

# On guard in a global environment

A brief about modernizing our Canadian Senate

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This brief is based on an [online essay](#).

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## Introduction [1](#)

In October 2015, 38 senators met for three days to discuss how our Senate might be modernized. Subsequently, on December 11, the Senate moved to strike a 15-member Special Committee on Senate Modernization. The debates leading up to this mostly concerned the functioning of the Senate. This brief is intended as a supplement that primarily concerns the role of the Senate, which, consequently, calls for adapting its functioning as well. [1-1](#)

The 19th-century constitutional theorist, Walter Bagehot, remarked with regard to the British parliamentary system, "If we had an ideal House of Commons ... it is certain we should not need a higher Chamber." In the process of adapting the Upper Chamber to our country, balancing regional interests became a *sine-qua-non*, which is still reflected in the fact that the Advisory Board on Senate Appointments soon to be formed will begin by recommending some people from underrepresented regions. [1-2](#)

Senators, as stated in their writ of summons, are appointed "for the purpose of obtaining your advice and assistance in all weighty and arduous affairs which may be the State and Defence of Canada concern." One weighty matter confronting Canada is the perilous state of our democracy. Another is the wellbeing of Canadians in a global environment over which we have, at best, but little control. In fact, even our very own democracy may be further damaged by an apparently widening trend to populism brought on by fear and hatred. [1-3](#)

## Senate's role [2](#)

In November, 1980, The Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs listed these four roles of the Senate, all of which are complementary to the functions of the House of Commons: [2-1](#)

- a revising legislative role;
- an investigative role;
- a regional representative role;
- a protector of linguistic and other minorities role. [2-2](#)

This brief advocates that the investigative role ought to be expanded to: [2-3](#)

- an investigative, anticipating, and critical problem-solving role. [2-4](#)

Such an expansion affects the Senate's workload and/or its capability to do things right. [2-5](#)

[A Legislative and Historical Overview of the Senate of Canada](#) (2001) quotes a professor F.A. Kunz, author of *The Modern Senate of Canada* (1965): [2-6](#)

"Governments have invariably found the Senate a well-suited place for first consideration of voluminous, complex, and highly technical pieces of legislation, such as consolidating measures, requiring great legislative experience as well as legal and financial talent and leisurely procedure. The services rendered by the Senate in such instances have been more than simple time-saving for the House of Commons; the Senate has turned out reliable and enduring pieces of legislation, which are amongst the best framed and most competently constructed Acts on the Statute Book of Canada." [2-7](#)

That was written 50 years ago. The words "great legislative experience as well as legal and financial talent" need be expanded by "plus a further, wide variety of professional experiences and expert talent." [2-8](#)

## Democracy in peril [3](#)

Numerous are the signs of our democracy being endangered. At the root is an electorate that is poorly informed. Especially when livelihoods are under siege, people have more immediately pressing matters on their minds than politics and government. Here are some of those signs. [3-1](#)

Canadians value democracy, or so it is said. But voter turnout zigzagged down from a 79.4% peak in 1958 to 61.1% in 2011. That is a huge drop. Not even reflected by these numbers is a far steeper decline in the turnout of eligible voters between ages 18 and 24 (an international phenomenon, actually). One measure advocated is lowering the voting age, but shouldn't we consider how well-informed our electorate is about, both, the issues we all face and about our system of government. (Voter turnout in the dramatic 2015 election went up to 68.3%.) [3-2](#)

On April 7, 2015, the Angus Reid Institute published the results of a poll to establish how well informed people's opinions are about whether our Senate should be abolished, reformed, or left as is. Of those expressing opinions on these issues: [3-3](#)

- 19 % followed them in the news and discussed them with friends,
- 36 % saw some media coverage and had the odd conversation,
- 29 % just scanned headlines, and
- 16 % hadn't seen or heard anything about it. [3-4](#)

On December 22, 2015, a piece in the *Globe and Mail* explained why (some?) newspapers are dropping their comment sections that accompany certain articles. They are mostly drivel, and costly to boot. Writes the author: "People just turned out to be so much dumber than we had hoped. Dumber, angrier, more irrational, impulsive. People are just scary. What does this do for our enshrinement of democracy?" [3-5](#)

Public "opinion" (for want of a better word) rides the crests of waves. The recent, long federal election campaign began with Quebeckers riding the orange wave and ended with them riding the red wave (even though the name Trudeau was supposedly hard to swallow). Presumably, this is the outcome of work by election strategists—strategists who read the public mind and are now the principal advisors in the PMO. [3-6](#)

As for thinking Canadians, electing members of parliament puts them in a quandary: Are we to elect a person whom we feel best represents our personal, business or regional interests? Or do we elect the political party whose philosophy—or rather, whose platform-of-the-day—a campaigner espouses? [3-7](#)

Consider, if you will, planks in party platforms. One may prefer the Conservatives' stance on our military's role in the Middle East and the Green Party's stance on environmental issues. And, yet .... [3-8](#)

Published in 2015, former Ontario Premier Bob Rae wrote *What's happened to politics?* Here is a quote from the book: "In Canadian politics, the gap between governing and campaigning has pretty much disappeared. I know from my own experience and talking with other politicians that governing was always seen as something different from campaigning. What we're seeing now is that campaigning never stops. The relentless messaging; the use of Question Period for messaging; the use of every government press release as a way of packaging, identifying, and branding never stops, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The perpetual campaign makes it very hard for citizens to see the process of governing and how Parliament is supposed to work as a deliberative body." [3-9](#)

A year earlier, former Nova Scotia's finance minister Graham Steele came out with *What I Learned in Politics* in which he advised politicians: "The voters have generally not any idea of what you're doing.... Keep it simple. Policy debates are for losers. Focus on what is most likely to sink in with the distracted electorate which is slogans, scandals, personalities, pictures, and images." He also informs his readers that people get into politics not knowing how to be effective. "It takes a long time to become effective" and elsewhere: "Policy is not done in places where it is supposed to be done. Policy does get done. It gets done around the edges. It gets done within the civil service." (A Martian visiting Earth might wonder whether those plumbing for an elected Senate do not do so for an elected civil service as well!) [3-10](#)

Here is a paragraph by C.E.S. Franks, professor emeritus of Political Studies at Queen's University, found in a collection of essays in *Protecting Canadian Democracy: The Senate you never knew* (2003), a book edited by the Hon. Senator Serge Joyal: [3-11](#)

“Much of the membership of the House of Commons is inexperienced and amateur to the point that members cannot perform their functions well. Amateurism in this sense means a lack of political experience before entering the House of Commons, a brief stay in the House itself, and a lack of other qualifications such as higher education, professional qualifications, and work experience indicative of high ability. Particularly on the scores of previous political experience and length of tenure, the Canadian House of Commons is one of the most amateur assemblies among the advanced Western nations. The average member of the Canadian House of Commons serves in the House a little more than four years, compared with more than eight years in Britain, and much longer for members of the American House of Representatives. Short tenures in the House means that many members are still finding their way and are not able to have much influence on parliamentary business before they are defeated and choose to leave.” [3-12](#)

Given these defects in both the electorate and in those elected, it is good to have a Senate whose members are generally older than members of the Commons. Most senators have come from the other side, the side where politics plays out. They understand that side perfectly well and even if the Senate has, by our Constitution, no say in the affairs of the Commons, it ought to be in as good a position as any other body or person to give thought to bringing about improvement in the situation and, hence, offer appropriate advice. Such would be part of the Senate's investigative and problem-solving role. [3-13](#)

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## **The nitty-gritty** [4](#)

Clearly, the problem is not a simple one to solve. For one thing, those elected respond to the electorate and, hence we need an electorate that performs as true citizens. This calls for effective, goal-directed education and educational media while avoiding the pitfalls of propaganda. The Senate needs the needed skills to get things rolling in this direction—skills in the design of educational curriculae, in communication, in digital technology, what-have-you. Executing the task involves a great deal of integration of diverse thinking. What all this amounts to is that our Senate needs a broader range of skills than is currently available to it other than seeking the best available consultants' advice. This is because integration is the nub, which is the major message of this brief. Linked problems call for linked solutions. [4-1](#)

Attempting to get our democracy out of the doldrums is one task that calls for objective evaluation and action. It is likely to be also a task that will stretch out over a lengthy period of time. Expect that during that time more pressing issues will pop up and will do so at an accelerating pace in an increasingly integrated and complex world in which priority must be given to the more urgent developments. This is where anticipation comes in because anticipation permits thought to be given to threats not yet immediately upon us. Here is an example of a threat lurking around the corner. [4-2](#)

The 2014 annual [Millennium Project Report on the State of the Future](#) tells us: "While much of the world's attention focuses on the horrors of extremists and intrastate conflicts, thought-leaders such as

Stephen Hawking, Elon Musk, and Bill Gates are warning the world about the potential dangers of artificial intelligence growing beyond human control. Whether A.I. can evolve into the nightmares of science fiction or not, it is certain that it and other future technologies (*e.g.*, robotics, synthetic biology, computational science, nanotechnology, quantum computing, 3D and 4D printing, Internet of Things, cognitive science, self-driving vehicles, and synergies among these) will change what we think is possible over the next several decades, but they could also lead to massive unemployment." [4-3](#)

“An innovative strategic thinking approach is needed about fundamental changes in the nature of work, economics, and education that will be required to prevent mass unemployment and increased income gaps.” [4-4](#)

In this case, experts engaged in this issue are already doing much of the preliminary work, which goes to show that our Senate does not need to start from scratch in every project it tackles. [4-5](#)

Now for an example of a problem the world might well have anticipated: terrorism. [4-6](#)

Canadian academic Thomas Homer-Dixon, in his *The ingenuity gap* (2000) anticipated enormous problems arising from Pakistan's massive unemployment of young people. Hopelessness and discontent, aided by propaganda, greatly assist in filling the ranks of ISIS. From Pakistani unemployment to indoctrination in madrasses, to Islamic fundamentalism, to filling the ranks of terrorist organizations: a stream of occurrences that is getting (has gotten?) out of hand because of insufficient attention. [4-7](#)

Actually, the principal focus of Homer-Dixon's book is that problems faced by our society are becoming increasingly complex and that our ability to implement solutions is not keeping pace. He perceives the ingenuity gap as a critical gap between our need for ideas to solve complex problems and our actual supply of those ideas. A widening gap can result in political disintegration and violent upheaval. He wrote that 15 years ago and the problem has become full-blown. [4-8](#)

[Part II of the essay](#) underlying this brief is a collection of notes some issues badly in need of addressing. Broadly they concern our economy, climate change, terrorism, education and information—the usual. But ingrained in these notes is how these issues are strongly interlinked and cannot be addressed as distinct categories. If this seems obvious, please consider our government departments and agencies with their distinct, circumscribed responsibilities. Are they not mostly doing just that? Hence, is it unreasonable to look to our Senate for providing the necessary linking? Who else? [4-9](#)

Yes, the government may form a think tank as a distinct advisory agency. But it is our Senate who, because of our Constitution, can apply the brakes when our government is about to go on the wrong track. [4-10](#)

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**Baby steps** [5](#)

All of which brings us to the question: how do we go about this? How do we deal with this seemingly impossible tall order? One way is to busy ourselves with other things so as to avoid dealing with it—Après nous le déluge. But if, over the last decade or so, the Chinese had taken this approach they

would not have advanced as a people and as a world power the way they have. [5-1](#)

And so, back to the question, "How do we go about this?" Whatever we do, we must bear in mind that we are entering poorly charted territory. We shall go through a period of transition and this certainly is not the time to call for constitutional change. Besides, we may not succeed. But let's put useless pessimism aside and leave it to the critics to come up with better solutions instead of pooh-poohing the work of those who do. [5-2](#)

This writer has no expertise in any of the issues here discussed. His views are those of an ordinary citizen, a person whose attention to how we are governed is continually disturbed by many other matters. Henceforth, his first recommendation is that the Committee calls upon people experienced in certain matters to provide critical advice and recommendations for immediate appointments to the Senate. Those recommendations could then be passed on to the Advisory Board on Senate Appointments, to our Minister of Democratic Reform, and to our Prime Minister. This brief is about to suggest with what kind of people we should approach to begin with. [5-3](#)

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## **“Heart and brain” [6](#)**

In keeping with the Senate's representative role and that of protector of minority rights, the essay suggests that as preliminary we perceive two distinctly different groups of senators: [6-1](#)

- Those with a thorough knowledge of our regions and cultural/religious communities,
- Those with professional expertise and well-connected in a wide array of fields. [6-2](#)

The first group represents Canadians directly ("representative senators"); the other group represents Canadians indirectly ("complex-problem solvers"). The first group broadly looks after regional rights and the rights of minorities. This cuts close to a provision in the Charlottetown Accord proposed in 1992: senators selected by the provinces. The second group stands on guard for our country as a whole. Working within a framework of 105 senators in total, the essay tentatively suggests a 38 : 67 split with the required legal expertise residing in the second group. It is further perceived that bills are voted on by the Senate as a whole, in other words that both regional and national interests are properly balanced. [6-3](#)

The current Speaker of the Senate has been appointed by the government. This looks fortunate because this may help provide a good rapport between him and the advisory board for recommending appointments to fill Senate seats now vacant. But eventually, it would be the Senate who will select their Speaker. [6-4](#)

There ought to be another senator of about equal rank tasked with directing the complex-problem solvers, a person with relevant experience. Think of him or her as an R&D executive who in consultation with the Speaker assigns priorities to the work to be done and appoints committees with the blend of expertise presumably best suited to each task—committees whose composition may be altered as insights develop.) [6-5](#)

## Diversity [7](#)

When we as Canadians think about diversity, we typically think of multiculturalism, *i.e.* differences in race, culture, religious beliefs, those sort of things. This kind of diversity is called *identity diversity*. It also includes gender and socioeconomic status. Not mentioned here is specialization in professional domains. That comes under the rubric *cognitive diversity*. Cognitive diversity includes perspectives, or the way we encode problems; heuristics, the tools and tricks used to solve problems; categories, the way we divvy up the world into similar things; models, ways of thinking about causal relationships between categories. It is cognitive diversity rather than identity diversity that makes diverse groups more innovative and productive. To be sure, identity diversity, training, experiences, and interests are important drivers for cognitive diversity; they contribute to how people see the world differently and how people think differently about specific problems. Yes, gender diversity plays a role, but this notion should not be confused with so-called gender equality. [7-1](#)

Canadians have been promised that the recently appointed Advisory Board on Senate Appointments will be guided by public, *merit-based* criteria, in order to identify Canadians who would make a significant contribution to the work of the Senate. The criteria will help ensure a high standard of integrity, collaboration, and non-partisanship in the Senate. It is understood that gender parity will be identified as a strong priority. However, there will likely not be a "hard target" that requires, for instance, that exactly half of all suggested appointments be women. [7-2](#)

To be sure also, whereas talent, expertise are very important, it still remains that collective performance depends on combining and growing diverse talent. Simply put, it is better to have a plumber and an electrician than two good electricians. Cognitive diversity is part and parcel of merit-based criteria. The thought-for blend of expertise and sensitivities might be arrived at by leaning in part on the advice of such regional bodies as provincial and territorial governments (for the "regional representatives"), but to a larger extent on the advice of professional, academic (notably scientific) and commercial associations (for the "cognitive representatives"). This ought to provide the spread of talents well beyond the ken of any PM and his private cabinet, to say nothing of the Commons. [7-3](#)

Suggested here are some kinds of people among the first to be appointed: someone with the vision to anticipate potential hazards in our ever-changing global environment, an expert in wickedly complex problem-solving, an expert in digital technology, an organizational psychologist, and a director of complex problem-solving. [7-4](#)

## Tenure [8](#)

The issue of talent cannot be separate from that of tenure. Form follows function. Domestic and global circumstances change at an accelerating pace and much—even though far from all—of the experience gained by people over a lifetime becomes rapidly outdated. Furthermore, it needs emphasizing that the preparation of many important proposals for government action is itself a complex problem and, hence, senators ought to be up to scratch on techniques especially developed for solving complex problems. Both these points make the desirability of a fixed term limit of age 75, originally intended to strengthen

independence of any senator's opinion from political pressures, questionable. Limiting terms by some fixed duration, even if politically convenient, makes not much sense either. Ideally, a senator's term limit should be based on fitness for the job at hand. The issue of freedom of thought is resolved by ensuring political independence and devising appropriate financial compensation and pension arrangements for efforts and time. [8-1](#)

Are we in need of a Constitutional change about tenure? There is a bit of recent history we might consider. The previous government sought to establish, by constitutional change, senators' term limits. Pending the hoped-for outcome and because a retroactive application of term limits is not feasible, the then Prime Minister, who recommended close to 50 senators for appointment by the Governor-General, only did so upon verbal agreement that the appointees abide by a term limit as set out in any expected legislation to that effect. One would think that, although such legislation has not been forthcoming, some senators might consider it right and honourable to step aside in order to facilitate the process of attaining the wide range of expertise needed. But it may not need to come to that. [8-2](#)

Another way of moving toward our objective is the appointment of extra-constitutional senators *pro temp*, people who function as senators, voting rights included. Yes, there will be all sorts of opinion averse to this idea, but as Senator Joyal observed way back in 1999, "In order to advance the debate, we must set aside the intellectual straight-jacket of the Constitution and contemplate the ways in which Canadian institutions might effectively meet contemporary needs through traditional self-adaptation and conventions." [8-3](#)

Somewhat limiting the choice of candidates is that new appointments need to be made while respecting the constitutionally established regional representations such as Quebec's 24, *etc.*. Of course, eventually it is best to seek a change in the Constitution, but it is expected that a rapidly enhanced usefulness of the ensuing senatorial brain trust ought to make the desired changes attractive to all regions and to the entire electorate. [8-4](#)

Another word about tenure. Currently, senators shall not be younger than 30 years of age. Bearing in mind that among current theories of how best to solve complex problems are ones of mathematical character, we need to recognize that many brilliant mathematical minds are found in people below this lower age limit. On the other hand, younger people are less likely to be cautious—simply a matter of psychological development. Why not have some brilliant young experts serve as squires to more mature senators? [8-5](#)

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## **Distinguishing problems from solutions** [9](#)

The essay is not about how to solve any of the many problems facing us; it is about how our Senate may go about preparing itself for coping with the increasingly complex problems that threaten our very existence. The actual solving of problems is the domain of experts, be they academics, practitioners, business executives, and so forth. What looks like an excellent little book for those wishing to get a quick grasp of what is involved is *Solving complex problems: Professional group decision-making support in highly complex situations* by Alexander de Haan and Pauline de Heer. Here is a quote of one paragraph to help us realize where we ourselves tend to err. [9-1](#)

"Global issues such as climate change, energy supply, health care and sustainability are often seen as 'problems.' But consider how these problems get addressed most of the time: 'we should stimulate the market for the electric car,' 'we should make transition toward hydrogen,' 'let's have vaccinations available in developing countries,' or 'take the train instead of the car.' Think about it, are these problems that are being addressed? No, these are, at best, solutions to problems illustrating that everybody seems to know what should be done about it, but do they know why? Typically, they announce their 'solution' and defend it. This will not help to constructively solve the problem." [9-2](#)

For an example, turn to the previous government's efforts toward elected senators and term limits. Those don't address the very problem of achieving a Senate "for the purpose of obtaining advice and assistance in all weighty and arduous affairs which may be the State and Defence of Canada concern." [9-3](#)

We all know that to sustain ourselves and our families usually requires holding down an income-generating job. Therefore, individuals should concentrate on preparing for a job, and so, as a society we concentrate on maintaining schools and on "creating" jobs if none are available. But as the previous paragraph shows, a lack of jobs is not *the* problem. *The* problem is the need for sustaining ourselves and those we are responsible for. Our societies have developed in such a way that the most common solution to that problem is having a job. In fact, there are many people who do not have a paid job; entrepreneurs, for example. At any rate, one could philosophize along this line till hell freezes over, but we should not lose sight of the fact that we may not have fully explored alternate solutions to the fundamental problem. That is the reason why my essay poses the "stupid" question: "[Create jobs? Why?](#)" and following it through with "There is plenty to do besides holding down jobs in traditional industry and commerce. We are short of quality educators (including well-qualified parents) and health care workers of all stripes. We are short also of time to engage in trying to get a better understanding of our roles as voters and citizens. Parents are too often short of time to do their parenting. We are probably short of time to better hone our skills. And short of time to truly relax, cool our minds, allow time for our scope to widen beyond ourselves and immediate social environments." [9-4](#)

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## **Complex, wicked, super-wicked problems** [10](#)

I have been using the term complex problem throughout, but some complex problems are more complex than others. Hence some distinctions. [10-1](#)

A wicked problem is one that is difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognize. The use of term "wicked" here has come to denote resistance to resolution on top of which, because of complex interdependencies, the effort to solve one aspect of a wicked problem may reveal or create other problems. Problems whose solution calls for a people to change their mindsets and behavior are likely to be wicked problems. Wicked problems include economic, environmental, and political issues such as global climate change, natural hazards, health care, the AIDS epidemic, pandemic influenza, international drug trafficking, nuclear weapons, nuclear energy, waste, and social injustice. ([Ref.](#)) [10-2](#)

Some characteristics of wicked problems: [10-3](#)

- The solution depends on how the problem is framed and *vice versa* (i.e., the problem definition depends on the solution)
- Stakeholders have radically different world views and different frames for understanding the problem.
- The constraints that the problem is subject to and the resources needed to solve it change over time.
- The problem is never solved definitively. [10-4](#)

Super-wicked problems have some additional characteristics: [10-5](#)

- Time is running out.
- No central authority.
- Those seeking to solve the problem are also causing it.
- Policies discount the future irrationally. [10-6](#)

By now we know all too well that economics and environment are strongly intertwined, but many, if not most of us are blind, or blinding themselves, to the fact that it is the environment which occupies the driver's seat." Global warming is a super-wicked problem whose intervention calls for a shelving of our immediate interests to salvage our longer term interests. And that runs into another problem. How can we deal with wicked and super-wicked problems within the constraints of a democracy, no matter how anaemic? That may well call for some state of emergency. Canada's Emergency Act provides for, among other emergencies, a declaration of a public welfare emergency. It would allow for a safeguarding of economic wellbeing, but what still needs looking into are our international trade agreements. A declared state of emergency may last for some five years. Yes, all this looks like rash language, but our measures must forestall worse. [10-7](#)

The term super-wicked problem was introduced and applied to global climate change some years ago and is the subject of a book by Kelly Levin, Benjamin Cashore, Graeme Auld and Steven Bernstein, [\*Overcoming the tragedy of super wicked problems: constraining our future selves to ameliorate global climate change\*](#). One lesson: "Most policy-relevant work on climate change in the social sciences either analyze costs and benefits of particular policy options against important but often narrow sets of objectives or attempts to explain past successes or failures. We argue that an 'applied [forward reasoning](#)' approach is better suited for social scientists seeking to address climate change." [10-8](#)

If the previous paragraph makes the eyes glaze over, worse is to come. But these paragraphs at least demonstrate that our Senate should be augmented with people for whom all this is duck soup and that those people are put in a position to immediately, positively interact with their senatorial colleagues. Digital collaboration, an upcoming topic, may well prove to be most helpful. [10-9](#)

The article referred to is, let's not overlook this, a research paper, nothing even approaching practical application. Nevertheless, the urgency of the problem requires immediate efforts toward coping with it while ongoing research may provide corrections and improvements along the way. [10-10](#)

The abstract further tells us that the four additional characteristics of super-wicked problems listed above "combine to create a policy-making 'tragedy' where traditional analytical techniques are ill equipped to identify solutions, even when it is well recognized that actions must take place soon to

avoid catastrophic future impacts. To overcome this tragedy, greater attention must be given to the generation of path-dependent policy interventions that can 'constrain our future collective selves.' Three diagnostic questions result that orient policy analysis toward understanding how to trigger sticky interventions that, through progressive incremental trajectories, entrench support over time while expanding the populations they cover. Drawing especially from the literature on path dependency, but inverting it to develop policy responses going forward, we illustrate the plausibility of our framework for identifying new areas of research and new ways to think about policy interventions to address super wicked problems." [10-11](#)

This essayist believes that, in practical terms, to "constrain our future collective selves" means declaring a state of emergency. [10-12](#)

Having moved, three years ago, from research toward public policy, the Australian Public Service published a document [Tackling Wicked Problems: A Public Policy Perspective](#) in which it is pointed out that the successful tackling of wicked problems requires a broad recognition and understanding, including from governments and ministers, that there are no quick fixes and simple solutions. It requires thinking that is capable of grasping the big picture, including the interrelationships among the full range of causal factors underlying them. They often require broader, more collaborative and innovative approaches. This may result in the occasional failure or need for policy change or adjustment. [10-13](#)

The document must be carefully read in its entirety. Furthermore, it should be interesting to know how that document was received and acted on. [10-14](#)

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## **Making use of digital technology** [11](#)

Having never ever been near the Upper Chamber, I can't have a clear idea how senators collaborate. No doubt, there is much I should have been familiar with before writing this section. However, one must row with the oars at hand. [11-1](#)

I am taking my cue here from the insights of the late Dr Douglas Engelbart, a pioneer of the digital age whose lifelong quest was "Boosting mankind's capacity for coping with complex, urgent problems." It is the very pursuit of this quest that led him to invent the digital display screen and the computer mouse to facilitate diverse minds to collaboratively produce single documents. Engelbart referred to this as "augmenting the human intellect." [11-2](#)

Engelbart and his team developed a computer editor, later named *Augment*, that permits a wide range of operations (one of them: the collapsing of paragraphs to permit a quick overview of documents by scanning their first lines.) He and his friend Theodor Nelson pioneered hyperlinking. It is hyperlinking that gave birth to those funny purple numbers for identifying paragraphs; very convenient for moving paragraphs around and great time savers for referring to some detail in a lengthy document. They might even be used for replacing marginal notes or proposing revisions in a document. In this instance, the addition of initials and a date stamp provide further identification: 11-3-hk-190116. [11-3-hk-190116](#)

Combine working this way with using a shared folder, such as in *Dropbox*, created especially for an

active committee. This should cut back for the need of committee members to meet at fixed times and places. A member consulting some colleagues in Vancouver can collaboratively write a document with another member who is working in Ottawa. [11-4](#)

Another way of making "marginal notes" digitally is by inking them in as shown in, *e.g.*, in the essay's [Appendix F](#). [11-5](#)

The essay was written over a period of more than two years during which many relevant facts came to my attention, facts I did not know before. As a consequence, apart from some ordinary editing, paragraphs have been changed, moved about, new paragraphs have been inserted, some others deleted, and most recently, the entire essay has been overhauled. But the original paragraph IDs have been kept in place. The essay became to be referred to as *an ongoing essay*. [11-6](#)

It is not suggested here that this is the best way for members of a committee to come up with a final report. Today there are newer tools available for collaborative writing and editing. Putting the use of some such tool together with a tool like *Skype* or, maybe better still, Apple's *Face Time* and, voilà, committee meetings can be held without needing to gather in a committee room. Meetings can even be stretched out over time without the need for any meeting schedules whatsoever. Wouldn't that be efficient? [11-7](#)

A huge advantage of collaborative writing is that it disciplines writers to properly understand one another before issuing their final report; a process of true "collective IQ" at work, mutually augmenting thoughts, a process vastly different from hearing people, noting what they have to say, then reporting on it; a process in which those consulted do not directly participate in writing the final report; a process not too dissimilar from the reporting done by even the best of journalists. [11-8](#)

A thing that strikes one when reading some debates recorded in the Hansard is how they are controlled by clock and calendar. (Ref. The Senate's [Rules of Debate](#).) For example, the so-called second reading of Bill S-8 during the 40th Parliament, *An Act Respecting the Selection of Senators*, took ten sessions stretched over a period from April 29, 2010 through March 10, 2011. The bill was verbally introduced (45 min. allowed) at the outset of the first session followed by other senators' remarks ordinarily restricted to 15 min. although a critic of a bill is allowed 45 min. The roster of senators attending varied from session to session. No doubt that there are good reasons for doing things that way if not merely following time-honoured tradition, or a bit of both. But it does not seem to be the most efficient way of taking care of business. [11-9](#)

It is also striking that four of those sessions had gone by before Senator Joyal spoke about something essential: the legal framework surrounding the issue under discussion. Had his mind and those of other senators been properly integrated at an earlier point in time (in this simple instance commonly known as "consulting"), an enormous amount of time and effort could have been put to better use. [11-10](#)

It is understood that senators can make good use of the delays between sessions for thinking about things, for looking up facts, for preparing a comment slated for a next session, but on the whole, the process seems exceedingly inefficient and, hence, costly. On top of this, I was shocked by a comment the Hon. Senator Bellemare made during the debate leading up to the striking of this committee: [11-11](#)

"If someone were to ask me what has struck me the most in my three years in the Senate, I would say

that it is the fact that there is no debate in this chamber. There is some debate, but most of the time people don't listen to each other. They plug their ears, close their eyes or look elsewhere. They don't look at each other, so the debate doesn't exist. There is no added value." [11-12](#)

Interesting. An honest and important observation by one who knows what goes on in lecture halls and class rooms. Reading from the Hansard, one must wonder how our senators can take so much verbal torture while maintaining that strict decorum of times long gone by. [11-13](#)

Also looking at the Hansard, I am inclined to believe that our Senate has an excellent support staff with the capability of recording and putting into text Senate sessions, doing simultaneous translating, and all sorts of digital IT work. Surely, working with those kinds of professionals to develop improvements along the lines here discussed ought to produce an outcome that will make senators' work quite a bit more comfortable and more productive, and by faster-acting not unduly long hold up bills sent up from the Commons. This might include checking out various commercial solutions currently available—*Duplex*, just to name an example. No free advertising intended, the following paragraph ought to give a feel of such a modern tool. [11-14](#)

*Duplex* is a distributed collaborative editor for users connected through a large-scale environment such as the Internet. Large-scale implies heterogeneity, unpredictable communication delays and failures, and inefficient implementations of techniques traditionally used for collaborative editing in local area networks. To cope with these unfavorable conditions, Duplex proposes a model based on splitting the document into independent parts, maintained individually and replicated by a kernel. Users act on document parts and interact with co-authors using a local environment providing a safe store and recovery mechanisms against failures or divergence with co-authors. Communication is reduced to a minimum, allowing disconnected operation. Atomicity, concurrency, and replica control are confined to a manageable small context. [11-15](#)

Is this the best solution available? Our Senate's IT people should be able to find out and evaluate all sorts of alternatives that are out there. For some general overview, one might read, for example, the article [Computer-supported Cooperative Work](#). [11-16](#)

With so much to be gained from digital collaboration, why not put it to the test? [11-17](#)

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