Chapter 13
On-Line Governance

ABSTRACT

Traditional government is being hollowed out as power dissipates upwards to supranational institutions and downwards to sub national agencies. Governments are also losing influence with their citizens as power is lost to interest groups, influential individuals and media organizations. Citizens are disengaging with the political process as they perceive their ability to effect change is diminishing. As individuals spend more time online, form relationships and interest groups in virtual worlds, the polis is becoming virtual. This chapter looks at how technology, which has already begun to transform service delivery in the public sector, can also transform consultation and participation. If power and influence has been dissipated from the government, can it be regained by finding new ways to engage online with the citizens on whose behalf it exists to serve?

BACKGROUND: GOVERNMENTS' LOSS OF POWER

Plato saw both the centrality of the citizen and justice as the natural state of man; 'justice is to the individual as sharpness is to a knife' (Plato, 400BC/2007, p.37). Others saw the state as a necessary evil, required to keep the peace in the face of man's desire for dominion or control. Thomas Moor imagined a utopia of city states with

power in the hands of the citizen, whilst Hobbs saw the destructive nature of man requiring a strong government to protect us from ourselves. The modern state has been defined as 'a legal and political organization with the power to require obedience and loyalty from its citizens' (Seton-Watson, 1977, p.1). The monopoly of this power and the maintenance of a territorial boundary are also seen as a defining feature (McCall, 1999). Hay (1996) sought to see the state in three distinct phases, or moments of 'stateness', the state as a nation, the state as a territory and the state

as an institution. None of these models saw the citizen as a requirement at the centre of the state or its power. In recent years nation states have seen changes in the way they can exercise power. Power has gravitated to either the sub-national or supranational level. Morison (1998, p.517) has spoken about this as the 'hollowing out' of the State and discussed the 'fugitive nature of power'. This has led to predictions of the end of the nation State (Ohmae, 1996) but, Pierson (2004, p.176) argues that States are diversifying, and developing. In the case of virtual worlds, the idea of a government presence at all has been challenged for some time. In 1996, in a reaction to the Communications Decency Act in the US, John Perry Barlow, a Fellow at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society, published 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace'. This document states, for example, *"Governments of the Industrial World.....I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather"* (quoted in Sustein, 2007, p153). As we will see later in this chapter, governments and state agencies have had a powerful role in the formulation and regulation of the internet and its virtual spaces since inception and this rather naive world view is inconsistent with the nature of our social development.

Vertical Dissipation of Power

Power has been seeded upwards at the supranational level to organizations like the European Union. Loughlin (2007, p.387) argues that the founders of European project sought to minimize the importance of the nation state by building a supranational European system as a foundation for a future federal Europe. States, if not losing sovereignty, are pooling sovereignty. Slaughter (2004, p.5), claimed that, *'states still exist but they are disaggregated'* and suggests that we stop thinking about states and focus instead on governments where the different elements of legislation,

adjudication and implementation interact with each other across borders.

Power has also been lost to, or diluted by, entities such as, The United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO). It might be assumed that governments would resist the transfer of power away from national parliaments but it has been argued elsewhere (Monbiot, 2001, p.305) that it has often been at the initiation of those in power, and against the wishes of those whom they represent, that these movements of power have occurred. This movement of power away from the citizen is one which is often either resisted by them, or done outside the national processes of scrutiny and accountability. According to Allain (2001, p.541),

The growth of internationalization qua globalization since the end of the Cold War, has meant that States have been willing to cooperate in new and expanding fields. This, in turn, has meant that increasingly States have moved to establish or reinvigorate inter-governmental institutions for the purpose of coordinated action. These institutions, to some extent, have escaped the scrutiny that ordinarily would be felt at the national level. With no true constituency to monitor their international activities and being one step removed from a general public to which they are accountable, States have sought and often achieved collectively what they could not accomplish individually.

In the absence of the scrutiny described above, improved standards of governance could be achieved by a form of peer review amongst nations. Boswell (2003, p.113) reviewed the proposition that international standards strengthen accountability and improve the performance of governance structures. The challenge was not in the creation of standards but how they are applied in practice and that peer review was the best way to ensure compliance. Governments must have the political will, the technical capacity, the resources, and there

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