Democracy in the Digital Age

Lord Freeman

DEM⊙S

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About the author

Roger Freeman was MP for Kettering 1983–97 and a Government Minister from 1986, latterly as Cabinet Minister responsible for Public Service and for the use of Information Technology in Government. He was created a life peer in John Major's Resignation Honours List. He is a chartered accountant and banker.

1. Introduction

The key public sector institutions of our democracy have not yet fully grasped the benefits of the information technology revolution. Ministers, Whitehall, Parliament and citizens in general are all behind major industries in the private sector such as banking and retailing in using IT to improve the efficiency of services. This pamphlet is about what needs to be done to harness the potential of IT to improve the business of government and public service. It builds upon the themes outlined by Ian Taylor MP, former Technology Minister, in his pamphlet, *Net-working*, published in May 1996.

My vision for our democratic public institutions in the next century is that they should be:

- more open
- provide more immediate information and service to citizens
- operate as efficiently as the best of the private sector
- allow more effective and immediate expression of political opinions.

In achieving these goals, we can save the taxpayer money and free politicians from the mire of paperwork to give them more time to listen and think. In short, our democratic institutions would become more responsive, cheaper to run and more effective.

Many sections of the private sector have recently embraced modern technology with alacrity and have done so profitably. Since the reforms of the financial services industry ten years ago, communications have become immediate and comprehensive. The larger retailers are able to detail purchases and charge their customers' accounts electronically and then restock their shelves, with the use of modern IT. The public transport industries are learning the importance of providing rapid and immediate information to travellers. The National Health Service is coming to terms with the importance of investing adequately in quicker procedures to process clinical data about patients. The IT Resource Management Initiative in the NHS began the process of identifying the cost of each clinical episode and now the benefits need to be fully delivered.

Universities, led by those in the United States, plan to use IT to create global teaching networks – students will be able to learn at remote sites from information sent from a central campus site. The Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) aims to put all its research on to a web server and so make it freely available to anyone in the world with Internet access. Moreover, the IFS budget model is electronically interactive. You can learn to be your own Chancellor by examining the consequences of your Virtual Budget changes and calculate if you are better off after the real Budget.

By comparison, our public sector is behind in the introduction of IT. Ministers should use modern IT techniques in their own offices, homes and in their travels to manage their responsibilities better and make informed policy decisions. Departments rely far too much on movement of paper, which tends to reinforce the now outdated departmental divisions of responsibility. Government itself could be organised in a different way by separating responsibility for delivery of services (to be provided by fewer service-driven organisations) from responsibility for policy (to be provided by fewer ministries organised on a new thematic basis).

Parliament could benefit from less reliance on the written word and physical voting by providing a wider range of information electronically to MPs to enable them to hold government better to account.

The relationships between government and the media could be improved by more rapid and comprehensive electronic disclosure of information, first to Parliament and then to the media, rather than cumbersome printed and private verbal briefings. Members of Parliament could learn the views of their constituents more immediately and more effectively through interactive IT systems, enabling voters to express their views on the issues of the moment and Members to reply and put their own message across.

Citizens would benefit from the direct electronic delivery of services via a home computer terminal, new digital television with direct Internet access or public computer kiosk. Services would be available at any time to provide information, supply government licences, receive tax returns and process applications for a wide variety of services and benefits.

Why has the public sector been relatively slow to react to the benefits of modern IT? Perhaps it is a combination of fear of higher public expenditure to pay for it, a reluctance to change existing paper-based systems of departmental services and an understandable concern about security of confidential information about citizens. All of these fears are misplaced.

The private sector will pay the initial capital costs and recover these by service charges to the public sector. Whitehall should not be isolated from the changes that will allow us to provide more immediate services to citizens. And, of course, strengthening the existing safeguards of the Data Protection Act will ensure that electronic information about citizens is dealt with securely.

Does the public want change? Maybe Granny will be reluctant to interrogate government or her MP using a computer terminal but her children and certainly her grandchildren will be willing and able. Paper systems will continue to dominate organisations for some time but the evidence of a new computer literacy is already evident in our schools and offices. The information technology revolution can be a force for reinvigoration in our great democracy.

2. Ministers and Red Boxes

Ministers should be competent managers as well as policy formulators. They have responsibility for driving change in government and for restructuring public services. They need to have modern IT available to them to accomplish this hugely demanding managerial task.

Ministers are too often plagued by reliance on the famous system of 'Red Boxes'. This entails the screening of the ministerial paper flow by a hard-working and professional private office of civil servants. Boxes are normally filled up for overnight work by ministers after the normal daily round of meetings. These meetings are sometimes based upon the principle that no minister can meet with a junior official, even though the official may be the expert in a particular aspect of policy, without all superiors also being present at the meeting. Not surprisingly, such meetings are large and sometimes difficult to arrange at short notice to get all the relevant people present. This system needs to be changed so that ministers have more immediate, comprehensive and real-time information about what is going on in their departments. They should get it directly from the appropriate official, however junior.

Michael Heseltine introduced MINIS (Ministerial Information Systems) when he was first at the Ministry of Defence and then in his subsequent departments and I benefited from these initiatives in my own work. The principle is simple. The minister needs accurate information on the individual budgets and staff complements of each

division within the department and an understanding of who does what and why they are doing it. This sort of information need not be reviewed exclusively on paper at annual meetings with officials. It could always be available, constantly updated and displayed on a personal computer screen within the minister's office. Information could also be made available continuously on the financial performance of the key agencies of the department.

A good example of how IT could have presented a real-time summary of departmental reorganisation is the successful 'Front Line First' Ministry of Defence Cost Study of the mid-1990s. Many agencies and organisations were involved. More regular electronic updating of financial information could have helped ministers review the progress of the work more rapidly.

At present, gaining access to files is time consuming and the information buried within the files is sometimes difficult to assimilate quickly. With modern IT this could be revolutionised and simplified. Ministers could interrogate the departmental database and have the information at once displayed on their own computer. The technology exists for the interrogation to be voice activated. No need for a keyboard, just 'Tell me what was said in Parliament on this policy in the last debate'. Then the information would be displayed on the screen – so simple!

The last Administration introduced the CAB-E-NET system to circulate information between Cabinet colleagues about their diary appointments and to provide background information and policy headlines on key decisions taken by each minister. Such a system only works to full effect if there is a real determination to commit comprehensive data to the network and if staff are well trained in using the system. But such a system is essential for modern government, based as it is on the principle of collective Cabinet responsibility. Each senior minister must know where his colleagues are meeting and speaking, what they are saying and why they are saying it. The communications of the media are global and immediate – the communications of government need to match this level of performance.

Ministers often rely on a daily press summary of comments about their department's work but this usually arrives after the minister has

reached his or her office and does take some time to digest. Such a service could be provided overnight and direct to a minister's home for reviewing on the way to work through the laptop computer in the ministerial car or on the minister's own computer or television set at home. The minister's diary could be constantly updated and readily available wherever the minister travels. Too often, meetings that could be arranged on the spot are arranged subsequently and often not as quickly as they should be, particularly following important meetings which involve a change of priorities. The electronic pocket diary should now be an essential requirement.

Ministers spend a lot of their time in Cabinet committee meetings with other colleagues but sometimes key meetings have to be postponed because not all the relevant ministers are in London. The use of video conferencing, particularly for ministers in territorial departments or travelling abroad, would enable decisions to be taken more swiftly and with appropriate security. During the BSE crisis in 1996, some meetings were held using video conferencing facilities to ensure that the ministers involved who were located outside London could comment on developing problems and facilitate immediate decision making.

The Ministry of Defence, the Foreign Office, the Department of Social Security, the Department of Health and HM Customs and Excise use these techniques regularly and their wider use throughout Whitehall is overdue.

Indeed, the use of video conferencing, e-mail and a secure dedicated Whitehall Internet could save the need for some Cabinet committees and even make the system more inclusive by asking for comments by colleagues electronically when the alternative could be no collective consideration at all. Decision making could be quicker and more widely based.

The volume of incoming e-mail correspondence to departments is bound to increase and modern techniques can help prioritise and categorise such incoming mail. In some cases, mail could be replied to immediately using a pre-agreed format and adding the electronic signature of the minister.

Ministers spend many hours signing correspondence to Members of Parliament and to the general public. I signed many tens of thousands of letters often in standard format when I was a Junior Defence and Health Minister. There is no reason why a standard response, in certain cases, could not have the minister's signature added electronically so long as there were clear and precise procedures laid down for checking authority to use a minister's digital signature. The Prime Minister's office deals with tens of thousands of letters annually which are normally signed by others: perhaps standard lobbying letters to the departments deserve standard responses with the electronic signature of the minister concerned. Indeed, we could go further. In the United States, software is being developed to improve the database of standard responses to letters as manual responses are drafted differently over time. Electronically prepared replies are therefore being constantly updated automatically.

Ministers should also have use of a travelling IT office enabling them to carry information about the diary, the diaries of others, the press reports of the day and updated lines to take on policy announcements and issues as they develop during the course of a day. Ministers should always be contactable by their office and their colleagues so that they can react to problems using remote television or telephone channels with their main offices.

All this may seem a burden to some in public office but, by relieving politicians of paperwork and by using modern IT, ministers can become more efficient, more responsive and more in control of events. Time saved from clerical drudgery could be devoted to more reflection and thoughtful input into important decisions.

A personal computer terminal in every minister's office is an essential first step. What's good for business is good for government.

3. Ending the Whitehall paperchase

Government departments rely on controlling the public sector system, both local and national, through a flow of paperwork. The telephone is used for prompting action and making appointments but the piece of paper is as important for government as the scrolls which contained the laws for the ancient prophets.

As new tasks have been placed upon government by Parliament, freshly organised departments and divisions of departments have grown up, each with their own specific system of paperwork. But the use of paper is inefficient. It prolongs the process of administration because it is more demanding in terms of requirements for copies. Authors of documents tend to be more long-winded than they would be with electronic communications. Paper is difficult to retrieve and ultimately is destroyed. It has to be copied and faxed. A paper-reliant system is outdated; IT can revolutionise the servicing of government.

Of course, ministers and civil servants will need proper IT training if this is to come about. I remember my experience in one major department where, following the introduction of new personal computers for the private office staff of the minister, I discovered after I had returned from a foreign visit that they had all disappeared.

I was told that there were serious faults in the system and that staff were reverting to the traditional use of the typewritten or handwritten note as a reliable substitute. Many months later, I accidentally opened a cupboard in my office to be greeted by a cascade of IT equipment

secreted and unused. Perhaps we should have anticipated the under-standable trepidation of officials and organised training in the use of personal computers. Software can, of course, go wrong and equipment can be expensive but we hear too little of the success stories within the public sector of the use of computers and how they take a lot of the drudgery and errors out of the system.

Use of modern IT will, I believe, continue to reduce the size of the Civil Service, particularly in the clerical grades. This should be wel-comed by new entrants who will see their tasks made more interesting and more enjoyable. I have seen, for example, the benefits is of mod-ern technology in the (now privatised) Chessington public sector pay-roll operation, where historically a myriad of clerks processed monthly salary payments for individual civil servants. This has now given way to a system which relies more on computer power than clerical power – a more satisfactory solution for the remaining staff.

Use of IT can simplify the tasks of departments. For example, in the complex world of social security and in identifying the right assistance to encourage the formation of new businesses. There is still a long way to go in developing effective software for many public services but progress is already apparent.

Mistakes have been made in applying IT to public services. In par-ticular, the Child Support Agency ran into problems with it computer-isation by de-personalising the service provided and by permitting different computer systems servicing the same case to operate without cross-referencing with each other. Furthermore, the remoteness of the staff (for reasons of employment dispersion) has meant that those caught by the new Child Support Agency regulations have sometimes been unable to talk face to face with a single official responsible for all facets of their case. We should be capable of both coordinating all information about a particular citizen's problem with the individual citizen concerned using new IT and permitting a meeting with staff (perhaps by video link) who could draw upon the relevant database to review progress with the case.

The British agriculture departments probably now regret not intro-ducing computerised traceability of cattle earlier, as has long been

available in Northern Ireland. With such electronic information, the BSE crisis could have been handled differently.

The criticisms of the valuable purchaser-provider split in the NHS may have been less strident if its administration had involved less initial paperwork and more information technology. Our police, Crown Prosecution Service, justice and courts computer systems still need greater compatibility so that information can flow between agencies correctly, securely and efficiently.

Some tasks in Whitehall do not have to be performed exclusively in an office and greater use should be made of the facility for staff to deal directly via computer links with other departments or central statistical libraries. The aim here is not to take away the necessary personal contact with the public but to make services work more smoothly by eliminating time-consuming processes. Indeed, many Civil Servants could work part time at home just as efficiently. The daily press of public sector humanity at Waterloo Station might one day disappear!

The new information technology available should allow the structure of government itself to change. We should not be obligated to retain the present departmental structures which have grown up over the last century or more. For example, it might be sensible to combine those departments which provide a direct service to the citizen such as collecting taxes, VAT and insurance contributions. Over the long term, the merger of the Inland Revenue, HM Customs and Excise and the Contributions Agency would save money and modern IT could enable comprehensive information to be held about the individual taxpayer or company. Activists within departments responsible for issuing individual licences or permits could be merged; similarly, those services providing benefits and financial support could be integrated.

The amalgamation of parts of departments providing services would leave other departments to provide policy advice and be responsible for key policy decisions. These departments, such as the Foreign Office, the Treasury and other central offices dealing with the coordination of government and setting standards for the performance of the public sector, would leave traditional Whitehall smaller but more effective. So the embrace of modern IT to provide services

would allow the redesign of Whitehall rather than simply its automation. We would have a truly integrated rather than fragmented government machine.

We need a comprehensive government Internet and electronic mail system across all Whitehall departments and agencies to allow rapid data flow between all ministers and officials. We should not allow fears of virus invasion of such a system to delay its introduction: solutions can and will be found to protect the system's integrity. So please, no more second class stamped letters circulating between departments. Efficient government is immediate government.

Communications to staff could be electronic. We could largely abandon the remaining old Civil Service noticeboards full of written and sometimes dated information. The old printed circulars would be old hat twentieth century technology and the noticeboard a museum piece. The Civil Service would, I am certain, willingly embrace the IT revolution.

4. Parliament and the electronic message

Our parliamentary system demands physical presence for voting and for MPs to make a contribution to the written record through speech rather than submission of papers. We have a relatively voluminous written record, both of proceedings in the Chamber and also the various committees. Voting is normally a scrum but this is particularly so for the very large Parliamentary Labour Party now on the government benches. Divisions are apparently taking up much longer as MPs file through the Division Lobbies. Speaking has always been a competition because of the very large number of Members of Parliament compared with most other legislatures. The system for distributing official documents is physically cramped in the Vote Office in the Members' Lobby; a very large number of public documents have to be indexed and made available in bulk to the Vote Office, which must be both expensive and difficult to accommodate.

A more efficient Parliament would contain a smaller number of Members who would be better paid, with more to do and a greater chance to speak. Select Committees should have some responsibility for the legislative process in order to give them greater prestige and make them more attractive to ambitious politicians. If Select Committees had full access to modern IT then evidence could be taken electronically and software could process and analyse it. Witnesses could be questioned via video conference and e-mail. Part of the drama may be removed from hearings but the end reports could be better informed and more influential.

The *Hansard* record of proceedings is already on the Internet but perhaps the next step is to move to the publication of key documents on to CD-Rom. Members of Parliament should be able to look forward to a comprehensive record of, say, 30 years in the Commons by storing all their CDs in a desk drawer rather than filling their living rooms with bound volumes of *Hansard*. And the task of recording debates by *Hansard* reporters could itself be modernised by the use of voice recognition software to translate the spoken word immediately into written words.

The Library of the House of Commons could become an even more important centre for information services. It could provide facilities for searching documents rapidly for relevant material to Members preparing speeches. Software could be developed to permit the Library to search, precis and analyse material over networks, responding automatically to earlier specified requirements of MPs. Services could be developed more comprehensively to enable individual Members' offices to interrogate this database.

Voting could be carried out electronically with personalised 'swipe cards' at remote terminals for those who are in the Palace of Westminster but who do not wish to leave an important committee or backbench meeting. Traditional voting takes up valuable time, and in addition can endanger health and digestion for those who have to sprint to reach the Chamber from outlying offices within the required eight minutes. (Peers have only six minutes!) Those who wish to meet colleagues or lobby ministers in the Division Lobbies – a long held valuable right of backbenchers – could continue to vote in person. I must add that, as a minister, I found such lobbying conversations difficult to conduct in a crushed corridor. And less time consumed voting, the more time for debating, research, committee work and constituency business.

Modern IT, coupled with a special Parliamentary Intranet, would allow Members to digest the large flow of primary and secondary legislation and government reports. The excellent research papers prepared by the Library of the House of Commons could also be held on a special Intranet. Summaries of media comments by departmental subject would be useful, too.

The process of oral questioning is an important means of ensuring ministerial accountability. The daily re-ordering of oral questions, as Members withdraw their submissions and priority questions are permitted by the Speaker, could be displayed electronically for Members on the Intranet in their individual offices in greater detail than is presently possible.

There have long been complaints from Members of Parliament about the timely release of information by Government to the House of Commons, sometimes subsequent to briefings that have been given to the press. If information were to be released electronically to the press and public immediately after the House was informed, such criticisms would be avoided and the media satisfied. Protection of government copyright is, to my mind, less important than wider electronic access to government papers and reports. The Government of the day always has an advantage in controlling the flow of information to the media by giving greater background briefing than is conveniently available to individual Members of Parliament. To place Parliament and the media on the same footing in terms of the detail of information supplied would be both democratic and courteous.

May I annoy the political journalists by suggesting that they could be truly disintermediated by the direct supply of more information quickly into the public domain? The news services and indeed the public would get the raw data in greater quantity. So, no need for gossip and perhaps fewer press conferences? Such immediate availability of government information should make open access a reality. There has been a relatively poor take-up of rights by the media under the current code, Access to government information. Perhaps there is less excitement in asking for information rather than discovering that it is not available.

Local government could benefit also from more use of IT in procedure. Reports could be available to members electronically who could download exactly what they need and want. Less paper and fewer meetings could mean more interest on the part of very busy people in standing for local office. And a final suggestion to annoy the Parliamentary Whips: what about electronic pairing? This would mean an end to errors and misunderstandings.

The vision of future Members of Parliament at work is one in which they have access to information at the same speed and facility as ministers in government, subject to retaining confidentiality of certain government documents and advice to Ministers. The modern politician can only hold ministers to account if the individual Member is armed with the same benefits of IT as the Government itself.

5. The electronic voter

For our democracy to function at a constituency level, politicians of all parties must be able to communicate their policies effectively to every prospective constituent. Members of Parliament must serve all their constituents' needs properly and effectively. The electorate should be given the chance to express their views efficiently not just on polling day but also during a Parliament. I believe that we are not achieving this as effectively as we should.

The electoral roll is now prepared in a form suitable for conversion to the constituency computer requirements of most political organisations, on payment of an appropriate fee. The collection of information about the electorate and their political opinions is of course subject to the provisions of the Data Protection Act 1984 but modern IT permits the storage of consecutive canvass returns and information about the wishes and views of individual voters. Political parties therefore have no need to canvas voters every election without knowledge of their past political affiliations. Parties can identify past political preferences and measure a swing of opinion by comparing present voting intentions against information stored on computers. Inevitably, the national parties will also move to securing national membership records and the more powerful central computers will permit communications with members more efficiently and more cheaply with mass mailings. The electronic recording of the electoral roll also helps the general mailings to Y list (first time voters) and B list (all newly registered voters on removal to a new address in the constituency).

Members of Parliament now deal with an ever-growing load of constituency cases. To keep track of perhaps 2,000 new live constituency cases each year requires the discipline of modern IT, recording the key historical events in a particular case and enabling the Member of Parliament to recall on the screen of his PC the past history of the case and identifying where departments have not yet replied to requests for information or action Too often, departments get away with long delays simply because IT is not used by the MP to keep track of open cases. I recall advice as a new MP that it was important to keep a written record card for each constituency case. Valuable procedure that it was, it is now outdated. Constituency cases could be dealt with most effectively by entering them on a laptop computer database and corresponding electronically with the appropriate minister.

All politicians seek to reach key opinion groups and opinion formers and this can be facilitated through modem IT. Statistical data is now available commercially not only of individual members of different interest groups but also the demographic profile of constituencies. Candidates can target direct mailing to individuals printing out the letters for either mechanical or manual signature at a faster rate than was ever possible before.

I believe that the electorate needs better service at polling stations, the ability to express their opinions more directly to MPs and speedier redress of their complaints. Polling stations record voting intentions on paper. This can result in significant delays, not only in queues at busy polling stations but also in counting the results. Results could come almost instantaneously if votes were keyed in electronically in polling stations, thus eliminating the need for manual counting. In my own case at the 1997 general election, I endured five recounts over a period of twelve hours. Such recounts would become a thing of the past if the Returning Officer could simply announce the cumulative electronic totals within minutes of receiving the data, rather than the long and wearisome process of verification and counting individual votes.

IT can facilitate a degree of direct democracy. Constituents should be encouraged to express opinions directly to their Member of Parliament through e-mail or interactive polling, in which views are

sought electronically to a number of different questions. Redress and complaints could be reduced from weeks to days (or even hours) by eliminating the circular flow of written correspondence which presently goes from constituent to Member of Parliament, MP to department, back to MP and from MP back to constituent. This paper-chase could be replaced by e-mail enquiry passing through the office of the Member of Parliament direct to government and back. Members of the European Parliament need to rely more on electronic contact with their large constituencies – particularly as we move to proportional representation. Direct reporting of their activities on a local or a national Internet will soon become essential, as will the ability to respond to e-mail from constituents many miles from their constituency office.

As our political parties fight for the centre ground, party membership and pledges of loyalty will become more important. Agents will have to become computer literate to control the database of opinions and to familiarise themselves with desktop publishing. In elections to come it may well be that the popularity of the candidates in the media will count for even less than their computer literacy. IT skills are becoming crucial to managing election campaigns and relationships in constituencies.

6. Government services direct to the citizen

In November 1996, the previous Government published *Government direct: a prospectus for the electronic delivery of government services.* This Green Paper was directed at improving the quality of public services available and was launched under the banner of the 'Information Society Initiative'. Incidentally, this Green Paper was the first ever published also in CD-Rom form. I hope this will be the precursor to a standard practice.

The communication between government and the citizen is largely by paper or telephone, although processing within government and sometimes between government departments is increasingly carried out electronically. We need, I believe, to introduce a fundamental change to the way in which government provides services to citizens and businesses by using electronic means. Moreover, reform has got to be firmly based upon the needs of the citizen. We need to ensure that government services are accessible twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, every week, convenient in access, however remote the citizen may be located, quicker and cheaper for the user of the service as well as the taxpayer.

The public sector has achieved some successes in the use of modern IT. Examples include social security services, the vehicle and licensing systems run by the DVLA, the Land Registry and services to industry by HM Customs and Excise. But much more could be done and the Government direct outlined the areas in which public services could be improved

First, it could modernise provision of information to the public. Already, the Government Information Service on the World Wide Web must be rated a great success, providing access to information from over 300 public services. The fundamental principle behind web site access is that citizens have a choice about information access their own terms, at a time that suits them and, increasingly, on a 'one stop shop' basis of access for a number of services.

The public should be able to access government information from a wide range of public access terminals or kiosks placed in libraries, post offices and shopping centres. From home or business, access could be via a personal computer or home television set adapted for Internet access. The citizen would be able to gain immediate information comparing the performance of local schools, hospitals, local authorities and emergency services. Some data is already collected and available on CD-Rom but more extensive comparative data for the performance of a local school or a local hospital over a number of years should become more widely available. information for business on current UK and European regulations would also be popular, as would the ability to bid electronically for contracts or purchasing requirements.

Second, the public should be able to obtain key documents such us tax forms or licence applications and return them directly to the relevant public sector department. Information sent back on a change of address or change in employment status to one government department should be shared between all relevant public sector agencies to save time and avoid inconvenience to the public. Interactive services would enable the citizen to question government departments and send back information that is requested and appropriate. The road tax licence, for example, could be issued after information on qualifying insurance and MOT tests as well as authority to debit a credit card or bank account had been verified by computer. Electronic signature cards to authorise charging and authenticate information sent are available now. We should not need to rely on queries at post offices or lengthy telephone calls for an official reply.

Third, where the citizen needs to talk to an individual such as a policeman or Child Support Agency officer, this could be provided

through direct video link. Some citizens will of course, require the help of an intermediary such as the local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) or professional adviser. CABs are ideally placed to interrogate computer-based information, with on-line access to ensure updated information. MPs could also benefit from the same on-line service for their regular constituency surgeries. Government funding to help CABs for this task was announced by the last Government and this should be continued.

The quality and range of public services in the future will be greatly enhanced by the use of new IT networks, enabling the citizen to ensure that the public services provide effective service in real time. Surely it is reasonable to expect at least half of all simple transactions with government to be possible via electronic networks within a decade.

7. Making it happen

Making full use of the rapidly developing IT in our democratic institutions will take a long time to achieve, possibly a decade. Only a small proportion of the public presently have their own personal computers or will be able to afford conversion of their television sets to obtain access to the Internet. So paper systems will have to continue in parallel with electronic systems for many years. But children at primary school are already becoming conversant with modem technology. In business it is rapidly becoming standard for secretaries, staff and senior management to be familiar with IT. Of course, to progress the rate of familiarity and the use of IT will require public acceptance that it provides an easier, cheaper and, above all, secure service.

Ensuring confidentiality of personal data is essential to prevent its unauthorised sharing between public departments and, indeed, with private sector third parties. Further development of the Data Protection Act 1984 will be necessary to protect the citizen and lay down the necessary procedures for all in the public sector.

To start the process of improving IT within the public sector, we need more comprehensive IT training for civil servants both when they enter the service and periodically throughout their careers to update them on new developments and opportunities. Such training should also be offered to all new Members or Parliament and their staff as well as to ministers.

The cost of equipping our public service with computer hardware and software will be expensive but there is every indication that the private sector is prepared to make the capital investment necessary to keep up with progress in IT. Industry will recover the costs through service payments from the public sector, leaving a cost-saving margin even for return to the taxpayer in having to pay for a smaller sized Civil Service. The private sector must drive the introduction of present and future technology: the public sector is not equipped to do so, despite the excellence of advice from CCTA. And the public sector must be careful not to become over dependent on any one system or supplier.

Only the authority of the Prime Minister can ensure the full cultural change necessary within the Civil Service and, indeed, within his ministerial team. The Cabinet Office should be the engine for driving change in the public sector and the Central IT Unit established by the last Government should be expanded further, relying in large part upon seconded staff from the private sector. Government departments need to publish more reports which are accessible electronically and the use of CD-Roms for publication of White Papers should become standard practice.

In the new IT age, we will need the security of proper control of data and there must be no single national database held about individual citizens who, it must be noted, already feel secure about the use of automated teller machines at banks with personal identification numbers and bank cards. This confidence needs to be extended to their dealings with the public sector.

We need a wholehearted national commitment to improve our democratic institutions through the use of modern technology. This very technology will continually change and improve and we should not let it bypass the public sector. The pace of change in modern standards and power of IT is accelerating spectacularly and the availability of information sources is expanding to match. The level of public access to the Internet is doubling each year. This is not fast enough but it is welcome. If the private sector can embrace the IT revolution, so can our public servants and representatives. This revolution is with us

now. There is no reason why we should not introduce new technologies to public services immediately. There is no financial constraint – only cultural attitudes stand in the way of a step-change in the responsiveness and efficiency of transactions between government and MPs, MPs and constituents, public services and the citizen. Residual Luddism should be cast aside: our democracy deserves to exploit the potential of the IT revolution.