What is e-Government?

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THE explosive entry of technology into every aspect of life has changed how people live, how they work, how companies do business—and how governments serve their people. For the first time since the creation of the modern welfare state, there is now a real opportunity to ‘reinvent’ government. With the help of the big IT vendors, governments are realising that by applying the same principles and technologies that are fuelling the e-business revolution, they can achieve a similar transformation. The result: the emergence of e-Government.

Simply stated, e-Government is the use of technology to enhance the access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens, business partners and employees. It has the power to create a new mode of public service where all public organisations deliver a modernised, integrated and seamless service for their citizens. The relationship is no longer just a one-way ‘us-versus-them’ proposition; rather, it is about building a partnership between governments and citizens.

Even though most of the excitement centres upon the Internet, governments must be aware that e-Government affects every aspect of how an organisation delivers service to the public. It is not just technology; it is not just business processes; it is not just human resources. It is all these areas combined. At the centre of it all is the customer. How well governments grasp the integration of all the components will largely determine how much value e-Government can bring to citizens and to governments themselves. Governments will need committed leadership, a full understanding of e-business principles and a clear strategy for overcoming the barriers to change: the fears of individuals, the departmental rivalries, the hostility of unions and the sheer size of the thing. The technology, although crucial to making it all possible, is the least of their worries.

Historically, citizens’ perception of government service has been less than complimentary. When they think about the prospect of contacting the government, they picture long waits and cumbersome procedures. But that does not mean the experience has to be as dismal as it usually turns out to be. Each day people e-mail their friends, colleagues and clients. They organise their air travel, order books and theatre tickets and even buy their weekly groceries online. They manage their personal finances online—at times of day that are convenient to them, not their bank. ‘People are used to working in a fast-moving environment. If you send an e-mail, you generally expect a response reasonably quickly

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—the same day at the latest.”1 These experiences are raising citizens’ expectations of better service from their governments. As more and more people become used to the quality of service offered by the best service providers and web retailers, their willingness to accept poor standards in the public sector is coming under strain. Citizens want the same ‘one-stop shopping’ and ‘service-in-an-instant options’ from their government as they do from private business. Most importantly, they want convenience, customisation and empowerment. If this became the norm in the public sector, it would not just make life easier, it would fundamentally change the way that people view government itself. In the next ten years, government departments that do not proactively adopt and adapt to Internet technology will cease to exist in recognisable form.

One of the greatest problems for anyone who has dealings with government, is its sheer complexity. The average government has between 50 and 70 different departments and agencies. Even for relatively simple matters like registering the birth of a child, a number of different agencies requiring a multitude of different forms may be involved. Rather than being prepared to communicate with each other, they expect users to communicate with each of them in turn.

One of the basic reasons for inefficiency in the public sector is that, whereas departments are vertically aligned, the majority of services that they deliver require complex collaboration between civil servants across departments. Indeed, the British government has been advocating the need for ‘joined-up government’ for several years now but has found the underlying government structures an inhibiting factor.

The Internet offers a solution to both problems. Increasingly, governments are realising that they will have to build Internet portals that are able to provide a one-stop shop for all of a citizen’s needs. These government portals are being designed to allow users to find what they are looking for by employing such questions as ‘How do I...?’ or asking about so-called ‘life events’ such as a change in employment status. In this way, services can be delivered to meet the needs of each individual. Many governments have plans for such portals, but at present only two such sites are anything other than local: MAXI, operated by the state of Victoria in Australia, and Singapore’s e-Citizen Centre.

Stages of e-Government

According to a report published by Deloitte Research: Public Sector Institute in June 2000,2 there are six dynamic stages through which governments will pass as electronic service evolves both inside the organisation and as it faces the public.

Information publishing/dissemination. This involves departments and agencies setting up their own web-sites to post information about themselves, the constituency, the range of services available and contacts
for further assistance. Thousands of such ‘one-way’ communication sites are already up and running.

‘Official’ two-way transactions. As government web-sites become more sophisticated, customers are able to submit new information about themselves—such as a change of address—instead of writing a letter or making a telephone call. There are also plenty of these around, although many depend on e-mail. With the help of legally valid digital signatures, a formal, quantifiable exchange of value can take place. It might be renewing a television licence, paying a parking ticket or enrolling on a course at a local community college. There are several hundred such sites, mostly operating at the state or local government rather than central government level. More sophisticated versions can guide applicants through filing a tax return or making a claim for benefit. At this stage, customers must be convinced of the department’s ability to keep their information private and free from piracy. Such web-sites substitute an element of web-based self-service for work previously carried out by civil servants, thereby challenging traditional working practices and processes. An embarrassing admission by Britain’s Inland Revenue in July 2000 that staff were rekeying in data received from online self-assessment returns by hand highlights the importance of the need to coordinate such web sites with offline channels of service delivery.

Multi-purpose portals. Based on the fact that customer needs can cut across department boundaries, a portal allows customers to use a single point of entry to send and receive information and to process monetary transactions across multiple departments. As well as acting as a gateway to its agencies and related governments, the government of South Australia’s portal, for example, includes a link for citizens to pay bills, conduct personal stock brokering and manage bank accounts.

Portal personalisation. Governments put even more power into customers’ hands by allowing them to customise portals with their desired features. In so doing, governments will get a more accurate view of customer preference for electronic versus non-electronic service options.

Clustering of common services. When the portal model takes a firm hold, the perception of individual government departments will disappear and the public will view the government simply as an entity with which to engage in a series of transactions. To make it happen, governments will cluster services along common lines to accelerate the delivery of shared services.

Full integration and enterprise transformation. At this stage, old walls defining ‘silos’ of services have been torn down, and technology is integrated still further to bridge the shortened gap between the front and back office. In some cases, new departments will have formed from the remains of predecessors. Others will have the same names, but their interiors will look nothing like they did before e-Government.

The majority of governments are at least at the first stage. And because
of their recent efforts in business process re-engineering and new technology implementation, most have the central elements of e-Government in place. E-Government is definitely not for the politically timid or half-hearted. One-stop, non-stop e-Government portals will revolutionise not just the way public services are delivered but government itself.

**Britain’s e-Government agenda**

The *Modernising Government* White Paper of March 1999 outlined the British government’s ambitions to change public sector services in Britain to make for better, modernised government. It offered a challenge to all public sector organisations, including local government, to modernise and achieve citizen-centred services—to integrate policies and programmes, to ‘join-up’ service delivery across departments and agencies, to harness the potential of information technology, to value the ideals of public service and get the best out of staff. ‘Government is not for those who work in government, but for people, both as consumers and as citizens,’ said Dr Jack Cunningham for the Cabinet Office, when he launched the White Paper. ‘We will make sure that government services are significantly improved so that they reflect real lives and deliver what people really want. Better provision of better services available from government at all levels is central to the approach of modernising government.’

The Prime Minister pledged that by 2002 a quarter of all transactions between citizens and government should be capable of being conducted ‘electronically’, rising to 50% by 2005 and 100% by 2008. On 30 March 2000, the target for offering all services online was pushed forward three years: ‘I want the UK to be the world’s leading Internet economy. Businesses and individuals across Britain are responding to this challenge, getting the UK online. I am determined that government should play its part, so I am bringing forward our target for getting all government services online, from 2008 to 2005. This will mean that people and businesses will be able to access government services 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is a challenging target, which will require more joined up working between departments, less reliance on paper trails, and the development of new ways of working.’

This announcement came just days ahead of the publication of the Cabinet Office’s detailed *e-Government* strategy document, which fulfils the commitment in the *Modernising Government* White Paper to publish an IT strategy for ‘information age government’. The strategy promotes innovation for new services. The centre will identify and promote common building blocks for e-businesses, but it will be left to departments and agencies, local authorities and non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) to develop business plans for their own services and customers.

**Access.** The *e-Government* strategy envisages that services will be accessed by multiple technologies, including web sites accessible from PCs, public information kiosks, digital television and mobile phones,
and call and contact centres. Services will be available from more locations and at times that suit users. A recent People’s Panel research, conducted by MORI for the Cabinet Office,\textsuperscript{5} indicates that there is a clear demand for some public services to be available 24-hours-a-day, seven days a week. Almost half of those surveyed would like to be able to contact public services in the evenings and at the weekend. Demand is highest for extended weekday opening hours (up to 8pm or 10pm) and during the day on Saturdays. The five services that people most want to contact during extended opening hours are National Health Service hospitals (non-emergencies), social services, doctor’s surgeries, local councils and the Passport Agency. This demand reflects increasing numbers of households where all adults are in work, as well as longer working hours. Many public sector bodies have already begun to develop portal technology as a means of providing access to services and information on the Internet. There are examples in local authorities, and several sectoral portals are planned in central government, typically in the fields of health (NHS Direct Online offers health advice), education (National Grid of Learning), business and culture.

\textit{E-business components.} Effective e-businesses need to win the trust of the people who use them and confidence that systems are secure, that authentication mechanisms are robust and that personal data is properly handled. All services will therefore be required to subscribe to common standards for authentication, security and privacy. There will also be a common format for smart cards that will be able to carry identifiers to enable online authentication.

\textit{Interoperability.} Through the wide adoption of Internet and Web technologies government organisations can communicate electronically with citizens and businesses. Within government, the Government Secure Intranet (GSI) now connects all major departments and provides central government users with e-mail and Internet access. Connectivity will be extended via extranet connections to local authorities, the NHS and other public sector bodies, making virtual team working possible across the public sector. The Knowledge Network, available via the GSI and the Internet, will provide information on government policy by region and locality and provide information on policy initiatives in respect of particular client groups.

\textit{Skills.} Implementing the \textit{e-Government} strategy will place significant demands on civil servants to work in new ways and to acquire knowledge about the new technology. They must understand how the evolving technology can create new ways of doing business, and they will need increased skills in the application and use of information.

\textit{The reality of e-Government}

\textit{Customer demand.} Though the Internet accounts for much of the ‘e’ in e-Government, governments should not make the mistake of assuming that most citizens want and, more importantly, will use government
services online. There are several possible reasons, notably a lack of understanding of the possibilities of electronic service delivery or a preference for traditional access channels. It is therefore important that the government maintains its commitment to citizen-focused delivery by introducing electronic service delivery in a way that is responsive to citizens’ needs. Solutions need to be sensitive to the social contexts of service use and delivery if they are to be introduced successfully. The need to tailor services and see them in the context of daily life has been recognised within education and health, but there is an opportunity for advancement across all government departments.

Research conducted by MORI (for Motorola) has revealed that the British public want to increase interactivity with government—75% of respondents wanted to access local or central government services electronically. Asked what sort of community information they would like to access electronically, information on local councils services and local events emerged as the top priority. Information on jobs and local education facilities is also popular. Findings from a range of studies show that, predictably, those who already use computers at home or at work are much more likely to be prepared to use new technology to deal with government. A study conducted by CMG (1998) found that almost three-quarters of those surveyed would use electronic services for information gathering—to get information or advice about benefits (73%) and to get health information and advice (74%). Furthermore, almost two-thirds would use electronic government services for education (65%), to vote (65%), to look for work (64%), to purchase a vehicle tax disc (63%) or to report a crime (63%).

However, these findings hide the fact that UK governments have the smallest percentage of customers using online services—about 8%. But with the leadership pushing online availability, they are anticipating a 424% surge in the next two years, which could bring customer demand for Internet service delivery up to 40%. Departments that interact most often with the public must therefore seize this opportunity to change the service paradigm. There will continue to be a substantial proportion of the population who are likely to remain suspicious of new technologies though. For instance, many will always be concerned that e-Government will make services less personal. This group, which includes a significant proportion of the over-50s, will consequently have a slower uptake of new technology.

For electronic self-service to provide optimum value to governments and their citizens alike, applications must at the very least offer all the traditional procedures for getting/providing service from an employee and be fully automated from intake to uptake. If not, customers will not see the point if they still must file actual papers or physically appear at an office for some other part of the process. In other words, ‘more’ only equates with ‘better’ when customers see the benefits of using electronic service over traditional means.
The digital divide. One of the most fundamental differences between e-Government and e-business is that whereas businesses can, by and large, choose their customers, government cannot. For e-Government to succeed fully, the dream of Internet access for all has to become a reality.

There is a genuine concern among policy makers that developing electronic service delivery and communications will lead to already excluded groups becoming, if anything, further disadvantaged. A recent Which? survey found that 15 million UK citizens would never become Internet users and a dedicated Internet report by the Office of National Statistics published on 10 July 2000 shows that although a quarter of all UK households have Internet access, the rate of take-up is significantly higher in the top-earning homes as compared to the poorest households where take-up is still only between 3% and 6%. The Economist recently reported the findings of the US Department of Commerce’s survey Falling Through the Net. It shows how real the digital divide remains despite increased Internet penetration across all demographic groups in America. For example, a high-income household in an urban area is 20 times more likely to have Internet access than a rural, low-income household, and a wealthy household of Asian descent is 34 times more likely to have Internet access than a poor black household. The irony is that it is those segments of the population most reliant on public services that are least likely to have access. A key part of any government’s work therefore is narrowing the ‘digital divide’ that exists between groups able to exploit the benefits of new technology and those that cannot, or will not.

There are innovative possibilities for ensuring better access for those on lower incomes. In the US, for example, proposals have been put to the government for tax breaks for workers on low incomes buying PCs from their companies. In Britain, the government is wiring up schools, libraries and community centres to promote public access. It is also working with telecommunications regulators to drive down the cost of access, to the extent that it is now cheaper to access the Internet in the UK than in the US during off-peak hours. However, income and class differences are not always clear-cut when other access channels are considered. For example, satellite television ownership is higher among those on lower incomes, dropping away with increasing prosperity. Similarly, the spread of cable television ownership and mobile phone usage is more even across the socio-economic grades than PC ownership.

The digital divide is not so much a question of access but of education. You can put computers in libraries, for example, but they are not going to be used by those who do not have the know-how. For this reason, the British government has committed £2.52 million to create a network of ICT learning centres across the country. Public Information Kiosks, already in place around the country (e.g. Sheffield
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and Islington), are an effective way of disseminating information and local council services to the public and encouraging citizens to become familiar with utilising technology. Unlike library computers, they have touch-screen navigation, so that the only skill required is the ability to touch the screen and follow the directions displayed.

A further issue surrounding the digital divide is that governments will need to think up incentives for those on the wrong side of the divide to take the leap. Although many consumers expect to use e-Government in the future, most are not currently aware that they can already access services in this way, and they often lack an incentive to do so. There is clearly an opportunity for government to use incentives to increase the proportion of people who use electronic services, as long as doing so is not discriminatory by disadvantaging people without access. If people have a positive experience with one electronic service, this should increase their awareness of and confidence in e-Government and public service online offerings. In the early days, however, incentives may have to be greater in order to get people to realise the convenience of using the Internet for transactions. Consumers will be more tempted to use the web if they realise that they are missing out on extra benefits. This will be particularly important for those on low incomes.

Privacy and security. In the public sector, the requirements for stringent security are slightly different. The nature of the information being transmitted over the networks means that privacy and confidentiality are absolutes. For example, e-mails sent by a local social worker with information on anything from child abuse to domestic violence need to be completely secure from infiltration. Local health authorities and trusts also need to be absolutely sure that the information they share about patients and patient records are kept only between themselves.

Additionally, the challenge of open government means that all government agencies face the challenge (not necessarily a technological one) of trusting the connection with various agencies, which may be considered as ‘hostile networks’. This could be, for example, district and county councils being connected to one another or county councils being linked to the police network. Effective security is therefore of utmost importance in assuring these agencies that the connections are secure between their different networks and developing trust between them.

The government-wide intranet, the GSI, is a good example of security demands on public sector networks. The vast number of departments and people connected to this network with different levels of security access demands tight security. The GSI therefore has a number of security levels determined by the confidentiality of information being transmitted, such as classified and restricted. There are also limited gateway points from the GSI intranet to the Web, and this is of course securely monitored with the appropriate firewalls and security software.
All the surveys show that people trust the government with personal data even less than they trust private sector firms. In a survey conducted by Gallup (1998), 54% of respondents cited security concerns as a major drawback of electronic service delivery.\textsuperscript{10} As more and more detailed information is gathered electronically and passed between agencies, some consumers will need convincing that personal data is not being mined in such a way as to breach their civil liberties. Accusations of ‘Big Brother’ behaviour will be unavoidable.

As more and more transactions are moved over to the Internet, authentication becomes critical. Reliable systems need to be put in place as a way of identifying people and confirming that they are who they say they are. A system is under construction in Sweden that requires individuals to have a unique ID to access the system; all information stored and moved around the system uses this ID as a tag. This is not a problem—all Swedes already have a citizen ID card—but in the UK there is no such set-up, and there has traditionally been heavy opposition to the introduction of such a card. Theoretically, birth certificate numbers or national insurance numbers could be used, eliminating the need for a brand new system, but then without a smartcard ID the system’s uses would be heavily curtailed.

\textbf{Web-sites.} In Britain, the government gets high marks for grasping the urgent need to accelerate the adoption of web technologies, as evidenced by the growing number of government web sites. Most offer the public vast arrays of facts regarding government structure, law, initiatives, geography, information requests and links to related sites. Yet the information they contain is mostly just an electronic version of materials already produced by print media.

In the mid-1990s, Britain was ahead of other European governments and much of private business. The government’s main portal (open.gov.uk) created a basic web presence for a large number of agencies, but that impetus has now flagged; in contrast to private sector firms, British government web sites, with some notable exceptions, now lag behind and look disconnected and relatively hard to navigate. Indeed, there is little consistency in what you can expect from one local council to another or in how information is obtained. A few have online forms, though usually they have to be printed out and mailed; most list councillors, though rarely with their e-mail addresses; only a minority recognise that people may want information in languages other than English. The notable exceptions are Lewisham, in south-east London (www.lewisham.gov.uk), whose site has quick links to council news, traffic reports, Ofsted reports on local schools and even air pollution reports from the borough; and Gwynedd in north Wales. At the time of writing, Gwynedd county council (www.gwynedd.gov.uk) was running live webcasts, not only of full council meetings but also of committee meetings, with simultaneous translation between Welsh and English.
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Many agencies indeed have still not got their heads around the simple information potential of running a 24-hour web-site. At the height of the passports crisis, when the Passport Agency offices were besieged by worried customers, most of its English phone lines went down, and thousands of unopened mail accumulated. Only one link with the outside world kept going—the Agency’s web-site. But it only carried background information, not a daily update of the state of play, nor any detailed advice on what customers ought to do.

Citizens will only be encouraged to use government web sites if they can find them easy to access, up-to-date, accurate and reliable. Because web spending has been seen as ‘below the radar’ in budgetary terms, budget lines and management responsibilities for developing a web presence have tended to be fragmentary. Staff with ‘new media’ expertise are relatively rare, many sites are outsourced in restrictive ways, and many sites are not yet regularly kept under review and updated in line with a coherent development strategy. In a study by the National Audit Office, *Government on the Web*, it was found that one agency whose site was visited by several thousand users a month was spending only £14 out of every £1 million running costs on maintaining its web presence.\(^\text{11}\)

Few sites, primarily business-facing agencies, have so far developed simple web-based transactions, such as facilities to download electronic forms, interrogate agency databases or accomplish dealings electronically. By contrast, in Australia 75% of tax forms are already filed electronically and the government’s Job Search site gives citizens full access and search capability to a database of jobs all over Australia.\(^\text{12}\)

Despite the possibility of potential cost savings, central agencies have as yet played a restricted role in monitoring the adoption of web technologies in government. For example, the Department of Social Security (DSS) handles around 160 million telephone calls each year (with mostly paper-based administrative systems), at an approximate cost of £2.40 per call (based on one of its most efficient call centres). If only 2% of these calls could be shifted to people looking up material on DSS web sites, then an annual saving of £7.7 million might be achievable. Likewise, a rough estimate of the costs of handling telephone calls within the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) is around £2.60 per call.\(^\text{13}\) There is therefore scope for similar savings across government.

It is fair to conclude that the public sector still has a long way to go before its use of communications technology gets public hearts beating. Government is not yet the ‘exemplar’ that the e-Envoy wishes. This could be worrying, especially when one considers that the technology push will not slow down for a decade ahead at least, and neither will the social push—the pace of private sector change and customers’ expectations of what a modern public service requires.

*Staffing practices.* Without quality employees, even the best technol-
ogies and processes are useless—moving toward the electronic enterprise does not do away with the human element. Even when citizens transfer their dealings with government to electronic channels, they will still want to feel that they can interact with live employees. For e-Government to work, staff, technology and business processes must operate in harmony.

Governments must consider both the upside and downside in their hiring decisions. On the face of it, putting more people on the front lines might seem to be a way to reduce customer waiting times and employee time spent on activities not related to customer service. But as technology alters the balance of channel access to services, human resource composition must also change—staff members need to be technically proficient to use advanced web-based service tools effectively. Similarly, governments will need a growing percentage of dedicated technical personnel to maintain increasingly complex databases and applications.

However, the threat of turnover still looms large. In tight labour markets, the lure of private sector compensation and career development is strong and, as a result, governments around the world are stung by high turnover rates. To be competitive, the public sector needs to be creative. Today’s mobile workers need a stronger reason than a pleasant job environment to stay with one organisation. It is all very well to urge and exhort, but new financial incentives are needed across government and the public sector for bodies to work together—both budget incentives for organisations and salary incentives for individuals. Governments will also need to strengthen their employee performance structures and offer opportunities for professional advancement so that staff have a real incentive to stay.

This is all well and good, but there will inevitably be some workers who are unable to adapt to new working patterns. Private industry can redeploy people more easily by changing its remit, but that is not an option for government departments and agencies whose goals and powers are usually mandated by statute.

*Digital democracy.* One of the most important aspects of e-Government is its potential to enhance democracy. The word ‘potential’ is used advisedly here—technology is democratically neutral. Used wrongly, it could stifle diversity or reinforce current patterns of power and debate; used well, it could create new ways for people to interact, particularly at the global and local level. We are already seeing examples of both: from the surveillance and control exercised over the Internet in some parts of the world, to the open debate and steps towards online voting in others.

Cynicism in the political process is a challenge for government and political parties around the world. It is manifest in low turnouts, complaints about the system, and in a willingness to support candidates from outside the political mainstream. It is a suspicion often coupled
with distrust in the information from traditional channels such as newspapers and television. Thoughtful governments are looking at the Internet not as a threat but as a positive potential tool to re-engage the citizenry in the business of governing.

The British government has recently passed legislation enabling experiments to be carried out in local elections in varying the times and places where people can vote, and in principle enabling online voting itself, though there is still some way to go in developing the necessary robustness and security.

Bury, Greater Manchester’s smallest metropolitan borough, was just one of four authorities selected by the government to test-bed a new electronic voting and high speed tabulation system which not only made the result known quicker but significantly improved all security aspects of a secret ballot. On 4 May 2000 just one ward, Besses in Whitefield, was involved in the experiment, providing a small and compact area in which to try out the new system. For the voters, the procedure was the same as ever, only the medium through which they cast their vote was different. The voters still gave their details to the polling station staff but were then given the means to cast their vote, a smartcard. After that, it was simply a short walk across to the polling booth where they cast their vote and then left.

The changes that the electors will have noticed though were as follows:

- The polling station register was held on a laptop or PC against which the elector’s name was checked off and a smartcard set up allowing the bearer to cast their vote;
- the smart-card was taken into the polling booth and inserted into a voting unit;
- within five seconds the ballot was displayed on the screen, showing the candidates and details of their party affiliations and any party logos;
- the elector needed only to touch the screen by or over the name/logo of the candidate they wished to vote for—the system marked the screen for that candidate with a cross;
- if the elector wished to review their vote they needed only to touch the screen by the candidate they had previously selected and the cross would have disappeared allowing them to make a different choice;
- having voted, the elector removed the smart-card and returned to the polling station staff;
- once the vote was cast the card would not work again until it has been re-initialised by the polling station staff, removing the possibility of an elector casting more than the permitted number of votes.14
There are real and tangible business benefits for local authorities to use this form of voting, the obvious example being that there is no further need to produce ballot papers beyond those required for postal and proxy voters. At the same time, fewer counting station staff are required.

Just as consumers at first used the web to gather information and only later took the plunge by buying things online, very soon citizens will move from using the web to communicate with government to expecting that they can cast online votes in a national election. Online voting might help increase participation, but it also raises some fundamental concerns. Some people are worried about the risk of trivialising what is a key element in our system of representative democracy. Would it really help to make people respect and value our political systems if voting was simply a matter of pressing buttons on a television remote control during a commercial break? As well as online voting, digital democracy includes a number of other things that are already gaining ground: campaigning and fund-raising; voter registration; opinion polling; communication between representatives and voters; and feedback from the public on legislative drafts.

The Internet is a powerful tool for spreading self-help information, but it is equally adept at spreading false information. It also provides unprecedented opportunities for interest groups to work together, something which governments have been slow to come to terms with. It will therefore be necessary for governments to reassess how they communicate information and how they can build greater trust.

The ability of people to link up so readily across national and international boundaries means that individuals are open to ideas and cultures from around the world. Some would argue that this poses a challenge to national sovereignty and the importance of the nation state. But the reality is that the Internet has unleashed new opportunities for people to take more control over their lives, which can only be a good thing.

Conclusion

‘Reinventing government’, a fashionable but premature idea a decade ago, is at last being made possible by the Internet. The Internet has been a liberating technology, one that has enabled people and businesses to interact in new ways. It is no longer a fringe activity restricted to early adopters; it is increasingly seen as part of the national infrastructure, in the same way as other more traditional components.

Now that banks are giving 24-hour access, 7 days-a-week, 365 days-a-year, the moment has come for governments to rethink the way that people throughout society choose to interact with them. Governments have mandated the notion of ‘electronic government’ and with that they have taken to employing commercial terms, talking about channels for the retail and wholesale delivery of government services. They have
recognised the need to change the way they do business, to provide services and information centred on the citizen. By harnessing the advances in technology, making services more accessible through multiple channels and more responsive by providing ‘joined-up’ services, the citizen has access to information relating to services through one point of contact.

It will be a consumer-led revolution bringing with it more efficient government, more transparent ways of doing business with the different branches of government; a two-way path of consultation and collaboration; a new level of accountability for elected and unelected officials; and more open and responsive politics.

For tomorrow’s e-citizens and e-businesses, the coming e-Government revolution is almost wholly good news. The extent to which e-Government will make a difference and add value, however, will depend on three factors: strong leadership, to ensure that the public sector workforce is ready to meet the challenges ahead; management of the ‘digital divide’, to ensure that already excluded groups do not become further disadvantaged; and well-managed innovation. The key now is, can the public sector deliver?

1 D. Bradbury, ‘UK Leads the March to the Paperless Ballot Box’, Computer Weekly, 29.6.00.
4 BT, e-Government: Ready or Not?, 1.6.00, p. 6.
5 Ibid., p. 47.
6 Ibid., p. 73.
7 Deloitte Research, op. cit., p. 4.
10 BT, op. cit., p. 74.
12 Ibid., p. 2.
13 Ibid., p. 4.