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Interview

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Now What? How the cure for information is more information, why politicians need bigger budgets, and why we're worrying about the wrong things with Gen Y

The public service is facing a generation shift, and 2.0 technology is bedevilling the government. What do we do? We asked David Eaves, a public policy entrepreneur, open government activist and negotiation expert. David advises the Mayor of Vancouver on open government, works with two spin-offs of the Harvard Negotiation Project and serves as a fellow at the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Queen's University. He is frequently updating his blog at www.eaves.ca.

Public Policy and Governance Review: *You talk about government needing a less hierarchical structure, at least at the lower levels. How do you suggest people start thinking about more networked or less hierarchical modes of government?*

David Eaves: This is already all going on. A lot of the way things are changing actually are consistent with the way they're already behaving. Public servants spend a lot of their time calling around trying to get in touch with the other public servants they need to talk to, and a networked public service is about making that easier. The bigger challenge is around what accountability and authority look like. It's not that there aren't models out there. The model I frequently turn to is the Mozilla model, where you have people who own sections of the software code, who own pieces of the product. It's actually quite an authoritarian model. People think that open source is democratic, it's actually not, it's very undemocratic. It's highly meritocratic. If you own a piece, you really decide what goes into that piece and what doesn't. There are a lot of people trying to influence you, and the key is, you have to respect people who are influencing you, because the more people who are giving you advice, the better the product's going to be, the better you look. You can't just ignore them, you have to constantly be engaging them. There's an accountability to people who are participating in your community that's very, very direct.

PPGR: *You've said there's a cognitive dissonance in networked government, that while people may be already behaving in this way, they are still connecting it in their minds to the formal hierarchy. How do you address that?*

DE: There's a top-down source of change and a bottom-up source of change. I think the bottom-up change is pushing as hard as it can. There's a lot of cool stuff happening, but it's kind of under the radar. The top-down is also necessary and ultimately required to shift. That's what you see at NRCan, where the deputy minister puts his briefing notes on a wiki and says anybody can edit them. They create the safe space that allows people to come and participate. For a lot of public servants that still feels risky, even though it has the blessing. But it still has an insurgency feel to it.

For me, there are two reasons the insurgency stuff is good. Number one, proof of concept. It shows this stuff works. The second is, it allows an organization that's pretty averse to risk to take some risk and do new stuff, and it creates demand on the leadership to do something.

PPGR: *Everyone seems to be worried about the extra amounts of data created by new technology. Given that government is a slower mechanism, how can it adapt to the social and cultural overload of this data?*

DE: David Weinberger talks about how just before the advent of the internet, everyone was like "Oh my god, we're going to get overloaded with information, we're going to get swamped and lost in this sea of data, and no one's ever going to figure out their way and we're all going to die." But that didn't happen. And the reason he says that didn't happen is because we discovered that the way to deal with lots of information is to create still more information. You just create information about the information. So things like tags, and filters. Google is a massive filter and it filters the information to give you what you think you need. Blogs are great because they filter. People read my blog because it filters information about public policy.

The Government of Canada has too much information. And what it's doing is actively fighting against the most effective filters for information. It has crappy search engines, it doesn't allow people to use social media, it doesn't allow blogging. Those are the filters that people actually need in order to figure out what's going on. The reason I like wikis and blogs in government is that it can improve people's capacity to grasp the incredible amount of information that's being thrown at them.

PPGR: *How do you get buy-in for social media, wikis and blogs in government? What conditions do you need to foster these things?*

DE: There's a couple of things. The first thing is, don't reinvent the wheel. I told the government, "hire Facebook." They're used an open source white book kind of networking platform, which I hope will work, it's certainly a lot cheaper. But the thing I like about the feds is that they're using open source software so it's all free, the cost is incredibly low. So let's say it fails. It was a year of one employee's time, which is a lot for that person, but for the public service, it's pretty nil. The cost of failure is low, whereas if you invest a lot of money in a Facebook-like application and it fails, it cost you $30 million, that's a lot of money. So really, really low costs. It should be cheap, because it's out there. Failure's okay, and the reason failure's okay is because the costs of implementation are low.

The second thing is, you've got to design a system that actually meets a need. The Facebook we live and use today was literally created to allow geeky guys at Harvard to connect or identify with who are the hot girls their friends knew. That was the initial use case. It was literally about "Can I see someone's face, or a photo and get some basic information about them?" And then the other uses were created because of demand. Not because they said, this is what this should be used for. It became about "Can you create this new feature?" And that's what's completely lacking in the government. It's more like scope out the entire project, figure out what the use case is, and then go build it. It's the opposite of how an emergent system works, which is to find out what a need is, meet is, and then build it to satisfy the emerging needs that arise out of that.

PPGR: *In terms of public buy-in, say, to engage people in consultation, what's to say "if you build it they will come" when it comes to these media?*

DE: It depends who you mean by "they." If you expect a million Canadians to show up, I think you're asking for failure. The whole point of the long tail is that there's five people out there that you need to be talking to. [*Ed. The long tail is a statistical concept about distribution in a marketplace, such that products that are in low demand or have low sales volume – generally about 20 percent of the distribution - can collectively make up a market share that rivals or exceeds the relatively few current bestsellers and blockbusters, if the store or distribution channel is large enough.*] There's another 100 who are interested, and may have something okay to say, and another 100 who are maybe on the wrong side or talking about the wrong thing. The long tail isn't about large numbers, it's about aggregating the right numbers, and finding the five people out there who have something interesting to contribute. Sometimes there are a lot of people who

have something to contribute, but you would need a very specific piece of information from them. I find these crowdsourcing applications very cool, where anybody in the city can identify where a pothole is. Anybody can do that, but it's a very simple ask.

One of the things I've been thinking about is, where the app is for doctors, where as they treat patients, every time there's an adverse reaction to a drug, they open up an iPhone app and say "this drug, this adverse reaction." And then right away, the federal government has aggregated data from doctors across the country about adverse reactions to drugs. If a new drug got on the market and it has an adverse reaction with another drug - which is very hard to predict - now we have instant data that suggests that it might be a risk. It might not be, but we have data that says we should deploy some resources to investigate that. You have that data instantaneously then. We're conducting trials three years after the fact or something stupid.

PPGR: *There's the idea that we have a democratic deficit. Do we need to do some repair to our democratic institutions to facilitate buy-in, or are we replacing that with all of this participatory media?*

DE: I'm not totally sure I buy into the whole democratic deficit stuff. I think there's a conversation deficit, and I think newspapers are in many ways to blame. They've dumbed the conversation down and they've made it simple, so people aren't interested. I am concerned about the democratic deficit, but not in the way most people are. I'm actually concerned about the role of politicians. We've denuded committees, basically your individual MP doesn't have any authority or any influence. Not that they ever had a ton, but they have no budget to do research, they don't have money to think independently, they don't have any committee powers to investigate anything that's going on. We don't ask anything of them. All the oversights have been outsourced to the Auditor General, who is now making value judgments. We've destroyed any role for the individual MP, and I actually think TV is the cause for this.

I don't mind if the government is crowdsourcing problems. What I want is a public service and politicians who can set overall strategy and can lay down what the assumptions are and what the priorities are.

PPGR: *There's a large distrust of politicians. How can we go about rebuilding that trust so that people would want that role for politicians?*

DE: I think it's the wrong question. There's no trust to be built. People aren't going to trust anybody. The question is, are they going to trust transparency. I think we're going to move to an era where a politician will be transparent about choices they're making,

decisions they're making, maybe one that engenders trust. I don't know that trust equals electability at the same time. Trust and electability are not the same things, I can really trust someone and choose never to vote for them.

PPGR: *Would that role still encourage information overload? Would we expect only the policy geeks to follow those discussions?*

DE: There's basically people out there who really care about public policy, and they think everybody else should too. They're like "the democratic deficit exists because everyone's not like me," which is a really obnoxious conversation. You know, there are a lot of people out there who want to spend time with their kids playing hockey, and we shouldn't begrudge them that. They don't care about what politicians are doing, and it's not clear to me that they should care too much. Let's not architect a system that demands that they be part of a crowdsourcing system - they want to outsource the decision-making to politicians. What I'm concerned about is that the decisions actually lay with the politicians. The more people see that decisions don't actually lay with the politicians, the more reason they have not to care who the politicians are. They're not voting for MPs anymore, they're voting for a party, they're really voting for the prime minister because that's where all the decisions are made. So are we surprised that there's no respect for MPs anymore? On what basis should MPs get respect? I actually think that people who run are often incredible people who want to donate, but the sad part is that we're putting them in a system that doesn't give them any respect.

PPGR: *Would some fundamental change need to happen at the top level then? Power has been increasingly concentrated in the PMO over time.*

DE: I think that these are structural problems that have been created from things outside of government. The rise of the television has allowed the prime minister to have a vehicle to talk to all Canadians, and they don't have to use their MPs anymore. It used to be that MPs were the communication vehicle for the party, but in the era of mass media you don't need MPs anymore, the prime minister can talk right to the camera. So that role is gone. With polling data (which is apparently now getting less accurate), the prime minister also doesn't need MPs. They used to rely on MPs to ask what's going on in your community, how is this going to play. Now they're like, "Let's get a focus group together, let's do a couple of polls, you say this isn't going to be popular in your community? I call bullshit, because I've done my focus group and it says 53 percent of people love it, and 40 percent of them vote for us, so this appeals to our base, we're done here."

So these are the things that are changing, and I'm not sure that structural changes to the internal system are going to necessarily respond to that. We have to really be careful about the unintended consequences.

The thing I'd really love to see is MPs have bigger research budgets. Congresspeople and senators in the United States have huge staffs with real budgets so they can investigate issues. Our guys are lucky if they can afford two and a half people. That's a receptionist at their home office and a receptionist at work and someone to manage them on a day-to-day basis. Of course they don't think independently, they don't have any money or time so they do what the party tells them.

PPGR: *You mentioned unintended consequences. What might those be?*

DE: So for example, we say not enough people are getting into government, are running for office, and we say we need to increase the salary of MPs. And the net result of that has been that, I think, people retain their seats much longer because the money's good. It's not about public service anymore, the money's really good and I want to hang on to my pension, I'm made for life. Look how long MPs are hanging around for now. I don't have the data, so I should be careful, but I get the sense that there's a lot of people who shuffled on, were more inclined to go, but now they're not. That's one.

But the other is campaign finance reform, the unintended consequence is that it's a lot harder to raise money now. The easiest way to raise money if you're going to run a campaign is to use your own. So now we've made it a wealthy person's game again because you can't get large contributions from unions and individual benefactors. There are a lot of good reasons for that, and I'm not arguing against it, but one of the consequences is that often you have to be a wealthy person to run.

PPGR: *You talk about disincentives toward efficiency and risk given the nature of bureaucracy. Do you think that path dependency is going kill off innovation, or will the Generation Y shift change things?*

DE: I'll be the first to admit I don't know. It's hard, because you want government to be conservative to some degree. It's a pretty important institution and we don't want them to run headlong into doing something that becomes deeply problematic. At the same time, a lot of things we're talking about aren't big systemic changes. The way we do HR in government is a complete gong show. Everybody's told in government when they arrive, "No one's going to look after your career, you have to look out for yourself." While that's true in any organization, I think it's particularly true in government and part of this has to do with the fact that, if I hire you, you're probably going to work for me for two years. You

may stay in government, we're all part of this organization, but you're going to go work for someone totally different. So I'm going to make really interesting choices about how I invest in you, about how much resource I'm going to put into you because I am going to lose you at some point. We can rely on the altruism that we're all going to be in government so it's for the greater good, but I've got a budget to manage, I've got my own team I have to take care of, I've got my own career to look after as well, and right now the incentives aren't all that strong for people to be mentored or for people to be managed well, because we're going to lose them anyways." It's not clear that as you get promoted you can pull people with you, which, in the private sector often happens - good people, you pull them with you. The number of young people I talk to that feel totally lost in their organizations and totally alone, it is depressing. So a big piece of this is just management, we don't give managers control over a lot of decisions of what's going on in their group.

Another piece of this is that it's really hard to fire people. I think that there should be firing camps held, where we teach people how to easily and effectively fire people. If I'm in an organization, and someone's bad, and the organization never gets rid of that person, that sends a really bad message to everybody else. And there's a lot of managers who are like "I know you can fire people, but the process is just simply too difficult." So I'm not interested in systemic change, I'm interested in what are the tiny little things that we can tweak that will have very large implications.

PPGR: *Are you concerned that young people will get into government and buy into the dominant framework, and navigate through hierarchies in the same way?*

DE: In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins talks about how every organization has a culture, and it ejects people who don't fit into that culture like a virus. So I'm massively concerned. Public service has a culture about how things get done, and people who are kind of free-thinking or entrepreneurial, many of them run the risk of being ejected from that system like a virus, especially if they land in the wrong place. There are a lot of great people in government who are doing a lot of entrepreneurial things, and I'm doubly impressed with them because I think they have to have twice the stomach as people in a smaller non-profit or smaller for-profit organization - there are a lot of larger bureaucracies in the private sector which also eject people who think differently. It's very hard for them to be entrepreneurial. How many companies go under because they squash new ideas? The problem with government is that it can't go under. So it squashes new ideas but it doesn't die, and that new idea doesn't go somewhere else to be seeded and grow up to become the new model, it just simply doesn't change.

PPGR: *So how should government encourage new ideas?*

DE: What makes me excited about GCpedia (a federal government 2.0 initiative) is that it provides playgrounds for people to play with ideas that I feel are safer. It allows not for risk-taking, but for playgrounds, sandboxes, where we can do some interesting things. The other great thing is that we have the advantage of being a federation, so we have lots of levels of government, it means that if one level of government is getting boring, the innovation can happen someplace else. I do open data in Vancouver, and I think open data is a national issue, but Stats Can and the federal government is too big and too dumb and too invested to see that. So we'll do proof of concept at the local level, and we'll get to the national level eventually. So I think if you're a young public servant, one of the things you've got to be looking for is accepting that there's going to be institutional stagnation, and identifying what are the departments where interesting things are going on, and what are the local levels of government where interesting things are going on, and go and find yourself there. Do what you can to show why it benefits government and benefits Canadians so you can export it.

PPGR: *How do you think governments view 2.0 technologies right now?*

DE: It's Schopenhauer's three stages of truth, we're somewhere between the ridiculed and the violently opposed. It's like "this is something kids use, it's not important, it's a fad." This is all part of the ridicule narrative. But you can run the entire spectrum of it simultaneously because government's huge. There's some places where it's ridiculed, some places where it's violently opposed and some places where it's declared self-evident.

PPGR: *So when government does actually buy in, you've mentioned that sometimes they only buy into the technology aspect, and not how people use it. What are the consequences of that?*

DE: This is where web 2.0 and government really run into a difficult place. Government is really used to organizing and mapping and planning everything before it acts, and web 2.0 is a fundamentally of emergent technology. It's about coordinating lots of people, about enabling people to create groups that allow them to create something. So everything gets laid in stone and then we move forward, or we have a place to play, and maybe something happens. These are really different views of how things should happen. And the former, the laid-in-stone system, believes that it is the only system that can mobilize large resources and make something big happen. The latter, and this is interesting, says you don't actually need the resources that you think you need, and we

can actually do a whole lot more with a whole lot less than you could ever understand. The problem with the latter is that it can't always prove that it can do it, the problem with the former is that it never knows how much it's going to cost.

Nobody says it, but it's like if it didn't cost money, it's not good. If you were to ask in an abstract way which community would buy into open source software first, private or government/non-profit sector, I would have picked government/non-profit sector 30 years ago, every time. It saves the public sector and the public money, ownership doesn't rest within a private corporation, it's easy to migrate to other systems - all these things are aligned with public sector values, and yet the public sector still doesn't use open source software, it's the private sector who does. There was this great article about the Birmingham city web site, which started off with a £200,000 budget and it's completely blown over into a £1,000,000 or something and they still don't have a website, and they're using proprietary code to do everything. Literally, they could have used Drupal, which is free, as their content management system. Now you have to pay someone to customize it, and you'd have to pay someone to service it, but you have to pay for those things anyway. But you can see the decision where "We can't get something for free because it must be bad."

PPGR: *Given some of these frustrations, what do you think it will take for young people to want to work in government?*

DE: There's a lot of great work being done in government, and I would say it's all about finding the right people, because there are pockets of innovation. The problem with government is not that there isn't innovation, it's that it's not structurally enabling innovation. What you actually have are individuals, we're relying on the talent of individuals to drive innovation right now, we're not allowing the institution to foster innovation. There's a lot of stuff going on, but as an outsider it's hard to see and hard to create criteria for knowing when it's going to happen, so you really just have to go and find the individual people.

In terms of attracting young people, I'm not worried about government attracting young people, I'm worried about the type of young people it attracts. Right now, we risk attracting a really conservative cohort. The implicit bargain is that you're going to have to sit around for 10 or 15 years before you get to do anything really interesting. I know when I say that there's literally 100 senior public servants who are going to jump up and yell at me, but you know what's interesting is that the people who jump up and yell are the people who were successful. There's such a selection bias. They'll say "Well that's not true of my career," but I would say "Yeah, but you're an ADM, you're a winner in this

system, of course you think it's great. You're the outlier, right? What about the 40 guys who joined when you joined and didn't end up where you ended up? How are they feeling about that system?" And they're silent because they're not at the conferences, and they're not invited to speak.

The young people who are attracted to that basic bargain are of a certain mindset. I'm not saying that mindset's bad. We need that type of mindset, we need cautious people and people who are worried about what innovation means at every level. What I'm worried about is if we only predominantly attract those people.