The Internet and Representative Democracy: a doomed marriage?

Lessons learned from the Downing Street e-Petition Website and the case of the 2007 Road-Tax petition.

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Abstract

The paper questions a conventional line of interpretation of the political relevance of the Internet in democratic countries: if on the one hand new communication media such as the Internet represent a positive element in the fight against the hubris of power; on the other hand, the same technologies can serve the agenda of those who want to influence popular consent in support of questionable politics and, hence, hinder the representative system in its very essence. To elucidate this point, the paper focuses on the *Road Tax* online-petition that in the early months of 2007 attracted almost 2 million signatures on the UK Government e-Petition website. My argument here is that when simple and historical democratic means such as petitions are coupled with the new generation of Web technologies the outcome might be unexpected. The road-tax petition will serve us as a blue print of: the possibilities embedded in the use of new technologies within representative democratic systems; the challenges they pose for democracy, and their unforeseen consequences.

Key words: e-petitions, e-democracy, web 2.0., road tax, Britain, Internet, politics.

The web offers people the chance to express their views at very little cost and, as this week has shown, generate a national debate at the click of a mouse.

Tony Blair, 18 Feb. 2007

Started off as a closed niche for computer geeks in the Seventies, during the last two decades, the Internet has evolved into a complex communication network used nowadays by more than a billion people worldwide as the backbone of a broad range of activities (from communicating with peers to working; from shopping to learning; from leisure to politics). In 2001, the sociologist Manuel Castells argued that, for its persistent expansion, for its scope and reach in our society, the Internet is for the contemporary world what the printing press was for the Modern era: it is a driver of socio-economical and political changes. Paying homage to Marshall McLuhan's work, Castells (2001) maintains that at the turn of the twenty-first century we have left what the Canadian media theorist defined the *Gutenberg Galaxy* and "entered a new world of communication: the *Internet Galaxy*." (p. 3). Along these lines are many other scholars, politicians, and practitioners who, especially in democratic countries, consider the new communication galaxy a powerful instrument in the hands of citizens that can significantly alter the traditional role citizens play in established democratic systems.

In this paper I challenge this line of argument. I do not deny that the Internet plays an important socio-economical and political role in advanced technological democratic societies, but, playing devil's advocate and taking as

an example Britain, a country that in the last two decades has witnessed a constant growth in the use of Information Technologies, I argue that the effects of new communication media on the quality of Britain's democratic system have recently produced some ambiguous results that deserve further analysis. Such ambiguity in fact needs to be taken into account when promoting or assessing changes in governments' use of new technologies applied to the democratic process. In this new era of communicative abundance, the question permanently seeking for answer is whether or not the Internet is good for democracy, or, in its more negative form, whether or not the Internet is in fact the end of it?

To elucidate my argument and clarify the quality of the ambivalent relationship between democracy and new communication media, the first part of the paper looks at the meaning of the term democracy in the twenty-first century. The remaining part instead analyses a recent experiment of the British government with an Internet-based petitioning tool used to improve the quality of the relationship between the government and its citizens: the Road-tax petition, that is the case-study at the core of this paper, was published in November 2006 in the UK Government newly launched electronic-Petition website and collected almost 2 million signatures. The pressure generated from that petition in the early months of 2007 played an important role in the Government's decision (one year later) to postpone *sine die* its plans for a new road tax. Focusing on that particular petition, in this paper, I sustain that in general to increase citizens' political involvement in the complex mechanism of a representative system, that is to allow citizens to continuously

scrutinize the use (and abuse) of power, assess their representatives' work, and openly question the policies they advocate, the use of the Internet in government's matters can guarantee a certain degree of transparency and accountability, which are indeed fundamental elements of a healthy democratic system. However, when simple and historical political tools such as petitions are coupled with the new generation of Web technologies, those referred in the literature as Web 2.0[1], the outcome can often result in a unexpected strong challenge of the political status quo. Therefore, I argue in this paper, one important lesson to be drawn from experiments such as the British government e-petition website is that the use of new communication technology in policies' matters, although often it's a laudable endeavour, should always be accompanied by a clear and thorough understanding of the possible implications and impact of that technology onto the existing political process, otherwise the unintended result spawn by the new technology can have serious negative consequences for the complex mechanism that sustain that process.

Democracy in the 21st Century

The Greek word *dêmokratia* indicates a form of government where the people (*dêmos*) rule (*kratos*), or, to say it with the often cited words used by Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg, it refers to the "government of the people, by the

[1] Web 2.0 is a neologism that attempts to capture the full spectrum and depth of the evolution of web-technology in recent years in the field of what is known as participatory media. Web 2.0. applications allow any user to fully interact with it. Interaction in this case is broadly understood: it goes from simply inputting a comment about a blog's post, or insert new content, modify it, edit, reject it (as it is the case of the online encyclopaedia Wikipedia). Blogs, Wikis, social network website such as Meetup.com, Second Life, Myspace.com, Facebook.com they can all be considered Web 2.0. applications. (Madden and Fox, 2006)

people, and for the people" (Lincoln, 1992, p. 405). Their popularity notwithstanding, definitions like these miss somehow the point, for they strip bare the concept of democracy to a minimum common denominator (the rule of the people) whose simplicity can never suffice for the inherent complexity that the term carries with it. The term democracy in fact indicates a much more complex form of government with a history that stretches over many centuries and many different models (Held 1996; Keane 2009). One of its most widely adopted forms today is based on governing through elected representatives. The representative model of democracy became popular in the eighteenth century, when the amalgamation of the old Greek ideal of assembly-based democracy and that of representation seemed the best possible solution for governing large nation-states. "Extend the suffrage, and democracy would be enabled by representation" wrote Hanna Pitkin (2004), "since, as John Selden put it, 'the room will not hold all', the people would rule themselves vicariously, through their representatives" (p. 338).

In a typical representative democratic system, traditionally, the fundamental role of citizens is to take part in regular elections to choose representatives who then govern on their behalf. That simple act of casting a vote, of choosing one candidate (or one party) over others, ideally, has two main advantages: it guarantees to the people a chance to evaluate periodically their political leadership and at the same time it gives the members of that political leadership enough time to earn their voters' trust for a new mandate. In this context, ideally, citizens should rarely be called into action between elections. The system however is far from perfect and too often winning a majority of

seats in Parliament for the government of the leading party or coalition equals to a pass to do whatever it likes (at least until the next election day). For this reason, among others, in his *The Life and Death of Democracy* (2009), the historian John Keane has recently argued that since 1945 that ideal-typical model of democratic government by representation has seen a radical "sea change" that has deeply altered its essence. The political geography of representative democracy has mutated from its original static hierarchical and territorially-bound configuration; to one where the exercise of power (willingly or not) is more open to questioning and scrutiny, not only from within the state but also from across borders (Keane, 2009, p 695). Representative democratic systems are progressively morphing into *monitory democracies*. With the term *monitory democracy*, Keane (2009) refers to a complex and intricate structure of government that incorporates all elements of the representative model and adds to them "many different kinds of extra-parliamentary, power-scrutinising mechanisms" (p. 688). Keane calls these mechanisms *monitory bodies* and they work at national and international level. They in fact can be found "within the domestic fields of government and civil society, as well as in cross-border settings", the same realms of influence "once controlled by empires, states and business organizations" (p. 689).

We now live in an age where "Democracy", Keane writes (2009), "is coming to mean more than elections, although nothing less" (p. 689). Since 1945, we have witnessed "the birth of nearly one hundred new types of power-scrutinising institutions unknown to previous democrats" (p. 689). Among these are activist courts, electoral commissions and consumer protection

agencies, blogs, online forums, and online petitions. These mechanisms of power scrutiny – working from within and across borders – serve the purpose to make democracy and democrats more accountable and more democratic, especially in complex societies where an always increasing number of people has lost belief in politicians and politics. In twenty-first century democracies, the monitorial bodies indicated by Keane are crucial elements of the politics of everyday life: they work as antidotes against the hubris of power that constantly threaten the functioning of representative systems. Through these mechanisms, those who represent are constantly reminded that their power is not immune from control, it is never absolute; and they must account for their actions throughout their entire time in office and not only before an election. In a monitory system that works well “the grip of the majority-rule principle – the worship of numbers – associated with representative democracy” is broken (Keane, 2009, p. 689), whilst those that are too often relegated in the back-seats of the political stage, whose rights are only remembered before election day, have the chance, through these new mechanisms, to voice out their concern clearly and loudly, not only at election day, but throughout the whole cycle between elections.

In this new political geography of democracy, a crucial role within its complex mechanisms of power-scrutiny is played by new communication media such as the Internet. “The political dynamics and overall ‘feel’ of monitory democracies are very different from during the era of representative democracy”, writes Keane (2009). “Politics in the age of monitory democracy has a definite ‘viral’ quality about it.” (p. 744). This is a crucial quality of

politics on the Web. Within this setting, that quality allows actions of resistance to power to follow unconventional paths and make their outcomes rather unpredictable. The facility with which in the Internet Galaxy citizens acting individually or organised in groups simply using mobile phones, relying on basic Web-tools (such as old style bulletin boards or news groups); or by using more advanced Web 2.0 applications (blogs, wikis, or video-sharing Web-platforms) can monitor, embarrass, and humble those in power reveals the growing political importance of new communication media in advance technological societies that are governed according to the rule of democracy.

The political potential of the new communication galaxy ushered in by the Internet can crucially affect the balance of power relationships in existing representative systems. From a narrow point of view, new communication media seem to play merely a supporting role in the oiled dynamics of representative democracy: they enhance dramatically the possibility for the members of the public to establish a direct and privileged relationship with their political representatives; and vice versa, the chance for politicians to keep in contact easily and inexpensively with each member of their constituency (Coleman, 1999; Kingham, 2003). From a wider and different perspective instead, one that sees politics as an ongoing process of active (albeit discontinue) participation rather than simply a mere act of delegation, the marriage between politics and new media offers the citizens of the Twenty-first century the chance to alter the periodicity of the major cycle that rules over who gets what, when, and how in a representative system. Using media like the Internet, citizens have in their hands an effective tool to easily

break that cycle into a stream of continuous public acts of assessment, that potentially are as politically significant as an election can be. But contrary to this latter, the formers are never predictable and can be quite sudden.

On the one hand, it can be argued, new communication media represent a positive element in the fight against the hubris of power; on the other hand, the same technologies can serve the agenda of those who want to influence popular consent in support of questionable politics and, hence, hinder the representative system in its very essence, representation. The 2006 Road Tax electronic Petition, discussed below, is a case in point of the negative impact new technologies can have on a representative system. Between the end of 2006 and the early months of 2007, the Road Tax petition managed to collect almost 2 million signatures. The populist pressure generated from its impressive success, amplified by mainstream media interest in the issue, was crucial in the Government's decision (one year later) to postpone sine die its plans for a new road tax scheme that many, instead, considered an unpopular but necessary path to safeguard the environment.

Petitions.pm.gov.uk

At the end of the 90s, the Labour Party Government led by Prime Minister Tony Blair believed that investing in IT was crucial for the future of Britain (Avery *et al.*, 2007, p. 14). Since then, as reported by the UK Office for National Statistics (Skentelbery, 2008), the country has witnessed a constant growth in the use of Information Technology both at individual and governmental level. Households' ownership of computers rose from 33

percent in 1998 to 70 percent in 2007. While both the figures of mobile phones and digital receivers have nearly tripled since 1998: mobiles from 27% to 78%, digital receivers from 28% to 77%. The Internet has witnessed an analogous growth and it is now an essential feature in the everyday activities of Britons. From 1998 to 2007, the percentage of households with an Internet connection rose from 10 per cent to 61 per cent (Skentelbery, 2008, p. 167) - four out five of these users access the Web via broadband connection (Dutton & Helsper, 2007, p. 8). A recent Survey sponsored by the British Government (Get Safe Online, 2008) has found out that over a third (33%) of the UK users spends between one and two hours a day in online activities. 15% instead declared their daily time online ranges from three to four hours. More than half (58%) is confident enough to use the Web to manage their finances (i.e.: Internet banking, or pay bills) and 64% percent shop online regularly. 40% of Britons use social networking site like myspace.org and Facebook.com. That figure is about 70% when we consider only the younger age group (18-24) British people also explore the Internet Galaxy in search of information. While non-users follow faithfully traditional media such as TV and Radio, Internet users turn “almost uniquely” to the Internet as their favoured source of information[2]. These figures picture Britain as an advanced technological country where people’s attitude is generally positive about digital technologies. The Internet especially is considered as an important element of the daily routine. The majority of British users (75%) think that it makes life

[2] According to the Oxford Internet Institute yearly survey of British Internet users, in 2007, people used the Internet to find information in the following field: planning a trip (54%), finding books (47%), finding the name of a local MP (46%), finding information about taxes (39%) or finding information about local schools (40%) (Dutton & Helsper, 2007, pp. 22-3)

easier, and that it is an efficient means to gain information (88%) (Dutton & Helsper, 2007, p. 27).

In this context, cannot come as a surprise that, in November 2006, in collaboration with MySociety.org (a non-partisan, London-based organization), the UK government, under the leadership of Tony Blair, launched a new service in the form of a website to allow citizens to create new or sign up for existing petitions addressed to the Prime Minister's Cabinet. It was a laudable but ill-conceived initiative that soon backfired and gave the government more troubles than benefits.

Petitions are not new in the United Kingdom. The right to petition the Monarch for redress of personal grievances dates back to the *Magna Carta* sealed by King John in 1215[3]. By the end of the 13th century, "much of the business of early parliaments was judicial rather than legislative [and] dealt with matters raised by individuals via petitions" (Lyon, 2003, p. 66). And in 1688 the Bill of Rights signed by King William III and Queen Mary II sanctioned that "it is the Right of the Subjects to petition the King, and all commitments and prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal" (William and Mary, 1688, Sess 2, cap 2). Notwithstanding their long lasting tradition, conventional forms of petitioning are often time consuming and difficult to set up. In the age of the Internet and mobile phones, they are still bound to follow a complex (sometimes cumbersome) bureaucratic process. Consider the case of the petitions submitted to the UK House of Commons: the text must be

[3] The right to petition can be found in chapter 61. A scanned version of the *Magna Carta* is available online at British Library website: http://www.bl.uk/treasures/magnacarta/index.html#

“respectful, decorous and temperate”; before submitting it, the petitioner must contact the House Clerk “to ensure the petition is in an acceptable form”. Only then, the petitioner can finally start collecting signatures. However, for the petition to be valid, “each signatory must include his or her address” (House of Commons, 2008, p. 2). To be successful, such kinds of petition – as any other traditional form of grass-root political campaign – must also rely on a certain degree of organization, a substantial financial basis to cover logistical costs and publicity (this latter, nowadays, might also involve costs for setting up a website to publicise the campaign) (Bimber, 2003, pp. 99-101). And many hours of volunteers’ time dedicated to exhausting door-to-door canvassing, or spent standing in a public square collecting signatures.

On the other hand, setting an online petition on the UK government website, literally, takes no longer than five minutes of a petitioner’s time, and even less to sign it. Moreover, the Government service opens up new opportunities for prospective petitioners to reach a wide audience with virtually no cost or other strings attached. Contrary to traditional petition, an online petition campaign does not need an organised army of committed volunteers. The whole process in fact can be comfortably organised from one’s living room with just few clicks of the mouse, some links posted on online forums, and by sending out few emails to friends and acquaintances. Furthermore, as it happens in the case of the petitions hosted by the UK Cabinet website, the institutional location guarantees a wide degree of visibility (in terms of media attention and access to the site); hence, it gives, potentially, access to a much wider audience, than any other normal online petition.

Since its launch the website Petitions.pm.gov.uk has proven very successful. In its first year it published more than 14 thousands petitions that gathered nearly six million signatures (e-Petitions Website, 2008). To make a comparison with traditional means of petitioning, according to official data released by the House of Commons (2008, p. 8), between 1989 and 2007 the yearly average number of petition received by the British Parliament was just 327, a number far below its online counterpart.

Prime Minister Tony Blair praised the success of the e-petition website as a sign of the good health of Britain's democracy (Blair, 2007 and 2007a). He also pointed out the positive impact the Internet has on the way in which the dialogue between representatives and citizens is organised. Others – and among these his successors, Gordon Brown and recently David Cameron – were less than impressed with the effects of the new service on government's business. The reasons of such discordant judgments are to be found in the attention attracted by one particular petition, commonly known as the Road Tax Petition.

The Road Tax Petition

Started by Peter Roberts, an accountant manager of an English manufacturing company, the Road Tax was a direct challenge of the government's intention to tackle road congestion and reduce CO_2 emissions. To achieve its goal, the scheme, similarly to the one successfully introduced by the Greater London Authority for some areas of the capital, aimed at reducing drastically the number of vehicles on British roads by introducing a nationwide pay-as-you-drive tax for all motorists. Robert's online petition,

submitted through the Cabinet's website, asked the Prime Minister to scrap the new scheme on the grounds that it was inappropriate and entirely unfair to motorists. In fact, Roberts argued, a stealth congestion charge was already in use through taxation on fuel: "the more you travel, the more tax you pay." (10 Downing Street, 2007).

Furthermore, the new scheme had already raised concern over the risks it represented for citizens' privacy. Messages post on various Internet forums and some part of the press speculated that for the new scheme to be effective and ensure payments, the government was planning to equip each vehicle with electronic tracking devices. These concerns were echoed by Roberts in the text of his petition: "The idea of tracking every vehicle at all times is sinister and wrong". Therefore, Roberts asked the Prime Minister to "forget about road pricing and concentrate on improving our roads to reduce congestion." (10 Downing Street, 2007)

Until November 2006, the accountant manager had been interested in politics, but had never really been involved in any political activity, neither traditional, nor online. Notwithstanding this lack of experience, thanks to the Web it didn't take him long to step into action. After visiting the webpage of the Downing Street's petition service, Roberts realised that a petition could help him questioning the Government's policy (Roberts, 2008)[4]. It was a quick and small step into the wider political arena. Yet, the petition's success went beyond any of Roberts' expectations. It began with just a few e-mails sent to a

[4] During our interview (6 May 2008), Roberts clarified that he came across the e-petition website quite accidentally through a web link posted on an online forum for motorist (Roberts, 2008).

handful of friends (29 emails in total) and some links posted on a number of websites that dealt with drivers' issues (Roberts, 2008). Roberts' intention was, in his own words (2008), "to start a viral email asking people to sign up the petition", hoping to raise around 35 thousand signatures before the petition's deadline in February. However, by the end of the first week, Roberts confirmed during our interview, the petition was already over 14 thousand signatures. Ten days into 2007, the number had gone up to 125 thousand (Williams, 2007), and by the end of January the petition had crossed the threshold of the half a million mark (Oliver, 2007). Eventually by its deadline, February 20, 2007, the final tally had surpassed the 1.8 million signatures mark (e-Petitions Website, 2007). In fact, at a certain point the petition generated so much Web-traffic that it crashed the Prime Minister's website (BBC News, 2007).

The road to ruin

During its initial phases, despite the rising impressive number of signatures, the UK Cabinet attempted to minimize the significance of the petition. Douglas Alexander, in his capacity as Transport secretary in Blair's cabinet, declared to the BBC that the government intended to proceed in finding a satisfactory solution to road congestion even if that meant asking motorists to pay a road tax. Nevertheless, he reassured, we "will listen to people" (BBC News, 2007a) and rebutted as "falsehoods" some of the claims made by Roberts. Alexander promised "that there would be safeguards to protect motorists' privacy and that the system would not be used to catch drivers speeding" (Webster, 2007). By the petition's deadline, however, because of the pressure

generated through the media, Prime Minister Blair could no longer avoid to address the issue publicly. Thus, to explain the government's position, Blair (2007) wrote an article published by *The Observer* and personally responded via email to each of the signatory of the petition, reassuring all of the interested parties that the proposed scheme was not about imposing “stealth taxes”, and, most importantly, that the government had not yet made any final decision about it. In that article, Blair remarked that the e-petition and the debate that it had sparked were undoubtedly signs of the good health of British politics. It had brought the government closer to its citizens. During the last decade, the Internet has transformed politics, and Web-based forms of dissent, such as electronic petitions, the Prime Minister pointed out, are as important as any other form of traditional political contestation. Thus, Blair continued, it would be unwise for politicians and surely unhealthy for democracy to ignore the views of such a large number of citizens and simply “try and sweep them under the carpet.”

Notwithstanding Blair’s words, the clamour surrounding the petition did not wither away. Its unparalleled success and its location (the government website), in the hands of the media and of the opposition in the Parliament quickly turned those electronic signatures into a national referendum, the unmistakable mark of the public’s will and its hostility towards the new tax scheme.

The Telegraph, a conservative-leaning newspaper[5], used the petition as the foundation of its active and pressing campaign against the government, *The Road to ruin*, which lasted for several months (*Telegraph*, 2007). By the end of 2007, was the then current Prime Minister Gordon Brown that at last decided – as the *Telegraph* put it – "to listen to his constituents" (Millward, 2007) and instruct his cabinet to ditch the scheme. The *Telegraph* (2007a) and other dailies emphasised the role played by the e-petition in Brown's decision (see for instance Mulholland, 2007). Subsequently, in March 2008, Ruth Kelly, the Transport Secretary at the time, surrendered to citizens' criticism and told the BBC that the government had finally decided to withdraw its proposal: "People legitimately raised concerns about privacy, fairness and how any scheme would be enforced. We don't have all the answers to those questions yet." Hence, she concluded, the government must put on hold the scheme until all those questions are answered. (BBC News, 2008)

Echoing Blair's words of praise, Peter Roberts said that the new service was an effective instrument to question the government's action and clearly a benefit for the quality of democracy in Britain, without it the government would have certainly gone ahead with its plan (Millward, 2007). Others, like Steve Richards, chief political columnist of the *Independent*, a left-leaning newspaper[6], labelled the Transport Secretary's decision "a classic case of a necessary policy killed by cowardice" (Richards, 2008). Notwithstanding that many believe that new laws are much needed to safeguard the environment,

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[5] 61% of the Telegraph's readership supports the Conservative party, the main opposition party in Britain. (Mori, 2004)

[6] Over 75% of the *Independent*'s readership supports either the Labour Party (36%) or the Liberal Democrats (39%) (Mori, 2004)

the electronic *cry wolf* of a tiny minority of the population managed to send the government into a frenzy and decisively affect the rights of the silent majority who did not sign the petition, or express its view on the matter. In a country of sixty million people, the journalist pointed out, this is hardly a sign of the good health of democracy in Britain.

These two views represent the extreme sides of a complex issue: is the Web good or bad for democracy?

The e-challenge to Democracy

Without debating the merits or disadvantages of Roberts' views on the environment, what is interesting about his petition is that in a short period of time, with as little organizational effort as possible and no financial commitment, a citizen with no previous experience in either politics or petitioning managed to achieve something unthinkable for any traditional petitioner in the same conditions as Roberts: the petition attracted the attention of a considerable number of people and of the media, and generated enough public pressure to eventually force the Government to forego its plan for the proposed new tax scheme. Quite remarkably, as noted by Tony Blair himself (2007), Roberts succeeded in generating a national debate with just few clicks of a mouse. Many cheered to that achievement. Others, however, did not share the same enthusiasm. According to a Government's source, who asked not to be named[7], Tony Blair's successor at n. 10 Downing Street, Gordon Brown utterly despised the whole idea of the e-Petitions website

[7] From a discussion with members of the cabinet during a workshop on the effects of the e-petition service. Discussion held under Chatham House Rule of anonymity.

which he inherited from Blair. Brown's contempt against the petitioning tool is to a certain extent quite understandable. For Brown, as for many elected representatives, tools like the e-petition website encompass some of the most dangerous challenges the Internet can pose to a representative system. A Web-tool that allows citizens to record their own views or cast a vote on important and complex issues in ways and speed that are unprecedented can potentially corrupt the whole idea of governing through representatives. It challenges the very essence of the system that produced it, and sometimes, ironically, it does that by acting from within that system itself – as it happened in the case of the Road Tax petition. In such instances, the act of governing through representatives is compromised by the emergence of a new system of government. At the core of this system is the will of the people and the decision-making process that sustains it is based on only two limited options of choices (yes or not) and very little space for debate. This new system masked as Web-enhanced representative democracy is far from what Keane labels monitory democracy, and in fact it can easily open the door to the worst form of plebiscitary democracy or, as Benjamin Barber (2004) would call it, "plebiscitary tyranny" (p. 25). That is a system that does not allow "informed and reflective decisions", or the constructive monitoring of power; but on the contrary the system is based on "snapshots of individuals opinions suitably aggregated" (Sunstein, 2007, p. 35). In this new kind of political setting populist charismatic leaders thrive while democracy dies.[8]

[8] Already in 1992, it is worth here remembering, the American billionaire Ross Perot, well ahead of the Dot-com boom, had spotted the importance of new media for a populist leader like himself. For this reason during his contested presidential campaign, Perot famously promised that – if elected – he would support the creation

In the case of the Road Tax petition the authority of the British representative system was put in jeopardy since the start by the arguable choice of hosting the petition within the Cabinet's official website. With that move the government gave the new service a public seal of recognition that increased the political weight of the petitions submitted through the site (or at the least altered the perception of citizens and media towards those petitions.) The end-result was that the government found itself in a rather awkward position in the eye of the public and of the media. It was as though the government had publicly announced: let the people speak out loud and clear through this new service, their voices will count. Unsurprisingly, once the people spoke, the media and the opposition parties quite legitimately asked the Prime Minister and his Cabinet: why are you not listening?

Beyond the challenge: lessons learned

The UK press reported that at the height of the road tax controversy, one anonymous Cabinet minister, outraged by the negative effects that *Petition.gov.uk* had had on the Government, said: "Whoever came up with this idea must be a prat" (Burkeman, 2007). The minister was later be "rumoured, reasonably enough, to be Douglas Alexander, the then transport secretary" (Ibid.) Ironically, some years earlier, when he was Minister of Commerce, Alexander had a different opinion on the merits of new technologies applied to politics. During a keynote speech on the value of the marriage between democracy and new media, in 2001, Alexander stated:

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of electronic town halls to allow all citizens to take active part in public debates and voting procedures (Grefe and Castleman, 2005: 163).

> "In order to attract people to get involved in online consultations and discussions, it is vital that government and representatives demonstrate their commitment to listening to and learning from the contributions that are made and to respond to them in a timely and transparent way." (Quoted in Coleman and Coetze, 2001, p. 20)

The recent-elected coalition government that has replaced the Labour government of Gordon Brown at the helm of the country has placed the e-petition service under-review, effectively putting the service in freeze indefinitely. "With a new Government in place a review is taking place of online services, including e-petitions" states a message that appeared on the website in May 2010. The new government is "committed to improving the e-petitions process" but before putting the service back online, the government is "looking at ways of ensuring that it functions as part of a cohesive approach to public debate and transparent government."[9] In other words, the new government lead by a coalition formed by the Conservatories and Liberal Democrats has learned the lesson from the road tax petition and intends to think carefully on whether or not to follow on the path opened up by Tony Blair in 2006.

Douglas Alexander's shifting position and the new coalition government's decision to stop the e-petition service are indicators of the growing uneasiness politicians feel towards the impact new communication media may have on the complex mechanisms of the exercise of power that constitute the basis of their world. This is a fear that, although justified from a personal

[9] http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/, 20 May 2010.

perspective (this is a new political environment that confronts politicians with new and unexpected challenges that can ultimately seriously hinder their careers); it is, however, a fear unjustified from the standpoint of the quality of democratic systems. There is more to gain than to lose from the use of new communication media in politics, however, the thorough understanding of the technology in use and of its impact on existing democratic mechanisms is a key factor in insuring the success of the marriage between technology and politics.

True, the excessive use of fashionable new tools in government business to reach out to the people, as demonstrated by the case of the Road Tax petition, can sometimes bring a representative system to a dangerous standstill and crucially hinder the quality of its very essence: ideally, the elected representative at the core of this system is never simply the echo chamber of his/her own constituency's will, but he/she must play a more important and proactive role of mediation between the will of the people and the need of the state. The successful exercise of such role can only be guaranteed by a fine balance between the independence of action of the representatives and the need for assessment of the electing constituencies. That, at least, would be the case in an ideal world where elected representatives never succumb to the hubris of power. Alas, the daily experience of the majority of citizens in representative democracies is quite different. Monitoring bodies and new communication media are not a destructive challenge; in fact they are crucial elements to keep that system in balance or, better, to improve its democratic quality. The Internet Galaxy provides a whole new range of tools and spaces that, on the one hand,

enable citizens to monitor constantly those in power; on the other hand, they increase citizens' chances to influence directly the political dynamics that inform their every day life (Wilhelm, 2001; Coleman and Norris, 2005). Apart from *Petition.gov.uk*, the case of Britain provides us with some other good examples of this dual effect. Through the Internet citizens can access websites that feed them with crucial information to monitor what their representatives are constantly doing on their behalf. An example of this is *Theyworkforyou.com* a non-partisan website that provides data on the daily activities of the Members of Parliament - i.e. voting record, texts of speeches, expenses claims[10]. So if a citizen wants to know whether or not an MP has kept his or her campaign's promises, he or she can simply visit the website and type in the name of the MP and he or she will be given access to that MP's historical record. Consider for instance Gordon Brown and David Cameron (respectively the former and the current British Prime Minister). If we check their names through *Theyworkforyou.org.uk* we instantly gather a snapshot of where they stand in political matters debated in parliament. We can then easily compare their Parliament's records and see, for instance, that Cameron has "voted strongly for laws to stop climate change" whereas Brown "has never voted on laws to stop climate change".

On the other hand, blogs and free video-sharing services (such as *youtube.com*) provide instead access to independent media platforms that allow citizens to denounce wrongdoings, and openly question who gets what

[10] It is worth noting that the presence of similar web tools is already a trend in advanced democracies. Theyworkforyou.org.uk in fact is not an isolated case. Similar services are provided for other parliaments: in the US is Watchdog.net; Italy's is watched over by openparlamento.it; while the European Union MPs are monitored by Epvote.eu

when and how without relying on the public service broadcasting to do that on their behalf. In this category, *Guido Fawkes's blog* is probably one of the most famous of such examples of monitorial bodies. The blog is run by Paul Staines, a self-described Libertarian and former Conservatory Party activist, who "campaigns against political sleaze and hypocrisy' and 'doesn't believe in impartiality nor pretend to" (Staines, 2004.) In the recent years the blog has become quite popular in Britain. *Guido Fawkes* is considered the most influential independent political blog in the country "devoured by politicians, lobby correspondents and anyone with an interest in the seamier workings of the political process" (*Guardian.co.uk, 2008*). Devoted to uncover "parliamentary plots, rumours and conspiracies"[11], the blog has played some crucial role in uncovering stories regarding politicians misconduct that were often ignored or sidelined as not very relevant by mainstream media. In 2006 Staines was the first source to name Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's lover when other media had instead refused to publicise the story of Prescott's extra-marital affair (Barkham, 2006). And in 2008, Staines's 18-months long uncovering of a scandal related to undisclosed campaign donations forced Peter Hain, a long standing Member of the Labor Party to resign from his Cabinet post. Hain had hitherto served as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and Secretary of State for Wales in both Blair's and Brown's cabinets. Mick Fealty (2008) from the pages of *The Telegraph* called Hain: "Blogging's first UK scalp". And giving credit to Guido Fawkes' work, Fealty went on writing that after the *Hain's affair* "the mainstream will be able to publicly recognise that the blogosphere is more than just a collection of

[11] Guido Fawkes' motto, as it appears on his blog: http://order-order.com/

'human interest' stories. And not least, that it ain't fluffy and has real teeth that bite."

When it all started, at the end of 2006, Tony Blair and his staff were seeking to break new grounds for strengthening the Government's relationship with the public by providing citizens with new ways to engage directly with the Cabinet and vice versa (Winnet and Swinford, 2007). The e-petition website was indeed a precise effort towards that direction. Reportedly, the original idea behind Tony Blair's decision to equip the Government website with an e-petitioning tool was influenced by a meeting the Prime Minister had with Eric Schmidt, the chairman and chief executive of the Internet company Google Inc., in October 2006 (Winnet and Swinford, 2007). Interestingly, Schmidt is not only the number 3 in Google's power hierarchy, but he is also a man who believes that "the true political power of the Internet will be to hold politicians to account. Computers will be able to test politicians' statements for truthfulness" (Forbes, 2006). To a certain extent, that is exactly what happened with Peter Robert's Road Tax petition.

The marriage between the Internet and a representative system is only doomed if and when that fine balance (between the representative's independence and his/her electing constituencies' rights to assess his/her work) is significantly altered, as indeed happened in the case of the UK government's questionable choice of equipping its own website with an e-petition tool, clearly without properly understanding the long term consequences of that choice. In all other instances, instead, the facility with which political dissent is organised and cultivated through the Internet can

only be an asset for democracy, one to protect and nurture. Forcing elected representatives to loosen their firm grip on power can transform a society ruled through representatives in a more democratic environment; one where monitoring closely those in power becomes an integral part of the political process.

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