

Debate in the House of Commons about the transformational government agenda, creating confidence in public services and the role of democratising delivery

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Transformational Government

Margaret Moran (Luton, South) (Lab): We are here at a transformational moment in history. I am of course referring to the fact that the debate is an extreme rarity in the House—it is only the second debate on transformational government that I can remember from the past three or four years. There is, by the way, another little event going on elsewhere involving a new Prime Minister which, I guess, means that the assembled masses are elsewhere. I shall perfectly understand if the Minister has to respond to a pager message from No. 10, because he is extremely worthy of aggrandizement and I would not deny him a move up the greasy pole, but I hope that some of our Cabinet Office Ministers will remain in post for some time because one issue with transformational government is the need for continuous leadership.

The masses are not here for this debate on transformational government, because it is not a sexy subject but a techie, geeky subject. Far too often, the debate concerns IT and technology, rather than the real purpose of transformational government, which involves outcomes for people. That is what I want to focus on, because transformational government is about using IT as a tool to achieve the best outcomes in public service delivery for all our people, but particularly those who need public services most. The issue is fundamental to all MPs, and we must get that message across.

I know that the new Prime Minister is committed to this agenda. He commissioned David Varney's report, and I am sure that he will implement it with all speed when he gets his feet under the desk at No. 10. I want to speculate beyond Varney, and on where the transformational government agenda should go next. I am chair of EURIM—the European Informatics Market—which you know well, Mr. Gale, as one of its founder members and a great supporter. We are doing a Select-Committee-style inquiry into transformational government, which is a subject that crosses Departments and sometimes falls between the cracks of Select Committees. In my short contribution, I want to say a few words about some of the policy strands that need to be brought together, and which we will explore in that inquiry. I also want to ask the Minister some questions.

Transformational government is about using technology to achieve the best outcomes for our communities, particularly those who need our public services most. It is an intensely political debate. People have told me that there is consensus on what transformational government is about, and there is to a degree. We all want our public services to provide greater value for money and greater efficiency, and we all want to ensure that we can use technology to free up resources for greater front-line working and to ensure more streamlined service delivery.

However, I believe passionately that politics is about trying to ensure two things. First, those who need our services most should receive excellent quality public services. That is hard to provide in a joined-up way. Secondly, we should create confidence in our public services so that everyone has a buy-in to them.

In the modern world, people expect 24/7 services from the private sector. They want services when they want them and where they want them. They expect efficiency, value for money and technology. Public services should deliver no less, and preferably greater excellence, so that there is a buy-in from the big tent—the middle classes—while enabling more resources to go to those who need them. I do not want to aggrandize the subject too much, but the agenda is about the future of public services.

What issues should we address? First, there are a couple of myths and legends. Too much of the debate about transformational government focuses on failed Government IT projects. One can look at "Government weekly" every week and find a litany of disasters, but that is not the whole story. There are excellent examples of what works both in central Government—in the Department for Work and Pensions I cite pension credits—and in local government. A recent exhibition by EURIM and SOCITM—

the Society of Information Technology Managers—exemplified some of the good work, particularly in local government, to join up service delivery.

I heard from a carer who was over the moon that the help that her father received from social services and the NHS was linked seamlessly with help from carers with one point of contact, so that she did not have to run around. More important, her father did not have to run round to a number of agencies to receive the care and support that he needed. There are some good examples, but too often we hear about the failed examples.

Let us be clear. There are failed examples in the private sector, and many of the largest and most complex IT projects are in the private sector. Some work extremely well—for example, Voca for financial services and BT for commission billing. Some projects are immensely complex, but we do not hear so much about the many private sector projects that fail.

We must learn. Many EURIM reports and a recent Public Accounts Committee report picked up some of the lessons that we still have to learn after all this time. First, IT skills are scarce in the public sector, and we must nurture and retain them. There is concern in the private sector about the skills shortage in information and communications technology, which must be addressed urgently. Secondly, continuity at the top is required at both ministerial and senior civil service levels. Thirdly, we must look at projects involving incremental changes rather than a big, centralised bang. In that context—dare I say—are identity cards, although I support them, and we need clarity of outcome. Those are some of the lessons to be learned.

In terms of where the agenda goes next, I want to suggest three strands that should be integrated if we want to transform—I emphasise “transform”—Government and public services. The first is social inclusion. All the strands fall neatly within the Cabinet Office’s remit, which is a happy coincidence. If we are to transform, we must have social inclusion at the heart of everything that we are doing.

We have had processes, e-envoys, tsars and so on to look at life episodes and the equivalent of the moose licence—let us go online and do whatever is easiest, whether it is relevant or not. We must be more sophisticated, and look at services that need to be joined up, but which are complex and include the most difficult problems. I chair the all-party group on domestic violence, and a social enterprise within the equalities network that I am involved with is an online domestic violence project.

In a crisis, a domestic violence survivor must contact between eight and 10 different agencies, which often give the same information over and over again. Survivors may have to cope with losing their home and the whole terrible situation while trying to care for their children. If we target such a complex problem rather than picking on the easiest subjects, and make the technology work for that person, everything else will follow.

The digital divide or social exclusion in technology has been written and talked about for what feels like millennia. The issue is not lack of hardware—certainly not in my constituency. Hand-holding rather than hardware is needed. We proved that again in the womenspeak project with the Hansard Society and Women’s Aid in 1999. We targeted the hardest to reach—domestic violence survivors.

The first people online were Irish women travellers in the north-west of England and Bangladeshi mums in my constituency, neither of whom would normally go anywhere near public agencies or talk about their situation. They were online using technology, and the Bangladeshi mums are still using that technology to learn online. We were able to reach out. It was said that those people would never go online and never participate, but they did because they had support and we ensured that that was available to them.

We must target the hardest to reach and ensure that we have genuine joined-up service delivery for those with the most complex problems. Of course, we must get certain services online because we need to shift the easy services online. Forty per cent. of people now do their tax online, which is great because it releases resources for the front line and those most complex problems. Social inclusion is one strand.

Diversity and choice in public service delivery is another policy imperative that we must discuss, involving appropriate service deliverers to meet the needs in the community. Social enterprise is

another Cabinet Office priority. Do we have models that enable us to ensure that social enterprises can deliver those services? Are IT suppliers and projects geared to dealing with that mixed economy? That is a question to the Minister.

A third strand is **democratic delivery**. In any private sector company, people build up relationships—R2R—and get feedback on their services. That is basic. It should be integral to transformational government, and I believe that it is coming. However, we should do more than that if we want to build up public confidence, which means that we should involve people who use our services online not only in helping us to maintain the excellence of public service delivery, but in designing and having a say in those services.

Again I quote Womenspeak, because in a legislative and parliamentary context, the evidence that we received undoubtedly helped to influence at least seven pieces of legislation, not least the domestic violence legislation itself. We could use it as a model to think about ways of engaging people in designing public services.

I pose some of those questions to the Minister. Are we geared up to tackle the issues that I have raised? We still have issues about data sharing, largely because of ignorance about the Data Protection Act 1998. However, there are some good examples, so why do we not learn from them and spread them? There are in public service delivery too many nay-sayers who use the Act to prevent joined-up services.

We must also consider ways in which we can ensure that when cost savings are delivered through IT projects, and the cost is attributed to one Department but the benefits are shared throughout several, we have models that enable us to evidence that situation, so that it can be built into the comprehensive spending review process. I understand that it does not happen now, but it will be fundamental if we are to join up service delivery and end departmental-itis.

We must also have some resource—a small pot somewhere—to encourage innovation and democracy in public service delivery. I hoped that digital challenge would be part of that process; I was involved in the early discussion with the Institute for Public Policy Research. Sadly, however, it is not, as we hoped it would be, a pot for innovation, experimentation, learning and the rolling out of good practice. There is excellence in some of those areas, particularly at a community level. I hope that even if the Minister has a very brief life left in the Cabinet Office before he goes on to greater things, he will take some of those messages back with him.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr. Pat McFadden): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, South (Margaret Moran) for initiating the debate. She is a great believer in the possibilities of using technology to improve service delivery, she is a serious commentator on the issue, and she has shown a great commitment to positive and productive dialogue with Ministers on the issue. I, like her, think that today is an appropriate day to debate transformational government. Yesterday, I challenged the Cabinet Office press office to give me the communications plan for the debate, but I fear that even its talents may keep us from the front pages tomorrow. We will do our best.

The issues are important for quality of life and for good government. My hon. Friend rightly said that they are not only about IT, but about change to the way in which things are done, services are delivered and, I hope, change for the better for the citizen who is in receipt of the Government's service. Change is rarely easy. The systems that we work with are complex, we are dealing with large numbers of people, and the services that we provide are often critical. They are not things that we can afford to get wrong. A private company may take a risk on launching a new product, and the customer may buy it, they may not. However, if we are talking about paying people benefits or pensions, we must get it right for their livelihoods, so great care must be taken to ensure that we get it right.

You will be relieved, Mr. Gale, to know that I shall not go through all the Government's IT and transformation projects, but I shall make a few general points and pick up on a few points that my hon. Friend raised. As she said, the record is better than some reports and impressions suggest. There are significant successful examples of the change that technology has enabled: millions of benefit payments are made accurately every week, which sustain millions of families; online payment of car tax has been taken up by about 9 million people so far; online tax returns were filled out by almost 3 million people last year, an increase of some 45 per cent. on the previous year; and I am sure that my hon.

Friend regularly visits schools in her constituency, as I do, so she will have seen the IT investment there, which places us ahead of many other countries, given its scale and intensity. It is crucial in helping pupils expand their own horizons and future opportunities. I could go on, but they are some of the successful investments and projects that have been made.

I agree with my hon. Friend that the Government must respond to the changes that are taking place in other parts of people's lives. If goods and services are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, it is immensely empowering. People are booking flights online, so fewer go to travel agents and they are downloading music and taking part in social networking sites at a time of their own choosing, all of which is empowering. Owing to the transactions that can be carried out, the old concept of opening hours is rendered obsolete. If people are being empowered in the private sphere, the state has a duty to respond, and to try to do things that fit with people's lives.

The issue is not just about the internet and we must remember that one third of the population are not online. In the provision of services, they cannot and should not be left out or left behind. Even as we use IT to make service better, we must get the right mix of service delivery channels, so that people who need personal or face-to-face help can still get it. Like my hon. Friend, I believe that we can combine the two effectively by doing the easy things online and concentrating face-to-face help more on the locations where it is needed than it has been in the past.

Another crucial issue, which I spoke about earlier this week, is time—the citizen's time and the country's time. If we can improve services through the application of new technology, we can give people more time spend productively, and if we can organise our staff time to maximise the use of new technology, and if their time is spent more productively, there will be national benefits.

I agreed with my hon. Friend when she spoke about social inclusion and the people to whom the issue is important. There has perhaps been a stereotype that Government service improvement enabled by IT principally benefits the cash-rich and time-poor—what might be called the BlackBerry man or woman. It certainly does benefit hard-pressed, busy tax-paying citizens—so it should, because public service should respond to their needs—but it is also critical to those further down the income scale, who often find themselves in more contact with different parts of Government than those who are a bit better off. If technology can enable service to work better and, as my hon. Friend rightly said, reduce the need for people to tell the same story over and over again to department A, department B and department C of their local authority, that is a significant gain.

The issue is relevant across the income scale. I believe that if we can reduce the time it takes for hard-pressed people to access the benefits and opportunities that they need, that in turn will empower them to take opportunities that they might not otherwise have been able to. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the aspect of social inclusion. I reject the view that Government and IT cannot go together, that they will always fail and, implicitly, that we would be better off not trying. It is in the public's interest and the country's to make progress.

Questions have been raised about the governance of some projects. We have a duty to ensure that we get the governance right—I shall say something about that in a moment—but we also have a duty to be wary of a default nostalgia for the status quo. Paper systems, boxes of files and so on are not always the best way to run things. Change is often difficult, but the status quo is often not perfect.

I welcome my hon. Friend's comments about a Select Committee-type approach. It is always good when she and other Members of this House show an interest in exploring such issues and contributing positively to a dialogue with Ministers. We have our official Select Committee structure, and one or two Members might say that that is their turf, but maybe I should not comment too much on that.

My hon. Friend mentioned significant life events, an important issue that David Varney mentioned in his report. She may know that my colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions are working on a project called "Tell Us Once" to examine some of those life events. Considering it from that end of a telescope—from the point of view of a citizen's experience—is exactly the right way to do so.

I shall blow the trumpet for a moment for my local authority. I recently visited a bereavement centre in Wolverhampton. It is in some ways a pioneering project. I believe that the DWP knows about it and is learning from it. When a family must go through the painful process of registering a relative's death, the

bereavement centre offers a range of services to notify the different departments and Government agencies that must be informed in the event of a death. One of the employees summed it up well when I visited. He said, "Our approach is to say, 'We'll do that for you.'" If we take that approach more during those significant moments when a family finds that it must contact government a great deal, that will be a step forward.

I endorse what my hon. Friend said about private and third sector involvement in the delivery of public services. It is one thing for the state to be responsible for ensuring a good outcome in public service; it is another for the state always to have to provide it directly. I do not believe that the two are the same. I chair the Public Services Forum. We have invited the Minister for the third sector, as well as representatives of the CBI and the Business Services Association, to recent meetings to discuss the third sector's involvement in public service provision. That dialogue, not only with direct state and state-employed providers of public services but with other providers, is important.

To enter a little into the political frame, what the Government will not do is retreat from responsibility for ensuring good outcomes. It is one thing to hold the view that different providers can provide public services; it is another to say that the state should retreat from areas of responsibility. This Government are not likely to do so.

Margaret Moran: I absolutely endorse the Minister's last point. Ensuring good outcomes for our communities is fundamental to good government and good governance. Will he say something about how the social enterprise action plan, for example, integrates with the transformational government action plan? It is difficult to see how the two mesh together and how we can ensure that capacity is built into social enterprises for them to be part of the mixed economy and to deliver transformational government in the way that we are discussing. As secretary of the all-party group on social enterprises, I have a particular interest—

Mr. McFadden: Never let it be said that the Cabinet Office is not a seamless and coherent Department, or that one part does not work closely with another. I assure my hon. Friend that the Minister for the third sector is an active and loud voice on the third sector's behalf, and that he is working with the sector to identify and deal with any barriers that might exist to its involvement in the field.

We are always trying to improve the governance of projects. We have published the transformational government agenda and established the Chief Information Officer Council. We are taking forward the recommendations of the Varney review and concentrating the number of Government websites to make them easier for the public to use, and we will keep trying to improve the governance and management of such projects. We are aware that the Public Accounts Committee recently examined the issue and made recommendations, to which we will respond in due course, but for today, I stress that the matter is crucial to the quality of public services. Our twin duties for the agenda are to be both ambitious about what we can achieve and rigorous about how we manage implementing it.

Margaret Moran: To reinforce the point, the Minister has not mentioned—I appreciate that he has limited time available—the **democratisation of public service delivery**. I commend to him a project with which I am involved, and of which I have been the architect for some time, called Kidspeak. It involves children's charities talking to children online about their experiences of domestic violence and the services that they receive. Could he look at some of those examples and integrate them into the transformational governance programme?

Mr. McFadden: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I point her to the recent report "The Power of Information", commissioned by the outgoing Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Even today, the Cabinet Office website is inviting comments from the public on the issue of time and public service. Online dialogue is extremely valuable.

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 The Power of Information report can be accessed at:
http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/upload/assets/www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/power_information.pdf