

Keep the faith: there's a real risk this may work

Martin Stewart-Weeks July 2015 v1.0

Tom Burton's recent analysis of the challenge for new Digital Transformation Office chief Paul Shetler was clear-eyed, disarmingly honest and deeply dispiriting.

<http://www.themandarin.com.au/42121-tom-burton-shetlers-challenges/#>

The question is whether it is accurate.

If it is, we are in trouble.

Those of us who believe that government and the public sector have to change, and often dramatically, to stay relevant and useful into an uncertain, volatile and deeply digital future are either wrong or deluded, or some unattractive combination of both.

If Tom's analysis is right, many of us (myself included) have been wasting our time on a series of more or less quixotic adventures whose sound and fury appears to have signified nothing, or at least very little. And that bodes poorly for what I assume is Paul Shetler's ambition to do what he can to keep shifting an impervious system of public administration whose irretrievably dark and secret arts will see off this digital impertinence. .

Let's quickly run through the litany of frustration from Tom's timely essay.

- The kool-aid intoxicated digirati (guilty again) have failed to convince the "hard-nut career bureaucrats" that the revolution is here. Quite the opposite, it seems. Resistance is reflexive, deep and stubborn.
- The "bright star" of Government 2.0 has "flamed out". (there goes a decade of my life) betrayed by the sudden departure of its chief Australian political architect, Lindsay Tanner, its promise of open government and personal democracy adrift in a sea of mandarin indifference..
- The enthusiastic mantra of "citizen, not government needs" is rendered naïve by the *realpolitik* that pervades the Vatican-infused high politics of Canberra and the public sector. Like a slap, Tom reminds us that, for them, government definitely comes first (what were we thinking?).
- The rhetoric of customer service and whole-of-government digital transformation is trumped every time by the lines of accountability whose rewards and sanctions reinforce the personal and untrammelled individual responsibility of agency heads. Their feudal power is not so easy to disrupt. Deep bureaucratic DNA and "atomistic" performance management eats the flimsy rhetorical flourishes of good intentions for breakfast, every time.
- Methods of accountability, notably in the "meat market" of Senate Estimates, renders the feeble attempts of those few senior leaders willing to go into bat for digital too painful and too personally and professionally unrewarding. Surprisingly, it doesn't happen often.
- Big, clumsy, vendor-choked IT projects incessantly either fail or cost far too much to deliver far too little. For those already predisposed to resist, these experiences provide a perfect cover for their complacency. And anyway, in the end Google can do it all quicker, cheaper and more effectively. So, genuflections to "agile" and "flexible" and "responsive" notwithstanding, why bother?
- In Canberra, we've split digital from technology and especially technology procurement. And, for good measure, we've split both from the real business of public work and sector reform. (I've argued against that structural weakness for a long time, but that's another question, I have a suspicion that Victoria's new arrangements at the centre might be attempting to remedy this).

- The divorce has turned out to be an unhelpful. The idea of taking an integrated, strategic and comprehensive architectural view of how we design, invest in and then execute the digital revolution seems laughable; it's almost embarrassing to even write the words, much less profess any genuine belief in them.
- If Paul Shetler sets up shop in Sydney, the mandarins will have even more reason to stay distant and disengaged. If it concentrates in Canberra, digital leaders and entrepreneurs everywhere else (of whom, it has to be said, there are many more in Canberra these days) will ignore it.
- And to cap it all off, the digital venture is rigid with the baleful politics of a government whose leader isn't interested anyway, intent primarily on keeping the whole sorry business as marginal to real power as its current political mentor.

It's a sad list.

Funnily enough, though, and as a melancholy optimist, the more I have thought about the analysis, the more I am inclined not to despair. Despite the evidence that can be assembled to the contrary, my own experience suggests there is a real risk this thing can work.

There is too much evidence to suggest that the analysis and its conclusions, for all their hard-headed pragmatism, are both wrong and distracting.

From simple stuff like easier and more convenient transactions in areas like tax, transport, immigration, health, aged care and child protection, evidence is mounting that people are getting used to more open and responsive rhythms of service and engagement.

Take a look at services like Patchwork <http://www.wearefuturegov.com/products/patchwork> and Casserole Club, <http://www.wearefuturegov.com/products/casserole-club> or the way in which the ChildStory initiative in New South Wales is rewriting the rules of digital design and procurement in favour of agility, devolution and new models of service. <http://childstory.net.au/>

Think about what the Khan Academy <https://www.khanacademy.org/>, AirBnB and Uber are doing to our settled notions of the way education, transport and accommodation are consumed. Have a think about the way a combination of big data, connectivity and analytics are changing the way building standards are set and regulated http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2013/03/big_data_excerpt_how_mike_flowers_revolutionized_new_york_s_building_inspections.html or fire services stop fires before they've even begun. <http://gcn.com/articles/2013/08/01/fdny-data-analytics.aspx>

And look at the creative ways in which more and more cities around the world are using data, analytics and more open and engaging ways to talk with, and listen to, their citizens to solve problems like congestion, setting investment priorities and urban regeneration <http://sustainablecitiescollective.com/embarq/1032721/thecityfix-s-year-review-top-ten-sustainable-cities-stories-2014>

In all of these examples, new designs of authority – basically, new configurations of power, control and accountability – are being wrought by creative and engaged people and organisations. And almost always, it is in the face of resistance, or even denial, from those keen to perpetuate a status quo that bolsters their own grip on the commanding heights they are unsurprisingly reluctant to concede.

Maybe my kool aid quotient has reached terminal levels, but everywhere I look there are just too many examples where the future is already working. Not as many examples as we'd like, for sure, and not always at the kind of scale and impact that immediately trouble the status quo, but green shoots of inspiration nonetheless.

Exhibit B in my quest for optimism stems from the book I wrote last year, with former Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner (the impact of whose political escape on the government 2 agenda Tom calls out in his analysis). <http://www.changingshape.com.au/>

The book presents an argument, and some compelling evidence, that everywhere you look, institutions are in retreat, more or less elegantly changing shape in the face of implacable forces decentring and redistributing their power and influence.

Like former Venezuelan Oil Minister Moises Naim, <http://moisesnaim.com/books/the-end-of-power/>, we don't proclaim the end of power as a simple and singular gospel of instant change. Nor do we argue that strong and effective institutions, of government or in any other sphere, are not still vital to our collective wellbeing and our ability to face the big risks and opportunities of a connected, digital age.

Far from it.

Institutions are tough nuts to crack and, in some ways, that's the way we want them. We kind of don't want them to change too easily and frequently. But being a tough nut is one thing. Hiding a wilful disregard for requisite change behind false arguments in defence of a status quo that is palpably not working is another.

In the book, we argue that, as it has in just about every other sector, the digital revolution will prevail in government because its engine and motivation are in tune with a zeitgeist that is shape-shifting the location of power and the distribution of authority.

Institutions only have one currency in the end – relevance, fed by legitimacy. The truth is that, as they have been for some time now from similar institutions in the media, entertainment, education, civil society and business, both are leaking at an alarming rate from many of the traditional systems of government and the public sector. Cynical indifference from some of its leadership often turns out to be in government much the same as it has elsewhere, which is an extended exercise in denial, arrogance and nostalgia. And we know how well that turns out.

The most impressive examples I have witnessed in the steady and determined march from "doing digital" to "being digital", in government and elsewhere, have come from a combination of:

- Optimism and imagination
- Leadership that is capable of holding the necessary space in which new and better can be designed, tested and built
- Devotion to the cause of exceptional service
- Matching the broad sweep of coherent design with a forensic obsession with excellent execution
- And, most of all, a spirit of hope and expectation that something better is both possible and valuable.

Tom may be right in the end and we will simply have to expect less in the endeavour to change the way we govern. And perhaps there are irreducible complexities and fraught tensions deep at the heart of doing government well that can't be glibly tossed aside by a mix of naïve, if well-meaning, digital enthusiasm.

But it can be done well and it is being done well at an increasingly impressive pace and scale. I have seen leaders and organisations in government who are already on the case. Their work and ambition suggests there's a real risk it could work.