

Chapter XXXVI

E–Government in Canada and Denmark: Contrasting Local and Inter–Governmental Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will compare the emergence of e-government in Denmark and Canada with a particular emphasis on the municipal and inter-governmental dimensions to the digital adaptation of the public sector. Denmark and Canada share many general traits in terms of the emergence of e-government in both countries. Internet and telecommunications infrastructures are well developed, widely accessible, and (on a relative basis) affordably priced; both countries enjoy high standards of living. Local governments differ greatly, however, in terms of political responsibility and autonomy, financing capacities, and degrees of influence over more senior order government levels. These differences are particularly evident in the field of healthcare, but they are also more generalized and the implications for e-government will be considered in terms of likely future trajectories of public sector reform and democratic legitimacy in each country. In particular, an important lesson derived from this chapter is that Canada faces greater challenges than Denmark in collaborating across jurisdictional boundaries and that weaker municipal capacity within the Canadian context is central to this concern.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter will compare the emergence of e-government in Denmark and Canada with a particular emphasis on the municipal and inter-

governmental dimensions to the digital adaptation of the public sector. My own approach to e-government in Canada adopts the following definition of e-government that itself originates elsewhere, having circulated around various OECD countries

in recent years: ‘The continuous innovation in the delivery of services, citizen participation, and governance through the transformation of external and internal relationships by the use of information technology, especially the Internet’ (Roy, 2006a). This definition usefully underscores the fluidity of relational governance both between actors within the public sector and externally with stakeholders including the citizenry and industry.

A complementary way to further dissect the e-government agenda and the types of relational changes occurring throughout the public sector is to invoke four dimensions of change – service, security, transparency, and trust (Roy, 2006a). The first two of these dimensions (service and security) typically reflect the incremental efforts of government authorities to adopt new technologies for new service delivery and decision-making models, while holding constant existing political, democratic institutions. Transparency and trust, by contrast, are more rooted in external pressures on the public sector to be more open and accountable and to rethink democratic processes more generally in response to pressures from a more informed and engaged citizenry. These four dimensions will be explained a bit further before proceeding with a review of Canadian and Danish experiences and how they compare.

Denmark and Canada share many general traits in terms of the emergence of e-government in both countries. Internet and telecommunications infrastructures are well developed, widely accessible and (on a relative basis) affordably priced, and both countries enjoy high standards of living. There is a tradition of strong government involvement in many aspects of societal and economic development and in terms of e-government specifically, both countries are regularly ranked among a group of global leaders that not surprisingly comprises the world’s richest nations (with the most digitally advanced jurisdictions seemingly clustered in Scandinavia, as underscored by the most recent global e-government survey undertaken by the United Nations, the details of

which are reviewed below). Local governments differ greatly, however, in terms of political responsibility and autonomy, financing capacities and degrees of influence over more senior order government levels.

These differences are particularly evident in the field of health care but they are also more generalized and the implications for e-government, across the four aforementioned dimensions, will be considered in terms of likely future trajectories of public sector reform and democratic legitimacy in each country. In particular, an important lesson derived from this chapter is that Canada suffers from a form of paradox of the digital age, namely that formal political federations – conceived to better coordinate resources and responsibilities across jurisdictional boundaries, now face greater challenges in collaborating across jurisdictional boundaries than unitary countries (Langford & Roy, 2008). Differing municipal capacities within each country’s model of public sector governance is central to this concern.

This chapter is organized as follows. Section two presents four conceptual dimensions of e-government in order to help frame subsequent discussion and assessment. The third section reviews the evolution of e-government in Canada and Denmark, with a specific focus at the national level whereas section four then examines the municipal and inter-governmental perspective while also contrasting municipal capacities in each case. E-health is a specific focus less in terms of health care specificities than in inter-governmental dynamics and the implications for localized governance and government in a digital era. A brief conclusion follows in section five.

FOUR DIMENSIONS OF E-GOVERNMENT

As noted in the introduction, one useful way to dissect e-government and the types of relational, managerial and governance changes occurring

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