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South Australian ICT Policy: an eight-year cycle

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Abstract

In December 1993 a new Government in South Australia came to power with a declared policy of outsourcing government information technology. During the term of that government and its successor, over the next eight years, public ICT policy in South Australia went through several phases but essentially settled on a new plateau. This paper reports some of the themes identified by participants in that process, and poses issues for related studies in other Australian jurisdictions, where hypotheses suggested by the South Australian experience can be tested.

Keywords

ICT Industry Development, Public Policy, Regional Development

INTRODUCTION

Studies of public policy, like studies of other areas of strategic management, can focus on *content* or on *process* (Alford, 2001). While content studies are usually descriptive (as in, for example Middleton, 1997) studies of process focus on how policies are formulated, adopted and implemented. The study of ICT policy process is relatively new.

Policy theorists often hypothesise a rational planning model, and even experienced practitioners present a textbook model in which identification and analysis of policy options precedes decision-making in a policy lifecycle (Bridgman and Davis, 2000). However, as Shulock (1999) as pointed out, analysis may not be used to make political decisions. Alford (2001) has argued that public organisations are the least likely to apply a rational planning model, while Spencer (2002a) has begun to explore diffusion models for policy adoption within the ICT area.

In seeking to understand the policy process as it applies to ICT, documentary analysis is not sufficient. Both analyses and evaluations are frequently treated as confidential, public documents are produced for political communication and web content is transitory (Spencer, 2002b) Reports from a range of people involved in making or influencing ICT policy decisions therefore provide a potentially crucial source of description of the *process*, as opposed to the *content*. This paper provides a broad view of the process discussion with one group of policy advisers and analysts, those who are expected to influence policy decisions. In this case the context is South Australian ICT policy over a period of 8 years representing two consecutive terms of government.

South Australian Context

Through the early 1990s South Australia had a long-term Labor government that was, in the wake of a State Bank disaster, defeated – to no one's surprise – at elections in December 1993. The incoming Liberal government arrived with ideological commitments to certain principles, one of which was to shed and privatise those areas of government activity that were not deemed to be part of a modern, free economy public sector.

Dunleavy *et al.* (2001) have outlined a number of influences for major government outsourcing in several Westminster system countries. The new public management developments were probably the most strongly argued in the South Australian context (as they still are by the Commonwealth). In particular, the incoming government announced before the election that it had signed up with IBM to outsource government information technology and create a technology partnership between the State and IBM (OAL, 2001). This was of considerable interest to a number of stakeholders – members of the IT industry

throughout the country who might have expected to bid for such an outsourcing deal, existing government suppliers who saw their existing government work vanishing, and IT staff within government who feared that their secure, pensionable jobs within the government were now at risk.

In the event, an outsourcing contract was entered into, but with EDS rather than IBM (EDS, 2000). The outsourcing contract and its structure and consequences are not the principal subject of this paper. It is important to note, however, that the outsourcing contract negotiations were driven primarily by an intention to create a focus for high-technology industrial development, rather than as a government IT efficiency strategy (Nikkei Business News, 1996; Productivity Commission, 1996)

A new South Australian government was elected in February 2002 and the returning Labor government faces an ICT environment with a raft of different questions from those it left behind it in 1993. This paper does not extend into the new government's term of office yet, although that will be a fruitful area for further research. It will take some time for the government's approach to ICT policy areas to develop, especially in areas that are not a common part of general discussion among the general electorate and therefore do not have broad-based political urgency.

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN ICT POLICIES

IT2000

The Liberal government's outsourcing and industry development strategy, which was originally conceived in general terms under advice to the incoming government from some key advisers backed up by an aggressive marketing organisation (IBM). To implement the strategy, the government established an Office of Information Technology (OIT) early in 1994. This was the first major break with tradition. Over the last years of the Bannon Labor government there had been an IT policy and strategy group within the Office for Public Sector Management, itself part of the Department of Premier and Cabinet. IT policy was seen as a target for best practice management within government, and the strategy group was responsible for liaising with line agencies, disseminating advice and information about good IT management such as sound business case preparation, strategic planning, recommended (but not mandated) technical standards and opportunities for new efficiencies through effective implementation of modern IT systems.

The new OIT was formed specifically to put in place an outsourcing arrangement that would cover all IT within South Australian government agencies. It was a central agency that had a project role, and moreover had direct backing from the Premier and his senior Ministers – especially the new Treasurer. It was to act on behalf of the line agencies, directing them to comply with contractual conditions that were common across all of government, and to put in place whatever supporting policies and projects were necessary to achieve the operational objectives. It soon collected IT policy and strategy advisers from existing management and project groups within government, many of whom brought their responsibilities for ongoing activities with them.

Senior advisers to the new Premier and Treasurer were a mix of long-term public servants, senior industry consultants (in the strategic sense of 'consulting') and a few entrepreneurial academics. Ray Dundon, an extremely experienced bureaucrat who had had within his management portfolio the State Computing Centre and State Supply (procurement) activities, headed the OIT from its formation. In addition to the staff of OIT, many of whom were on relatively lucrative contracts with the government, there was a Premier's Taskforce that had a charter to "provide strategic advice on all significant information technology issues affecting the Government and the economic development of South Australia" (IT2000, 1994:Executive Summary)

Within the first year of its existence – and in parallel with work directly related to implementing the outsourcing arrangements – the OIT, the Economic Development Authority and the Premier's Taskforce prepared a vision for the role of ICT in South Australia. This

vision was published as "IT2000" (IT2000, 1994)¹, and it set a precedent for governments around Australia. As a vision statement it was the first to start from a position outside government efficiency in IT usage. It argued that ICT was a valuable strategic asset that could enable clusters of new industries, provide an export industry for the state, become a potential employer of significant numbers of people, and act as an enabler for a smart, technologically sophisticated populace – an 'Information Society'. In fact the IT2000 report was one of the first public documents in the ICT field in Australia to use that term, other than attempts by Barry Jones in the Commonwealth parliament (Jones, 1991) to stimulate discussion of long-term strategies.

The OIT went through a number of iterations in its structure, size, roles and responsibilities, responsible Minister and name over the next few years. It was originally created as a special-purpose office with a sunset clause, and then was turned into a full Department. When it had responsibility for the industry development consequences of ICT policy it became the Department for Information Industries (DII). When the industry development role reverted to the state development department, it was renamed the Department for Information Technology Services (DITS). When it was merged into new super departments created after another election, it was broken up into various policy and project groups, most of which fell within the aegis of the Department for Administrative and Information Services (DAIS), which also managed government office accommodation, government procurements, land titling and valuation, printing, fleet management and forensic science, among other roles (DAIS, 2001)

Many of the senior staff who worked with OIT in the initial contractual and policy formation stages have moved out of the government, while others have remained through the various iterations and restructuring. Another group have, in the manner of public servants, transferred in and out of line agencies, often performing similar policy development and implementation tasks at a local level as fewer activities were centralised across all of government.

IT2000 established a number of projects and obtained Ministerial and/or Cabinet support for mandated actions by government. Most of these were not related directly to the EDS outsourcing contract, although the IT2000 report did try to show linkages when seeking strategies for treating IT "as an industry critical to the economic growth and increased competitiveness of other South Australian industries" (IT2000, 1994). Some key examples are:

- The centralised, directive approach to change was reflected in adoption of a common desktop environment. A whole of government contract with Microsoft was established and agencies were instructed to comply and to bear any costs of conversion (GovICS, 2000).
- Where consortia of agencies had been gingerly negotiating to adopt common packaged software for administrative systems such as financial and human resource management, the IT2000 vision stepped in to adopt single government-wide standards and to mandate adoption within a relatively short time frame².
- A limited panel of PC suppliers was appointed. Special approval had to be obtained from central government before an agency could purchase from another source. This control mandated use of PCs rather than Apple Macintosh machines, and forbade the more technically adventurous agencies from building or refurbishing their own computers.
- The IT2000 focus on industry development pervaded all contract negotiations. Prospective vendors were required to include industry development proposals with their bids for large contracts. The proposals were evaluated by a central industry development group (either as part of DII or in the separate industry department) and could change the outcome of a tender evaluation (GovICS, 2000).

¹ Despite Singapore having already used the same title for its vision statement (Chun, 1997)

² This position has now been relaxed so that major agencies are again negotiating their own standards (Frontier Software, 2002)

- Additional whole-of-government infrastructure projects were put in place, such as a telecommunications management strategy and a whole-of-government radio network. The central IT organisation also took responsibility for specifying and negotiating these contractual agreements, applicable to all agencies.

IE2002

The Government's overall focus, and how it has been modified over the 8-year term, is demonstrated by comparing IT2000 with the later overview document that was released as "Information Economy 2002" (IE2002, 2000). The IT2000 report, crafted by a senior taskforce that reported directly to the Premier, took an aggressive stance on implementing planned, top-down change. For the first time it identified the Information Industries as a new area of industrial development in their own right, neither resource nor manufacturing based. It had a planning horizon of at least 5 years and it was released before the ubiquity of the Internet and the widespread introduction of e-commerce.

IE2002 had a horizon of only 2 years. It was principally directed to a Minister with a commitment to the Information Economy – but he was not the Premier. It took a softer, bottom-up approach to change, in which "government, industry and the community work together as equal participants, each with their role to play" (IE2002, 2000:6). Further, "... [in a] concerted effort to position South Australia as a leader amongst the information-enabled societies of the 21st century [government] has a responsibility to its citizens to enable and facilitate that process". Development of IE2002 involved consultant-led discussion with stakeholder groups, rather than a selected experts group. Its focus was not on creating a new industry but on societal change, and bringing along the community to access a globally reconstructed information society. Implementation of the IE2002 projects is carried out by a diverse selection of agencies and interest groups, rather than driven by a central project office.

METHODOLOGY

To develop a broad-based view of the processes, interactions and motivations that were involved in policy development over the whole 8-year period, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with a diverse sample of people involved at various times for various parts of the policy cycles. Findings presented in this paper are drawn from seven interviews with senior people who have had a long-term involvement with policy formulation. Other interviews with less senior people, or those whose focus is specifically policy implementation, are not included in the current report. The group who are the subject of this paper included private sector consultants on IT and Telecommunications, industry body managers, senior project managers and ministerial advisers.

The author participated in some of the earlier activities of the OIT/DII/DITS. There are validity issues associated with a former participant studying the history and existing remnants of the policies and projects they were involved with. The interviewer trod a fine line between the disadvantage of over-familiarity with some interviewees (or cooler dealings with former workplace antagonists), and the advantage of credibility and trust that many interviewees accorded during interviews. Interviews were taped, and none of the interviewees had any objection to the taping, but some comments were so frank – to the point of being slanderous – that the interviewer was frankly concerned about the sensitivity of the taped material. On the other hand there are references of the sort ("you remember when Trevor said ...") that require the interviewer to insert explanations in interview transcripts.

This research has a strongly interpretivist approach. The objective is to use the interviews to identify themes that inform understanding of participant perspectives of ICT policy process. Interviewees were encouraged, with additional questions and non-verbal indications of the interviewer's interest, to diverge from the core questions of the interview if they wanted to discuss something they considered important. Core questions were kept short and related to things that had happened and to the interviewee's personal experience. Most of these interviewees needed little encouragement to expand questions, to reflect on their experience, and try to explain it and generalise from it.

Interviews were conducted in late January 2002, just prior to a state election. Each interview took about an hour (the natural time unit for anyone who has been to a lot of public service meetings). Settings were selected by the interviewees and ranged from shared meeting rooms to personal offices, and in one case a table on the footpath where the interview took place over coffee between mobile telephone calls to the interviewee. None of the interviewees had trouble talking for an hour. After explaining the research interests of the interviewer, and confirming their willingness to have the interview taped, the interviewer used the following questions to scope the interviews:

- To be sure I have it accurately, can you say who you are, your position and your involvement with government IT policy?
- What are the most significant policy statements and initiatives that you have been involved with?
- Can you tell me about the process for policy generation?
- Over the time that you have been involved in IT policy, who have been the most significant individuals and networks influencing policy?
- How important is contact between different governments?
- What has been the interaction between government and industry, or government and academia?
- Do you think IT policy is established as a “real” policy area for governments?
- How much *understanding* of IT policy do you think there is, and how much *interest*?

Much of the terminology used in these questions is deliberately imprecise. It allowed the interviewees to interpret the questions according to their own priorities and focus. From the interview transcripts a list of high-level topics and issues raised by the interviewees was prepared manually. These have been grouped into the themes discussed below. Much more detailed qualitative analysis draws out the nuances of the impressions and reactions of the interviewees, but such low-level analysis at this stage would obscure the core of this particular paper. Quotations from unidentified interviewees are used to illustrate the themes extracted from the interviews.

FINDINGS

Government Projects as Policy

Several of the most senior interviewees identified specific projects as their most significant policy initiatives. For example, establishing the whole-of-government Microsoft contract was regarded as a policy initiative, because it involved a new way of managing technology standards within government, and policy was refined during project implementation. An issue that was raised time and again was the need to see such major projects principally as a large-scale change management challenge.

A major technology project is really a major change management project.

One interview commented that in its time OIT was largely involved in change management, and that change management, or change facilitation, was “not always taken well”. Another observed that in his opinion the EDS outsourcing contract represented a major change in IT management within government and that many IT managers did not get that message, leading to ongoing problems.

ICT Governance Models

Different change models were described, from top-down planned change to ongoing emergent change. Interviewees’ preferred change management approaches linked strongly with their ICT governance and policy formulation models, and it was apparent that several of them have spent considerable time grappling with those issues. One former strategist (now a consultant to government) proposed that “IE policy development should require collaboration” and from this point concluded that a central, multidisciplinary team should do policy formulation but have no responsibility for implementation. That would ensure that policies were developed to be ‘saleable’ to line agencies, and implicitly validated. By contrast

a former Ministerial adviser had concluded that, from his experience, “policy formulation and implementation can’t be separated”.

A senior manager still involved in central policy development described the existing governance arrangements as relying heavily on ‘task-based teams’ that brought together experts from within line agencies to team up with policy officers for central projects that developed strategies and implemented them. The direct issue for ICT governance arrangements – both in reflection and for those still involved in implementation – was when to seek “genuine collaboration” and when to centrally ‘set rules’. Increasingly complex consultative arrangements have been used, and one of the interviewees has created senior advisory groups – at Chief Executive level – with procedural rules such as no proxies accepted at meetings and formal review dates set for each group decision.

A person who was closely involved in the IT2000 developments took a quite different approach. He still believes that “exciting progress” needs “visionary leadership” and that you need “special people to make things happen”. Such people, in his view, must be intellectually capable of dealing with high degrees of complexity and ambiguity and are required to lead the change and policy processes. Another manager had a different concern with staffing of policy offices. He deliberately tried to avoid recruiting ‘technical’ people, believing that he needed non-technical policy advisers in order to focus on user areas. A former manager felt that “lots of people with IT background have the right technical knowledge but lack a big picture approach” and that people with knowledge of areas such as marketing and community development were required. However, this interviewee (who had himself started life as an engineer) regarded that as more a matter of selecting people with breadth of knowledge than of excluding technologists.

There was general agreement that structures significantly impact the effectiveness of policy development and decision-making. The effect of a Minister or an agency Chief Executive blocking significant policy development through lack of interest in the ICT area was cited several times, and even when a Minister is enthusiastic the Premier may have a different view. Interviewees did not relate structure to the specific policy decisions made so much as to whether *any* decisions were made. The role of the Information Economy Policy Office (IEPO) was controversial. One of its architects described it as “not what I had in mind at all” and both structure and staffing were mentioned as having changed its focus and effectiveness.

Bureaucratic instability was commented on, but opinions on its effects varied. An industry advocate complained that long decision times were “exacerbated by Ministerial and key personnel changes”. Another former participant had worked out that during the period 1994-1999 he had 8 times changed the Minister to whom he reported, 10 times changed the department he worked in – sometimes only as a change in name – and 15 times changed the office in which he worked. However, he also noted that he often continued to work on the same thing, and that one project kept the same terms of reference and objectives through a number of organizational, nomenclature and (supposedly) strategic changes.

Process of policy development

For some advisers, policy development has been a rational process with defined steps while others proceed in a more haphazard manner. One admitted that when he started with OIT there “wasn’t a defined policy process” but went on to describe the second stage of policy development after a general policy/ideology decision has been made:

...Somewhere along the line you have to go through a process of deciding ‘does this stack up?’ If we’re putting in a policy it’s because we want to achieve some particular outcomes. Let’s clearly define them ... let’s make some judgments about their value ... and then you can make a judgment.

This was not inconsistent with the EDS Outsourcing project, which was described as a matter of taking an existing political decision and trying to introduce definitions and a competitive process to its implementation. A senior strategist noted that the IT2000 processes had broken new ground for the South Australian Government, because they

introduced evaluating economic development potential rather than just assessing a cost-benefit analysis of the internal government position:

It's still a hard thing for government to do ... cost-benefit analysis is easier than economic projection, which takes more political courage.

However, another interviewee observed that within government even standard business cases are hard to do, and that one may know that a decision is right even though presenting a supporting business case is difficult. He rather cautiously accepted the advantages of a 'benevolent dictator' in progressing policy decisions.

The IEPO process for policy development started with 'brainstorming' within IEPO, which rarely used consultants, preferring to access 'in-house expertise'. For example, IEPO was reported to have developed its own definition of the Information Economy. In another current policy group, ideas from multiple sources were dealt with by creating a project team that formally studied the issues and options and worked out a strategy and plan. A third group recognised a complex interplay of agencies (customers), vendors and regulators, from which strategies were devised and which in turn were affected by those strategies.

Policy networks

Networks within and between governments are important, although they are rarely formalised. The role of networks has been a focus for British policy research (Rhodes, 1990). While policy groups use existing personal contacts of the people they recruit to communicate with agencies, senior bureaucrats usually are brought together in committees. Intergovernment liaison occurs at a number of levels, from the Ministerial Council down. Former ministerial advisers from another state were an important source of information for the Minister's office, while public servants dealt with other public servants. It was commonly agreed that, apart from Commonwealth funding of state-based projects, intergovernment liaison was most likely on issues of common standards and compatibility, either in technical infrastructure or the 'soft' infrastructure such as privacy legislation. State governments are in competition with each other in the area of economic development and rarely collaborate.

Views of government-industry liaison vary with the role of the interviewee. Industry advocates talk about communicating with individual public servants but having great difficulty dealing with 'government' as a body, especially during the later years of the government's term. Senior advisers are more occupied with specific major companies than with representative industry bodies, one describing his office as "receptive to discussion and ideas from significant industry vendors". Experienced industry advocates, with a background in telecommunications or recent involvement with other industry sector, noted the relative immaturity of the ICT industry. The government-supported IT Council comprises 13 different industry groups, and "that says something about the industry". Industry initiatives such as Business Vision 2010 (SABV2010, 2002) are examples of industry "working for itself, but IT is the sector that does this least". It was argued that the IT Council, and the IT industry as a whole in South Australia, is not proactive in dealing with Government.

Government-academia liaison was limited to just a few senior academics and government support for academic programmes. In policy development a former adviser summarized the lack of involvement as

(a) I never thought to approach them, and (b) they've never been proactive enough to approach me.

None of the interviewees provided any examples of government-academia collaboration in policy development.

Political Understanding of ICT

Policy process is intimately related to understanding and interest at a political level. Opinions about the current status of political understanding and focus on ICT policy were consistent:

IT is very much seen as a fringe-dweller.

The message there is that over certainly the last four years we have fundamentally failed to turn anyone in Cabinet on.

IT policy, of its own volition, has no currency with the Chief Financial Officer or Chief Executive.

After the first 3 years there was no political champion.

IT is not in the forefront of the public's eyes.

One interviewee noted that “early adopters and the privileged parts of the community are the only ones in an Information Society”, while much of the community still has no access, no awareness and no skills. For public servants, at least, there must be less frustrating areas to work in. However, those advisers still in government, and the active outsiders, still believe in the importance of the ICT area. They liken ICT infrastructure to road and transport infrastructure and are convinced of the importance of planning for the future, even though “the public doesn’t understand this and most people in government don’t understand it”.

CONCLUSIONS

For a policy researcher looking to the future, or for an ICT industry advocate, the most depressing findings from this study are those that interpret the ICT public policy process in South Australia as slowing down, losing impetus, failing to manage or even recognise knowledge and not diffusing policy innovations past the group of early adopters and change agents:

Have we learned anything? Basically, no.

People who learned things about policy at the time no longer work in government, most of them.

Government does not value knowledge and does nothing to retain it.

ICT policy development, like the industry that it interacts with, is still relatively immature. None of these interviewees presented a formal model for policy development, or justified their process in terms other than current political and governance arrangements or personal experience. ICT policy makers within government form their own networks, excluding politicians, academics and most of the industry. Even then, according to the interviewees in this study, there is little continuity of understanding and influence to ensure that programs are followed through, evaluated and used to inform subsequent policy and project decisions.

It should be acknowledged that policies are like other systems – the more you develop the more you have to maintain. This necessitates a shift from policy and visioning into projects, reviews, and evaluation. However, the interviewees in this study describe a policy area that from their point of view has achieved little in the last 5 years. One felt that all ICT achievements of the 8-year period were within the first three years, and even that “took more effort than it should have”. Another noted that it was interesting to stay in touch with recent political announcements because “when you’ve been there and seen what’s been happening, know what’s been happening in the past, then you read newsletters with a different perspective”.

Public sector management has been described as more diverse in content than private sector management (Alford, 2001). An important aspect of the diversity is its significance in the policy decision-making process. This study strongly suggests that ICT policy is not driven by rational and deterministic analysis, although analysis may be carried out to assist implementation *after* the initial decision is made. Extension of this research outside the South Australian context, and to directly include political rather than bureaucratic decision-makers, offers the potential to understand and improve the formulation of public ICT policy.

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