Interview: Shauneen Furlong on Canada's slide from digital government pre-eminence

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Shauneen Furlong *was one of the guiding lights of Canada's transition from paper-based to online government. At the 2015 CeDem conference, she spoke to Democratic Audit's Sean Kippin. In part two of this interview, she discusses how Canada incentivised its public servants and persuaded the public that digital was the future, and what lay behind their eventual slide down the league tables.*

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SK: How did you persuade organisations that making a transition to an interconnected model of digital governance was a good idea?

Trying to say to these organisations "we want you to work together" was not sufficient, so we had to use what you might call Machiavellian tricks! One such trick was simply, as I mentioned, making it so public. If you were on this very connected "internet" team that it had been said would make Canada successful, you were part of a future and it was a credit to your career. So, if you were one of this elite group who worked with us, it was good for your career. So we had to incentivise people. We only picked 12 out of the 60 Canadian ministers, and we picked them based on the size of their departmental transactions. We also picked tax and social services. After that, we picked those we thought could make a big difference; the Deputy Ministers that were the most forward thinking and progressive, for example, who we felt would influence the dynamic. And that worked really well.

We also, as I mentioned, had to overcome a "silo" mentality within and between the departments. So brought together people across government with completely different cultural and political backgrounds. For example, we sat down with an Army General and our Environment Minister and an Environment bureaucrat, and [the former] came to the meeting with all of his army brass, medals, and insignia, and the Environmental Minister was dressed casually like you! It was wonderful being able to bring these different characters from different professional and

cultural backgrounds together in the cause of technology and digital government. Another area of success for us was in influencing Canada's Treasury board, which is one of the highest levels of the Canadian government. This allowed us influence over over departments through that, and it gave us access to better funding for our projects. So, when individual ministers would say 'well I can't invest that much money, its too high risk', you had the option of minimising the risk by allowing them access to a greater degree of funding in case things went wrong. So we'd begin with a little pilot project between say, tax and pensions that was relatively low risk that didn't rattle the public who didn't like us messing us around with that data and wouldn't use our systems.

SK: So that was within the system. How did you convince the public that it was a good idea? Were they enthusiastic?

When we first announced that you could pay your taxes online, those of us on the inside of government, as well as those who worked with digital, thought 'this is wonderful!' and assumed that people would welcome the opportunity to pay their taxes in their pyjamas! But the citizens were actually offended by this. We got around it by offering a bonus to those who did agree to pay online, which was C$100. It surprised us that such a small incentive made such a difference, and we began to see people changing their attitudes. It wasn't easy educating people at the time, but you can't get a citizen to go into an office any more!

This small incentive allowed us to make the change. By having that money, the citizens helped us share that data and to break down those silos, but the central agency – in this case the Treasury board secretariat – had money to play with, to facilitate those changes. We called them 'catalytic initiatives'. We also made our group of ministers public. We did that by design, because when you're an Executive in the Government of Canada, you don't want to be in the public eye. Usually with public servants if you're in the public eye then your career is at risk! We generally prefer to operate under the radar. But we decided that this was going to be public because we thought it would help to spur the project. The first twelve members of our task force, I should say, did very well in their careers subsequently, and that created an incentive for other people to get involved. Suddenly the Heritage Minister wanted to participate, the Environmental Minister wanted to participate, and so did lots of other people. We were a little Machiavellian in our approach, but it was effective. And as a result, we were first in the world for five years in a row in digital government.

SK: So why did Canada lose that status? Was it a case of other countries getting better, Canada getting worse, or both?

Honestly, it was because the government changed after an election, and people like me were reshuffled when that happens. In the end, I returned to the academic world. Because it was a project so associated with the outgoing Prime Minister, every speech he made we would make him mention our digital transition, to keep it in the publics mind. So it was very tied to him. When the Conservatives came in, they did not want to advance an initiative so associated with the previous Prime Minister. There's no question about it, because when the party changed those of us who were keenly involved moved out or were moved out. And that money that was dedicated to allowing these silos to work together and to allow them transformational pilots of digital and online government which were risk free, dried up. So the initiative and any momentum was lost.

Meanwhile, some other countries got involved. A number of Governments improved their online and digital governance offer. Singapore, the United States, Australia, and Canada were all vying for that role of international pre-eminence. Now Canada is 11th, so we're unfortunately not leading the world in that respect any more. But we did get there first, and led the way for a long time.

Whats your take on the UK's digital government approach? How do you think we've done?

The UK is doing well, very well. There are huge challenges there. I work with some British companies, but I also work with an American company called World Information Services Technology Alliance, and it represents 80 countries national technology associates. The man who represents the United Kingdom is a big player in that group.

One of the issues that I looked at for this group was to do this survey looking at best practice. One of the things that we were promoting was the idea that you shouldn't do what Canada did, you should leapfrog us. We had to go through the whole heritage side of things, cleaning up paper and things of that nature, but when you're starting with e-government don't start with infrastructure, go straight to cellular.

But some of the innovations going on worldwide are very exciting and have made a real difference. In Libya, for example, they had a big problem vaccinating young children. You'd think that this was so basic, but the public sector methods to advance that aren't great. But someone realised that they could capitalise on the fact that everyone has a cellphone, so it occurred to create a system which sends a message informing parents of a vaccination clinic in operation over the coming days, and instructing the parents to spread the word. All of a sudden, vaccinations increased by around 80% – those citizens suddenly became government agents! You could not do that in a paper based world, and it couldn't have worked in a paper-based way.

Has the UK done well on digital government because we're a very centralised country?

One of our projects was the 'lost wallet' which represents several different layers of your identity – your drivers license, your bank card, your national insurance number. The UK has more items at the same level, so in that respect its easier to get the data required more easily. I would say in general terms that the more centralised the system is, the easier it is to bring everything together. The fact that Canada has a smaller population spread over a much larger geographic area, with different tiers of government, is another challenge.

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Dr. Shauneen Furlong is an independent consultant and part-time professor who lectures with University of Toronto and University of Ottawa. She was formerly Executive Director, Government On-Line for the Government of Canada.

This interview was carried out at the 2015 CeDem conference in Krems, Austria, at which Dr Furlong was a keynote speaker.