

Third Way e-Government: the Case for Local Devolution

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Abstract. Governments often embrace the Web as a means of delivering joined-up, citizen-centric services efficiently and cost-effectively. In the UK, despite significant investment both provision and usage of e-services have fallen short of target. In this article the current status of UK e-government is analysed in relation to 'New Labour' Third Way governance. It is concluded that the inherent contradictions of Third Way ideology and the government's favoured command and control style are hindering the development of e-government. It is proposed that greater devolution to local councils may accelerate the provision of participatory, partnership-based e-services. If this is to be successful however, central government must move beyond the popularly prescribed model of transaction-based, bilateral e-services and reconceptualise e-government as an instrument of devolved, communitarian governance.

1 Introduction

It is widely recognised that Internet technology plays a central role in contemporary social transformations. Its capacity to institute change has been seized upon by social analysts (warning of its panoptic properties), businesses (seeking cost-savings), citizens (primarily for communication) and governments (cost savings, improved communications and increased participation). A study of the potential of e-government [1] identified that the Web could not only improve service efficiency but also facilitate new networked relations between the state and its citizens. Recognising this potential governments have invested heavily in the e-government platform. In the UK investment has been significant, yet progress has been slower than planned with portals lacking the functionality of those of other European nations. In a recent survey by the European Commission [2] the UK was ranked sixth in Europe in terms of the availability of online services (at 50%) and eighth in terms of service sophistication (71%). In April -June 2004 the underutilised central government portal, 'ukonline.gov.uk' was replaced by two portals: 'Government Gateway', providing services for businesses, agents and the general public, and 'DirectGov', aimed specifically at the private citizens. Though services are improving, Web technology has not yet delivered the results sought by the government in its 1999 White Paper, *Modernising Government* [3]. It is proposed here that lack of progress is due not to

the commonly ascribed problems of unrealistic aims, inadequate resources or the digital divide, but to deep-rooted problems of governmentality centred upon the erosion of state power, the reluctance of central government to devolve decision-making to local authorities and public scepticism.

2 Government aims: 'joined up' and efficient e-government

In common with other European countries the UK government mapped out a strategy for the provision of joined-up, citizen-centric, efficient e-services. The three specific aims are as follows (*italics added*):

- ensure that policy making is *joined up and strategic*
- making sure that public service users, not providers, are the focus, by *matching services more closely to people's lives*
- delivering public service that are *high quality and efficient* (1999:2).

The ambition to develop an e-platform that not only to delivers services efficiently, but in an accessible, convenient and relevant manner is not unique. Additionally, the apparent duality of purpose is accommodated within Third Way ideology which, treading a careful path between Conservative individualism and 'Old Labour' collectivism redefines state / citizen relations in a communitarian model located within a framework of economic rationality [4]. In reality, however, it may simply be impossible to provide services which are both responsive *and* efficient – at least in the short term. Joined-up, responsive e-services are likely to require less central prescription, greater local autonomy, more flexible cross-boundary communication and, importantly, a move away from traditional, protracted, hierarchical decision-making. In contrast, efficiency usually demands standardisation, automation and economies of scale, requiring a relatively high degree of central planning and control. Given the high degree of inherent complexity, conflict may be anticipated between efficiency and responsiveness. Thus, mutually incompatible objectives and the inherent dichotomy of the underlying ideological framework may already be erecting unseen barriers.

2.1 Prioritising Efficiency

Despite the rhetoric of participation, efficiency and cost-effectiveness are afforded high priority in the public sector [5]. Again, this is not unique to the UK, but indicative of the developed world's response to globalisation and intensifying competition. Yet the state has welfare obligations that may impinge upon the achievement of sound financial outcomes, but can not simply be dismissed, for example to serve the greater good, to promote inclusion, and to provide uneconomic public goods. As Jackson [6] illustrates, these obligations lead to fundamental decisions about the balance between efficiency and welfare distribution, for example, whether to pursue a utilitarian policy of the greatest good for the greatest number, or to maximise a weighted sum of each individual's welfare, or to pursue a strategy of

maximising the welfare of the least well-off in society. The Weberian state gains its legitimacy precisely from its obligation to address such issues - it is this welfare role that stops the state from degenerating into 'a mere conspiracy for oppression and extortion'[7]. Yet, the UK government, despite its socialist roots and apparently ignorant of the potential conflict between the ideologies of the welfare state on the one hand and the corporate state on the other, continues to propound the now almost universally accepted logic of private sector values.

There is much to suggest, both in government literature and public sector managerialism, that the Third Way has retained many of the core tenets of Conservative neo-liberalism. In *Modernising Government* [3] the corporate world is held up as a role model:

'We have seen a revolution over the past decade in the way leading companies across the world do business. They have used networked computing to refocus their activities on the customer. They have used IT to work more closely with their suppliers. They have made innovative use of information to become learning organisations. They have supplied new services, when, where and how the customer wants them. They have developed new delivery channels like call centres and the Internet. They have given their staff the support they need to use IT effectively.'

More recently, the advertisement for the post of Head of e-Government described the role as 'analogous to that of a CIO in a very large and diverse conglomerate', concerned with 'how ICT can transform public services and deliver efficiencies in operations'[8] In Sheptycki's [9] analysis as the power of the state shrivels, the will to govern strengthens, though importantly Cohen [10] observes that as power ebbs away the style of governance changes from macro-interventionist to semi-feudal managerialist. There is much in the current approach that validates this insight, including the artificial creation of internal markets within public sector institutions, the imposition of audit and the introduction of corporate style management structures, practices and vocabulary. Underpinning all of this is an implicit acceptance of the premise that the public sector needs to be reformed – indeed for the last twenty years the most vociferous critic of the state has been the state itself.

3 Central Government's Role in e-Government Development

Reformist critique would argue that the post-social condition allows governments only a facilitatory role in the development of e-government. It is argued widely that the role of the state is diminished, its power eroded and its custodian role all but defunct [11], [12], [13]. The post-social condition embraces a much diminished state which is no longer a driving force but a mode of co-ordination. The decline in the power of the state may be conceptualised as a 'hollowing out' rather than an overall reduction in size. Giddens [14] observes that in most societies the size of the state has

remained the same, or continued to grow. In the UK, for example, the public sector has grown steadily since the Labour party was elected, yet there is little doubt that the power of the state and government is much diminished – for example, in May 2004 the High Court gave leave to citizens of the new EU states who had already been granted asylum (or were awaiting the outcome of an appeal) in the UK to challenge the government's decision to stop welfare payments; during the same month the government announced that it would not advise the England cricket team to abstain from touring Zimbabwe, as to become involved in the debate would be 'inappropriate'. Such incidents lead the public to question the role of government in contemporary society. This is not a UK phenomenon, but symptomatic of a broader globalisation and the growing complexities of trans-national regulation, though it must be noted that the UK seems to have moved further and more rapidly down this route than other nations.

3.1 Public Scepticism

At the same time the public is highly sceptical of politicians, the government and civil servants [15], [16], [17]. Recent events, reported at length in the media, have raised questions about the government's integrity - the embellishing of 'evidence' that Iraq possessed WMD in order to justify the imperative of invasion, the implied involvement of the Cabinet in the death of government scientist, Dr. David Kelly, the whitewashed Hutton Report into the case, the debate over whether British troops in Iraq were equipped appropriately, doubts over the legality of the war, and claims of government-sanctioned bugging of the UN. Scepticism towards the apparatus of the state is also increasing, exemplified by public concern over surveillance (databases, speed cameras and the like). State communications do little to reassure, for example the recent television broadcast that car owners who fail to renew annual tax discs will be identified and fined automatically. Such communications are incredibly potent in reinforcing public perceptions of the state as a dominant, coercive power, contradicting many of Prime Minister Blair's statements about the importance of communities, the ideal of co-governance and the state as custodian of the people. In light of the widening gap between the government and the governed it is unsurprising that public has responded with ambivalence to initiatives to improve participation – for example whilst local Citizens' Councils have been created to encourage civic engagement, these tend to attract activists grateful for an avenue along which to pursue their own agendas and have had little effect upon the growing sense of disenfranchisement. According to Warketin et al [18] disaffection with government is likely to affect usage of e-services, thus apparent public ambivalence to the e-platform may in fact be a conscious decision to desist, fuelled by uncertainty about the integrity of both the state and its technology. The prevailing perception of a government out of touch with its citizens and apparently intent upon increasingly interfering in their lives to its own ends presents a significant challenge to the government's ability to engage citizens online.

4 Role of Local Government

At the same time there is little doubt that models of governance which tolerate fragmentation and local representation are in the ascendancy internationally. Like other nations, the UK government has embraced the principle of democratic revival and communitarianism. Its commitment to engaging citizens online is not to be doubted - exemplified not only by the central government portals, but by obliging local government to establish similar portals at local community level. Local e-government strategy is formulated, directed and monitored by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, which also administers the 'Local Government Online' (LGOL) fund to assist councils in their development of online services. *However*, at the same time the government appears unwilling to prioritise participation above cost-effectiveness. A statement by the The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) in the 2004 report SOCITM *Local e-Government Now* [19:4] notes:

'It seems clear that e-government policy is now at a turning point. On the one hand, more pressure is being placed on local authorities to link e-government activity to the Treasury's Public Service Agreements'... on the other hand, the Efficiency Review is taking centre stage and the potential savings facilitated by e-government are coming centre stage with it.... Central government is now signalling that it wants some serious return on its e-government investment. As a result, the target to get all services online by 2005 is all but dead as a serious framework for shaping future activity'.

Whilst the European Commission's progress report [2] identifies co-ordinated portal solutions and extensive back-office reorganisation as key enablers of e-government, such substantive change requires a significant amount of planning, coordination, resources and time. Given the political imperative of delivering and being seen to deliver outcomes within an elected term these requirements may be treated as luxuries. In its 2003 discussion paper *Managing e-Government* [20:3] the local government Society of Information Management Technology (SOCITM) opines:

'The expectation [of central government] is that flexible ICT systems will join up partner organisations at minimum cost with no disruption to existing services and in a very short time frame.....', however, '...an infrastructure which is low cost normally comes at the expense of flexibility and is, therefore, not very good at joining up to other partners' ICT infrastructure' .

Local government, therefore, is faced with the challenge of constructing an e-government platform which not only delivers its own services, but works in partnership with a range of quasi-private and private agencies to provide services which are not only joined-up but low cost. Despite its desire to reinvent the public sphere and revitalise social democracy, the government has resisted re-nationalising services transferred to the private sector by the Conservatives in the 1980s, opting instead to engage stakeholders by mandating reform of local government political structures, giving councils a statutory duty of public consultation, and developing multi-agency partnerships in key areas (such as health, transport and education) [21]. It has been suggested [22] that there may be a hidden motive – that closeness to the

community may not only encourage greater stakeholder participation, but also provide a useful means of exerting pressure for service improvements upon public sector managers, professionals and front line staff – classic neo-liberal outcomes.

4.1 Prevailing Governance Model: ‘Centralised decentralisation’

From the above it is apparent that the New Labour government, far from sweeping away the neo-liberal managerialism of the 1980 – 1990s, has simply superimposed communitarianism upon the existing ideological framework. Newman [21] opines that the Third Way was created instrumentally as a means of distancing New Labour from its predecessor, from unelectable, socialist Labour party. Once elected, however, the government has faced the task of operationalising an essentially self-contradictory discourse. Perry and Peck’s [23] neo-Durkheimian analysis of New Labour’s modernisation of the public sector exposes a complex model in which management structures are decentralised whilst power is retained centrally. Despite the rhetoric of communitarianism, in practice the Labour government has consistently displayed a propensity to cling to its favoured ‘command and control’ style in which it can freely exercise coercive power. The Performance and Innovation Unit’s 2000 report *Reaching Out* [24] acknowledged that in the past government structures had ‘too often been over-centralised, insufficiently joined up and inadequately attuned to local conditions’. *Reaching Out* concluded that the problem lay not in insufficient devolution, but in central government initiatives being disjointed with little attempt to bring together the ‘fragmented networks of regional government’. According to Lee and Woodward [25] Blair did not entertain the possibility that overcentralisation might reflect the absence of political devolution and that implementation deficiencies might be best redressed at the local level. Thus, instead of seeking devolution the government favoured a top-down solution, thereby giving itself the almost impossible task of running in parallel two potentially conflicting models of governance: i) devolved, horizontal, participatory; and, ii) hierarchical, centralised and managerialist.

4.2 Partnership

Newman’s text, *Modernising Governance* [21] identifies four distinct models of governance in a quadrant framework which vary along two dimensions: decentralisation/differentiation – centralisation/vertical integration; and, competitiveness/innovation - continuity/ sustainability. The hierarchical model, characterised by centralisation of executive power and vertical coordination lies diametrically opposite the open systems model, based upon experimentation, innovation and incrementalism. The joined-up, networked, collaborative mode espoused by New Labour lies within the open systems quadrant of the model. Third Way communitarianism encourages partnership and alliances between the public, private and voluntary sectors – the result of which can be seen in the proliferation of PPPs (Public-Private-Partnerships) [see 26]. The involvement of multiple partners in public service has, however, in many instances resulted in expensive over-complexity, poor coordination and culture clashes [for example, 27], and questions are now being

asked about the real benefits of PPPs [28]. Lacking devolved power, local government has little clout - 'the discourse of partnership speaks of equality, shared values and high trust, creating an illusory unity which masks fundamental differences of power, and resources and directs attention away from the need to engage with the gritty political realities of divergent interests and conflicting goals [21:117]. Whilst local authorities may wish to prioritise local needs, they can not jettison centrally-determined agendas and authoritarian rule – for example, the forced suspension of the Humberside Chief Constable Westwood in July 2004, demanded by the Home Secretary and pushed through the judicial system, despite the resistance of the Humberside Police Authority. Newman [21] suggests that the interaction between centralisation and decentralisation, between 'controlling' and 'enabling' strategies involve different sets of norms and assumptions which, if overlaid upon each other produce inconsistencies and tensions which are not easily resolved. The inherent imbalance in power between central government and others may undermine the long-term viability of partnerships and multi-agency collaborations.

Many of the government's multi-agency initiatives require the operationalisation of two dramatically different philosophies - for example, the well-intentioned 'Framework for Multi-agency National Project' (FAME), [29] seeks to develop a framework for information sharing in a multi-agency environment, *however* as intimated, the government has set strict targets for the achievement of e-government and electronic service delivery, recognising that 'if these targets are to be met it is essential that efficient and effective information sharing between local authorities and partner organisations takes place'. Prescription and target-setting counteract the imperative of organic growth at the heart of the open systems model. Similarly, the FAME project contains many of the features of a rational goal model, emphasising control, audit and evaluation, yet simultaneously, recognises the importance of self-governance the framework states:

'Local leadership – particularly that of elected councillors – is vital to deliver the benefits of local e-government', identified as 'service transformation, revitalised democracy, and economic vitality'.

The government's definition of 'partnership' appears confined to central and local government working together with private sector companies where appropriate. Whilst this may encourage enterprise and value for money, it is unclear how the democratic ideal might be pursued within such a constrained definition.

Additionally, the complexity of public-private partnerships may burden public servants with responsibilities which they are ill-equipped to deal with - for example, in 1999 the government launched an initiative entitled 'Computers Within Reach' which aimed to provide 100,000 computers to low-income families. Distribution, installation, training and technical support were outsourced to the private sector. The £15 million initiative collapsed in 2002 amid disputes over delivery, faulty hardware and exorbitant help-line charges, illuminating poor planning, inadequate control and naïveté on the part of public sector managers. A recent study [30] appears to confirm

that in relation to rational planning the performance of public servants is affected by a lack of technical resources and expertise.

Newman's [21] analysis of inherent confusion in the Third Way is reflected in the inconsistencies of the current e-government strategy, policy and implementation – the aim of joined-up, responsive, participatory' e-services can only be achieved within an open systems model in which organic growth and local autonomy occupy key positions. It is not easy to reconcile this ideal model with the current rational goal approach based upon prescription, centralisation, target setting, performance measurement and management. Indeed, Stoker [31:418] suggests that New Labour's policies towards local authorities are deliberately designed to be a muddle 'in order to both search for the right reform formula and create a dynamic for change by creating instability'.

The government's apparent ambiguity, on the one hand encouraging partnerships based upon flexibility, innovation and experimentation whilst on the other becoming increasingly prescriptive in a bid to secure short-term targets, is in fact a logical outcome of the self-contradiction of the Third Way in which the compelling narrative of communitarianism is continually tempered by economic and political pragmatism.

5 Devolution – The Way Forward?

Thus, far from facilitating the development of e-government, central government's current approach, whether muddled by design or default, may actually be acting as a brake on progress. Faced with eroding power, difficulties in running a 'decentralised, centralised state' efficiently and growing public scepticism, perhaps the time has come to go beyond decentralisation to a truly devolved model. Analysis of local e-government development suggests that in some localities councils have had great success in developing e-platforms in conjunction with private sector and civil organisation [see 19]. In each case the local council has established partnership networks at two levels: strategic, and service. The council acts as a driver and coordinator, drawing in other public authorities or voluntary and community organisations, or in some cases private companies which provide, for example, ICT or customer care expertise. Local authorities take seriously their obligation to deliver high quality, yet efficient e-services – the SOCITM report *Local e-Government now* [19] states:

'It is no longer enough for councils and their partners to look simply at using technologies to deliver individual services or transactions electronically, even though that may deliver improvements in services. The focus now must be on maximising the return on the investments that have been, and are still being made. The value of local e-government must be judged by the return it delivers to all the stakeholders'.

Local successes in the UK mirror those achieved by other EU nations which are pursuing regional and local approaches to e-government [32]. Unlike the European

regional developments, however, local authorities in the UK have set themselves an ambitious target to deliver high returns to 'all stakeholders'. Set against the latest, and hitherto most stringent Efficiency Review [5] it is unlikely that local authorities will achieve this target by their own efforts. Ronit [33] observes that the potential role of civil society institutions in contemporary governance has until now been widely neglected. Civil society institutions offer the prospect of a form of governance which relies less on state and market and more on alliances and global networks of private self-regulation. Since public choice theory exposed the 'myth' of public service serving the greater good (claiming instead that it serves only the opportunistic behaviour of bureaucrats and politicians), such a model at least offers the attraction of networks of coordination and cooperation, which may be instrumental in reshaping governance relations. In an analysis of possible regional strategies for e-government development a recent EU report [34] identifies Lombardy as a 'negotiating' region which is developing variable alliances for specific projects and application areas. One of the key objectives in Lombardy is to develop an integrated network connecting local administrations and public agencies. Plans are project-based and 'bottom-up', requiring extensive negotiations with diverse partners. Importantly, the Department of Innovation has created a network of regional competence centres to provide know-how and support for the devolved government. This model of 'negotiating regions' could potentially provide a blueprint for the development of local government in the UK provided central government is willing to 'let go of the reins'.

In a recent paper Lee-Kelley and Kolsaker [35] suggest that e-government success will have to be redefined and measured against criteria which reflect the degree of fit between provision and citizen usage. The reality is that if the public fails to engage in e-government then the state, markets and civil society can not be reconnected as sought in Third Way ideology. Networks of voluntary cooperation may be well placed to improve the degree of fit, without being accused of nanny state interference or Big Brother surveillance. To be successful, central government would have to withdraw from its command and control regime, giving local networks an opportunity to develop e-services which are fit for purpose within the local context. It is argued here that local communities face different challenges and have varying priorities, thus the government's 'one size fits all' approach to the provision of low-cost local e-services, coupled with recent signals that it is seeking serious return on its e-government investment warns of a further drive towards efficiency which may jeopardise participation. It is self-evident that communitarian governance requires the involvement of the community – yet the community is unlikely to be particularly enthusiastic about low-cost, standardised, automated services.

6 Conclusion

In sum, the e-government platform offers much more than the prospect of cost-effective, electronically-enabled government services. It offers also an opportunity to harness the Web to construct a new communitarian, information age model of governance, closing the widening gap between citizens and state, reducing public

scepticism and involving civil societies in creative, organic public/private/voluntary collaborations. Ideologically, 'information age governance' chimes well with the Third Way - indeed, socio-political interaction and communitarian collaboration are key elements of Third Way ideology. Yet, whilst Web technology offers a means of facilitating collaborative governance, there is little sign that the UK government is minded to pursue new opportunities. Though lip-service is paid to participation and empowerment, in practice citizens and partners are invited to *deploy* government-prescribed e-services rather than *design and develop* a new model of technology-enabled governance. That the government has chosen not to develop the communitarian potential of the Web suggests one of two things, either visionary myopia and an obsession with low cost delivery, or a conscious decision to exploit technology to maintain the planned muddle of the centralised, decentralised state. Whatever the desired outcome, government should not ignore the potential of new, networked collaborations in post-social society. Thus far there has been little analysis of low usage rates in relation to citizen disengagement and the changing face of democracy. E-government potentially has an important role in governance - the technology is superbly equipped to facilitate new strategic partnerships, communities of interest and synergistic collaborations, but if it is to harness the full potential of the electronic medium the government *must* reconceptualise its e-government strategy in terms of a platform for a new, devolved model of communitarian e-governance.

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