

INTRODUCTION

As a preliminary to my remarks on e-governance in the electronic environment, I would like to provide a little background about the structure of government in Australia that will assist in placing my remarks in context for you. Then I will give some background on the state of e-government in Australia and finally address the issue of e-governance in the e-government context.

Australian System of Government

As many of you will know, Australia is a federation based on the six States that were previously British colonies in the 19th century. The major functions of the federal government relate to activities with national scope, such as defence and foreign affairs, telecommunications, air transport, shipping and the economy as a whole. The constitution leaves residual powers to the States, which are largely responsible for police, public safety, public transport, education and health services, and through local government for many of the functions that in Europe and America are covered by municipal authorities.

As soon as completing this description of the division of responsibilities between the different levels of government however, I am aware of the many ways in which, in practice, responsibilities cross over the formal constitutional boundaries. For example, although primary and secondary education is formally a responsibility of the States, in practice most of the funding for them as well as the establishment of national standards for them derives from the federal government, while delivery of the services remains with the States. The same is true for health services. In other cases, some functions that were formerly the domain of one level of government have moved to another: for example, for most of the 20th century legal aid was a State responsibility, but for a period from the mid 1970s to the late 1980s it was taken over by the federal government, until being returned then to the States.

From the point of view of the life events of citizens, the division of responsibilities between the different levels of government is also inconsistent. For example, State governments are responsible for the registration of births deaths and marriages. Each of those registers is separate within each State and between States and the federal government. Nevertheless, all levels of government use and rely on the information in such registers, even when the function being performed is not State-based – for example, a person seeking income assistance through the social security system needs forms of identification based on a birth certificate. I shall return to this example later in the context of e-government.

e-Government in Australia

Turning now to the situation in Australia in terms of the take-up of e-government, I am able to report to you that, as in many OECD countries, Australian governments at all levels have assiduously taken up e-government initiatives offered by modern information technology developments. As early as the mid 1990s most governments in Australia had formal policies promoting the provision of online information services by their respective agencies. In all jurisdictions these have followed the common path of development that we have seen in comparable countries elsewhere: from the initial stages of provision of static information representing largely re-formatted materials that were normally distributed in print, government websites have

become much more dynamic, offering not only constantly changing and configurable versions of information derived from databases, but also interactive services through which citizens can transact business with the government.

Australians are early-adopters of technology in all forms, and the internet has been no exception. Studies over the past 10 years have shown a continued rise in the numbers of people both capable of using the internet and actively using it to transact business with government. In 2001 the national census results indicated that only 37% of all Australians did not use the Internet– a more recent 2005 press survey indicates that 52% of households have internet access.¹ In a study conducted by the Australian Government Information Management Office in 2003 into the benefits of e-government, results indicated that 80% of internet users conducted transactions with government using online services. As many as 57% of business and 46% of non-business respondents were users of e-government services. At the same time several comparative surveys of the maturity and take-up of e-government have placed Australian governments in the top 5 percentile compared with other comparable economies.²

From a situation in the early 1990s when most government agencies had no online presence, now services are provided interactively at all levels of government. For example, the Department of Immigration Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, the agency responsible for controlling entry to Australia, now issues hundreds of thousands of visas each year wholly via web services. The Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade issues via their website advisory travel warnings for destinations that are not safe and offer a subscription service by which traveller may subscribe for updates to such advisories. These are just a few examples at the federal level of government.

The benefits accruing from these developments are significant both for governments, in terms of efficiency and reach, and for the users of government services, in terms of consistency, speed of transaction and time-savings. At the same time, they have posed challenges both for suppliers of the services and for the users. For the first time, much of the great complexity of the Australian system of governments and the distribution of functions across it has been exposed to the user. There have been substantial improvements in navigability over the past ten years, but much of the complexity that I described in my opening remarks remains daunting to many users of government services in the online environment. These are the issues that Australian governments are now addressing through attempts to shape their web presence more in line with the life events of their users than with the legislative or administrative structures that underpin their services. But the challenges here remain considerable.

Let us return again to my earlier reference to the life events of births, deaths and marriages. The separate State registers do not permit cross matching or data sharing. There is no established standard “citizen record”, nor indeed any agreement on what it should contain. While from the perspective of democratic checks and balances, this separation of powers and functions is a good thing, it poses great obstacles for the provision of integrated services across governmental boundaries in such a federation

¹ *E-Government Benefits Study*, Australian Government Information Management Office, Canberra April 2003, p.24; Sydney Morning Herald *Good Weekend Magazine* 9 April 2005.

² *Better Services Better Government*, National Office for the Information Economy, Canberra 2002, p.4

as I have described and for the objective to moving online services to a citizen-centric form rather than an agency-centric form. For example, there have been efforts over several years to get agreement on a national electronic health record that could bring significant benefits to patients and also significant efficiencies to governments at State and federal levels. However, the privacy and need-to-access issues have proven to be more challenging to find acceptable solutions to than have the purely technical ones of standardised inter-operability. Other efforts to simplify matters for online users by providing transaction capability across organisational boundaries have been more successful. For example, recently the Australian Taxation Office has been able to settle agreement with Medicare Australia so that Australians lodging their tax return using the Office’s online services can simultaneously have their Medicare data included in the return by accessing the Medicare system through the one interface. This example, of course, operates within the one level of government and there is still much progress to be made towards cross-jurisdictional services. This brings me to the main issues of my address and our concern here – the issues of governance.

E-Governance

In the Australian federal government the broad whole-of-government framework for managing the provision of government services online has been guided since 2002 by the government’s *Better Services Better Government*³ strategy. Under this broad umbrella a number of dependent strategies have been developed to facilitate and regulate the practical implementations that government agencies have had to put in place. These include the *Technical Interoperability Framework*⁴ that prescribes standards for government-to-government interoperability, and the *e-Permanence* suite of standards and guidelines issued by the National Archives of Australia⁵ since 2000, that provides guidance to agencies on meeting their legal responsibilities, managing risks, and adding value to their processes through good recordkeeping practices. These frameworks, although initiated in the 1990s, are being continually updated and made more practically implementable for agencies, by providing tools and best practice guides.

The Demand and Value Assessment methodology developed in 2004 by the Australian Government Information Management Office to assist agencies with the evaluation of proposals for the provision of e-government services includes specific guidance on addressing the e-governance issues that are presented by online services. The methodology defines governance issues to include:

- increased community participation in democratic processes;
- increased transparency of government processes; and
- increased accountability.

Obviously not all of these relate to every service of government. In most life-events it is the second two – transparency of processes and accountability – that matter most to

³ *Better Services Better Government*, *op.cit.*

⁴ <http://www.agimo.gov.au/publications/2005/04/agtifv2#Australian20Technical20Framework>.

⁵ <http://www.naa.gov.au/recordkeeping/overview/summary.html>

most users of the services. They raise many complex issues at an implementation level and I would like now to discuss these using some online examples from our Australian government sites before inviting your discussion of the issues raised.

At the end of the day, e-governance legislative frameworks and policies have little impact if they are not practically supported by the appropriate technical and administrative infrastructure. In particular this means appropriate arrangements to ensure the creation, capture and management of records of transactions. Only on this foundation can the essential requirement of e-government - **trust** - be assured. Systems and arrangements that are not trusted by their users and other stakeholders will simply fail.