increasingly incompatible ideologies, which social media are sharpening more than softening.

And no matter how participatory and dispersed political culture might become, sharp and ambitious people will learn how to use information to accumulate power for themselves and their friends.

Mr. Newsom knows all this. He is, after all, a politician. Yet he has faith that digital natives will break down the partisan divides that so comfort digital immigrants.

And for the rest, he believes we are just going to have to trust that things will turn out okay.

"The contours of this shift are just taking place, and no one knows how this will evolve," he concludes. "But we are on a collision course with the future … and government will have to realign itself to this new reality."

After all, the digital commonwealth smashes anything that defies it: It smashed the music industry; it is smashing newspapers and broadcasting; education is probably next. Do politicians and bureaucrats actually believe they will be immune?

Either way, in a world where, as others have put it, Gutenberg has given way to Zuckerberg, perhaps the last thing we should be worrying about is how to make Question Period more civil, or parliamentary debates more relevant.

It may be that they just don't matter anymore, and never will again.