

I want to talk to you this evening about technology, how it empowers people and how government and public servants can use it to improve the service we can give to the public.

There is of course a default assumption about Government IT projects that they will always be late, or over budget, or won't work, or maybe all three.

And there is also an assumption that we are on a mission to spy on people, to diminish their liberty and have some kind of big brother agenda.

We saw some of that this week with stories about a supercomputer ready to probe into the most intimate details of everyone's lives.

I would like to take a few moments to make a few points not just about this story but about the assumptions lying behind it.

First of all, there is no plan for a new supercomputer or a new government database.

What the government is doing is asking whether we can do a better job for people, at critical moments in their lives, by making sure that one part of government talks to another when dealing with related issues.

So, for example, when dealing with a bereavement, are we going to elevate it into a point of principle that people have to give the same information to different bits of the government, over and over again, when maybe the different bits of the government could tell one another?

Is it a point of principle to ask an old age pensioner who is claiming pension credit to go through the whole process again to claim a rebate on council tax, or should we ask the bit of government which has dealt with her pension credit to talk to the bit that deals with council tax benefit and sort it out for her?

This is not about a new IT project. It's about whether government can raise its game by making sure that the left hand knows what the right hand is doing when it is dealing with the same person.

Sometimes, this is an issue of public or child safety. Sometimes it is one of making life simpler for people. It doesn't always happen at the moment and, if we can do a better job in this area it will help people and empower them rather than be an assault on their privacy or civil liberties.

On the more general issue of Government IT projects, if things go wrong we should hold our hands up, fix the problem or learn the lessons.

But it would not only be factually wrong to say this was the case for all government investment in technology – it would also represent a damaging national defeatism about the future.

If government based IT really never worked we would not be processing 13 million benefit payments every week.

A million biometric passports would not have been issued last year.

NHS Direct would not exist.

3.7 million people would not have been able to renew their car tax online.

Technology is increasingly empowering people and changing their lives in ways we could not have imagined even a decade ago. When people are using technology to download music, to buy an increasing range of goods and services – all at a time of their own choosing – then government cannot and should not shut itself off from the way this changes people's lives and their expectations.

Smarter people than me may know where all this change is going to lead but one thing is for sure – it is not going to stop. People's empowerment is not going to go backwards.

We cannot allow the belief to take hold that somehow government cannot be part of this change, that we should be frozen in time, that creative people like those here tonight can never suggest ideas or drive through projects to improve the quality of service to the public or make their lives better because there will always be someone to say it won't work, so you better not try.

That would be an appalling national judgement to make and would hold us back as a country.

Of course the Government has a duty to invest taxpayers' money wisely and it is fair that we be criticised when Government gets it wrong but we must never let creativity and ambition be defeated by the default nostalgia that says things were always better in the past and it's not worth trying to do things better in the future.

And that's what these awards are all about tonight – paying tribute to people who tried to make life better for the public we serve. People who had an idea and who worked with their colleagues to make it happen.

So my message to you is to keep on being innovative. Keep on striving to do things better. And most of all, keep on trying to empower the people we serve.

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