

Comments on *Transformational Government: Enabled by Technology* (Cabinet Office document Cm 6683)

3rd February, 2006

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Introduction

The following comments have been assembled about Cabinet Office document Cm 6683 *Transformational Government*, in the light of the authors' work on *Justice Online: Distributing Cyberspace Fairly*, a project funded by the ESRC (award no. RES-000-22-0563), which attempted to examine, at individual, national and international level, the effects on just outcomes of the deployment of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). In particular, the authors studied the Singaporean experience of e-government, and have based their comments around that study.

For further information about the project, see Kieron O'Hara & David Stevens, *inequality.com: Power, Poverty and the Digital Divide* (Oneworld, August 2006), and for a specific discussion of e-government, see O'Hara & Stevens, 'Democracy, ideology and process re-engineering: realising the benefits of e-government in Singapore', submitted to the e-government workshop at the World Wide Web Conference 2006. Copies of this paper can be supplied by the authors on receipt of an email request.

Comments

Data sharing

There's some recognition of the trade-offs with privacy here (see p.12) and there will be a new Ministerial focus on retaining trust and privacy. However, the problems involved in the amalgamation of databases should not be underestimated – the power that amalgamating databases unleashes is often underestimated. Culturally, the UK has been resistant to idea of govt keeping personal data in such a way as to enable efficient retrieval and reuse. The type of sharing of data envisioned here is a substantial leap in terms of both quantity and centralisation of information from the current position. Singapore, by contrast, has traditionally viewed personal privacy as less important than the national interest and significant quantities of personal information have always been held by government. Hence the extra step of sharing data across departments has always been relatively unproblematic in that context.

The reason for this in Singapore undoubtedly stems from stronger communal allegiances and a shared communal conception of the good which places communal obligations before individual rights in some cases. The difference between Singapore and the UK, in other words, stem from the very different ideological underpinnings of these societies. Our society is one based on neutrality between conceptions of the good. Govt should provide a framework of rights that respects persons as free and independent, capable of choosing their own ends. It tends to assert the priority of fair procedures over particular ends. The public life that informs it is a procedural republic. Singapore has a different set of values – almost the reverse. Govt is very much tied to a vision of what the good life is – security, material wealth, safety, enclave mentality, family values, etc (and political legitimacy in Singapore springs from the People’s Action Party government providing these). Political institutions mould individuals towards this ethos, and procedures are set to bring about these particular ends.

Some further points:

1. Singapore’s legitimacy is slightly more contrived than the UK’s. The PAP’s election results are truly staggering, but not entirely surprising – when the gov’t controls the education system, shapes the views of its citizens so intimately, the fact that they come to ‘consent’ to a gov’t that embodies those values they’ve been socialised into, is less than a revelation. The PAP’s ideology seems like common sense to the average Singaporean citizen.
2. When citizens reject that view of the good life, the legitimacy of the PAP will crumble. This is why the Internet and the World Wide Web are seen as both a threat and an opportunity in Singapore.
3. Being procedural, the UK doesn’t share this problem to the same extent.
4. Singapore can more easily manoeuvre citizens and civil servants towards these ends, even if it means further invasions of privacy, whilst that legitimacy (and the shared vision upon which it is founded) exists. The UK would have far further to travel in terms of rolling back privacy in order to reach the same stage as Singapore. The reason Singapore is a world leader in e-government is, in part, because these things are unproblematic. The issue here is not so much one of democratic v non-democratic, it is more about a society that displays pluralism and bases its legitimacy on the consent of citizens in a manner that is structured by that pluralism – versus – a society that seems to have removed pluralism and bases its legitimacy on the homogeneity (hegemony?) of its citizens’ views.

The Singaporean civil service

Two points of contrast between the UK and Singapore: (1) the civil service is neither neutral nor (2) purely vertically structured. Both these are in contrast to the UK. Non-neutrality allows (as per the previous point) a more seamless integration of the new technologies within government departments largely because all public servants are driving the same ideological line. So long as this holds, then civil servants are unlikely to push back, or resist government initiatives in this area (the Singaporean civil service’s response to the SARS crisis in 2003 involved a dramatic reconfiguring of many government information systems, which was accomplished within an astonishingly small period of time). Second, because different departments work closely together, individual civil servants often work on secondment in other

departments, and a number of cross-ministry bodies exist. Hence there is a greater amount (and established tradition) of horizontal organisation in the Singaporean state. This reduces friction during implementation through co-operation and collaboration. The UK has not, traditionally, had this model. Clearly defined departmental territories have made close collaboration very difficult. Attempts to create cross-ministry bodies have led to resistance or to falling through the gaps (there are a number of examples of this, from George Brown's Department of Economic Affairs in 1964, through to the Minister for Women more recently).

Part of *Transformational Government* shows a concern with this (joined-up solutions, shared infrastructure, etc.) and there is a clear attempt via the Service Transformation Board and the Customer Group Directors to address this problem, but these initiatives still seem to be fragmented in their approach, with the possibility of reinforcing territorialisation, rather than breaking it down. The porous – even invisible – boundaries between departments in Singapore (and the way individual civil servants operate across these boundaries) are crucial to the high level of e-service provision in that country. The same does not exist in the UK.

Consultation

The Customer Group Directors and associated aspects address the need for 'customer' consultation. Services and their provision mechanisms should be consumer driven rather than top-down. Similarly, there is mention at the outset of more democratic engagement for citizens (p.4). Some points: (1) The CGDs seem rather dispersed in nature (but that might be a false impression); (2) There seems to be some move towards an e-citizen style portal with everything available via one site, as with the Singaporean SingPass system. If so, this will raise many of the privacy issues already touched upon above given that the UK has far further to move than Singapore did to achieve this level of integration. (3) Little is said about the formation of 'focus groups' from citizens and businesses. (4) Little is said about enhancing democracy. Singapore has the Feedback Unit which allows direct consultation of citizens and businesses at many levels: service design; service delivery; policy design and implementation. The important role of the Feedback Unit in Singapore in preserving the PAP government's legitimacy should not be underestimated.

Summary

For a number of reasons, to do with geography, history and ideology, Singapore is rather better-placed to explore the possibilities of e-government than the UK. The best choice for the UK seems to be a more incremental, less immediately ambitious approach, in that there are many issues and pitfalls along the way (privacy being perhaps uppermost) where there are important political debates to be had, that have either been settled or sidestepped in Singapore. Although Singapore in many respects represents best practice in e-government, it is not clear that their's is a model that will be easy for a Western liberal democracy to follow.