A BETTER, DIGITAL DEMOCRACY

by Niki Lomax

KEY RECOMMENDATION:

Create a centralised, integrated online government information service.

INTRODUCTION

This constitutional review is an exciting opportunity for New Zealanders to have a say on some operational issues relating to our democracy and, importantly, engage in a broader discussion about the future of our small Pacific nation. However, it is concerning and frustrating that most New Zealanders are not participating in this conversation. Rather than actively disengaging from this process most people I have talked to either feel unqualified to comment, or don't even know the review is happening. When I have discussed this review with friends and family the most common response has been '*What's a constitution anyway?*'

How can we make our constitutional arrangements part of the public consciousness? How can we expect New Zealanders to hold their government to account if they don't know what they are accountable to? How can we ensure breaches of the Bill of Rights Act receive proportional outrage when most citizens don't know we even have a Bill of Rights? How can we expect anything less than ignorance when the Treaty is taught as a relic of history and not understood to be a relevant, living document?

This submission will not discuss all the issues outlined in the Constitutional Advisory Panel's Terms of Reference, but will instead respond to the Panel's bolder and more ambitious question. *What are your aspirations for Aotearoa New Zealand?* Broadly, I can sum up my aspirations as follows – I want New Zealand to be:

> *Sustainable, equitable, inclusive, engaged, and ambitious.*
> *A better, digital democracy.*

This submission offers one key recommendation which I believe will assist in moving New Zealand towards this goal – the creation of a centralised, integrated online government information service – a tool which will assist in the development of a more informed and participatory public. This online service should incorporate the establishment of a central consultation platform, a 'one-stop-shop' for submitting on parliamentary bills, local plans, or discussion documents.

While I acknowledge this is not a strictly constitutional issue, I hope it will be of some use to the Panel in forming recommendations on increasing civic engagement and knowledge around these issues.

START BY IMPROVING CIVICS EDUCATION

The 2005 *Inquiry to review New Zealand's existing constitutional arrangements* concluded that the government needed to:

> 'To foster greater understanding of our constitutional arrangements in the long term,
> increased effort should be made to improve civics and citizenship education in schools to provide
> young people with the knowledge needed to become responsible and engaged citizens (Constitutional
> Arrangements Committee, 2005: 5).'

It seems highly likely that the current constitutional review will produce a similar recommendation.

I absolutely agree that fostering greater understanding through better civics education is important. It is generally accepted that a better-educated public will be more participatory, more successful at holding the government to account, have a greater understanding of their rights and an appreciation of their obligations and responsibilities as citizens. However, the curriculum is only one tool. Creating 'responsible and engaged citizens' will only be possible if parents and teachers are able to reinforce this learning. The government must therefore adopt a comprehensive strategy that aims to make all New Zealanders more informed.

THE GOVERNMENT IS MISSING A KEY OPPORTUNITY

Everyday New Zealanders make thousands of interactions with the government. Whether it's lodging an ACC claim, checking a student loan balance, collecting superannuation, appearing in court, applying for a passport, renewing a driver's licence, applying for welfare, applying for research funding, completing a tax return, or looking up when public holidays are. Every one of these interactions is an interaction with an interface managed by the government. Every one of these interactions is an opportunity to educate, and it's an opportunity the government is currently squandering.

The current Government is not unaware of this potential. In mid-2012 they set '10 challenging results for the public sector to achieve over the next five years', which included 'Result 10: New Zealanders can complete their transactions with government easily in a digital environment (SSC, 2013).' By 2017, the Government hopes that 70% of all common transactions with government will take place in a digital environment (DIA, 2012).

This goal should be more ambitious.

A bold, well designed, integrated web platform for government which connects services in a meaningful way for the user will make these interactions not only much simpler and enjoyable, but educative. The educative potential of a well-designed interface and strong information architecture should not be underestimated. This also should not be a goal limited to 'customer transactions' but participatory transactions – it should be as easy to make a submission as it is to find out your tax code.

Achieving this will require more than developing some isolated smartphone apps for specific services, or improving front-end design of some core government websites. A better, digital democracy will require more dramatic change.

A CASE STUDY: THE UNITED KINGDOM

The British Government Digital Service (GDS) was established in 2010 as a new team within the Cabinet Office in response to the Martha Lane Fox report: _Directgov 2010 and beyond: revolution not evolution_. The GDS oversees a number of projects which all aim to create a digital service in the UK that is simple, clear and engages people with government.

At the centre of this initiative was the development of a centralised, integrated web platform for government, all located at a single domain: _GOV.UK_.

GOV.UK took thousands of government websites and redesigned the entire framework, creating an integrated platform for all government services. Rather than having to learn a new language every time a citizen interacted with a government website, these interactions, as the GDS puts it, are now 'simpler, cleaner, faster'.

The new platform is designed around the needs of the user and designed to make sure people will use it and learn something when they do. The entire structure of the site is designed to be educative, but it has also succeeded in being both intuitive and enjoyable. Searchability has been prioritised so people can find exactly what they are looking for as quickly as possible. GOV.UK can be navigated by department, by topic, or by policy, with other navigation options including 'How government works' and 'Get involved'. 'Get involved' acts as a consultation hub with all open consultations listed with links to relevant information, as well as links to volunteer and community service organisations.

The use of navigation is in itself an educational tool. By listing all 24 ministerial departments, 20 non-ministerial departments, 334 agencies and other public bodies, and 12 public corporations, straight away the user understands the scope of government and gains a sense of how the departments relate and interact.
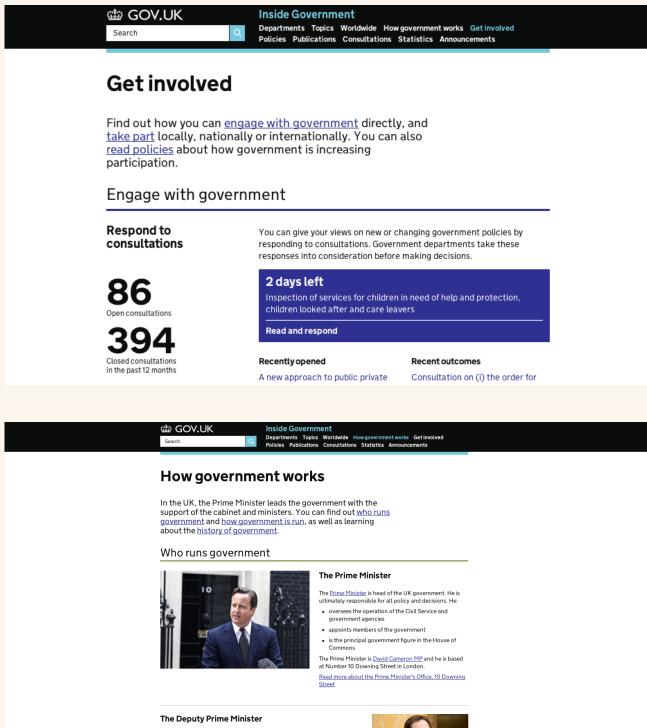
Underpinning all the work of the GDS is a philosophy of openness. All of the code they write is available on *GitHub*, an open source code hosting service, for developers around the world to freely access and use. They have also adopted a culture of experimentation. Rather than launching a final perfect design, they launched a beta version of the site and encouraged feedback. The GDS recognises the need to rapid evolution, encouraging agility and adaptability in the development process.

As discussed in the 2012 *Government Digital Strategy*, published by the British Cabinet Office, a 'digital by default' strategy is not only beneficial in terms of civic engagement, but its cost effective:

> 'By digital by default, we mean digital services that are so straightforward and convenient that all those who can use them will choose to do so whilst those who can't are not excluded. We estimate that moving services from offline to digital channels will save between £1.7 and £1.8 billion a year. Government is improving the way it provides information by moving to a single website, GOV.UK.

Transactional services now present the biggest opportunity to save people time and save the government money (Cabinet Office [UK], 2012: 2).'

New Zealand already uses this language. Our own *Government ICT Strategy* talks about being 'digital by default' (ICT.govt.nz, n.d.). At the centre of progress towards this goal should be a similarly open and experimental culture like that of the British GDS. The next steps in New Zealand should not be incremental, they should be bold.

'GOVT.NZ'?

As part of the Constitutional Advisory Panel's report, I hope the Panel will consider including a recommendation that supports the prioritisation of improved government digital services in New Zealand with a view that all tools aiming to increase civic knowledge and participation should be promoted.

There are some truly terrible government websites in New Zealand. Many are clunky, difficult to navigate, and frustrating to use. Traditional models of government procurement are not suited to the rapid evolution of digital technology. Once something is updated, it takes no time at all for it to be out of date again. Centralised guidance and the adoption of an agile, open, and experimental approach to digital services will be a crucial part of delivering effective government services in the 21st century.

Of particular priority should be a centralised database which collates information on all open public consultations similar to the UK's 'Get involved' page. Something like 'govt.nz/submit' could act as a central place for citizens to submit on a bill before parliament, or a council's unitary plan, or comment on a discussion document produced by a ministry. Collating this information has the dual benefit of making the information easier to find, and increasing public awareness of the opportunities available to formally submit on issues of interest.

It should go without saying that protection of privacy and identity assurance should be at the front and centre of any government digital service. This is already a core principle of the government's ICT strategy which states that 'security and privacy by design will be the norm' (ICT.govt.nz, n.d.).

The GOV.UK example is of enormous use. Apart from anything else, the nuts and bolts are openly accessible, free to use and adapt.

TO CONCLUDE

Civic knowledge has been a constant theme throughout this conversation and it seems likely that the Constitutional Advisory Panel will receive a lot of submissions championing civics education. It also seems likely that the Panel's report will echo that of 2005 which noted concern that 'too many New Zealanders do not have sufficient understanding of our current system (Constitutional Arrangements Committee, 2005: 5).

Modernising our democracy by improving digital interactions with government is an obvious and effective way to address this across all sectors of society.

As young New Zealander, committed to this place and its future, I hope this conversation has materially positive outcomes for our country. Improving civic knowledge in New Zealand will require multifaceted solutions. I support prioritising civics education in the curriculum, and I support prioritising the improvement and integration of government digital services in New Zealand.

A submission by Niki Lomax to the Constitutional Advisory Panel, 31 July 2013
nikilomax@gmail.com | @nikilomax

REFERENCES

Cabinet Office (UK) (2012). *Government Digital Strategy.* Retrieved 20 July 2013, from:
   http://www.publications.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/digital/strategy/

Constitutional Arrangements Committee (2005). *Inquiry to review New Zealand's existing
   constitutional arrangements.* Retrieved 20 July 2013, from: *http://www.parliament.nz/
   resource/0000002679*

Department of Internal Affairs (DIA) (2012). *Better Public Services for New Zealand: Action
   Plan August 2012.* Retrieved 20 July 2013, from: *http://www.dia.govt.nz/vwluResources/
   Result10ActionPlan/$file/Result10ActionPlan.pdf*

ICT.govt.nz (n.d.) *Government ICT Strategy and Action Plan to 2017*. Retrieved 20 July 2013, from:
   http://ict.govt.nz/strategy/action-plan/

State Services Commission (SSC) (2013). *Better Public Services: Snapshot of results at 8 July
   2013*. Retrieved 20 July 2013, from: *http://www.ssc.govt.nz/bps-snapshot*