

‘In eGov we Trust’

Against the Motion: John Murray, *School of Business, Trinity College, University of Dublin*

I have no specialist competence to speak about eGov. Those who organised this conference said that was why they wanted me to speak. I suppose they wanted the motion not just defeated but humiliatingly obliterated. When it comes to voting, I appeal to your sense of pity. I have to live here; you can all go away.

Under such circumstances, the best strategy seems to be the most tried & true student debating approach: rant until ejected from the debating chamber.

I have four reasons why you cannot trust eGov:

1. WHO COULD TRUST THOSE WHO FRAMED THIS MOTION?

(i.e. your distinguished Council, who stand as the custodians of e-Gov)

How could anyone trust a group that sets up this motion as a serious premise? The allusion to, the pun on, ‘*In God we Trust*’ is just too much.

It is bad enough to assert that we would trust in **Government** – for many people, trustworthy government is an oxymoron, like airline food or military intelligence. And trust in government is in universal decline¹. Many see government as ‘sausage-making’, I am told by researchers, – we like some of it but hate to think of how it is made. Since the mid-sixties public trust in government has been decreasing in all the advanced industrialised democracies (*was that about the time mainframe computers started the eGov saga?*). A myriad of surveys finds a consistent and ubiquitous decline in trust. Nearly half of Americans see the Federal Government as a threat to personal rights and freedoms. Half of young people do not trust government to do the right thing even some of the time. Sixty three percent of citizens do not trust government. Gallup polls report trust in government at a 40 year low.

But this motion asserts that we would trust in **E-gov** – the conspiracy of the digital-mavens; the cyber-crats, public-geeks and civil-anoracks (*by-the-way those are all hyphenated in defiance of the hegemony of e-mail prose which has succeeded in de-hyphenating 16,000 good English words in the latest Abridged Oxford English Dictionary. Why? Because hyphenation slows down e-mail typing. And this from people who cant invent an alternative interface to the QWERTY keyboard. Please don’t ruin my lunch by asking about text messaging*)

And there is worse: who would trust a **male eGov**? Because this is an overwhelmingly male conspiracy - just look around you. eGov is a technocratic, authoritarian, rationalising, centralising, hierarchical male deity born of the wedlock of computer science and software engineering - arrivistes in the pantheon of knowledge - and trying to force its brutish attentions on the world of citizens, politicians and public servants. We are well advised to remember that women now outspend men 3:2 on technology; they influence 57% of technology purchases; they are the majority of voters as well as the majority in university and the leaders in the hi-tech binge. Young women are more likely than boys to use mobile phones, digital cameras, satellite radios and DVD recorders. Yet 75% of women say they are ignored,

patronised or offended by salespeople in electronics stores. The first voice-calibrated video-conference systems omitted the decibel ranges for women. They are still waiting for someone to hear themⁱⁱ. eGov is gender-challenged. Please do not believe that you have dodged this gender bullet by finally having the good sense to elect a distinguished woman as your Chairperson. It could be too little, too late.

Worse again: this is a **monotheist** church, dedicated to the erasure of the essential bio-diversity of polytheists, atheists and agnostics.

But be cautioned – the **unbelievers fight back**. My partial name-sake, Madalyn Murray O’Hare, founder of American Atheists, brought a legal challenge against the Treasury of the US in 1978 against the use of the motto ‘*in God we trust*’ on American currency. Her attempt was denied on the blatantly specious grounds that the phrase was not religious.

The atheists however seem to have God on their side, in manner of speaking, because this year the mint struck 300m dollar coins without ‘in God we trust’ (or the date) on the rim. The coins are now changing hands for \$50 each. With sufficient hubris, the eGov establishment could yet see the value of those with nGov (no eGov) or lGov (eGov-Lite) being greater than those with eGov.

And speaking of value, did you know that a study of 250 CIOs and CFOs around the world this year showed that 30% of companies did not know the value of what they were spending on software and 37% of CIOs had never tried to quantify the value their IT assets?ⁱⁱⁱ

No one could trust a man in a suit who preaches ‘in eGov we trust’

So here are a few **interim thoughts** for you, the priesthood of eGov:

1. *you are starting from behind in the trust stakes*
2. *don’t get the eGod, - sorry, **eGov syndrome** – it puts people off (they don’t trust people of God-like stance, equating them with those at the railway station who carry placards of doom or redemption).*
3. *change your **gender** – that’s why so many wont use eGov: they hate a hard rational know-all male god of Wonkdom; they much prefer a sensible, understanding, empathic female embrace.*
4. *don’t be fooled by your **zealots** - they are far fewer than the passengers of convenience (politicians looking reformist; pundits beating a drum); than the sellers of religious regalia (consultants, system suppliers, service providers and outsourcers), than the confused and committed agnostics, and the atheists.*
5. *remember the **\$ coin**: god will have the last laugh – she has a wry sense of humor. How are you to explain the success of organisations with limited eGov, with decentralised and open source approaches, with learning and adaptive capability that does not require guidance from above?*
6. *Get a life, relax, & get on with the **basics**. ICT and eGov exist to enable and serve, not to transform.*

1. A CUSTOMER-CENTRIC, INTEGRATED VISION IS TRUST DESTROYING

‘Customer-centric, integrated’ appears to be the contemporary received wisdom.

Beware received wisdom and best practice: as often as not it represents modal ignorance.

Besides, such a vision seems to correspond to the old adage about second marriages: the triumph of hope over experience. We have been at the receiving end of customer-centric, integrated visions for fifteen years and we are still sold hope^{iv}. As Michael Barber, former head of the UK Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit noted at one stage in his Prime Minister’s reform process, “it was no longer the despair that was killing us; it was the hope”^v.

Instead of starting with customer-centric and integrated, start with the basics of government and its management. Then maybe something can be designed that engenders trust. The three most vital activities of the apparatus of government are to assert and preserve values that ensure the legitimacy of the state, to make decisions based on evidence and wise counsel, and to deliver services^{vi}.

First, public service **Values** underwrite the state’s legitimacy. But set against these widely understood values we see a record of consistent shortfall:

Against Honesty we see broken social contracts, hype and unfulfilled promises; the frequent reality of eGov as technological and political rhetoric

Against Transparency we see the spectre of the ‘superfile’ on the individual citizen and its unknown, unapproved and untraceable use

Against respect for individual privacy we see that nearly half of citizens believe that the security and privacy of personal information is at risk^{vii}

Against universal Access & Equity we see a digital divide – adopters of eGov = 36% of population, but 63% in the mainstream & sidelined are not on board, in the language of one recent survey. But while you worry about the digital divide you have not realised that the divide is a *double divide*. The less well-off may be excluded from access, but many of the very well-off *refuse* access. These are the digital Luddites: in America the proportion of people turning away from using of the internet is growing: already reaching 17% in 2002^{viii} (15 million people, or more by now, who say they don’t like it; found it uninteresting and useless, and a bad use of their time). They are not odd-balls – they are people just like you; people who also say they are fed up interrupting conversation to take incoming email; tired of having their children go from school to game console, of blackberries at dinner tables, of kamikaze drivers on mobile phones, of iPod humanoids who don’t know others are trying to talk to them. They are the 70% of airline passengers now reported to be rebelling against plans to allow mobile phones during flight^{ix}.

and: *Against Probity & Truth* we see the recurrent scandals and occasional cover-ups concerning large scale projects that go badly wrong.

eGov is a value system as well as a technical system. Without intrinsically designed-in values there can be no trust. And without trust, civil society is undermined.

The second vital activity of government involves **Making decisions based on Evidence and Wise Counsel**: Where does eGov interact with the processes by which difficult decisions are made by governments and their officials? We hear about the implementation of eCabinet, but is this just documents on screens? How does eGov interact with policy-making; how does it drive evidence based decision making (vs the malaise of anecdote based policy). How is it used by the Mandarinate & Ministers? If it is not there, where is the basis for organisational and political trust at the highest levels? This should be eGov in the thick of decision-making but when we search, it is missing in action.

And third, we have **Service Delivery**: This is where the crowd has always gathered, but progress seems to have stalled: there are web sites and portals; lots of dramatic high profile failures in delivering large-but-basic change-overs to the digital world; citizens using the interfaces to garner information and to implement basic functional transactions (licenses etc) but NOT using these tools as interactive hubs... the US & Canadian systems speak of failing to convince most citizens of the advantage of on-line services.

Citizen see themselves at risk of security & privacy failures or abuse, while eGov leaders say money is the problem – in other words they cant see the problem and money is not the solution

Increasing the uptake is frequently presented as the challenge and the priority^x (Accenture 2003 eGov Key Findings).. but this is the Detroit syndrome (build the cars and then figure out how to unload them on an unwilling market – “*sell the metal*”)

Well, hear the message! They don't like it! (1) because it is sometimes painful (*filling in tax on line frightens some people so much that they prefer to pay accountants to do it*) and pointless (*Google commonly outpaces government portals in getting you where you want*). They don't like it (2) because it is not what they want or need (eg security, privacy, simplicity). They don't like it (3) because it sounds silly (*digital gov when we cant manage to count ballots electronically better than part-time volunteers can; uGov and Gov 2.0 when eGov is still at toddler stage*).

Summarising some more Interim thoughts:

1. *If you don't **build-in values** you fail the trust test at the design stage & that is not where design typically starts*
2. *If you cant bring eGov into the **inner sanctums** of policy-making and decision-making, you cant ever secure deep organisational & political trust and support*
3. *If you dont **listen** you will spin wheels until the rubber burns out. Your job is not to 'move the metal'*

1. THE CANCER OF CONTROL CONSUMES TRUST

Integrate... consolidate... mandate... standardise... appoint a Federal CIO^{xi}... appoint an eGov Tsar... everyone must be eGov'd by midnight... ‘trust us, we are the government and we have seen the future’. Why does such a compulsion to centralisation, command and control and stridency pervade eGov?

Why must it be ‘all or nothing’... why must it be so generally humorless?

Remember, we hate ‘bGov’ (big government) - that is what started the whole reform movement in the ‘80s, leading to the creation of the new public management and the emergence of eGov as an instrument of reform as well as citizen service. But eGov all too often morphs into another version of bGov: big, central, faceless, machine-like; a digital juggernaut driven by zealots with a manic glint in their eye. George Bernard Shaw said that “*reformers have the idea that change can be achieved by brute sanity*”... and this seems to apply especially if they are male, engineering-scientifically trained, and on a mission.

Technocentric experts, design concepts, and strategy can drive a monolithic integrated, controlling vision that becomes humanly and politically repugnant: grand planning of the soviet era revisited. The world has moved on. The excitement is around government as network; empowered citizens; complex adaptive systems; “order for free”, emergent structure... the models are right there in front of you: the internet itself, eBay, open source design, user led innovation^{xii}. It does not have to be controlled to be ordered, to work, to adapt; in fact it looks like it works better without the overweening control. Simple rules run complex adaptive systems.

So be prepared to start again. A trustworthy eGov requires soft as well as hard systems approaches. Build on people from the bottom up. Design for emergence. Go with the network not the monolith or hierarchy.

Some more Interim thoughts:

1. *beware the **cancer of control***
2. *manage your **origins** and broaden the genepool of eGov enthusiasts*
3. *design the **network**, order may be for free & of higher quality.*

1. AND, FINALLY, PERVERSE INCENTIVES INSTITUTIONALISE MISTRUST.

Remember that social institutions shape and enforce behaviour. In the world of eGov, a variety of institutional forces conspire to undermine trust:

Politicians	who are drawn to the rhetoric of eGov as a signal of their appetite for reform, for modernity, for leaner more efficient government and who thrive on making the big announcement, the media soundbite, but who announce & then forget.
Officials	who can be clueless generalists or autistic specialists, who are driven by the career potential of the ‘next big thing’, who seek big budgets and new agencies to build status
Vendors	who sell what they have; who sell the second-hand version of what they have already sold to the private sector; who cant wait to sell the next one to replace the one that failed
Consultants	who will sell anything; whose fee-based incentive means they thrive on failure as much as success; who transfer conventional wisdom from the private sector at marginal cost

- eGov Units driven by pride, by messianic zeal or by fear of failure; by the instinct for self-preservation; or more cravenly by self-aggrandisement
- eGov Institutions This international gathering and professional association is a powerful professional institution that, like all others, is subject to fashion, to conventional wisdom, to the politics of envy (who has the newest, the biggest, the most avant garde this year and how can we live with the embarrassment of being a late adopter?)

And then there are the citizens – the users. What institutional force speaks for them?

- Users They have no real voice and no exit. They have been turned into the incarcerated inmates of eGov^{xiii}

You have to transfer the power to the user or fail forever to engender trust.

Some final Interim thoughts:

1. *perverse* incentives make eGov implement bigger, more expensive, more risky projects that destroy trust more permanently
2. *power* is in the wrong place and therefore not trusted
3. if the incentives don't *change* the syndrome won't, and mistrust can only grow

SO:

1. NO ONE COULD TRUST A MAN IN A SUIT WHO PREACHES 'IN EGOV WE TRUST'
2. A CUSTOMER-CENTRIC, INTEGRATED VISION IS TRUST DESTROYING
3. THE CANCER OF CONTROL CONSUMES TRUST
- &
4. PERVERSE INCENTIVES INSTITUTIONALISE MISTRUST.

**Ladies & gentlemen, I put it to you that
this motion should be voted abhorrent to this house.**

RESPONSE

In eGov we Trust - Well, yes, I have to agree

I trust it to –

be over budget, off schedule, sometimes worse than nGov (no eGov), definitely bGov (big Gov), suffering the God-delusion, male, value-free, missing the mandarins and ministers, riven by the control virus, and perversely incentivised.

because:

1. NO ONE COULD TRUST A MAN IN A SUIT WHO PREACHES ‘IN EGOV WE TRUST’

Our knowledge of Babylonian civilisation which existed over 3,000 years ago owes much to the fact that their records were written in cuniform script on clay tablets which are virtually indestructible when baked... Today, you here present write records in a variety of digital formats on media that have none of the incorruptability of Babylonian clay. CDs and DVDs are not indestructible; magnetic tape can last less than 50 years as NASA scientists discovered when they tried to resurrect data from the 1975 landings on Mars. ... Digital storage media can deteriorate in 20 years and become obsolete ... every technology-based society faces the information equivalent of a gap in the fossil record. **Stone, clay and paper will all bear witness to human history from the invention of writing to the 1960s... and then... and then... nothing...**

What have you wrought? Has the end of history been written by eGov^{xiv}?

2. A CUSTOMER-CENTRIC, INTEGRATED VISION IS TRUST DESTROYING

There is an internet running joke about a non government website that invites users to race its Google search engine against the official government web portal. It nearly always wins. It was built in a morning – “*We ran catastrophically behind schedule*”, says the creator, “*but we still finished before lunch*” – whereas the government portal took years, and tens of millions to implement.

3. THE CANCER OF CONTROL CONSUMES TRUST

... Federal CIO; eGov Tsar; Citizens “have to be made to increase their uptake”. You have to stop saying and publishing these demands. It makes you look like an uncloaked spaceship full of attacking Borg about to pick on the hapless Starship Enterprise. We *do* want ‘*to boldly go*’ with our split infinitive to the ends of the galaxy of government, but with nice Captain Janeway please, not programmed by the Borg.

4. PERVERSE INCENTIVES INSTITUTIONALISE MISTRUST.

.... Look to yourselves... who has boasted these last days of their latest eGov gismo in a moment of one-upmanship; who has felt the green monster of envy tempting them to say ‘we will have one of those by next year’. By way of analogy, women who are now the majority of car buyers in most mature markets, clearly prefer affordability, practicality and safety in purchasing a car. In America, the purchases of their top five cars by men average 365 hp; women bought 172hp on average. Who has bought the 365 h.p. digital engine when a sensible woman would have bought the practical and safe 172 h.p. model?

I trust eGov to deliver these outcomes reliably... unless ...

Unless, of course this wise eGov institution rejects the motion in an act of courage and creative genius, and starts a new era of r(real)Gov, forever recorded as beginning here with a Dublin Declaration.

ⁱ NPR, Kaiser, Kennedy School (Harvard University) Poll, 2004; P Blind, *Building Trust in Government in the Twenty First Century: review of the literature and emerging issues*, 7th Global Forum on Reinventing Government, Vienna, June 2007; www.usatoday.com/news/politicselections/nation/2004-01-16-youngvoters-gns_x.htm; Report on Trust in Government & Media, Grandfather Economic Report series, 2006.

ⁱⁱ M J Penn, *Microtrends*, Allen Lane, London, 2007.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Financial Times*, October 1st 2007, 'Big Spenders are brought to book over IT assets' reporting a study by Micro Focus of 250 CIOs and CFOs from companies in US, UK, France, Germany & Italy

^{iv} "About 85% of all public sector IT projects are deemed failures", T Ramsey, IBM Head of Government Services, quoted in *The Economist*, 'Why the Transition to e-government will hurt', June 22nd, 2000.

^v M Barber, *Instruction to Deliver*, Politico's, London, 2007.

^{vi} J A Murray, 'Managing Strategically in the Public Service' in R Galavan, C Markides, J Murray, *Strategy, Innovation & Change*, Oxford University Press, 2008 forthcoming

^{vii} 'The New e-Government Equation: ease, engagement, privacy, protection', Council for Excellence in Government and Accenture, April 2003

^{viii} Penn, op cit, pp 261-265

^{ix} Penn, op cit, p 259

^x Accenture, *eGovernment Leadership Report*, 2004, finds that "increasing take-up is a priority. The potential benefits... will not be realized if usage... is low... need for innovative methods of driving take-up", p4.

^{xi} requested by National Association of CIOs, Congressional Committee hearing on e-government legislation: see T Datz, 'The E-Government Act-the cost, the hurdles, the future', *CIO*, <http://www.cio.com/article/31729>

^{xii} S. Kaufman, *At Home in the Universe*, Oxford, 1995; E von Hippel, *Democratizing Innovation*, MIT Press, 2005

^{xiii} See: A O Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970.

^{xiv} Alan Cane, *Financial Times*, Oct 3rd 2007, 'Today's storage is far less durable than baked clay'