Time for a New Paradigm of Government:
From Holding on the Past to Re-Imagining Our Future

By Christopher Wilson

Abstract

Despite the many cultural and technological evolutions that have taken place in society over the last 150 years, our systems of institutional governance have failed to keep up. As a result, governments today no longer have the full knowledge, resources or power they need to produce the results desired by their citizens. Everywhere we see a continual decline of public confidence in the ability of governments to be effective, ethical or even believable. This lack of confidence has generated both a populist backlash and the creation of technological alternatives to government as providers of social coordination. Without significant re-imagination and reinvention, future governments are likely to be even less useful or friendly.

Old assumptions about governing are no longer valid. These are assumptions like - citizens aren't knowledgeable or sufficiently educated; or that citizens cannot effectively share knowledge and resources or collaborate; or that citizens can't reach collective decisions except through the use of agents representing them; and that governing institutions must be centralized and run by leaders. Can we imagine a different governance possibility using today's assumptions, tools and knowledge or must we be prisoners of the past?

The biggest challenge for citizens and champions of the public good is whether they will allow themselves to imagine a governing process that does not depend on these out-dated assumptions. Without explicitly defining what a new governing institution might look like, this paper looks at some of the key capacities that should nevertheless be included. Foremost among these capacities is the need to develop a broad capacity to facilitate social collaboration in order for governments to retain their effectiveness and legitimacy.

Introduction – Governance in Need of Reimagining

Our system of collective governance was designed and built for people who lived so long ago that none of them remain alive—not even their great-grandchildren. That system of government was created in a time when most people were farmers; when education was rudimentary and rare; when science was only just beginning; and when transportation involved largely walking and horses (although, if you were very fortunate, you might take a ride on a steam train or a sailing ship). It was a time when doctors were not much more than butchers, and the ideas of antibiotics, vaccines and DNA were unknown. Cities were a social blight of overcrowding, poverty and sewage. Slavery had only just officially ended in the US, but the practice was still prevalent in much of the world. It was a time when people rarely left their village or town, and had little sense of the world. Needless to say, there was no Internet or Facebook, no cellphones or computers, no TV or radio, no movies, no Disneyland and no summer vacations. There were no drones, no satellites, no rockets, no moon landings, no planes and no cars. There wasn't even electricity.

And yet, surprisingly, the system of democratic government designed for that time is still presumed to be, by almost everyone, the best form of social coordination that we could possibly use today, requiring no significant adjustment for the obvious advances in knowledge and technology, or the behavioural and cultural changes that have occurred over the last 150 years. While the majority of people around the world persist in believing in the basic principles of democracy — "rule by the people" — our systems of democracy remain dated and out of sync with the realities of today.

In many countries, democracy is no longer a living, breathing process, but a fragile museum piece that has taken on a rigid, canonical stature as if it had been etched in the ancient tablets given by God to Moses. And strangely enough, the more these sclerotic structures of democracy are challenged by the realities of everyday life, the tighter people hold on to them. They consistently and obstinately mistake the aging, institutional *form* of democracy for the *spirit* of democracy. Those *forms* include the buildings, the laws, its partisan dynamic, the periodic votes and the people that work for government, including its elected leaders, who, once chosen, are believed to be so thoroughly in charge of governing and problem solving that "the people" don't need to bother. The *spirit* of democracy, on the other hand, is the collective consciousness generated by all citizens as joint owners of the enterprise called "society", with equal say and equal responsibility for all its outcomes.

Moreover, persistent institutional failures and ineffective problem solving of present day democracies are eroding popular faith in the very system of democracy itself. You would have had to be living as a hermit not to have heard the cries of dissatisfaction from Trumpeteers wanting to 'drain the swamp', the French 'mouvement des gilets jaunes', the Brexiteers, or Ford Nation in Ontario. Popular perception is that governments are: ineffective; unable to satisfy the needs of the people; no longer representative of their electors; lacking in fairness; its leaders are corrupt or out of touch; its bureaucracies are too slow or too stupid; and overall seem incapable of looking out for the common good.

"Donald Trump's [MAGA] message resonates in the most forgotten corners of the US," says Chris Arnade, "because viewed from these places, America no longer seems a great country."[i] Of the 11

national polls taken in the US between November 3rd and 28th 2016 on average, only one quarter of Americans felt their country was headed in the right direction[ii]. The Oscar-winning filmmaker Michael Moore put it succinctly in a tweet: "In June, Britain voted to leave Europe. Yesterday, America voted to leave America."[iii]

This frustration and perceived lack of legitimacy is coming not only from those outside government but inside it as well. For instance, former US Representative John Dingell from Michigan, the longest serving Congressman in history, having served for more than 59 years, wrote just prior to his passing in February 2019 that, "The most profound change I've witnessed is also the saddest. It's the complete collapse in respect for virtually every institution of government and an unprecedented cynicism about the nobility of public service."[iv]

While all the shortcomings of government are invariably placed at the feet of political and organizational leaders of different stripes, in my opinion, this is a mistake — even though it is quite clear some leaders are better than others. The bigger problem is that our governance system has not evolved at the same pace as the society it is meant to guide. This has created an inevitable disconnect that *no* leader, no matter how brilliant or well meaning, can ever bridge. It's like trying to run today's *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare* on an ancient Atari 2600 console. It doesn't matter what the skill of the player is, it just won't work.

"Democracy, as we know it, is failing*,"* says Yaneer Bar-Yam[v], President of the New England Complex Systems Institute at MIT. "The real question ultimately is, will we be able to change the system?"

To begin with, we should be clear that government is fundamentally about social coordination. Most simply, it's about how we try to prevent tripping over each other as we go about our lives in close proximity to one another. For instance, when two cars meet at an intersection, governments have created rules that everyone must abide by to reduce the likelihood of accidents and harm. But governments are also a means for how we organize ourselves to accomplish things collectively that we could never achieve alone – things like going to the moon or creating an Internet. Therefore, government is fundamentally about social coordination to minimize conflict and maximize innovation.

Our systems of government were originally designed to facilitate this social coordination through the use of periodic voting of elected representatives; political parties and partisan leaders; separate legislative, executive and judicial branches of government; and a non-partisan public service. And for well over 100 years those systems served us well, helping to create what is today the most well educated, healthiest, most prosperous, safest, most connected, and most peaceful society in human history.

Yet in doing so, governments altered society itself, changing its capacities and culture -- as well as society's expectations of what's possible. So much social change was created that yesterday's model for social coordination is increasingly incapable of meeting the needs and necessities of today and, as a consequence, it has created much of the perceived ineffectiveness and dissatisfaction with governments everywhere.

For instance, while many of the threats for societies of old tended to be geographically limited, today's threats are clearly global, including: climate change, nuclear war, over population, access to basic resources, mass migration, the social instability of a growing income gap, automation and the prospect of declining employment, the attacks on critical infrastructure coming from anywhere in the world, human engineered pandemics, and other powerful new global threats being generated by democratized knowledge over the Internet. Human progress is clearly a double-edged sword.

Whereas governments of old were generally designed using silos of expertise that were coordinated by leaders at the top of a hierarchy, such hierarchies are no longer knowledgeable enough or powerful enough or resourceful enough to deliver the results expected by their citizens.

Yet "all these [global] challenges have two things in common," says Ian Johnson, Secretary General of the Club of Rome. "First, they are all anthropogenic, caused by us humans[1]. Second, to a broad approximation, these challenges are all *shared problems*... Shared problems must be addressed through shared solutions. This requires all of us changing our values, and understanding the commonality of humanity's challenges on earth, and, *they require new forms of governance*: especially of the commons—whether local, national or global."[vi] New forms of governance are required because hierarchies and silos are not the best mechanisms to foster sharing. This is the principal failing of leaders and hierarchies today -- that they do not promote sharing. Something else is needed.

The Failure of Leaders

A key element of our outdated system of governance is its almost total reliance on the notion of leadership. Most people continue to be obsessed with the idea of the heroic leader, "the saviour," someone who they believe will protect them from all manner of shortcomings, relieve them of the burden of having to work things out for themselves with their neighbours, and do so while magically ensuring that all of their preferences will be met -- regardless of everyone else's.

"In our political culture," writes Dan Gardner[vii], "a leader who acknowledges uncertainty and encourages experiments is 'indecisive.' A leader who permits dissent is 'weak.' A leader who changes his mind in response to new evidence is a 'flip-flopper.' A 'real leader' is one who centralizes power, is certain of everything, who breaks the knuckles of anyone who disagrees, who never admits to being wrong, and who will deny to his last breath ever having changed his mind about anything. A real leader is a Great Man issuing orders from the top of a pyramid."

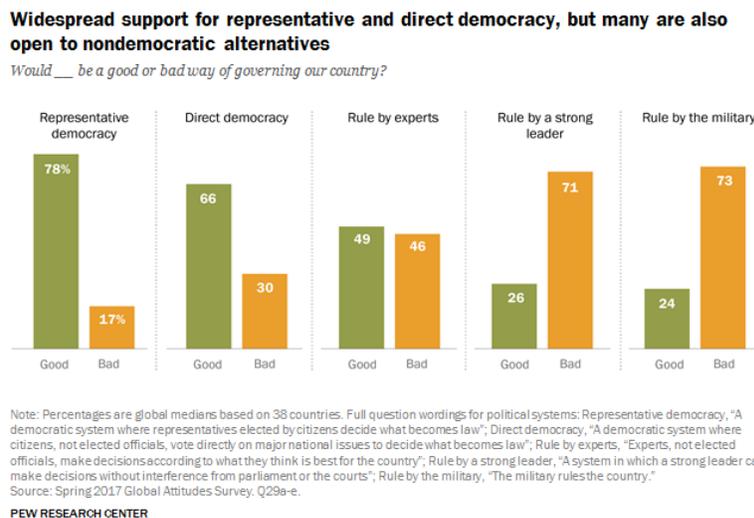These "leaders" prey on our immense sense of entitlement. For instance, government should absolutely protect me against the costs of falling sick, but I should not have to pay taxes to protect someone else. Government should ensure that that my outdated job of digging coal is protected, but government should not collect taxes to help create new jobs in the clean energy economy of tomorrow. So leaders are constantly playing a zero-sum game of "us" versus "them" when what's actually needed are people capable of fostering reconciliation, collaboration, or innovation.

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[1] This is actually quite a hopeful comment because if humans are part of the problem, then we can and should be part of the solution.

Amazingly, many people defer to these "heroic leaders" even when it comes at the cost of their own best interests and well-being.

Inevitably, the narrative of this "great man" (and it's almost invariably a man) involves him being bold enough, confident enough, or stupid enough to make choices that others would normally run away from. Yet as Michelle Obama has recently revealed, world leaders are really no different from everyone else. During a book launch in London,[viii] she commented that "I've been at every powerful table you can think of, from corporate boards, to "G summits", to the UN. Here's the secret: [the leaders] they're not that smart." But why do we persist in believing that they are?

When we remove the fantasy of leaders being so much "smarter" than us, the decisions of "great men" are more easily understood. Leaders are leaders for one reason only – people are willing to follow them. No followers, no leader[ix]. They attract followers because they are willing to impose decisions on others, frequently without any regard to their rationality and usually with religious-like fanfare. In doing so, their decisions inevitably favour one person, one group, or one organization at the expense of others in a "win-lose" scenario reminiscent of medieval conflicts. In fact, the degree to which such inequitable decisions are successfully imposed is often seen as a proxy measure of the leader's "greatness" and a key source of the leader's attractiveness. It would appear that we follow "great leaders" because they are great bullies.

Widespread support for representative and direct democracy, but many are also open to nondemocratic alternatives

Would ___ be a good or bad way of governing our country?

Note: Percentages are global medians based on 38 countries. Full question wordings for political systems: Representative democracy, "A democratic system where representatives elected by citizens decide what becomes law"; Direct democracy, "A democratic system where citizens, not elected officials, vote directly on major national issues to decide what becomes law"; Rule by experts, "Experts, not elected officials, make decisions according to what they think is best for the country"; Rule by a strong leader, "A system in which a strong leader can make decisions without interference from parliament or the courts"; Rule by the military, "The military rules the country."
Source: Spring 2017 Global Attitudes Survey. Q29a-e.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: Richard Wike, et. al.. 2017. "Globally, Broad Support for Representative and Direct Democracy", *Global Attitudes Survey,* Pew Research Centre, October 16. Accessed at: http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/10/16/globally-broad-support-for-representative-and-direct-democracy/

According to a recent survey of 38 countries conducted by the Pew Research Centre (above), bullies seem to be increasing in their popularity. While "more than half in each of the nations polled consider representative democracy a very, or somewhat, good way to govern their country, in all countries, pro-democracy attitudes coexist, to varying degrees, with openness to nondemocratic forms of governance, including rule by experts, strong leaders or the military."

Our acceptance of this "great man" myth is frequently not the product of informed rational choice, but it is more a cultural legacy whose roots have long ago passed from memory. Everybody just 'knows' that *some one* must be in charge. This cultural relic not only fails to guarantee any modern usefulness as far as social coordination is concerned, but it generally produces significant impediments to collective learning, social adaptation and evolution. Few of us really challenge why we accept unquestionably the assumption that "someone has to be in charge", we simply follow it out of blind habit and Pavlovian peer pressure.

Yet in today's world, one of the hardest truths to accept is that *no one* has all the knowledge, resources or power to do anything of significance in society— least of all the ability to address any of the complex concerns currently of importance to citizens. When, for instance, have our elected leaders responded to questions about a complex problem by saying, "I really don't know; let's find out together"? They don't do this because, as US President Truman once remarked, not having an answer is tantamount to admitting that you're not an expert and that you don't have the "right stuff" to be a "great man." Accordingly, "great men" have become particularly adept at evading, dissembling, hedging, spouting vagaries and outright lying in order to maintain the public fantasy of their superiority. In truth, however, the only real secret they carry is that they just don't know. A humble leader, willing to learn from others, is in fact an absolute rarity.

Equally rare, especially politically, are those leaders who can bring together all the diverse voices of their community or society and inspire their collective creativity and wisdom. This is the social equivalent of being a conductor of an orchestra, bringing all the varied contributions of different people together to orchestrate social cooperation and collective impact. Instead, what's usually on display are wannabe generals, playing politics as partisan warfare, pitting one group against another, where winning or losing is the only possible outcome, and where collective learning is rarely, if ever, on the agenda.

When confronted by complex or wicked problems, "great men" prefer familiar, black-and-white answers to issues they over-simplify. This enables them to communicate to people in friendly "sound bites," and to demonstrate their brilliance and effectiveness with quick instinctive decisions that appeal to their audiences. Instead of having to take the time to understand a problem's complexity, or to attend to a variety of perspectives, or to assemble the collective learning and shared commitments necessary to resolve it, they just wing it.

Some leaders, such as US President Trump, don't even make this effort. According to Daniel Dale of the *Toronto Star*, in the 828 days after his inauguration on 20 January 2017, Trump has lied 4,913 times, or on average 5.9 times a day[x]. "He's lying about so many different things at once, and in big ways – not exaggerating or stretching, but completely making stuff up."[xi] Trump has completely given up on the notion of governing on the basis of objective evidence which governments for the last 70 years have tried to do. In its place he has aggressively used whatever 'truth' serves him in the moment -- regardless of validity or sense.

The combination of incomplete understanding and quick decision-making leads not only to ineffective action, but it also provides rich fodder for all those rebellious critics who inevitably and justifiably feel the need to resist the leader's claim to being "the one true patriarch," although

invariably with the aim of replacing the existing "patriarch" with themselves. Unfortunately, under the universally mistaken assumption that a government's past shortcomings can be wholly attributed to one person—regardless of the system in which they operate—the failures of one leader become fertile ground for more "great men" to arise -- like weeds.

In such an environment, important practical social concerns, such as avoiding the possibility of operating with incomplete understanding, or with limited creativity, or with weak implementation capacity, are never addressed because they are always assumed to be a function of the leader's "greatness."

In stark contrast to this popular belief, the complex, socio-economic challenges of today's world do not respond well to the simple, linear solutions of "great men." Nor is trying to funnel society's creative capacity through a handful of individuals even the best way to marshal society's collective potential[xii]. As we hear from a growing chorus of actors from all sectors of society, there is an urgent need to find better ways to cooperatively utilize our vast collective resources—both tangible and intangible. Yet, this ambition remains largely unrealized because "great men" and "cooperation" have so far proven to be antithetical.

Despite the popularity of our belief in leaders, there have also been times, in all areas of government, when the need to resolve an issue was particularly acute -- so strong in fact that stakeholders were willing to go where no one had gone before and work together, often inventing entirely new rules and behaviours to allow themselves to get where they needed to go.

And again in contrast to popular belief, for those who stuck with the collaborative process, the experience was usually perceived as a very rewarding journey, both professionally and personally. But if organizations and communities are having such positive results from collaboration, why are their experiences and learnings not better known? Why must we repeatedly reinvent the wheel each time groups and organizations choose to cooperate? Why do we not understand collaboration as well as we understand, say, management?

The answers to these questions are both cultural and paradigmatic. Our Western culture lionizes individual over collective achievement, even when those supposedly "individual" achievements would clearly never have happened without significant collective input. It's the army that wins the war, but it's the general who takes the credit. This age-old cultural bias is now reinforced by mechanistic and industrial management paradigms which presume that only an elite few have the wisdom, creativity and energy to make things happen. Employees are just so much undifferentiated raw material. From the perspective of many organizational leaders, employees are simply interchangeable widgets to be manipulated by those "enlightened" few like themselves. Among most management practitioners, despite growing evidence to the contrary, top-down is still perceived to be the only way to coordinate among a variety of organizational capacities.

"Large corporations are vast and complex entities with customs and attitudes that are hard for any one leader to change. So why," asks Justin Fox of *Time Business*, "do we [still] talk as if the CEOs are truly in charge?"[xiii] Or as economist Tim Harford observes, "I see . . . people who, in the face of an incredibly complicated world, are nevertheless absolutely convinced that they understand the way that the world works."[xiv] "We are no more capable today of making good leaders, or reducing

the effects of bad leaders, than we were forty years ago," says Barbara Kellerman of the Kennedy School. "The leadership industry is a fraud."[xv] Unfortunately, this fallacy of leadership has increasingly negative impacts on private and public organizations as their organizational environments are increasing in complexity.

This growing disconnect between governance modality and operating environments encourages the perception that leaders are incompetent, unethical or both. Sadly, for many people, there seems little distinction between those modern leaders who have been shown to be unethical or criminal and all those other leaders whom citizens just assume haven't been caught. According to David Brooks, the entire "leadership class" is being exposed as ineffective or "fundamentally self-dealing."[xvi] The incessant "corporate scandals and the recent worldwide financial catastrophes [have shaken] the cult of the heroic CEO to its foundations."[xvii]

This distrust of leaders also carries over into the even more complex area of the public sphere resulting in citizens turning to non-establishment populists in a last-ditch effort to see real change. Cocooned within the fantasy of their own specialness, established political leaders are suddenly "surprised" by their citizens warm embrace of grifters and con men. They view it as irrational; call their supporters "deplorables", "ignorant", or "racists" for their backing of the populists, all the while widening the rift between themselves and an angry, alienated public and confirming their negative view. Without followers, traditional 'leaders' can't lead. Without viable leaders, followers will go to whomever seems plausible.

Ultimately, these shifts of loyalty will be as true for the populists as it currently is for traditional leaders. In fact, it is the hope of some, like Robert Wright[xviii] and David Frum[xix], that the failure of the populists to inspire greater social harmony or greater social innovation will not only encourage their downfall and but also cause people to seek a different and more modern solution to governance, one that better matches realities and needs. However, the road from here to there may be paved with a great deal of pain and suffering.
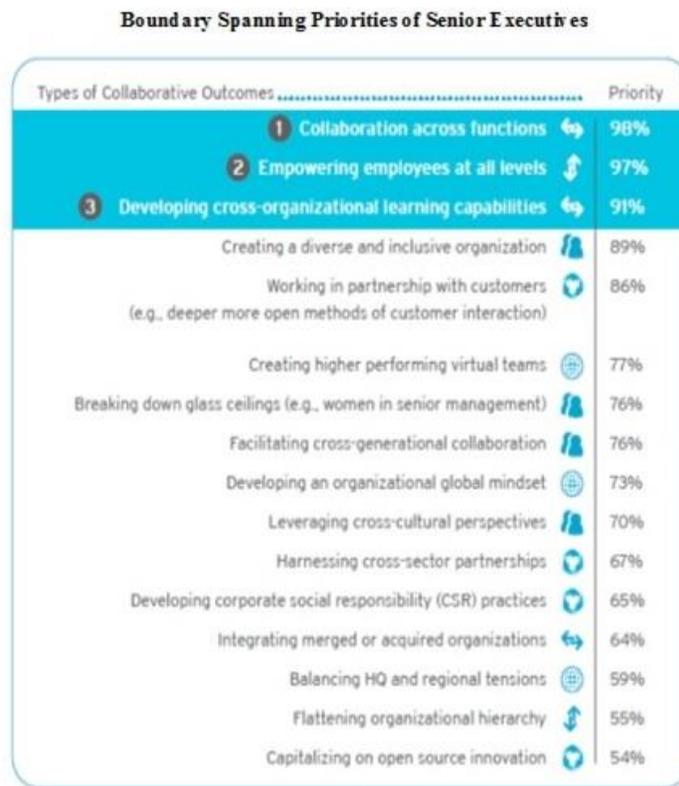
That said, we can already see the beginnings of change. For instance, it should be obvious that because of universal education and universal (or nearly so) connectivity and access to knowledge, any reliance or dependence on a few 'representatives' is both naïve and hugely problematic, not only for solving the tough complex problems of the day, but also for sustaining a healthy democracy. Limiting the task of social coordination to the capacities of a few individuals seriously constrains both understanding and innovation, while it simultaneously encourages authoritarianism and a population guided by entitlement and bribery, in lieu of their shared ownership.

Instead of followers acting simply as pawns and tools in the success of *causal leaders* -- i.e. those seen as prime movers -- the work of so called "followers" is now being regarded as important in its own right, necessitating a new form of "leader" to ensure its success. This is requiring people who might otherwise be tagged as "leaders", to move away from attitudes of control and coercion towards more supportive behaviours like, "how can I help?" This explains the intrinsic appeal of management notions like "servant leadership"[xx] and "facilitative leadership."[xxi] Within this evolving notion of *catalytic leadership*, the classic leadership element of "bringing people together

to make something different happen"[xxii] remains, but the elements of control and dominance are gone.

Is the current generation of leaders up to the task of catalyzing, empowering, and collaborating? A global study[xxiii] by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) suggests not. While 86% of the senior executives they surveyed believed it was "extremely important" for them to work effectively across boundaries in their leadership role (see figure below), only 7% of these executives believed they were currently "very effective" at doing so.

In similar study, CCL found more than 90% of the executives it surveyed said that collaboration was vital for their leadership success. However, when asked a follow-up question, "Are the leaders of your organization good at collaboration?", fewer than 50% of the respondents replied that their leaders were good at it. "In a horizontal world," say O'Leary and Vij, "there are many times when collaboration is needed, but often one does not know how to do it—and do it well. Collaboration yields immense leadership challenges."[xxiv]

Boundary Spanning Priorities of Senior Executives

Types of Collaborative Outcomes	Priority
1 Collaboration across functions	98%
2 Empowering employees at all levels	97%
3 Developing cross-organizational learning capabilities	91%
Creating a diverse and inclusive organization	89%
Working in partnership with customers (e.g., deeper more open methods of customer interaction)	86%
Creating higher performing virtual teams	77%
Breaking down glass ceilings (e.g., women in senior management)	76%
Facilitating cross-generational collaboration	76%
Developing an organizational global mindset	73%
Leveraging cross-cultural perspectives	70%
Harnessing cross-sector partnerships	67%
Developing corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices	65%
Integrating merged or acquired organizations	64%
Balancing HQ and regional tensions	59%
Flattening organizational hierarchy	55%
Capitalizing on open source innovation	54%

Survey participants were asked to rate the level of priority they would place on various collaborative outcomes over the following five years. **Source:** Jeffrey Yip, Chris Ernst and Michael Campbell. 2011. *Boundary Spanning Leadership: Mission Critical Perspectives from the Executive Suite.* Center for Creative Leadership.

This insightful observation comes as a flood of stakeholder groups try to institute distributed governance arrangements in order to respond to a host of wicked problems through collaboration

and partnership. According to IBM's 2012 Global CEO Study[xxv], more than two-thirds of the CEOs it surveyed planned to partner extensively. The survey involved more than 1,700 CEOs from 64 countries and in 18 industries, and it identified a growing use of team-based environments, the promotion of experiential learning techniques, and the use of high-value employee networks. For instance, employee empowerment was being combined with increasing openness and transparency to offset the command-and-control style of leadership that so characterizes modern corporations. "The trend toward greater collaboration extends beyond the corporation to external partnering relationships. Partnering is now at an all-time high."

This, however, is not just a business trend. "To deal with the complexities of today's world," says Wayne Wouters,[xxvi] Canada's former Clerk of the Privy Council and once its most senior public servant, "we need to work with each other [in government], and we all need to collaborate with citizens, the private sector, academia and civil society to resolve the problems and challenges we face . . . Collaboration, consultation, partnerships—these need to be the hallmarks of the Public Service of Canada in the future."

Nevertheless, "the idea of collaborating with the public in policy development is not new", according to Paul Brown[xxvii]. "Far from it. Clerks of the Privy Council have emphasized it in their annual reports to the Prime Minister of Canada for years." For instance, in the Clerk's 1997 report to the Prime Minister, "Citizens want a greater say in policy-making it is incumbent on the Public Service to expand the avenues for open and inclusive policy development"[xxviii].

Yet even as Canada's Clerks have repeatedly underscored the importance of collaboration, an IRPP–Nanos poll[xxix] has suggested that the primary cause of the decline in public confidence in government centres precisely around the perceived inability of government to work effectively with others. Some well-worn issues—natural resources, border protection, safe communities, research and development (R&D), trade and international affairs—continue to command public confidence and, not surprisingly, the attention of governments. But with many other issues—health care, jobs, education, First Nations, the environment, the aging population, social programs, living standards, productivity, and, in particular, the balancing of budgets—there is much less public confidence.

Not surprisingly, all these issues illustrate a more complex type of problem referred to as "wicked" by Rittel.[xxx] The increasing complexity of society resulting from the growth of knowledge, technology, and connectivity has meant that the frequency and volume of interactions among the diverse elements of humanity have far outpaced the ability of any single person, or even a small group of people, to understand or control collective action. "The machinery of government," says Savoie, "has not been adapted to the complexity of today's society and the requirements of the modern economy."[xxxi]

And paradoxically, the Canadian public, despite its predisposition for electing "saviours" and "great men", remains unconvinced that those who say they have all the answers actually do. The required solutions involve many steps and lots of players, which the public interprets as a significant barrier for governments. In essence, if governments have to collaborate, the public has little or no confidence that they will or can.

In a world, therefore, where partnership and collaboration are increasingly demanded, and where public confidence in the ability of leaders to collaborate is low, the very concept of leadership has become problematic. Our obsession with the need for someone to be in charge presents one of society's biggest obstacles to effective governance and government. Leaders resolutely proclaim to be in charge, when none can be. When what is needed is a capacity to ask questions, our leaders purport to have all the answers. When facilitation among peers is required, leaders compete to command. When power must be shared, leaders instinctively try to impose their power. When distributed governance is the only option, leaders fight for control.

When no one is, or can be, "in charge," the incessant political cries for better, stronger, more effective and forceful leadership are meaningless. Moreover, traditional command-and-control styles of leadership are quite antithetical to cooperative environments where many may legitimately see themselves as "leaders."

Frustrated by the current incarnation of government, citizens will flee on election day to any plausible candidate in the hopes of making a change. Few seem to grasp that leadership is irrelevant, so the cycle of disappointment begins anew. The prized attributes usually associated with being good leaders—their confidence in their own knowledge and judgement, their "take charge" attitudes, their willingness to whip people into line, their dominance—almost guarantee that any required social collaboration fails. In reality, what's needed is something actually different from leadership, another social mechanism, that allows groups of peers to work in collaboration.

Time to Re-imagine a Different Way of Working Together

So here we are today, almost a century after the advent of universal education and decades after the foundation of the global Internet, with many of our democratic institutions under attack for being quaint, ineffective, or at worst counterproductive to the needs of the time.

The failure of leadership is but one element of government that is out of sync with modern realities. In fact, the very assumptions upon which our government institutions were built have become antiquated, invalid or irrelevant. If no one can be in charge, then its corollary is that many must be in charge. So the challenge of the time is quite clear -- can we design a system of governance where many are in charge? The quick answer is yes – democracy, but democracy unlike anything currently in vogue.

If leadership is no longer the appropriate tool to achieve social cooperation, what other tools do we have at out disposal that can achieve coordination when knowledge, resources and power are widely distributed in society? If Parliaments and Congresses consistently fail to produce effective results, are there other ways for democracies to structure themselves to avail society of its collective intelligence? If there are no "right answers", then how can we institute practices of collective learning that over time bring us closer and closer to the possibilities we as citizens aspire to? If governments don't have all the resources to achieve their intents, how can we better utilize all the resources embedded in society? Can we design a governance system that does not depend

for its success on the saintliness or omniscience of decision makers? And lastly, can we design a process that works independent of the individuals who may participate in it?

In truth, over the last couple of decades, we have witnessed the emergence of ideas like *multi-stakeholderism*, *cross-agency working, cross-sectoral collaboration* and *participatory democracy*—not because someone at the top felt inclined to be generous or inclusive—but because these notions have been understood to be pre-conditions for the social coordination that will enable progress. Unfortunately, our public institutions have generally shown little serious interest on these fronts, beyond obeisance to an ample amount of rhetoric.

Even as governments increasingly find themselves without all the knowledge, resources or power needed to fulfill their intents, they are also discovering that they don't have the knowledge skills or tools to engage with others. The issues they face may require input nationally, regionally and locally. They may require input from many different disciplines and many different stakeholders. In today's environment, *no single government body*—no matter how extensive its legislative or taxing mandate—can be successful simply by working alone-- that is, of course, if the measure of its success is producing positive results in society. But how should governments work with others?

Since the 1970s, there have been a growing number of substitutes for government in the form of mechanisms for achieving social coordination both at the community level and online. Even within governments, the old rhetoric around "streamlined silos" has gone out of fashion. In its place, there is talk of "integrated government," "horizontal government," and "whole of government" methodologies.

Yet, despite the rhetoric, governments remain deeply entrenched in their old "top-down" approaches. Read anything about government reform, and the prerequisite for successful change that is always identified up front is "support from the top." Ask any politician about spending political capital on government reform and you'll find it's largely a non-starter. Despite governments woefully lacking in the frameworks, skills and mechanisms that would enable them to affect the more cooperative behaviours, government leadership is unwilling to invest in either the time or attention to develop them.

The traditional paradigm of government says that "government is about some combination of coordination, stabilization, redistribution and pedagogy while the primary function of the bureaucracy is to protect and preserve administrative institutions consistent with constitutional processes, traditions, values and beliefs"[xxxii]. But if one pulls back a bit from the specifics of what government does—i.e. making rules and laws, delivering services, operating multiple business lines, generating revenues and providing protection—the basic *raison d'être* of government is coordination.

Stabilization and redistribution are essentially tools governments use when their efforts at social coordination fail, and while administrative preservation is a device to pass on institutional learning, it is also a device to insure against periodic hijackings of government by groups of citizens fomenting non-cooperation in society. Governments have always (until recently that is) represented the principal (if not the exclusive) power for social coordination -- whether that was

in terms of legislating codes of behaviour or carrying out public investments which the private sector would not undertake.

The basis of all this coordination has been government's traditional monopoly on coercion and its *perceived power* to punish or reward. This is a legacy of ancient, autocratic kings. In the last few centuries, however, this *perceived power* of governments has been augmented by the *legitimate authority* that has been conferred on them by citizens in democratic societies who have elected representatives to government to deal with issues of social concern and public interest. Over time, governments, empowered by these two sources of power, have co-evolved -- along with their increasingly more diverse societies -- to become a tremendous force for social coordination, albeit in a centralized, top-down fashion that was ultimately embodied in the notion of the Welfare State.

Yet a quick scan of recent media easily reveals evidence of a great erosion of both the government's *legitimate authority* as well as its coercive, or *perceived power*. The perception that government leaders are ineffective and/or unethical is wearing away at the former, while technical innovation is eating into the latter.

Whether it is highly regarded public officials being charged with "gangsterism"[xxxiii] or corruption or threatened with a litany of impeachable offences; or the growing perception that the people in government just cannot be relied upon to get things done, the legitimacy of government is regularly being called into question. This is further illustrated by the inability of governments to:

- direct their economies in response to global forces beyond its borders[xxxiv];
- make significant impact on issues like climate change;
- address the escalating income gap and widespread poverty; or even
- tackle public sector indebtedness.

The general perception is that governments are ineffective when it comes to dealing with the complex concerns that matter to their citizens.

Simultaneously, emerging technical innovations like "Bitcoin," which operate independent of government monetary control,[xxxv] or new forms of AI, artificial intelligence, that can coordinate among numerous technological devices independent of human direction, or even the repeated and intrusive hacks by small groups or individuals into government electronic infrastructures[2] all these suggest that governments are no longer as much in control as they once were.

Take away both of these enabling tools—*legitimate authority* and *perceived power*—it then becomes reasonable to question whether governments will continue to be trusted to fulfill their traditional role as the principal coordinator of society. For some governments, like, for instance, Canada's federal government, the task of providing social coordination has simply been vacated,[xxxvi] in favour of a focus on redistribution to mitigate the impacts of its coordination failures. But as problems mount, the cost of relying on redistribution will soon become unaffordable or inequitable or both.

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[2] Like the Russian hacking of the Democratic National Convention during the 2016 US presidential election that was identified by US intelligence agencies and the manipulation of social media in favour of Donald Trump.

Restoring the ability of governments to effectively orchestrate social coordination lies somewhere between two collaborative maxims: *be helpful* to others, and *don't take all the credit*. Instead of seeking legitimacy from being able to impose solutions on others, governments today are more likely to garner the legitimacy they so desperately seek by helping others to solve their own problems in their own way.

For instance, it has been amply demonstrated that the standardized solutions characteristic of the Welfare State do not work for everyone, everywhere. And oftentimes these solutions are found to be palliative at best. However, being able to help those most affected by a problem to help themselves—with contributions of knowledge, resources or influence—dramatically increases the likelihood that local, customized solutions will actually work and make a real difference for those in need[xxxvii].

When governments can act in this way as effective brokers or helpful partners, their reputations in communities soar. Those partners who are helped quite naturally tend to acknowledge the support provided by government, and in the end, there is no greater legitimacy than that which is bestowed upon you by others. While there is always some legitimacy to be derived from being able to punish people or enact laws, it pales beside the legitimacy generated from *perceived generosity*. Such legitimacy is naturally attractive: people *want* to work with you, they *want* you to work with them, as opposed to being forced to work with you or for you. It showers its recipients with a collective power that is *willingly* bestowed by others, as opposed to the power that governments have traditionally just taken for themselves.

Unfortunately, the notion of *perceived generosity* is clearly lacking among today's leaders of government, because they remain stuck in an inherently feudal mindset of government by control. But if governments could foster reputations that flow from their *perceived generosity,* then they will acquire a new place of respect and trust among the citizenry. But we are far from there.

Says Larry Diamond, "Democracies fail when people lose faith in them,"[xxxviii] that is, when the mechanisms for 'government by the people' are no longer perceived as being effective or in the interests of the people. Former Canadian Prime Minister Joe Clark recently put a slightly different spin on this idea. He said, "I think the greatest threat to Canada is not some disease that will come, not some attack that will come. But we will just grow sufficiently indifferent [to each other] that instead of finding national reasons to come together, to be our best, to be excited about our whole country, we sort of slip off into our gated communities and stay there and watch the world go by."[xxxix]

But how does this type of isolationism become our "greatest threat" while we still live in a democratically governed country? It can only be that over time our democratic institutions have somehow encouraged it, through an inability to foster shared purpose, shared learning, shared decision making and shared progress. In isolation, we can no longer stand together against common threats. We can no longer work together for a better future for all. We become hostages to our own ignorance and the targets of grifters and bullies. This wasn't always the case. But apparently it is becoming more so.

By being indifferent to each other, or retreating into a mean-spirited and isolationist "us-them" mentalities, we risk losing our sense of wholeness as an inspiration for national creativity and collective strength. Without it, the *spirit* of democracy dies within us even if democracy's *forms* remain. And with that death, we enable the foundations of fear and terror to emerge from our continuous exposure to a world full of differences and uncertainty.

Those leaders who seek to separate us, or diminish our diversity, or who would have people turn against one another, are incapable of seeing beyond the most obvious limitations, or of productively utilizing life's great gift of diversity. In that light, the long decline in public sector legitimacy may also be tied to the inability of its leaders to connect with society's rich tapestry of people, and the inability of those leaders to articulate the wholeness which emerges from us all. And without that sense of wholeness, the task of governing for everyone has become immensely more difficult, if not impossible.

Who then, if not the leaders of government, is equipped to change government and make it more cognizant of the whole and more adaptable to an ever-evolving environment? The only reasonable answer to that question is: those who are the actual owners of government—*we the citizens*.

But how would we, as individual citizens, go about doing that?

To begin with, we must be able to imagine and give expression to a future which we are all willing to share. That means we need to develop a "capacity to imagine" together. We need to be able to describe those possible futures in which we are willing to live into, as well as the ability to share them broadly with each other so we can establish common ground. What public good could be greater?

Believing that my future can come only at the expense of another's is a tried and true recipe for great tragedy. Similarly, believing that the future must be like the past is a ludicrous invitation to recreating the shortcomings of the past in the future. There is no more certainty to be gained from trying to impose the past on the future, than there is in trying to use the knowledge of horse-drawn buggies as a guide for space travel. The past is past, so leave it there—no matter what the populists would like us to believe.

Finally, a shared future is grounded in the aspirations that I share with others -- things like family, good health, or purpose in life. However, the only path to learning these shared aspirations is through conversation and dialogue. We must actively engage in conversations with those 'not like us', so we can learn what we share in common, to overcome that which separates us. Through sharing we create anew.

A community, a country, humanity as a whole -- these are all emergent phenomena. They are never static. They are always changing as people and ideas move through them. Government too is a living, constantly evolving phenomenon. Therefore, trying to specify the exact nature of a government yet to unfold is a futile exercise. It will be what it becomes. But that doesn't mean we can't imagine a future we'd like to live into, or identify some of the basic buildings blocks of a government that could possibly bring that vision into reality.

We might begin by considering what isn't working and what is likely to be needed to get us to where we need to go. It's no accident that the growing connectivity of the Internet has led many to question the very foundations upon which our governments were built—notions like representative government, the use of experts, and the obsession of equality over basic fairness. Greater access to information has increased the likelihood that people will ask questions. And with more than half the world's population now using smart phones and able to connect with one another, it's not just the world's most repressive regimes that are being questioned, but the world's most democratic ones as well.

In light of all this global scrutiny, it's no longer enough to be content with simply reforming existing governments—that is, fiddling around their edges[xl], adopting, say, a newer, friendlier language of cooperation, while keeping the same old structures and operational assumptions alive. In case some haven't noticed, many people are looking for significant and real change. This is amply demonstrated with their choices of leaders like US President Donald Trump, Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary, President Recep Erdoğan of Turkey, Brazil's new president, Jair Bolsonaro, and many others. But they don't always know what form that change should take. "What could be worse?" they often say. However, a quick look at history provides an easy answer to that question – lots! Unfortunately, not everyone is a fan of history.

Despite governments, and even democracy itself, appearing to have fallen out of favour with many people around the world, serious discussions to bring our antiquated systems of governance up-to-date, nevertheless remain by and large taboo topics. The idea of possibly walking away from our Westminster or republican models of government is considered heresy, not only among those involved in the public sector, but also by a public brainwashed into believing this man-made process has now gained the status of something sacred and inviolable—despite its obvious flaws and dysfunctionalities.

Not to belabour the point but, the original design assumptions of our system of representative democracy no longer exist; the monopoly that governments once had on social coordination has ended; and the traditional Western models of government have been largely hollowed out in practice by both extreme partisanship and cult leadership. As a consequence, an entire generation of people from around the world has begun to lose faith in democracy altogether[xli].

My home country, Canada, is not immune to these anti-democratic tendencies. At one point, the cover of Canada's national newsmagazine, *Macleans,* screamed[xlii] *,* "The House of Commons is a Sham." More recently, the *Ottawa Citizen* claimed Canada's Parliament was "close to a point of no return"[xliii], that is to becoming simply a ceremonial body instead of being the central pillar of Canadian democracy. Unfortunately, this decline won't be remedied by a selfie-friendly Prime Minister or by provincial premiers intent on shifting costs to others. When opinion makers in the past referred to Canada as the "friendly dictatorship"[xliv], people thought it was a clever turn of phrase. Yet, one after the other, Canada's political leaders have continued to flaunt their distaste for the inconvenience of Parliament[xlv], its institutions[xlvi] and its traditions.

In the media, you periodically hear about lingering public concerns:

- the provision of quality health care;
- climate change;
- issues around indigenous peoples;
- the reduction of poverty;
- the increasing infrastructure deficit;
- the balancing of privacy and security;
- the growing unaffordability of education; and
- the incapacity of governments to successfully manage the economy.

The very persistent nature of these concerns should be enough to flag the fact that they are, together with their solutions, systemic in nature, requiring contributions from many different people and groups, and often crossing the lines between business, government and civil society. Unfortunately, our political 'leaders' aren't paying attention beyond taking the most politically expedient position.

Against this backdrop of ineffectiveness, there are also a number of emerging policy challenges which demand unconditionally that governments operate in a more open and collaborative way and underscoring a critical need for governments to function differently in the future. These emerging challenges are even more fundamental, existential in some cases, but they receive scant public attention. These include concerns such as:

- the global viability of perpetual economic growth;
- the future of human work in an era of ubiquitous technology;
- the growing risks to humanity of unrestrained and democratized technological advancement;
- the impact of unconstrained population growth;
- the growing threats to accessing basic resources (such as water, food, housing, and security);
- the inequitable distribution of society's wealth;
- the destabilizing threats of mass migration; and
- the continued solvency of governments addicted to debt.

And as profound as these public policy concerns are on their own, they are further complicated by the Internet and the tools of the digital era. What all of these concerns have in common is their complexity, their inherent "unknowableness", and their resistance to quick answers.

Significantly, however, they also represent shared problems. That is, we – each government, each department, each business, each civil society organization, each citizen – we all contribute to these problems through our actions and inactions. Consequently, we can and should contribute to their solutions. Furthermore, all these problems are coming to the fore simultaneously, adding immensely to the coordination challenge imposed on governments.

To make progress on these fronts, we need to pool our knowledge, our resources, our creativity and our power. As a result, governments must relinquish their claims to having all the answers, the knowledge, the resources, or the power to unilaterally affect the solutions desired by their

citizens. The function of governance is now one that has become widely distributed, requiring many people, many minds, many hearts, and many organizations in and out of government to cooperate and coordinate amongst themselves.

Furthermore, in today's era of innovation we also find ourselves endowed with more than just the two models for resolving society' coordination challenges. Historically, government leaders have often met large social challenges either by *reducing social diversity* (and all the harshness and social violence that implies) or by imposing more comprehensive and severe *systems of control* (as China appears to be doing currently with its "social credit system"[xlvii]).

Today, however, we can also add coordination options generated from a variety of new technologies that effect coordination among electronic devices, global connectivity and access to information via the Internet. This internet connectivity also enables a further option of a broad, network-style, participatory democracy that has the potential to engage any and all, somewhat reminiscent of how the ancient Greeks may have first envisioned democracy.

Whatever the future may ultimately bring, the chronic inability of governments to meet the needs of their citizens has already inspired a host of new, creative behaviours—behaviours that are occurring both on the margins of government and external to it. These changes tend to embody one or more of the following mental shifts:

- Reframing our assumptions and technologies for social coordination;
- Focusing on results instead of political positioning;
- Focusing on scalable learning as opposed to scalable efficiency;
- Redesigning government to foster collaboration;
- Shifting our models of governance from top-down leadership to co-ownership and stewardship; and
- Generating stewardship from process design.

One of the most universally accepted complaints of modern government is that it is overly bureaucratic, i.e. following rules instead of pursuing context dependent learning and judgement. Yet simply laying the responsibility for revitalizing our bureaucratic government organizations at the feet of individual leaders will prove fruitless. "No single leader, however enlightened", say Hamel and Zanini, "can convince a couple of hundred [senior executives] to redefine their self interest, give away a chunk of their authority, and start acting like mentors instead of overlords… the bureaucracy is going to win every time." [xlviii]

What's needed, they say, "is an approach to reinventing management that is far more courageous, spirited and collaborative than anything we've tried thus far. We need something that routes around the old power structure, builds a coalition of the willing, exploits the power of combinatorial thinking, is deeply principled yet grounded in reality; and simultaneously revolutionary and evolutionary." Theirs's is an open invitation for a different way of thinking -- one grounded in shared ownership and mutual responsibility.

Frederic Laloux makes the case that organizations and social institutions are a reflection of our collective consciousness. These institutions change when we change. For instance, absolute monarchy, feudalism, and slavery were all once deeply entrenched in society. But that didn't mean they were unchangeable because they were all *human* institutions. We created them, so we could uncreate them -- and we did.

So too with top-down bureaucracy. As Hamel and Zanini assert, we must wake up from our blind acceptance of it; and know it for the moral failure that it is: a process of rules over judgement, and of personal weakness and negligence over ownership and responsibility. We need to trade our acquiescence to it for the moral indignation that bureaucracy, as we have known for a long time, is just wrong. Not only is it unproductive but it is deeply at odds with our human nature and our sense of self-governance. It is the last vestige of an aristocratic or empirical past that is no longer helpful in guiding humanity towards a more fulfilling future. As a cornerstone of government, we must eliminate this top-down, bureaucratic model.

Yet despite the anticipated resistance to changing the current governmental model, just the act of "imagining what might be" may offer sufficient leverage to make a clear break from traditional thinking. If we can forgo our assumption that the future of government must always be like the past, then by imagining a different future, we open ourselves up to the steps we'll need to achieve it and tools we'll need to get us there. The collaborative challenges of our times are sufficiently great that we need people -- lots and lots of people, thinking about what might be, and having the courage and enough skin in the game to be willing to embrace change -- so that we can bring into being that which we can all imagine together.

While to some, engaged as they are in the day-to-day activities of government, the very idea of transforming the giant behemoth called 'government' may seem impossible or unimaginable, it isn't really. It's already being done! It's being done probably by members of their own organization, by people who are so genuinely committed to public service and to making a difference for citizens that they will find whatever route works. And at the core of their transformation is a simple psychological shift from "Thou shalt do this" to "How can we help?"

Beyond this, very little new needs to be invented. The collaborative tools are all basically there. New collaborative technology tools appear almost monthly. Even the social technologies that facilitate collaboration might be no more than those already being employed among healthy families and networks of friends. Therefore, it's not good enough to claim that "I can't," because "you can." You can certainly do what you can do, and then connect to find that together "we can" do something which is much greater. This has been the historical promise of both our communities and our democracy.

And that transformation begins in earnest with a simple choice about the future that you want for yourself, your children and grandchildren—that is, if you want to avoid someone else's future being thrust upon you unwillingly.

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