Book Review

E-Government in Europe Re-booting the state, by Paul M. Nixon and Vassiliki N. Koutrakou (220 pages with index) (2007, Routledge Advances in European Politics)

Although the United States is often invoked as the birthplace of the Internet, in many respects it is Europe that represents the cradle for e-government. With just over twelve per cent of the global population but nearly one third of those online, and many of the world's largest and most technologically sophisticated organizations in both government and industry clustered there, Europe is ripe with experimentation and empirical evidence. Indeed, if one draws from the most recent e-readiness index prepared in 2007 by the Economist Intelligence Unit, although North America is the highest ranked region, in large measure due to broadband affordability, seven of the top ten national countries are European.

It is from this backdrop that Paul N. Nixon, of the Hague University in the Netherlands and Vassiliki N. Koutrakou of the University of Anglia in the United Kingdom have put forth an edited volume entitled, *E-Government in Europe: Re-booting the state* (2007, Routledge). This ambitious undertaking brings together a group of twenty leading scholars that reflect the geographic, administrative, political, and disciplinary diversity that renders the European Union (EU) such fertile ground.

Diversity and context are crucial. As the authors point out in their introduction, 'e-government isn't just about value-neutral technological advances in service delivery and communication. . . . (it) is about people and how democratic governments act in their name (p. xix). Accordingly, the opening definition of e-government, adopted from the World Bank is broad and inclusive, emphasizing the ability to transform relations within the public sector as well as in concert with citizens, civil society, and industry. With the potential for efficiency and service improvement on the one hand and transparency and citizen empowerment on the other hand the list of potential benefits of e-government is, not surprisingly, rather long.

Potential is the operative word however. The authors underscore that with every benefit comes barriers, and that as well as solving old problems, e-government also carries with it the promise of new or greatly expanded ones – such as privacy and freedom of information. Moreover, overlaying the significant potentials and real challenges of e-government nationally is the emergence of a transnational e-government project for the European Union as a whole. As the world ever so gradually flirts with both technocratic and political notions of what it means to be a federated architecture, it is Europe that is on the frontline of having to configure an optimal alignment of multiple governance layers both within and across national borders.

While such multi-level realities are addressed right up front in the first chapter, it is nonetheless the national level that remains the focal point of this volume, as reflected in the six questions provided by the authors to help frame the subsequent country case studies. The intent is to explore both commonality and diversity across member states, while also considering the longer term consequences of present strategies and reforms. Having set the stage in this manner the introduction to this volume then provides a concise and helpful overview of subsequent chapters and their coverage and contributions to the overall collection.

The European perspective then becomes the purview of chapter one, authored by Nixon who is also one of the book's co-editors. Nixon dissects many EU initiatives that have come to shape the emergence of

the information society within the public sector but also for European society (and a fledging polity) as a whole. Nixon concludes that there is a dual e-government role for the EU: first, 'as a unifying facilitator creating the conditions whereby member states can share experiences and pool expertise in order to create flexible, interoperable service provision that are citizen-centred. . . (and secondly) as an example to member states of how government can be re-booted through the adoption of modern technologies which transform the way in which we think about government' (p. 29).

The coverage of this book is very much supportive of Nixon's first role while suggesting that the second remains something of an unfulfilled promise at this point in time. The EU's flagship initiative, 'i2010', for example, is a far-reaching framework to extend and extend the information society across the European polity, but there is less evidence of digital governance innovation within the EU's own political and administrative architectures. Still, ongoing pursuit of progress in five major areas identified by the EU in its 'eEurope 2005' framework (knowledge management, interoperability, security and identity management, mobile services, and e-democracy) offers an important platform for shared innovation at both the national and transnational levels. Many of the volume's country-specific cases provide testament in this regard.

Before exploring e-government across various national jurisdictions, however, two additional chapters provide more conceptual perspectives that help considerably in framing subsequent investigations. Chapter three, by Miriam Lips, now holder of the inaugural e-government research chair at Victoria University in Wellington New Zealand, examines the inter-relationships between identity management, citizenship, and democratic governance in a digital environment.

Lips' main purpose is to distinguish between a customer-centric world of e-government and one that is truly citizen-centric. Whereas the former has come to predominate the service agendas of e-government – with global consultancies such as Accenture and Capgemini explicitly benchmarking government against private industry, the latter has been much more rhetoric than reality. Lips makes a compelling case that in order for transparency, accountability and performance to be improved, a more encompassing e-government is required to balance choice and convenience with obligation and engagement. Interestingly, at the very least the potential underpinning of this more encompassing approach are reflected in the development of an e-citizen charter (p. 125) by the Netherlands that includes a number of more participative minded principles than merely viewing the public as service recipients.

An interesting link emerges between Lips' analysis and that of Nixon discussed above, namely the importance of extending citizenship beyond the purview of the nation-state. A key, and as yet it would seem unmet challenge for the EU is the stimulation of genuine innovation and reform in the realm of e-democracy, one of the EU's stated five priorities (as outlined above). Difficult questions nonetheless present themselves in terms of whether democratic renewal through more digitized mechanisms and more socially networked communities can be best nurtured locally, by countries, or for the European Union as a whole. No doubt to some extent progress at all such levels must be simultaneous: yet finding the right balance in terms of investments and expectations has thus far proven to be an elusive mission.

Much of the rest of the chapters reveal just how multi-faceted e-government has become in terms of design and implementation, permeating most all aspects of service and policy in today's public sector. Many cases reveal cleavage, however, between the promises often accompanying e-government strategies and the actual empirical knowledge of what the public thinks about e-government and actual public sector performance. It would seem important to extract from this sort of volume the tremendous variance both within and across countries in terms of what may be becoming a multiple set of citizenries and how (and if) each one understands e-government and views it as a priority (or not).

In the book's conclusion, the authors face the daunting task of extracting some key themes and lessons from the richness and diversity of the preceding contributions. Being selective by necessity, there are three salient points to highlight here, two of which provide much room for agreement between myself and the authors while the third point remains somewhat more complex.

The first point is that e-government is expanding across a widening and diverse set of jurisdictions, and this trend includes both the richest EU member states as well as more recent entrants such as Slovenia. Notwithstanding the digital divide that remains continentally, experiences such as those cases of Estonia and Portugal demonstrate how a more encompassing polity can foster shared learning and at least greater prospects for e-government in serving as a driver of economic, technological and democratic convergence.

Size would also seem to matter. Despite real e-government innovation and progress in larger jurisdictions such as Britain, France and Germany, there is clearly something to be said for being small and nimble, a point underscored by cases in this volume such as the Netherlands and Denmark. The Danish contributors to this volume, for example, underscore the unique mix of small size and decentralized use of IT along with more recent central initiatives and cross-agency dependencies. Ironically, however, a leader in e-health, Denmark has recently amalgamated county structures into larger regional units in order to better manage health care in particular. As the chapter on e-government in Germany also makes clear, striking this federated balance is a task for all countries, both unitary and federalist alike.

A second point important point rightfully underscored by the authors is the more dubious notion that e-government is about trimming – much less slashing, bureaucracy. Virtual systems and electronic service delivery can generate cost savings in very precise segments of public sector operations, but overall the systemic needs of a more digital public sector require massive financial investments – with no guarantee of success. New identity management systems are a case in point: fearing escalating costs driven largely by biometric technologies and electronic information systems British Prime Minister Gordon Brown in late 2007 ordered a review of the proposed national identity card scheme.

Lastly, then, the book ends with a message that the Internet and new information and communications technologies may not be inherently transformative, but rather the latest iteration of new tools and processes. The authors are certainly correct in my judgment that e-government's success will ultimately be determined by people and not by electronic systems, but a strong case can also be made that new technologies are also driving the need for new modes of living, learning and governing.

The challenge that the public sector faces lies in navigating this space between tradition and transformation. To my mind, the empirically strong set of cases presented in this volume lends some support to the notion that our existing organizational and institutional models are hard pressed to keep up with the pace of digital networking and innovation. E-government may therefore in some ways be 'just another phase in the long history of government and administration' (p. 215) but it may also be a phase that proves to be far less incremental and more disruptive than those of the past.

Jeffrey Roy is Associate Professor in the School of Public Administration at Dalhousie University
E-mail: roy@dal.ca.