I have a fantasy in which a modern Constitutional Convention assembles a group of fifty-five men or thereabouts whose commitment to democracy and whose wisdom are not in doubt. Their task is to design democratic institutions suitable for this small planet in the year 2000. And so they come to the problem of the unit. (Dahl, 1967: 957-8)

I. Introduction: the problem of democracy in the 'mixed polity'

Dahl's wise men disagreed about which unit was the most suitable for democracy, on a scale ranging from the very local to the global. Yet, because politics occurs at all these different territorial levels, Dahl argued that we ought to consider different kinds of democratic models for units of different size and kind. The arguments for democracy at the local end of his scale turned, as they have always done, on the prospect for direct citizen participation in collective decision-making, while the necessity for representative institutions was plain at any level beyond the very small.

Here we are, already past the year 2000. The implications of information and communications technologies (ICTs) did not enter into Dahl's thinking, nor did - or could - the advent of postmodern, post-parliamentary politics. Nevertheless, the central thesis of this paper is that 'the problem of the unit' remains with us still. Indeed, it has been made much more complex by enhanced possibilities for direct participation through ICTs, and by the postmodern vista which brings into view a wider variety of collectivities in the 'networked society’. Moreover, these collectivities are increasingly defined not simply in terms of territory, but in terms of interests, affinities, or identities of all sorts. Many aspire to some degree of autonomy, to the right to decide matters for themselves. Some of these matters are internal, relating to deliberation and implementation of rules, policies and issues relating only to the collectivity in question, while others are concerned with their relations to other polities, including states. Some collectivities are 'real', while others are 'virtual', existing only in cyberspace, and some are very short-lived. For some, it is difficult or impossible to estimate the size of membership, or to establish clear criteria for joining

1 This paper is part of a continuing study of the relationship between ICTs and the future of representative democracy and accountable government. We are concerned in this paper to identify and explore issues as much as to resolve them. We ask participants in the ECPR Workshop to treat it as work in progress, and not to quote from it at this stage. Comments are, however, most welcome.
or exclusion. For some, too, it is impossible to identify a leader or leadership group, because such roles are eschewed, rather like student movements in the late 1960s.

Cyberspace famously subverts spatial boundaries, including those of territorial political communities at all levels. It empowers affinity groups that cut across jurisdictions, and vastly increases the possibilities of forming temporary or longer-lasting collectivities. This partly-connected, partly-disconnected, interweaving and shifting constellation of political forums and arenas makes Dahl's problem look simple, grappling as he did with a set of less inclusive, more stable, more territorially-defined political arrangements than is possible today. It also makes the design and reform of democratic processes – especially considering how they might be experienced by persons who are involved in more than one of these collectivities - far more interesting, but much less tractable.

Our purpose here is to cast light on the issues that are involved, by exploring the relationship between 'modern' politics – especially its characteristic orientation to representative democracy - and an ICT-powered, 'postmodern' politics characterised by more diffuse structures and less commensurable political norms. In order to explore this relationship, we conceive of postmodern politics as taking place in a 'mixed polity', that is a polity composed of a mixture of different, and not obviously compatible, political forms. In the history of constitutional ideas, ‘mixed government’ was usually conceived as a mixture of monarchical, aristocratic and democratic elements, but we borrow the term to denote a polity composed at once of modern and postmodern elements: if postmodern practices are emerging, then they must be taking root amidst an institutional framework that has been shaped in modern times.

We conceive of the mixed polity, then, as a welter of jurisdictions, networks and domains, some defined in terms of recognised territories, some defined in formal institutional terms, but many defined in neither of these ways. We argue, too, that the study of the postmodern ‘mixed polity’ cannot for long evade or ignore classical questions to do with membership, accountability, representation and the legitimacy of decisions. In the political structures of traditional, territorial units that have persisted in the modern era, there is a continuing pressure to maintain processes that make possible some kind of aggregative and integrative functions in and among the different networks and sectors in which politics takes place. We assume, however, that these processes are not likely to enjoy the kind of centrality and primacy that classical constitutional theory, at least, accords institutions in the 'parliamentary chain of steering'. Instead, democratic processes focused on electoral politics and parliamentary debates will have to fight for a place amidst a growing array of competing forums and counterveiling ideas. How, and indeed whether they can do so successfully, is a question we begin to address here.

Some of these forums – such as established policy communities - are strongly institutionalised and provide the means of participation in policy-making for insider groups, albeit often in ways that are both closed and opaque. Other groups operate in the well-established structures of civil society, at different levels, including the grass roots. Their political influence upon the wider polity is probably best described as limited and sporadic: it is certainly far from non-existent but tends to be issue-specific and contingent, although it is also oriented towards formal political processes. Still other groups may function at the margins of civil society, with almost no connection to conventional public decision-making forums and almost no awareness of, or
contact with the machinery of parties or parliaments. The (as yet unproved) premise behind much postmodernist writing (see for example, Holmes, 1997), however, is that, in principle at least, it will be easier for such groups - however transient and ephemeral - to flourish in the virtual society. At the very least, society in general may become more aware of their existence and demands, so that they are enabled more easily and confidently to assert and negotiate their claims.

By this reading, the virtual society is potentially a much more inclusive society. But if societal boundaries to political systems give way in cyberspace, does it follow that the idea that politics has essentially to do with decision-making within, and on behalf of, a discrete collectivity must give way as well? If it does, it would mean, first, that postmodern politics undermines the possibility of holding any institutions or persons to account for the consequences of decisions, or for the probity and technical quality of governmental processes. Second, it would mean that, if decision-making is a matter only for each of the social fragments in and for itself, then the need for debate, discussion, argument - in short, the aggregation or reconciliation of the views or interests of any wider collectivity - is obviated. This is true, regardless of which concept of democracy - for example, populist, liberal or republican (Edwards, 1995) - one has in mind. For the postmodernist vision to come to pass, however, it is necessary to assume some kind of connectivity between the politics that takes place in these different forums. Will this really be the case, or will postmodern politics simply grow up in the interstices of the modern constitutional state with no more heed to its health or demands than that paid by postmodern critics who have simply written it off?

II. ICTs: reinvigorating or marginalising formal political institutions?

The disjuncture between the significance ascribed to formal political institutions in modern and postmodern writing lies in their intrinsically opposed views about the significance and desirability of social complexity and political order, and in the ways in which they relate to evolving concepts of representation, aggregation and accountability. At some danger of oversimplification, it may be said that, as it developed in western Europe in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, representative and responsible government promoted a concept of order that placed a premium on hierarchical, top-down control of the demands made by society on the political world. The practice of representation (better understood perhaps as re-presentation) emerged as a device for simplifying the way the political elite conceived of society as well as for pigeon-holing the views that come to be expressed. In other words, constitutional models such as Mixed Government and then Parliamentary Government held an emergent pluralism at bay by structuring and legitimating the kinds of interests that were given a voice and the channels through which they were able legitimately to express their demands. They served, therefore, to reduce the volume and scope of issues which the political system was obliged to process and resolve, as well to restrict the range of acceptable solutions. It can therefore be argued that parliamentary government emerged as a particularly orderly and mostly successful device for reducing political complexity in an era when the growth of the electorate, the growth of the mass media, and the growth in the range and scope of the administrative state could be expected massively to increase the range of demands on the political system. To a significant but - as we argue below - decreasing extent, parliamentary government has served to channel, and therefore to restrict, these demands while providing a legitimate democratic front. Above all, parliamentary
government has secured governments a degree of freedom and space to deal with social problems by negotiating privately in closed networks with powerful interests on which, however, they have become increasingly dependent. In other words, representative democracy buttresses the primacy of central political institutions by providing legitimate mechanisms for managing complexity. We return to this point later on in the argument.

This is a solution to the problem of order that has also carried a high political price, not least in public disillusionment and apathy. It is also one that has become increasingly less convincing as parliaments and elected governments have become less able to monopolise and control processes of public decision-making. In previous writing (Bellamy and Raab, 1999a, 1999b; Bellamy, 2000), we analysed the problems faced by representative government at the end of the twentieth century and examined how far ICTs offer scope for its reform and renewal, with particular reference to its British parliamentary form. In particular, we were concerned to probe the significance of ICTs for the management of complexity. Will ICTs serve, for example, to encourage the emergence of a wider range of more open, less easily manipulated interactions between parliamentary elites and members of the public, thus reinvigorating representative democracy? Will they provide governments with the means of re-centring public decision-making on the ‘parliamentary chain of steering’ or will they simply reinforce existing problems and trends?

To examine the first of these questions, we surveyed the possible uses of telephony, digital TV, personal computers and networked terminals in public or commercial spaces, and analysed the democratic significance of ICTs, using a four-rung ‘ladder of informatisation’ of parliamentary politics (Bellamy and Raab, 1999; 1999a). This ‘ladder’ is reproduced as Appendix I. We concluded that the application of ICTs could well improve parliamentary procedures and bring representative institutions closer to the public. But we also found that there are few signs that parliaments are, as yet, much interested in innovations on the higher rungs. This is not surprising, for a number of reasons. Not least of these is the severe challenge that the development of new information and communication flows mount to what are often deeply entrenched infrastructures and processes for handling information and communications, and for controlling the uses to which they are put. The ‘reinforcement’ thesis (Danziger et al., 1982) holds that existing institutions tend to tame new technologies and shape them to their own purposes, and that technology is a tool for the reinforcement of existing power structures. Democratic institutions find it easier and less dangerous to innovate - and particularly to embed innovation into their day-to-day routines - in ways that are commensurate with existing communications paradigms, established structures of political control and well-established organisational roles.

It follows that we should expect parliaments, too, to focus more effort on 'informatising' their own internal business arrangements and on the delivery of information to the public, with less interest being shown in stimulating and incorporating more open democratic interaction. We therefore believe that, especially in the longer term, the significance of ICTs is more likely to be lie in the service of direct, non-parliamentary forms in which citizens interact with each other in ways that do not presuppose the existence, or even the primacy of, central political institutions. In such a context, attempts to wire up parliaments might be better seen as futile, rearguard actions by deeply conservative institutions jealous of their prerogatives and legitimacy. For these reasons, our overall thesis was that informatisation can go only
so far in harnessing the democratic promise of ICTs and in adapting political institutions to the reality of a diffused, pluralist, postmodern society in which politics focused upon central parliamentary institutions was in retreat.

This conclusion is reinforced by a broadbrush assessment of the implications of ICTs in relation to five trends which are commonly perceived to be undermining the primacy and legitimacy of the ‘parliamentary chain of steering’ in western representative democracies:

**The relegation of politics by electronic media**

The Internet is a *pluralising* medium, facilitating the creation of more diverse sources of information as well as new, independent channels of political communication and debate. Far from reinforcing trends to more highly managed forms of democracy, cybersociety, it is widely believed, could subvert the power of politicians, bureaucrats and media tycoons. There has been considerable excitement, therefore, about the burgeoning of community networks, electronic public squares and online bulletin boards (Tsagarousianou, Tambini and Bryan (eds.), 1998). Petitions are organised electronically; electoral campaigns are revitalised by online access to candidates’ information and electronic hustings; and electronic channels are used to disseminate dissident information and views from within repressive, closed regimes.

The potential significance of such opportunities for democratic life may be inestimable, for many of them bear directly upon the core processes of accountability and representation. However, as we showed in our previous work, practice is lagging, especially insofar as it bears on the quality of interaction among citizens, elected representatives and governments. For many years to come, most people will continue to receive a significant proportion of their political communication from old-style broadcast media. Moreover, the increasing convergence of communications and entertainment media, together with the growing competition between their service providers, could seriously challenge traditional public service broadcasting. Unless they can convey the view that politics matters and is interesting to citizens, ICTs will have failed to overcome the apathy that corrodes the current system of parliamentary democracy. But, beyond this ‘consciousness-raising’ effect, the new technologies must provide the means for greater participation, on the one hand, and accountability on the other. Supporting these functions might well be within the scope of ICTs, depending upon how they permeate society and are designed with political accessibility in mind, not just as ‘consumer’ tools for fun, shopping, receipt of state benefits and the like, and certainly not as instruments for top-down surveillance and control.

**The power of party discipline over representative institutions**

In principle, ICTs could easily support a variety of new channels of communication within political organisations, through which the patterns of information flows might be changed and powerful resources made available to ordinary members to help them to challenge party machines. On the other hand, party elites might be equipped with a more extensive and effective armoury of electronic tools that might reinforce their communicative supremacy; history attests to the difficulty of reforming party
organisations. Moreover, as we will discuss below, in the information age traditional parties are as likely to be side-stepped by new political processes, or ‘hollowed out’ (see below), as they are to reinvent themselves with new ICTs.

**The control of parliaments by political executives**

The executive’s control of parliament is built into the bones of Cabinet systems such as the UK’s, where it is a consequence of the development of party-political discipline over a century or more. This is not likely to be easily loosened simply by the ‘informatisation’ of representative institutions, especially if this means little more than enhancing government’s ability to give information to parliament, MPs’ ability to communicate with individual citizens or parliament’s ability to broadcast to the public. Recent and cautious reforms of UK parliamentary procedures, although not without important effects on the scrutiny of the executive, have so far failed to bring about fundamental change in the relationship of parliament and government. To the extent that ICTs have been involved in these changes - for example, the televising of proceedings (utilising the technologies of the ‘first media age’) and the greater availability of documents and reports on the Internet (utilising the technologies of the ‘second media age’) - they offer little comfort to the ‘optimistic’ school. Reports from other countries - Denmark, Slovenia, Scotland and others (Coleman, Taylor and Donk (eds.), 1999) - point to a similar conclusion.

**The displacement of decision-making into policy networks**

The fragmentation of the governmental system into specialist policy communities or ‘subgovernments’ embracing both public and private interests has long been recognised (e.g., Richardson and Jordan, 1979; Kooiman (ed.), 1993). There has been rather less comment on the de-centring of democracy that may result from this trend, as opposed to tacit acceptance of it as an inevitable way of managing complexity and interdependence in the modern world (but see Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan (eds.), 1997). The question arises, then, as to how ICTs could help to reverse, or at least help to manage, the trend towards decision-making in closed, non-transparent networks outside the main arenas of parliamentary democracy. This question directs us to considering the extent to which the economic and social elites that have become enmeshed in neo-corporatist networks are themselves subject to democratic control and renewal. This issue resonates, therefore, with the growing preoccupation in recent democratic theory with strategies for democratising the multiple centres of power and decision-making in the complex, interdependent structures of modern governance. Insofar as new kinds of electronically-supported information flows and resources, including those generated by new kinds of civic networks and bulletin boards, could help to support such strategies, then informatisation could mitigate the counter-democratic tendencies associated with policy networks.

There are, however, two important qualifications to be made about such optimistic scenarios. The first is that by enabling speedier communication and sharing of information in and around networks, ICTs may themselves be implicated in the proliferation of networking as a form of governance, masking complexity and fragmentation by reducing the costs and inconvenience in managing relationships across boundaries. In mitigating, or even facilitating, the trend towards networks, ICTs also conspire in producing its political consequences. It is inevitable that some players develop better ICT infrastructures than others and - other things being equal -
are able to 'win' more often, in the political games played in networks. The growing dependence on ICTs means that these will play an important part in modifying power balances amongst participants: ICTs, like money or votes before them, are becoming a powerful resource for political competition. There will be new sets of 'haves' and new sets of 'have-nots' in the networked polity. What Schattschneider (1960) called the 'mobilisation of bias' - in which some issues, and the interests associated with them, are organised into politics whilst others are organised out - might well persist in the networked polity, even taking new forms as ICTs rewrite the rules of the game. The result could be that ICTs will merely redistribute political inequality and impotence rather than overcoming them; that would hardly be a democratic outcome.

Secondly, even if networked technologies could redistribute political influence and increase the inclusiveness of at least some kinds of decision-making processes, we need to consider what kind of democratic politics would ensue. Democratising the internal processes of political parties, strengthening and democratising civil institutions (some perhaps in a virtual sense), and enhancing the accountability and circulation of elites within networks all speak to the aggregative as well as the expressive functions of representation and accountability. But they do so mainly in relation to dispersed centres of power in a complex world. What is largely missing is whether and how such scenarios could map onto or reinvent the traditional processes of electoral politics and parliamentary debate, especially the core processes of representation and accountability.

**The ‘hollowing-out’ of the state**

The discussion above provides specific illustrations of a more general point, that governing may be too complex and societies too diffuse to be steered effectively, at least through the traditional structures of the Weberian state. One version of this argument is that the state is being 'hollowed out' both from without and within (Rhodes, 1996). In this view, power shifts away from centralised state institutions in downward, outward and upward directions, although we may have doubts that central governments are quite so rapidly and extensively losing their grip over policies and their implementation in many fields. What is the case, is that the constraints on their autonomous power over strategic and economic decision-making have become more apparent as governments become increasingly entwined in the management of international interdependencies. Internally, too, governments are confronted by policy networks, as discussed above, in which the role they play ranges from uncertain leadership to deep dependence. In addition, governments operate within multicentric societies, with shifting modes of influence and multiple sources of power. Moreover, diversity and complexity go beyond the structural to the cultural: society is not only multicentric but multicultural and varied in its values. The processes of parliamentary democracy cannot be unaffected by such changes and attention must be directed to the cultural provenance of the accounts and stories that are brokered in parliaments. How are they negotiated, and by whom? Whose narratives do they represent? Even to pose these questions is to doubt whether all voices can best be represented, heard and reconciled through restricted and highly-managed parliamentary channels. They might be more faithfully articulated through new, more direct, more diverse modes of democratic politics.

The argument here is that democratic practices must therefore change to accommodate a socially diverse society, just as they must also respond to the emergence of more
diffuse and complex governing arrangements. Flexible ICT networks appear to offer the technical means for acknowledging and coping with such complexity. But for this very reason, they raise important normative issues. Without new forms of co-ordination and aggregation, there is a real danger that ICTs will simply amplify the fragmentation of public space, balkanising politics into multifarious and shifting constituencies that cannot be aggregated by any obvious means into collective decision and action. It is far from clear that parliamentary institutions can find an adequate response. Parliamentarians may, for example, wish urgently to consider the extent to which, and the means through which, they should take notice of the outcomes of political debates conducted in the public squares and bulletin boards of cyberspace, but such efforts at incorporation may - rightly perhaps - be seen as forlorn attempts to tame new technologies and resist the possibility of legitimising new democratic forms.

The conclusion to be drawn from this brief survey of the declining health of parliamentary government is that the most significant contribution of ICTs to democracy may well lie elsewhere than in their application to the centralised institutions of the Weberian state. We see little reason to suppose that informatisation will either greatly disturb or accommodate the main lines indicated by these five trends. If anything, it is people operating outside the parliamentary context who are the most enthusiastic about ICTs, and they appear to see more exciting possibilities for a politics without representative democracy (for example, Holmes, 1997; Poster, 1993, 1997). They are therefore bent either on replacing it or paralleling it with what they deem to be more genuine, or direct, democratic forms that are better suited to the politics of the present and future: in other words, with post-parliamentary politics.

But what kind of ‘politics’ can that be? The making and implementation of decisions or policies by political and governmental institutions figure only vaguely in images of post-parliamentary democracy, in which the emphasis is far more on discourse and communication than on deliberation and decision. Where collective, parliamentary decision-making aggregates and condenses, post-parliamentary political discourse disaggregates and expands, celebrating variety and the rich pluralism of opinion. Post-parliamentary discourse, in itself, aims at no terminal point of aggregative decision. It therefore aims at no action for which anybody can be held accountable under any code of accountability. It is also, therefore, of course, a politics in which ‘representation’ seems to have little real meaning or resonance as part of a legitimising theory of democracy, and in which ‘accountability’ is hard to locate, either conceptually or empirically. We have previously argued that this implies serious consequences for the aggregative and accountability functions that lie at the heart of parliamentary democracy in large-scale societies - at least, as parliamentary democracy has been traditionally understood.

However, our earlier papers deferred a more intensive discussion of whether this matters, and why. Such a discussion needs to start with a set of underlying questions to do with the nature and locus of power and decision making in the virtual polity, the continuing role and nature of the ‘state’ and how we should think about the relationship of one to the other. To go back to Dahl (1967): what are the political units in which postmodern practices of participation and accountability could and should be articulated? We now begin to open up these issues with a view to clarifying the concepts on which this analysis depends.
III. Integration, plurality and collectivity

Before these issues can be tackled, let us revisit the answer to a prior question: ‘what are representative political institutions, such as parliaments, for?’ The traditional answer is to say that democracy is not simply about providing opportunities for individual citizens to express their personal opinions, to promote their private interests or to seek redress for individual grievances - or indeed to join together with other citizens to mobilise the power to do these things - though it must certainly embrace all these possibilities. Individuals also hold interests in common as a collectivity, a ‘public’, that shares goods and values in common, makes rules for collective life, and establishes widely-accepted principles for promoting mutual well-being. This recognition of the importance of the ‘public domain’ has certain crucial implications for assessing the claim that a political system is ‘democratic’.

First, a democracy must establish open, inclusive processes by which public issues can be not only aired but also resolved, and through which the value system underpinning them can be constantly tested and renewed. Second, the decisions that are made, and the actions that are undertaken, on behalf of the public must be open to public display, scrutiny and challenge. Third, the damage that those decisions and actions might do to individuals and groups must be prevented or at least remedied.

Thus, parliamentary democracy involves an inclusive process, in which participants display certain moral qualities, especially toleration of each other’s perspectives and interests and a willingness to mediate them with reasoned argument. The ideal that is often put forward is a form of deliberative democracy, involving a search for the best outcome for the collectivity as a whole, one that is acceptable to, or at least not harmful for, all participants (Fishkin, 1991). ‘Deliberative democracy’, of course, can mean different things, as recent discussions show (Elster, 1998), but most theorists adhere to a core definition, which includes collective decision-making with the participation of all who will be affected by the decision or their representatives: this is the democratic part. Also … it includes decision-making by means of arguments offered by and to participants who are committed to the values of rationality and impartiality: this is the deliberative part (Elster: 1998: 8; emphasis in original).

Our understanding of aggregation includes deliberation (or discussion, or debate) as the means for arriving at a (perhaps voted) conclusion of decision- and policy-making. In using this term, we wish to avoid the connotation of ‘mere’ aggregation through voting, though we part company with any notion of deliberative democracy that suggests that all can be resolved simply by maximising opportunities for rational discussion.

All this means that there is therefore a necessary duality – and therefore an important and inescapable tension - at the very heart of the notion of the ‘public’. ‘Public’ means not only "the public as a collectivity" (the whole) but also "the public as plurality" (the many)’ (Ranson and Stewart, 1994: 60). Thus a ‘citizen’ is, at once, both a member of a society with collective interests and an individual within an aggregation of individuals all of whom have private and partial interests. The exercise of citizenship therefore implies not only the power to influence decision-making and to hold decision-makers to account, but to engage in both of these processes in ways that
acknowledge and accommodate the inter-relationships between public purposes and private concerns. Viewed from the ‘top’, private interests are not only those held by individuals, but also include sectoral interests formed by, and defining, groups below the level of the collectivity as a whole, as in most accounts of ‘pluralist’ politics. Viewed from below, however, the issue is not so simple. Faced with a multitude of arenas, interests and roles, how can individuals expect to relate to the diverse and diffuse communities and networks to which they potentially belong?

As we have seen, Dahl (1967) discussed the problem of recognising and accommodating a range of territorially-defined collectivities within a single state. Most ‘modern’ democratic theory assumes that the ‘collectivity’ in question is co-terminous with a fixed, constitutionally-recognised, political unit, such as national government, or less frequently, a provincial or local authority. It is usually couched, therefore, in terms of a simple, one-dimensional relationship between individual citizens and the unit in question, one that is mediated primarily if not exclusively through processes of representation and accountability, channelled through representative bodies. Thus, as we have seen, the political significance of the parliamentary democracy project lies in the way it reinforced the ideal of a highly integrated, centralised polity, even as the world became a more complex place. Parliamentary democracy assumes both the possibility and desirability of a single political sovereign (‘parliamentary sovereignty’) conceived in centralised and hierarchical terms. It therefore assumes a unified and unitary structure of command, such as the ‘parliamentary chain of steering’. Above all, it assumes a single and inclusive forum of the political nation, reflected, for example, in the primacy of the House of Commons in the United Kingdom political system.

These are assumptions, however, that have been institutionalised through long-standing practices. They emphasise the role of elected representatives as gatekeepers as well as conduits of democratic opinion, filtering both the number and range of opinions and issues that come into political account. They also assert the desirability of simplifying and aggregating opinions and issues to the point where they are capable of being re-presented and resolved in a single forum, and establishing administrative arrangements capable of guaranteeing the primacy, inclusiveness and effectiveness of feedback. In these ways, the rhetoric and practices associated with parliamentary democracy may be seen as important techniques for controlling and making more manageable the political effects of social complexity and diversity.

In contrast, however, political theorists have recently become much more conscious of the growing mismatch between the confinement of democratic politics within the restricted channels of parliamentary politics, and the multiple nodes of power to be found in complex systems of governance, including many which transcend the increasingly blurred and shifting boundaries between state and society. At the same time, what has become more apparent is the plurality of connections experienced by individuals to the multi-faceted social worlds in which they live. The ‘collectivities’ through which individuals seek to pursue their interests are plural, contingent, overlapping and often transient: they are neither simply-defined or fixed. They are constituted according to a variety of criteria, of which the territorial factor is only one, even if that produces several nested units in the manner described by Dahl. They are also far from being uniformly dominated by formal state institutions or by conventional political channels.
IV. Parliaments and postmodernisation

Most accounts of postmodern society and politics dwell upon the transformation of the state, and the shift of public decision-making, away from the primacy of central institutions in a more fragmented, diffuse polity. Here there are plural nodes of decision-making, and networks as well as markets supplant or co-exist with bureaucracies and hierarchies (Maidment and Thompson (eds.), 1993). In some versions, there are no normatively privileged ruling institutions and no central core of agreed public purposes or moral values. For some writers, this shift is inevitable and is viewed dispassionately: because collective goals cannot be pursued in the postmodern polity, it is meaningless, and merely nostalgic, to give them any further thought. It is futile, moreover, to worry away about the design of institutional forms that might give them effect (see, for example Frissen, 1999, chapter 5, commenting on recent Dutch parliamentary reform commissions). Indeed, for theorists such as Poster (1997), it is useless to try to imagine a postmodern democracy: even to employ the term is to imprison the future in the worn-out categories of modernism. For writers such as these, the stance has to be one of letting go. For others, however, these trends are to be regretted not least because they empty politics of collective content, meaning and morality. The danger is not so much that politics will transmute into a war of all against all, but that

it will not be about anything in particular…. There is no inquiry, no debate, no agreed-upon grounds for asserting truth-claims, no propositions to be tested, no persuasion, no refutation, and no requirement that words connote the same phenomena for everyone (Fox and Miller, 1995: 69).

The postmodernisation of politics cuts society adrift from the prospect of improvement guided by generally agreed aims, including the pursuit of egalitarian ends (van Stokkom, 1992, cited in Frissen, 1999: 107) Furthermore, postmodernists view ICTs as the handmaiden of these accelerating trends. 'Cyberspace' is virtual, and cannot be tied to or mapped onto the formal institutions of the Weberian state. 'Cyberdemocracy' can be developed in all kinds ways that owe nothing to the territorial collectivities which their members may inhabit. The very concepts of 'membership' or 'citizenship' are unclear and elusive; so too, in consequence, are 'decision' and 'policy'. The very ideas of 'representation' and 'accountability' appear, then, to be irrelevant, and even embarrassingly outmoded, in these postmodernising times.

If this is the emergent future, then, as we have speculated before, the application of ICTs to reinvigorate parliamentary democracy amounts to 'wiring-up the deck-chairs' on a ship of state that is doomed to sink below the waves (Bellamy and Raab, 1999a) But what, then, are we to make of democratic innovations such as the historic recreation of a devolved Scottish government, one that is moreover replete with plans for the extensive use of ICTs in its parliamentary and governmental organisations, as well as between them and citizens and social groups? Is this simply to provide the deck-chairs with tartan cushions? The very centre-piece of the new arrangements is the establishment of a representative body - a parliament, one that is related to an accountable executive, and of a kind that, we are increasingly told, is fast being consigned to redundancy or oblivion.
This question brings us back to the issues at the heart of this paper. What role can there be for central political institutions in the mixed polity, and how (and how effectively) could the performance of this role be subjected to democratic involvement and accountability? A brief scan of contemporary political theory suggests that it is possible, in principle, to adopt one of four broad responses to these questions in the literatures on postmodernism and pluralisation. The first, which is associated with certain post-Marxist literature (see variously, Miller, 1989; Mouffe (ed.) 1992; Hirst, 1994), finds it impossible, in the end, to let go of the centralised state, however hollowed out it becomes. This writing continues to see the state as a special kind of association that can and should control the terms on which all other associations exist and act. The talk in this literature is of a continuing process of pluralisation, in which the state creates a more diverse, participative, inclusive society as a continuous act of political will. It devolves more of its own functions, for example, to voluntary associations in civil society, and takes positive steps to nurture a wider range of communities. It may thereby come to recognise a much wider range of identities and demands, including those from hitherto excluded groups. However, the overriding claims of social justice mean that it must ultimately retain both the right and capacity for regulating civil society and mediating among the different constituencies that compose the polity. In other words, there is a powerful if residual notion that the state, and therefore democratic institutions within the state, should continue to provide a forum for deciding what is good for the collectivity as a whole. The assumption is that democratic debate can continue to take place on the basis of common values, bringing, for example, equality and justice to the fore. It follows that parliaments, however limited their powers, should and could still aspire to serve as symbols of political integration and as sources of coherent policy.

The second response is more commonly associated with post-communitarian and liberal theorists on the Right (for example, MacInytre, 1988; Rawls, 1972). It acknowledges - not always with complacency - the multiplicity and diversity of identities and values in contemporary society and, in consequence, denies that there is a common platform of values capable of supporting a widely accepted notion of what is socially good. Indeed, the assertion of such a notion is bound to be oppressive to those who do not share in the dominant value system. However, they believe that it might, nevertheless, be possible to agree a set of procedures which could permit different groups to compete in the political arena on terms that could be generally acknowledged as ‘fair’. In this formulation, central institutions therefore take overarching responsibility for mediating and supervising relations of competition and exchange that exist among groups and networks. Aggregation is important, but it amounts to no more than an agreement about procedure. Voting, for example, is good enough.

The third response, which, as we have seen above, is mainly associated with postmodernism as a theoretical perspective (Connolly, 1991; Frissen, 1999; Fox and Miller; 1995; Poster; 1993) is the belief that aggregation in either of these senses is neither a feasible ambition nor normatively desirable. Formal governing institutions may survive, but have no generally accepted prior claim to regulate or mediate among other associations, groups or networks. Postmodern society is seen, rather, as a web of affinities and affiliations, often shifting and never permanently fixed. Social bonds are formed locally from webs of meaning that are constantly re-negotiated and always contingent. From this perspective, any attempt to re-centre politics on the state, to impose an overarching set of values or procedures, is therefore bound to be partial and
oppressive: aggregation is a dangerous aspiration. What, however, is there to prevent this ambition being realised? What, too, is there to ensure that webs are open, or to prevent the emergence of new forms of exclusion? At this point, postmodern theory tends to fall back on the assertion that postmodern politics are likely to be associated with new dispositions and attitudes, ones that are capable of fostering new connectivities and more open, more welcoming political discourses and communicative orientations. It therefore fosters a hope that postmodern society can engender greater mutual respect. Whether this is hope is based on anything more solid than unfounded optimism is as yet far from clear.

The fourth response - one to which our own analysis tends - acknowledges postmodern tendencies to fragmentation and balkanisation, and agrees that they cast important doubts on the practical competence of the modern state. But, at the same time, it is much more sceptical about the possibility of an unproblematic, universal shift to a new postmodern political style. It seems more likely that the emerging polity will be a hybrid or mixed social form, in which the contradictions between modernity and postmodernity will set up tensions that will prove to be impossible to resolve. On the one hand, the mediative, aggregative, aspirations of the state and its central machinery will never finally wither, though they may well become severely attenuated, and the traditional functions of parliaments - aggregation, representation and ensuring accountability - will never become redundant. On the other hand, the pluralisation of society, the growing complexity of decision-making, the diffusion of governance and the growing popularity of anti-foundationalist discourses, will make it increasingly difficult to sustain the legitimacy and the effectiveness of the ‘parliamentary chain of steering’.

**The end of parliamentary institutions?**

What then, is the role of parliaments in a mixed polity? It might seem, on the one hand, that the effort and money spent on reinventing parliamentary institutions amounts to little more than a sentimental clinging to an outdated tradition, to a much-loved political teddy-bear. Who really believes in parliaments any more? No need to pension them off; however: time will take its toll, despite all the effort devoted to modernising and informatising these bodies. Political and governmental institutions correspond to the societies they inhabit and lead. When - even (or especially?) in Scotland - we can no longer be certain what constitutes the 'collectivity'; when its manifestation is no longer uniquely tied to an identifiable territory co-terminous with a contemporary 'state'; when interests can be aggregated at global and sub-state levels; when deliberation and decision-making can take place in multiple arenas at many levels or at no 'level' at all, then the claims of the parliamentary-democracy project look increasingly threadbare.

On the other hand, it is possible to assert that, though in practice parliaments may be of small relevance to the making of decisions and to the exercise of power, they nevertheless play an essential part in bestowing meaning and legitimacy on governance, however dispersed and diffused. Indeed, it may be that this role will become more important in conditions of political change, fragmentation and unpredictability. In the proper sense of Bagehot’s famous term (ed. Crossman, 1963), parliaments, and the party politicians who strut across their floors, have become
‘dignified’ parts of the political system, exercising few direct powers but playing an equally important role in focusing interest and fixing popular attention. Their most significant function is to act as the front offices of politics, displaying the issues of the day, and influencing and reflecting the changing political climate which is, at bottom, the only effective restriction on the powers of back-office networks. For example, it is not necessary to believe that the Scottish people fell victim to an illusion that a self-governing nation collectively required an ‘efficient’ deliberative body in order to argue the case for the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. Rather, by this view, the Scottish Parliament is a symbolically necessary institution, acting both as a powerful legitimization of, and a lodestone for, Scottish aspirations both inside and outwith the Scottish political world. It is also, obviously, a working legislature, but this may not be its most significant role.

This argument assumes, then, that parliaments are still perceived as a special source of democratic legitimacy, capable of establishing the democratic credentials of a regime in a way that no other institution can. It assumes, too, that postmodern politics has not yet established its own claims to legitimacy or transcended what is still, largely, a modern or even pre-modern political culture. Elements of postmodern politics must co-exist with a modernistic consciousness of a past in which the achievement of the parliamentary franchise was the distinctive mark of political belonging, and in which the attrition or abolition of parliamentary institutions signalled important dangers. It is true, of course, that these dangers were associated with the assertion of centralised, authoritarian regimes rather than the splintering of power in an array of disparate networks and groups. But can we face a postmodern future without the blessing of parliamentary institutions? On what objects should political legitimacy now come to rest? A diffuse agglomeration of self-governing, sometimes transitory, fragments?

Parliaments in the mixed polity – still an efficient part of the political system?

This discussion gives force to our view that the most salient feature of contemporary government is that we are uncomfortably situated between parliamentary and post-parliamentary forms of governance. The future is just as likely to consist of diverse combinations of these forms, as it is to consist of the replacement of one form of society by another. Elements of modernity will persist into a postmodern world, which will exhibit varying kinds and degrees of accommodation and tension. In this mixed polity, networks may proliferate but have not entirely supplanted older, bureaucratic structures of policy-making and implementation. Central administrative machines may have altered in shape and scope, re-thinking their modes of steering or rowing, hiving off some functions, decentralising others, and devolving still more, but they have neither withered away nor – as mentioned earlier – been irreversibly hollowed out. In practice, networks tend to adjust to and incorporate these machines, rather than entirely displace them. Markets may be playing a more prominent role in the allocation of values, but do not normally stand alone and are entwined with other arrangements (Thompson et al (eds.), 1991). Indeed, one interesting manifestation of the mixed polity is that ‘co-production’ between the state and society is coming to be seen as a favoured way of making and implementing policy (Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan (eds.), 1997; Kooiman (ed.), 1993). To be sure, from a democratic point of view, many commentators are concerned with the legitimacy of closed, non-transparent networks (e.g., Rhodes, 1997).
The main point we make here, however, is that governments are far from irrelevant or invisible in the literature on governance, although their role, influence and accountability are often unclear. The following extract is taken from a recent Dutch policy document and captures well the tensions apparent in a system caught uneasily between Weberian, social democratic, and postmodernist assumptions:

Government and citizens are increasingly operating in a network society in which they are becoming more and more equal and in which the strength of government is determined by the delivery of quality and by the joint creation and sharing of policy information. Indeed, policy can in some cases even be said to be a co-production. Yet at the same time justice must also be done to the more traditional function of government, for example maintaining law and order and exercising the monopoly on protecting safety and security, although government is also having to take on new roles such as interactive and communicative leadership. Government has, however, traditionally been a referee too, and has as such been responsible for the public interest, taking account of minority interests. A new balance must be struck in the network society between government, the market sector and civil society. With the advent of the network society, government must invest in newly shaped information relationships. (Dutch Parliament, 2000: para. 2.1)

The point that emerges is that postmodern governance is a kaleidoscope of many forms, including those that reflect older concepts of policy-making, representation and deliberation. Its elements are sometimes conflicting, often tailored to the influences of different domains, and frequently inappropriately applied. But it is always variegated rather than uniform, and that is what is 'postmodern' about it. A postmodern polity cannot consist of postmodern elements alone: above all, the postmodern polity celebrates complexity. As we saw above, the modern polity recoils from it, denies it or tries to reduce it, and parliamentary democracy has offered important techniques for bringing this about. The mixed polity, on the other hand, must search for ways of accommodating complexity while also coming to terms with the far from unspent legacies of parliamentary democracy.

It may be, too, that parliaments still have, and should have, a substantive, as well as a legitimating, role to play, in helping to provide for representational, aggregative and accountability functions in the mixed polity – or rather, that the performance of a 'dignified' role (in Bagehot's terms) necessarily involves the possibility that representative institutions will continue to have a powerful, if not always easily directly measurable, influence on public policy. As Judge (1999: 140; emphasis in original) writes, citing a host of supportive literature:

To conclude that parliament's substantive contribution to law-making is limited, even peripheral in the case of detailed formulation and implementation, does not mean that parliament is peripheral to the process of policy making itself. Often the contribution of parliaments are [sic] indirect..., or perform a "climate setting" role, or, through oversight of policy implementation, contribute to the "next round" of policy development...But, even if it is conceded that, despite all of this, parliament's practical contribution to policy making is relatively restricted, the crucial point remains that parliamentary representation is still of paramount importance in the legitimation of public policy outputs.
This is to assert that parliaments remain an ‘efficient’ part of the political system, relevant to the direct exercise of whatever effective power still accrues to the Weberian state. We assess this assertion, by exploring what the concepts of representation and accountability might mean, why they might still be important, and how they might be operationalised, in the postmodernising world. Perhaps unsurprisingly, our tentative conclusion will be that the tensions and contradictions in the mixed polity make it much more problematic to see how representative institutions can help to make them work but - more contentiously perhaps - we nevertheless assert the continuing importance of these concepts to the democratic health of the contemporary polity. This then, is a conceptual and practical problem that needs to be more thoroughly addressed in relation to the postmodernisation and virtualisation of democracy.

As we saw above, representation can be seen as a way of coping with overload by simplifying and aggregating demands made upon decision-making bodies, as systems models such as Easton's (1965) show. Structures outside or at the boundary of the 'black box' do not transmit 'raw' pressures or messages; instead, they filter, combine, re-state and select them in ways that can then be processed by the government machine. Although systems approaches oversimplify and perhaps distort the nature of politics and policy-making, they nevertheless serve a useful purpose by pointing up the normative and practical role of 'gatekeeping' institutions in the political system. In particular, they set out the rationale for aggregative functions that help to keep the system's fuse from blowing. Elected representatives transform what they 'represent'; the degree to which they distort (misrepresent) the views, interests and demands that they 'stand for', or indeed reject them, is an important evaluative question, one that exposes the extent to which the frustration of unalloyed popular demands is legitimate in a democratic polity. Centralised, representative government is government in which no one person or section can get all they want. Compromise is not only functionally crucial but is thereby cloaked in legitimacy to the point where it is seen as a positive virtue. In such a system, no one wins outright although some potential issues lose outright by not even getting past the gatekeepers. Depending on the electoral importance of different mixes of interests, the skill of the gatekeeper lies in convincing losers that they have at least had their interests taken into account - a problem that is best pointed up in the Burkean notion of ‘virtual representation’. As has been well understood for many years, the success of gatekeeping skills depends upon there being a substantial degree of popular deference to, or trust in, the ‘system’ - in its processes and incumbents - in order to reconcile as many groups as possible to a process in which they can never entirely win and may sometimes badly lose.

More recently, the crucial, complexity-reducing function of trust has been examined by Luhmann (1979), and its importance is now being rediscovered in the proliferating literatures on co-production, power-dependency, and networks. In the networks of the mixed polity, the mutual negotiation of roles, and the critical role played by the exchange of resources, involves trust in the willingness and ability of partners to perform to mutual advantage (Raab, 1992). In its further development of these relationships into 'contingent interdependency' (Frissen, 1999: 227), postmodern governance does not obviate, but may even extend, the need for trust. Frissen writes:

Administration ... should primarily rest on a trust in autonomy. Not because autonomy self-evidently produces what is good but because confidence in autonomy is both intelligent and pleasant. It is intelligent because the
administration links up with processes of social fragmentation in a flexible fashion … It is pleasant because it avoids the administrative perversions of totalising intervention and the destruction of variety. It thereby eliminates the need for fraud, deceit and calculation on the part of autonomous actors and domains towards the central planners … But this is not a trust in some ideal of basic democracy or in some naive anarchism. It is a trust based on a respect for contingency, an appreciation of fragmentation and the hope for connections (Frissen, 1999: 226).

What has changed in the concept of ‘trust’ is that its use and meaning has shifted over time. No longer are we so concerned as were Burke, Bagehot, or Almond and Verba, for example, with the generalised trust of the people in the ‘system’ as a whole - vertical, bottom-up trust, if you like. Instead, we have become much more interested in how trust is created in the context of specific purposes or relationships. Some examples are the establishment of popular trust relations within a pervasive but specific functional regime (for example, governments’ current concern with establishing popular trust in e-commerce (Raab, 1998)); the establishment of trust between partners in a public/private partnership; and, as in the quotation above, the establishment of trust between tiers within devolved political or managerial arrangements. What all these examples illustrate well is that this growing interest in trust reflects the more diffused, flexible and contingent nature of contemporary governance, and this must include the exquisite difficulties in establishing trust relationships in the virtual world of cyberspace.

At first sight, at least, it seems obvious that while postmodernism may create an increasing need for trust, it may place decreasing emphasis on the effectiveness of - or indeed, the need for - gatekeeping. In contrast to hierarchical conceptions of order that were embedded in the model of parliamentary democracy, complexity is not a problem for postmodern politics; indeed it may even be welcomed as reflecting more accurately the complexity of postmodern societies. The problem which has preoccupied theorists as diverse as Hobbes, Burke, Crick and Easton – that of reconciling diversity and order – seems to disappear. The idea that politics has to do with the difficult task of making authoritative decisions within, on behalf of, and with the acceptance of the members of, a collectivity fades away. Whereas gatekeeping inevitably frustrates desires, the plural segments and arenas of the postmodern polity hold out the prospect of gratifying and indulging them. But this means, too, that postmodern politics undermines the possibility of, indeed ceases to possess the ambition for, holding anyone to account for the probity, quality or consequences of public acts. If no-one is in charge, the concept of ‘stewardship’, a concept which is inherent in the liberal emphasis on accountability (Gray and Jenkins, 1985), is also extinguished.

None of this can be shrugged off as of little or no consequence for the quality of governance and the health of democracy. For all its faults, a parliamentary system classically recognises the need to provide political authority for making and implementing binding decisions at the 'macro' level, whatever or wherever that level may be for the case in question. It provides, for example, a well-recognised means for establishing and renewing an overarching legal framework, for the democratic control or regulation of public goods. Above all, perhaps, it supplies a legitimate technique for extracting and allocating money and other resources for purposes that exceed the scope and capacities of smaller or less inclusive domains. It also provides
authoritative constitutional and political arrangements for mediating relations between smaller collectivities.

But if social action or public decision-making is simply a matter for each of a plethora of social fragments, is there to be no collective deliberation or even transparency about transcendent issues? If the public sphere is splintered into a pluralistic array of transient groups, how are the wider repercussions of actions in one domain on other domains, to be recognised and controlled? Simply by local negotiation and exchange? If so, is there a way of ensuring that these processes involve the most appropriate stakeholders or that outcomes can be implemented and enforced, whatever the material, organisational and political resources available to the unit in question? Can and should central institutions carry residual responsibilities for seeing that questions such as these are addressed or that the implementation of outcomes is adequately supported and resourced? If so, what gives it the legitimacy and capability to do so?

Such questions as these serve to point up the true importance of ICTs for the contemporary polity, and for our understanding of postparliamentary democracy. The significance of electronic means for political participation is often seen to lie in the circumvention of the need for representation or mediation. But such a shift towards direct democracy does not by itself necessarily pose a threat to the public realm or its central institutions. Participatory democracy (Pateman, 1970; Budge, 1996) still involves decision-making by and for the collectivity as a whole, and therefore still involves the ideals of representation and accountability. It is rather the de-centring of those institutions in postmodernity that challenges the centrality of these concepts, whether democratic processes are supported by ICTs or not.

In the mixed polity, the processes of mutual adjustment between sectors, groups or interests increasingly take place outside the central arenas of representative democracy. This shift inevitably obscures both the locus and processes of decision-making, making it impossible for members outside these forums to fix responsibility or influence outcomes, though in practice much might depend on what constitutes domains or fragments within the mixed polity and the extent to which their memberships overlap. Thus it might depend on which categories or groups are involved; whether they are mutually exclusive or cross-cutting; whether the sectors are horizontally or hierarchically aligned (or perhaps nested); what the criteria are for membership, and who, in the end, determines and enforces them; and what kinds of internal processes and leadership are extant in various domains. But these contingent approaches to participation and representation are silent on a central question: whether the interest of the wider polity in the affairs of each domain can and should be recognised. Is anyone responsible, for example, for ensuring that no-one is excluded from these processes, or that the interaction of the parts adds up to something approaching fairness, equity, and coherent policy?

As we have seen, the working assumption is that we are faced for the foreseeable future with a mixed polity in which postmodern novelty will coexist with the political legacies of modernity. In particular, the political machinery associated with the modern state will continue to exist, even if many its functions are devolved or dispersed. Governments will continue to raise taxes and allocate expenditures, parliaments will continue to legislate, nation states will continue to conduct diplomacy, maintain armies and go occasionally to war, and territorially-defined collectivities will still function and assert their authority. However attenuated, it is the
customary machinery of government that will probably bear the brunt of mediating and regulating the diffuse, overlapping networks of governance. The paradox is that, far from withering away, central institutions, including parliaments, may be faced with intensified problems of managing political complexity. These problems are born of the assumption - which we share - that there may be circumstances in which it is desirable to hold some rings, at least, between disparate elements, and that it will be important to do so in ways that are recognised to be democratic and legitimate. Whether in the end, politics in the mixed polity can be centred in these ways, remains, of course, to be seen.

V. Conclusion

The question addressed here has been what role ICTs are likely to play in the mixed polity: how, if at all, they can be harnessed to this task. Before we can finally deal with this question, we need to identify the range of possibilities for responding to the fundamental issue posed in this paper. The conclusion to be drawn from this overview is that the main contribution of ICTs to democracy lies elsewhere than in their application to centralised parliamentary processes. Yet the importance of aggregation cannot be gainsaid, in old democracies as in new. Parliaments have always symbolised the coming together of persons, and even peoples, in concert for a political purpose, thus giving political expression as well as practical reality to social and cultural aspirations towards nationhood or of territorial sovereignty. Something of this may also be seen at the various levels of political community above and below that of the nation-state. The advent of a Scottish Parliament in 1999 provides rich illustrations, but so, too, has the establishment or re-establishment, down the ages, of the instruments of self-government elsewhere: for example, in former colonial territories, or in the transitional democracies of the former Soviet Union and in East and Central Europe.

If a parliament, as a representative institution, is a centripetal force, the centrifugal force of cyberspace is its antagonist. Whilst we do not mean to perpetuate myths about particular territories or their parliaments, these conflicting tendencies deserve to be recognised, for they shape the problem of aggregation in the cyber age as a political one of some significance. A fundamental question, and one that is raised directly by the concept of the mixed polity, is how very different kinds of unit may interact, if at all. This applies especially to relations between those units that will continue to operate in and around, and be legitimised by, the institutionalised machinery of governance, and those that operate mainly or wholly within their own domain. What does it mean to ‘aggregate’ political opinions or interests? Within and across what political communities or ‘units’? What is aggregated, and why is it important? What are the consequences of aggregative failure? Finally, what role can there be for central political institutions, and how effectively can the performance of this role be subjected to democratic involvement and accountability in a mixed polity?

References


APPENDIX ONE: Applying a 'ladder of informatisation' to parliamentary democracy

- Online participation in proceedings of parliamentary committees
- Online participation in citizen juries and deliberative panels
- Online participation in focus groups
- Participation in political forums in civil society, such as electronic public squares and village halls
- Mobilisation of opinion through online petitions and political campaigns
- Online participation in election hustings

- Online advice bureaux held by MPs
- E-mail correspondence between MPs, citizens and the Executive

- Publication of MPs’ voting records and position papers
- Information about the availability of MPs
- Parties' election manifestos and candidates' position papers
- Broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings
- Publication of records of parliamentary proceedings and votes
- Publication of official and parliamentary reports, policy documents and draft bills

- Expert-systems support for legislation
- Electronic voting for MPs in parliamentary votes
- Online access for MPs to draft bills, minutes of debates, committee agendas, etc.
- Online access for MPs to library and information services
- Electronic voting in parliamentary elections

(Source: Bellamy and Raab, 1999b)

This ladder is designed to illustrate the broad distinction between the use of ICTs to strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of the state in controlling and serving citizens, and the use of ICTs as ‘citizen technologies’. On the lowest rung are proposals for strengthening parliamentary democracy by enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of elected representatives, thus enhancing the influence and prestige of parliaments. Such innovations respond to the claim that a major source of parliaments’ failure to deliberate wisely and to scrutinise government effectively lies in the low quality and independence of information possessed by elected representatives. ICTs could redress such problems by, for example, providing online access to significantly enhanced library and research services. However, whilst these
measures may be valuable improvements in the way in which representatives work, they do not necessarily widen citizen participation or significantly improve the processes of parliamentary democracy.

On the second rung, better provision of information to the public is available through networked technologies, such as the Internet or digital TV, which offer fast, cheap and effective ways of disseminating a wide variety of information. This might include records of parliamentary debates; draft legislation and committee papers; information about MPs, including their availability to constituents, voting records or position statements; information from Ministers, such as answers to parliamentary questions; and information about elections, including party manifestos and campaign materials. Potentially, at least, the wider and greater availability of such material could enable citizens to undertake their roles as electors and constituents more competently and intelligently, but it also increases their reliance on point-to-mass, 'broadcast' channels of information dissemination and thus on those who control those modes.

These two rungs, and the categories of technology-mediated innovation associated with them, involve the use of technologies as accessible sources of richer, more comprehensive, more flexibly-organised information resources. However, they take relatively little advantage of the interactive capabilities of ICTs for supporting qualitatively different kinds of interaction and participation in the democratic process. Our third level therefore denotes a range of proposals for exploiting, for example, the interactive possibilities of telephone helplines or e-mail in creating new bonds between representatives and the public. The third rung, however, remains more or less within the realm of communications involving citizens as individuals who largely interact with representatives over their private concerns.

The fourth rung, on the other hand, involves proposals for using ICTs to offer members of the public opportunities to participate more directly and, at least as important, more collectively, in the policy 'input' processes of parliamentary democracy. These opportunities may also enable more direct and collective approaches to holding representatives and governments to account, as we will explore below. The early history of electronic democracy is littered with experiments, often termed 'electronic town meetings' or 'city forums', to use cable TV to involve voters actively in election hustings, in discussions with elected representatives or in confrontations with officials (Abramson et al., 1988). The Internet provides even richer, more widely available, opportunities for democratic interaction on the issues of the day, particularly in the formative stages of making policies or laws. It is not difficult, for example, to conceive of arrangements that could permit members of the public or spokespersons of pressure groups to present online evidence to parliamentary committees.

These 'higher rung' applications of ICTs appear to present unambiguously positive opportunities for strengthening the involvement, competence and power of citizens in the processes of parliamentary democracy. We enter, however, a couple of important caveats. The first is that it is by no means obvious that dissemination will necessarily be either universally rapid or egalitarian. The analysis above indicates that those facilities capable of supporting the richest information services and the most convenient interactive communications media will be disseminated most quickly and intensively amongst young, educated people in the higher social classes, especially those who currently enjoy continuous, personal access to PCs and who will continue
to form a significant *tranche* of the market for cellular phones. For this reason, indeed, many governments and commercial companies assume that, for several years to come, call centres - accessed, in the main, by customers using touch-pad phones connected to land-lines - will continue to provide important channels for high-volume, low-value transactions, such as claiming welfare benefits. In other words, although facilities for e-commerce and e-government will almost certainly spread rapidly in the next few years, it does not automatically follow that all sections of the public will thereby enjoy equal access to those technologies and services that are best suited to supporting more sophisticated democratising inputs.

The second caveat is that it by no means self-evident that investment in ICTs will necessarily favour the rapid emergence of higher-level applications, so far as electronic democracy is concerned.