

**Keynote Speech for Mary Hanafin TD, Minister of State at the  
ITAPA International Congress, Bratislava, Slovakia  
On Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> October 2003**

**Introduction**

It is my great pleasure to be here today in Bratislava to share the experiences of my country in developing an Information Society - with a particular focus on our approach to exploiting technology in Government.

I am conscious too that I am here on the eve of Slovakia's joining the European Union. As you know, Ireland holds the Presidency of the European Council during the accession period - so we look forward to formally welcoming you to the EU during that time.

Indeed, we will have an opportunity to discuss the mid-term Review of the e-Europe programme when we join you and the other accession countries in Budapest next February - and then in Dublin, in June, to further explore innovative organisational change - and the benefits of investments in technology in modernising Government.

Today I am here to speak in the context of the journey we in Ireland - a small open economy situated on the periphery of the European Union - the journey we have taken in positioning ourselves as a leading location for knowledge-based economic activity. It is a journey that has seen Ireland become a major player in the global ICT industry - and which has allowed us to explore the greater use of technology in the social, economic and cultural life of our country.

As Minister with specific responsibility for the Information Society, my main interest is in the use of technology rather than the development of the ICT industry itself – I want to explore the potential for both government and citizen that technology now brings with it – the scope for innovation and creativity on a new and exciting scale.

Modern technology is transforming the way we interact and do business – in Government, in commerce - in fact in all human activity which involves interaction between people and organisations. The essence of the marriage of communications and computing technologies – ICT - is that it makes possible *new connections* – new partnerships of mutual benefit - connections that challenge old assumptions about *what* is possible.

## **Background**

The Information Society in Ireland has evolved significantly since 1999, when the first Information Society Action Plan ‘*Implementing the Information Society in Ireland*’ was published. It was a collection of policy initiatives spanning many government departments and agencies – and was a reflection of how wide its impact is on wider society.

Then last year - three years after our initial Action Plan - we published *New Connections*, which took account of progress since 1999 – including the rapid changes in technology that continue to be made – and the e-Europe plans - which work towards the Lisbon goal of making the

European Union the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy by 2010.

The challenge for us was - and continues to be – to ensure that all players are moving forward. To do that we have created a number of ‘instruments’ of co-ordination. Political and policy direction is primarily given by the Taoiseach – the Prime Minister – with whom I work as Minister of State – on the **Cabinet Committee on the Information Society**.

Two high level cross-Departmental groups - the *e-Strategy Group of Secretaries General* and the *Implementation Group of Assistant Secretaries* - coordinate ‘implementation’ across departments and agencies responsible for the actions set out in *New Connections*.

In addition to these ‘instruments’, the Government set up the **Information Society Commission** - an independent advisory body drawn from the business community and from social and cultural organisations. The Commission’s role revolves around advising the Government on the future direction of the Information Society – which is more recently giving way to the concept of a knowledge society based on a thriving knowledge economy.

### **Evolution of e-Government**

Our understanding of what Internet technologies can bring to the process of government has evolved since we first embarked on the agenda in

1999 - when we focused primarily on achieving the on-line delivery of information about public services.

Today, we are looking to harness ICTs in new and imaginative ways to transform not just the way we work, but what Government actually does - our focus has shifted from getting public services on-line to using technologies to transform what we do.

The modernisation of the Public Service in Ireland over the last decade – since long before we came to speak about e-Government – has meant moving from a traditional model of command and control to an intensely citizen-focused model.

e-Government has meant that new technologies can be exploited to improve exponentially the efficiency and effectiveness of the public service – to transform government in its wider sense into an agile, responsive organisation with a common shared view of the needs, the rights and the responsibilities of citizens.

But technology was initially seen as a separate dimension – a different modernisation process – and that is now proving to have been an obstacle – or a constraint - to rapid progress – by focussing on the technology rather than on its potential.

### **Action Plan I**

Our first Action Plan envisaged electronic delivery of public services in three strands:

- Strand 1 – the provision of *information services* online through the websites
- Strand 2 - building *interactive services* such as the Revenue Online Service which is initially directed at business users – and has proved to be extremely successful
- Strand 3 – exploring the possibilities for *integrated services* based on user needs, and available through a single point of contact.

Progress made in implementing the first Action Plan was significant. In May 2000, the Government agreed on the *Public Services Broker* as the central access point for integrated service delivery – a citizens portal if you like.

The *OASIS website* was launched in April 2001 – Oasis is an integrated online resource of public service information based around citizen-centred life events, and available through a single point of contact.

The *BASIS website* was launched in May 2001 - providing an integrated online resource of public service information based around business-centred needs, and available through a single point of contact.

Both of these will be a part of the Public Services Broker when it is fully in place.

In an EU benchmarking exercise carried out in November 2001 – an exercise to measure progress with online delivery of public services - Ireland performed strongest of all Member States. Indeed, According to the most recent European Commission web-based survey on Electronic Public services, Ireland is ranked in 2<sup>nd</sup> place after Sweden out of 18 countries.

### **New Connections**

The Second (and current) Action Plan, *New Connections* - which , as I said earlier, was published in 2002 - builds on the significant progress made during the implementation of the first plan.

The overall Information Society agenda, as set out in '*New Connections*' covers three key infrastructures to underpin development:

- Telecommunications infrastructure
- Legal and Regulatory environment, and
- E-Government.

The plan also describes 4 supporting pillars to build the capacity necessary to support Information Society Development in Ireland:

- E-Business
- R&D
- Lifelong learning, and
- E-Inclusion.

Significantly, with respect to e-Government, while *New Connections* re-stated the significance of the Public Services Broker in delivering

integrated services, it pointed to the need to look beyond service delivery – to look at the broader dimension of public administration in the new environment of sophisticated technology and citizen-centricity - putting the client at the centre - representing a significant shift in emphasis - and raising issues about the structures and processes that had evolved in a different ‘paradigm’.

### **Putting the Citizen at the Centre**

There are, in fact, a number of reasons why this ‘citizen-centric’ approach is required:

- Serving the citizen effectively means giving value in terms of quality service and accountability for the use of taxpayers’ money – so we are widening the definition of ‘service’.
- Easier access to information means that citizens are more informed and capable of greater use of self-service access facilities – they have a higher expectation of the quality and efficiency of service.
- Developments in technology have created a new potential for economies of scale and sharing of common services - for the development of improved systems to support cross-organisational working – such as in e-Cabinet.

Indeed, the e-Cabinet initiative will set up a framework for the secure electronic transmission of documents between Departments and between the Cabinet Secretariat and Departments.

It is a comprehensive project involving all Departments and will offer unprecedented opportunities for collaboration - and for delivering greater efficiencies throughout the Public Service. This will involve

- The electronic distribution and management of Cabinet papers;
- The use of technology in direct support of Cabinet meetings – including the presentation of complex issues at Cabinet; and
- The creation of new information resources.

This project is the first initiative of its kind. It will electronically support drafting and inter-departmental consultation processes involved in preparing Cabinet Papers. It will deliver considerable process efficiencies for Government and for every Government department.

The scale of change implied by e-Government - and the impact it could have on all sections of the public service - mean that it should be approached in a structured way with a clear vision of what the ‘transformed’ corporate public service would look and operate like - and agreed principles and strategies to underpin the change process.

On-line provision of services does not equate to on-line usage. It is not enough to have these services made available on-line - we need to ensure that every citizen is in a position to access services using the easiest channel – and we must ensure that we are not using technology to build barriers to access. We are conscious of the imperative not to allow the development of a digital divide in Ireland.

### **E-Government - benefits the citizen**

As I mentioned earlier, our **Basis** and **Oasis** websites provide information to businesses and citizens in a more meaningful way – centred on



predicaments or events in their lives or activities rather than on bureaucratic structures.

This will mean

- Less red tape for those dealing with government;
- Quicker access to services, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week;
- Better quality services - provided more efficiently with the use of state of the art technology;
- Services with the citizen at the center;

Our objective is to provide an electronic gateway for service access for "life events" such as

- Registering a birth;
- Getting a passport;

and for business activities, such as

- Starting a business;
- Registering a company; and
- Filing returns.

But modernising Government is also about more transparency, user-centricity and inclusiveness. It is about a bigger concept of service – about responsiveness and doing right by the citizen – about a more

inclusive and democratic system. Perhaps most importantly, it is about simplicity – about removing the complexity of Government and about liberating citizens to use their talents and skills in an ever-changing and increasingly competitive world.

**But there are many challenges . . . .**

### **Re-engineering in internal government processes**

Traditionally, public services are organised into ‘*silos*’ – or ‘*stovepipes*’ as our American friends call them. This type of organization is at best a constraint on the integration implied by citizen centricity – and at worst, it militates against such a significant paradigm shift. The systems of Government that prevail in many countries are based on Ministerial responsibility for specific areas or service types rather than on citizen ‘types’ – citizens whose predicaments require state intervention in a number of areas.

In our model of the Public Service Broker, we are creating the ‘appearance’ of integration - but we must be careful not to conceal the potential benefits of ‘actual’ integration which full exploitation of technologies can mean in a more comprehensive modernisation process.

Indeed, the very use of the term ‘e-Government’ has tended to marginalize it as something removed from organizational reform - by focusing perhaps too much on the technology itself rather than on its uses.

So, in Ireland we are talking less and less about ‘e’ and more and more about innovation and modernization – because, like it or not, ‘e’ is now a part of most aspects of life – it is, or should be, in the ‘DNA’ of our organizations and our political and administrative processes.

I deliberately use this image of DNA because, like the double helix, technology should be invisible to the user – it should be second nature to us to be able to use and exploit with ease. This is perhaps a greater challenge for the technology industries than the users or potential users.

The Proper exploitation of technology in Government means we should be able to minimize duplications in many activities - in data collection and internal agency processing when huge resources are being put into reinvented wheels – where bureaucratic ego is still too much of a driver over ‘service to the citizen’.

### **Access to e-Government**

Ironically, many of the people who interact with Government frequently are the very people who have difficulty in gaining access to sophisticated technology – and unfortunately are at risk of being excluded from the very benefits we are trying to share.

Raising the level of access and participation by increasing the numbers using the tools of the digital age is an important goal and is an aspect of this Agenda that I particularly focus on. The medium term focus is on multi channel delivery – providing online or online enabled services in parallel with traditional delivery modes.

The key is ‘usability’ – and I am aware that more and more people in our surveys are choosing the telephone as the preferred method of access. This is important for us because we have a significantly high mobile phone penetration rate - and a whole ‘mobile lexicon’ has evolved among people in all sectors of society.

On a recent visit to the New York I had an opportunity to see the **311 facility** in operation – basically a contact center which citizens can call for information and action on a whole range of services.

I was struck by the how they are using Internet technologies for their call-centre operators who are presenting information though human voice interaction with citizens.

With mobile telephony we have ubiquitous, affordable and easily usable technology available to a significant number of people. Its essence is in its usability – in its simplicity – and simplicity tends to be a good indicator of potential success.

While it may involve complex networks and sophisticated software, the important thing is that it is simple and uncomplicated to use, using the most natural means of communication – the human voice. For all of us, I think there is a lesson to be learned – the value of keeping it simple and easy for people to use and relate to.

### **In conclusion . . .**

Technology has the potential to transform Government – just as it is transforming business through the world. There are constraints to

progress in the structures, processes and cultures of public sector organisations – constraints that have nothing to do with technology.

It is important to keep in mind that simple things work better – that there is a certain elegance in simplicity that is hard to escape – but there is a danger of over-engineering the problem – a process that can lead to expensive and unwanted solutions.

More and more we are coming to realise that people actually like to deal with people – that the scope for using technology is limited to automation of standard processes – that technology may be better used serving those who serve the citizen - facilitating more meaningful interaction, dialogue and mutual adjustment.

I hope that in sharing our experiences I have given some food for thought – that we can learn from each other as we move forward. As we join together in a larger European Union, I think we should exploit our new relationships to move forward together – to harness the potential of technology to transform society for the better.