



Virtual Government leaves little room for citizens

Victoria is pushing to introduce the electronic delivery of Government services. Chris Connolly examines the implications.

The information revolution taking place in Victoria can often have the appearance of one long sales pitch to multinational companies to set up shop in Melbourne, while the locals are kept in the dark and given little insight into the practical implications of Jeff Kennett's multi-media vision.

However, at the INTERACT Multimedia Festival held in Melbourne in late October, the nuts and bolts of electronic service delivery - one of the key planks of the Victoria 21 policy - were on display, preempting their imminent roll-out to the suburban shopping centres of Melbourne.

The system (to be called MAXI) involves the complete delivery of all Government services through information kiosks, interactive telephone centres and the Internet. The initial system on display at Interact allows citizens to transact with VicRoads, the Victorian Electoral Commission, the Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, Local Councils and most utilities all on the one computer screen or during the one telephone call. Eventually all government services and utilities will be included.

You can pay bills, check information, change address, renew your licence and even change name in one electronic session, either from the comfort of your own home using the Internet, or at an information kiosk in a shopping centre or railway station.

Identification and Authentication

This electronic system is designed to supplement the existing system of branch and counter services, where citizens can still interact with real people. In order to take full advantage of the new system, citizens will have to be able to identify themselves to a machine. Australia Post will provide this identification service during the initial roll-out of ESD through their KeyPOST service.

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KeyPOST is a system which can provide individuals or organisations with a unique digital signature based on public key cryptographic techniques. Citizens can sign any communication with the digital signature created using their private (secret) key, and the recipient can check the digital signature against a public database of (non-secret) public keys. The KeyPOST system is likely to form part of a wider network of certification authorities who will produce digital signatures.

Initially, Australia Post will sup-

ply the digital signatures on floppy disk, along with the accompanying software required to access government services on the Internet. Citizens will have to prove their identity at an Australia Post office (by producing a passport, drivers' licence etc.) before a digital signature will be issued. It is not clear at this stage whether you will be able to use the floppy disk at information kiosks.

Eventually, the floppy disks will be replaced by smart cards (credit card sized plastic cards with embedded computer chips) and all kiosks will be fitted with smart card readers. Home computers can also be fitted with smart card readers, and there are even special smart card phones. The smart cards will carry the digital signature, but may also perform other functions, such as storing health information or electronic money.

This raises the immediate prospect of the smart card becoming a quasi identity card. The use of identity cards was soundly rejected by Australians in 1987 during the Australia Card debate, but they occasionally sneak back on to the agenda in other guises. If the KeyPOST cards are widely used, they are likely to have many of the same properties as identity cards. The card will almost certainly have to display a name and number, even if this is only for the practical purpose of distinguishing your own card from that of other family members or colleagues.



If you refuse to obtain a smart card for ESD, you will have to rely on the traditional counter services.

While there are many people who will argue that digital signature smart cards are an inevitable part of the new information society, this does not excuse the introduction of potential identity cards without public debate.

One aspect that is not immediately apparent is the cost of identifying oneself as a Victorian citizen. The KeyPOST service described above is not free. In fact it will cost \$20 a year for the basic service. There are no concessions or exemptions available. You must pay the fee to gain the full benefit of MAXI.

Out with the old...

Victorian Government policy is to provide all government services electronically by the year 2000. They expect eventual costs savings through reduction in staff and 'bricks and mortar'. Although Government policy is to use ESD as a supplement to existing services, there must be some chance that the traditional counter services and branches will be run down.

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Government services are a mix of essential services and compulsory services. Citizens don't usually interact with a government department by choice. In these circumstances it is essential that citizens aren't left behind by technological developments. Groups which may have concerns about ESD include

the aged, people with disabilities, people on low incomes, remote and regional communities, people concerned about privacy, people with literacy difficulties, and people from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Yet there does not appear to have been any consultation with the wider community about the issues raised by electronic service delivery and the level of awareness among the general population is very low.

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The Government's response to date has been to promise that the new system will operate as a supplement to existing services, rather than as a complete replacement. They also aim to establish 'community computer centres' (probably in public libraries) where people who do not have access to the Internet from home can conduct their government business.

The fine print

An interesting feature of the MAXI information kiosks on display at INTERACT was that the terms and conditions were only available by following pointers on the touch screen which eventually lead to a separate area of the system.

It was stated that you agreed to all the terms and conditions simply by using MAXI, even though the terms did not appear on the home

page. They were not available for print out and they take 5-10 minutes to read.

Under the heading 'Privacy and Data Protection' there was a clear statement that MAXI could not provide a guarantee that information would not be disclosed, and that by using the system you agreed that MAXI were not liable for any unauthorised disclosure. Under other headings you agreed (again by just using the system) that MAXI were not liable for any complaints or problems arising from your use of the system, and that each and every dispute would be a matter between you and the relevant agency.

A glimpse of the future

If these information kiosks are to replace humans as the typical delivery mechanism for government services, then it is to be hoped that members of the community can have some input into their design. A simple transaction at INTERACT took up to ten minutes - longer if you read the terms and conditions - as each step involves one finger typing on screen. It is unclear how convenient the system will prove once it is installed in shopping centres - but a queue of busy shoppers breathing down the user's neck while they try to type their address on the touch screen should prove a useful test.

Overall, there are enough potential issues raised by MAXI to justify at least some degree of community consultation. The Premier Jeff Kennett spoke in glowing terms about MAXI and the transformation of government in Victoria. His strongest point was that Victoria was leading the way, and that this would be the first complete implementation of ESD in the world. For consumers it is more important to get the system right than to be the first people to have it.