E-Government in the United Kingdom

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INTRODUCTION

Like many of its western counterparts, the United Kingdom (UK) government has a long history of using IT in the administration and delivery of public services. Indeed, as early as 1959 mainframe computers were introduced in order to automate some routine aspects of public administration (Margetts & Willcocks, 1992, p. 329). However, it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s—as the UK rose to the forefront of the emerging microcomputer industry—that IT featured in policy discourse in anything other than an extremely minor fashion. Even then—despite the appointment of Kenneth Baker as the government's first Information Technology Minister in 1981—the issue did not feature prominently and there was nothing approaching the equivalence of the neighbouring French government's review of the long-term social and economic policy implications of *L'Informatisation d'Societe* commissioned in 1976 by President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing (Nora & Minc, 1980). In fact, one former government minister claimed in his diaries that Baker's appointment to the government had more to do with finding a minor role for a politician piqued at his omission from the Cabinet than with Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's belief in the importance of IT related issues (Lawson, 1992).

However, the agenda began to gather some pace following Thatcher's departure in 1990. Under the helm of Prime Minister John Major, the Conservatives introduced a number of important policies—including a series of industrially focused information society initiatives aimed at boosting the use of ICTs by business. In addition, prompted perhaps by the popular emergence of the Internet, other branches of government began to show a greatly increased interest in the issue. For instance, a Parliamentary committee—the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee (1996)—produced a major report on the implications of the information society for government. In addition, the publication of a major study on the same issue by the European Union (1994) added weight to the emerging agenda. Shortly before losing power in 1997, the Major government produced what was arguably the UK government's first systematic consideration of the implications of ICTs for government when it published an exploratory Green Paper titled *Government.Direct* (CITU, 1996). Though it came too late in the life of the government to advance its ideas any further than the discussion stage, it at least served to heighten the prominence of the agenda (Hudson, 2002).

BACKGROUND

While the publication of *Government.Direct* was a landmark in the UK's e-government debate, it is fair to say that Tony Blair's incoming New Labour government would have given ICT related issues more prominence in any event. Indeed, while leader of the opposition, Blair famously announced to his party's annual conference that he had struck a deal with British Telecom to connect all of the UK's schools, hospitals, and libraries to the Internet. The announcement performed the dual function of showing that New Labour was both ready to govern and keen to exploit the potential of emerging Internet technologies.

However, Blair's government was in office for more than a year before they published any coherent plans for greater use of ICTs by government—in a broad discussion paper titled *Our Information Age: The Government's Vision* (Cabinet Office, 1998)—and almost two before more concrete policy objectives were published as part of the *Modernising Government* White Paper (Cabinet Office, 1999). Though detail was still thin on the ground, the publication committed the government to making 25% of its services available electronically by 2002 and 100% by 2008. A detailed plan of action was outlined the following year in *e-Government: A Strategic Framework for Government Services in the Information Age*, along with a new commitment to have all services available electronically by 2005 rather than 2008 (Cabinet Office, 2000). These major policy papers were supplemented with the publication of a series of complementary frameworks, guidelines, and regulations (e.g., CITU, 1999, 2000a, b). On top of this, important institutional changes were introduced, most notably the creation of an e-minister, an e-envoy (with his own well staffed office), and a series of departmental "information age government champions" responsible for pushing change forward. Finally, a number of other arms of government were charged with the task of bolstering government thinking in this area, most notably the Cabinet Office's Performance Innovation

Table 1. Blair's key Information Age government targets

- UK: best place in the world for e-commerce by end of 2002
- 100% of public services available electronically by end of 2005
- Universal Internet access by end of 2005
- Broadband available to every home by the end of 2008
- High usage of e-government services

Unit who published a weighty document—*e.gov. Electronic Government Services for the 21st Century* (PIU, 2000)—outlining the government's long-term vision (see Hudson, 2002).

Crucially, this agenda was about more than placing basic information about services online. Instead, the government wanted to "bring about a fundamental change in the way we use IT … [to] modernise the business of government itself" (Cabinet Office, 1999, p. 45). They suggested new technology had the power to join-up services that were presently delivered in a fragmented fashion by multiple government agencies through a centralized Web-based portal that would direct citizens to the full range of services relevant to their specific "life-episodes" (p. 47). More radically still, they suggested that as ICTs are likely to engineer a greater front-office/back-office split, there was no reason why private and voluntary sector organizations should not play a greater role in delivering public services—both in terms of back-office processing functions and client-facing front-end tasks (Hudson, 2002; PIU, 2000). Indeed, they envisaged a scenario in which there would be competition and choice for the citizen—between, for instance, the state managed portal for all citizens and more specialized private or voluntary sector maintained portals aimed at particular client groups (CITU, 1999). As the Performance and Innovation Unit (2000) put it at the time: "The vision for electronic delivery of government services is to move to multi-channel, mixed public and private delivery of citizen-focused services" (p. 20).

Alongside these plans for e-government, New Labour also committed themselves to a number of complimentary policy objectives at this time. Chief amongst these were the intentions to make the UK the best place in the world for e-commerce by 2002 and to deliver universal access to the Internet by 2005. The latter objective was, perhaps, less ambitious than it might sound, defined as access to the Internet via a neighbourhood Internet facility rather than in the home. However, it also included a commitment to making training available for those who needed it. Key in terms of meeting these access targets was the development of some 6,000 community based "UK Online" centres. As these programmes came to fruition in 2004, an important additional target was announced by Tony Blair: to make broadband available to every home by 2008. Around the same time, a new e-government target was also established: to ensure high use of electronic public services. Table 1 summarises the key targets.

PROGRESS AND IMPACTS

As the 2005 target approached, the government maintained they were broadly on track to meet their e-enablement target: 75% of services were available electronically by the end of 2004 and they estimated some 96% would be by the end of 2005 (Cabinet Office, 2005a, 2005c). In global terms, the UK was performing well in many of the rankings of e-government performance at this time too. For instance, the UN placed the UK fourth in the world in terms of e-government readiness (UN, 2005) while a report published by the European Commission (2005) rated the UK as third best in the EU in terms of the sophistication of its e-government services. (See Table 2 for some of the key services.)

However, despite these successes, there are some notable weaknesses in the programme of reform to date. Chief amongst these is perhaps the very low usage of e-services: though the UK ranks highly within the EU for the quality of its services, it finishes bottom of the EU league table in terms of e-government usage by businesses and towards the bottom for usage by citizens (Eurostat, 2005). While there have been three (increasingly sophisticated) incarnations of the central government Web portal during the Blair era—open.gov.uk, UKOnline and, most recently, Directgov—it is fair to say that the visibility of these has remained relatively low given the hype surrounding the e-government agenda at its launch. Indeed, Tony Blair himself recently admitted whilst being questioned in Parliament that he did not know the URL of his government's flagship portal (House of Commons Liaison Committee, 2005, p. Q90). One might add too that the services available at present fall someway short of the radical vision for the reinvention of government trailed in 1999 and that most operate within existing agency boundaries rather than working across them, not least because individual government departments were given a target of getting 100% of their services online by 2005 but no target for working across departments or agencies. Moreover, government has struggled with the issue of online iden-