

Speech: Government at your service: Ben Gummer speech

The theme of this conference is government at your service, which was picked up on at the speech that I gave to a gathering that you held at the end of last year.

And it's not a kind of reference – sideways reference to a 1970s sitcom. It's actually to try to understand something fundamental, and it means a great deal to me, and it means a great deal I know, to most people who are in public service; that is the principle that to govern is to serve.

It's a principle which I think has been challenged significantly – not so much by the people who are in government of whatever stripe, or those who seek to serve the government in the Civil Service, and not by public servants around the country. Nor indeed by the people whom the government serves.

There is no single body who is to blame or who is at fault for this failure of a common understanding that 'to govern is to serve'. It is because the connections, the interface, between government and people has become increasingly fraught, and one which I believe has contributed significantly to the response that people gave at the referendum in June last year.

Indeed, I would like to extend my thanks, also, to the Institute of Chartered Accountants. The last time I was hosted by the Chartered Institute was at a hustings for the referendum in Essex, and at that point it was quite encouraging. We started the day – the hustings – with a significant majority in favour of leave, and after my fellow panellists and I had a good crack at our opponents, we switched it around. Unfortunately, I failed significantly to have the same effect on my constituents, and indeed as we did around the rest of the country.

And the reason for that is, not just a broad commentary on the way that people felt about the European Union, but what the European Union represented to people. And that wasn't just a reaction to the European Union itself; it was to government. It was to the state of being. It was a question, really, saying: 'Are you content with the status quo?' Unsurprisingly, some parts of the country were content, but large parts otherwise came back with a resounding answer, which was 'no'.

The Prime Minister reflected on this in her speech that she gave on the steps of Downing Street; that this was a direct challenge to the way that government operates, and its relationship with citizens. It was a questioning in our collective faith in democracy; as she has put it, in the simple verities of our commonality of our state. And she has put it at the front of her mission to restore trust in the way that government works with people, and with the public, so that we can actually build a country where everyone believes that they have a stake and that government is responsive to their concerns and needs.

Now, some Prime Ministers in the past have said some of that. But none of us have been faced with that direct challenge that we had on the 23rd of June. And I don't believe anyone has put it front and centre of their mission for government in the way that this Prime Minister has. And I don't need to tell you, and I know that many people that I meet when I knock on doorsteps – even though they might not agree with the policies of government – what is universally felt is that the Prime Minister clearly has a profound commitment to public service.

And I hope that what we will do in the next few years is demonstrate how that commitment and that leadership is changing the way that government works and operates. And I hope today to be able to give you some practical and real examples of how we are going to make that change.

And you talk Andrew, a lot about efficiency at reform. Efficiency is a dry word. I know that you understand this and everyone in this room understands it. I've seen David Dalton walking in. Here's a man who understands about efficiency in his hospital, Salford Royal.

But efficiency is not why it is important to David, in and of itself. I know that the accountants in this place, many of them are passionate people, and they are passionate about their job' not because they want to change the numbers at the bottom of the balance sheet. It's because of what money allows you to do if you spend it wisely.

If you create efficiency at the centre of government, on the way that you run a hospital, or in whatever activity you are doing, you have more money to spend on the things that matter to people who have that relationship with government.

But that sense of efficiency is not just about the release of cash and cashable savings, and you are going to hear some of that from Jane Cunliffe later today. It's also about the way government itself operates, and the efficiency with which it responds to people's concerns. And I believe we really have made significant achievements in the last few years.

Andre, in your 15 years as an organisation, and in your time as director, and when we started on this journey back in 2010, the Today programme would always say: 'Everyone says you are going to cut red tape. Everyone says that they are going to cut the number of civil servants and they are going to increase the efficacy of Government X, Y, Z, and they never really do and it's all fake.'

They do not ask that question anymore because the changes that we have made over the last six years are demonstrably profound and are making a difference to the way that government works. The Civil Service is now smaller than at any time since the Second World War. And yet by any number of measures, we have improved the productivity of the Civil Service. And the measure actually that interests me most in this context is that the overall satisfaction of civil servants is now at an all-time high. They are enjoying their jobs and feeling like they are contributing more than when they were a significantly larger organisation.

And that will be no surprise to many people in this room because you know, in running your own organisations, that by directing resources correctly and appropriately, by getting people into the right jobs and giving them the skills to do what they need to do, you create a happier and more focused and productive workforce, which reflects in the services that you can provide to your customers, or in our case, to the public.

And what are those things that we have done over the last six years? It isn't just simply a reduction in headcount. There's been a very carefully managed process which has seen, amongst other things, a radical reduction in the number of non-departmental government bodies, focusing their important work and making sure it is more collaborative and joined up.

It has been the foundation of the Government Digital Service, and I am delighted that its first Director General – and it demonstrates the importance we attach to the Government Digital Service – is sitting here today, Kevin Cunnington. And I will come on in a moment to talk about the work that he has been doing. And the digital transformation which GDS has achieved over the last six years, not only in the savings that it has released but the worldwide renown that the GDS has achieved in changing the interface between public and people, government on the internet.

The reductions that we have made in government property: reducing over 100 properties in Central London to what we aspire to be 20 separate properties in the next few decades. And all of that coming together to achieve real savings in excess of 50 billion pounds since 2010; money that we have been able to inject into public services, which is why public satisfaction with public services has remained consistent despite the fact that we have been living through the longest period of fiscal restraint in modern times.

But that is not enough, it is merely the foundation of what we wish to achieve, and clearly as I've reflected on, it was not sufficient to change people's minds about how government operated back in 2016. So we need to do more, and we have to think actually profoundly about the way the public service reflects in what it actually means to individual citizens.

It's a question that transcends the professionalism and dedication of the thousands of committed civil servants that I have the privilege of working with every day. And I wish to make this absolutely clear at the beginning of this speech. It is remarkable and most people here who work with civil servants will know this, how people come into work every day with a quiet commitment to public service in the way that our civil servants do. It is something of which we should be profoundly proud in this country. My frustration is that we are not able to release that public service in the way that it should be. Indeed, that the opaque interface that exists between public servants and people is as much a frustration for public servants as it is for the people who see those public servants, as a result of that interface, as mere bureaucrats.

Indeed, I feel that the changes that we need to make are not only important for the people that we serve, but for the people who seek to serve. That relationship which I spoke about last time, where we have got ourselves into

a place where the public feel that they exist to serve government, when it clearly and manifestly should be the other way round, is a source of frustration not just to the public, but to all of us in government, and those who seek to make government work.

At the core of it, it's a question of what are we trying to make public servants do when they're working in appallingly antiquated buildings, to old-fashioned working patterns, excessively hierarchical organisational structures, with what can generously be called suboptimal technology. And you expect them to be able to fulfil that vocation that they have.

I visited the other day some HMRC staff in Cardiff, in a building that would have made a 1960s Moldovan architect proud. And you could see a group of people who were having to deal with difficult complaints with the public, and one thing I'm never going to change is the relationship between taxpayers and tax man, and they're conscious of that, but they also understand that unless they do their job well and efficiently, we do not have the money to spend on public services.

And what I found talking to a small group of people is, just like I do everywhere, a group of people who care passionately about their job, and the reasons why they're doing it. And they are certainly not doing it for bragging rights down the pub, and nor are they doing it for a large salary. They are doing it because they believe in what they're doing. And yet we put them in a horrendous building with computers that don't work, and we expect them to be able to serve the public in the way they would wish.

So, this is not just about a catchphrase, it's about an entire approach to public service which concentrates on the environment in which we expect public servants to do their work. Now reversing that relationship that I described, the one where people feel like they are serving the government, is not one that we achieve just by saying something. It's by doing something, not just at the interface on the web page, but the way the government itself operates. And that is the heart of transformation.

So I want to outline four ways in which we are going to make that happen, and all of them are sufficiently new for them to be revelations at this conference.

Government Transformation Strategy

The first is this: I'll be publishing in about half an hour's time, the [Government Transformation Strategy](#), which we have been working on now with great effort over the last few months.

I'm grateful to Computer Weekly for their previews of this – there's Mr. Glick – of this strategy. It is even better, Bryan, since you kindly gave some sneak idea of what was going to happen. It is an important document. It's an important document because it describes the journey that I have just said.

We have done Stage One to worldwide acclaim, which is to create an interface

with the public which, in the public services where it is concerned, is better than anything that we have done before. There's clearly a great deal more that we have to achieve, so although you no longer have to have a paper driving license, and although we already have a digital real-time tax system, already seven million people having used personal tax accounts since December 2015, we've got the new tax repayment system, where 1.4 million customers used the service in the last six months.

Although gov.uk itself receives 3.5 million visits every single day – and although digital transformation in the last three years alone has achieved 3.56 billion pounds' worth of savings. Although we have done all that, there is so much more to do in terms of the public interface, but more importantly, the back end: the transformation of which I was speaking, the way that we get Digital to change the way that government works.

Because there's no point having a pretty shop front if the mechanisms behind it correspond more with the late nineteenth century than they do with what a modern service should look like. And the Government Transformation Strategy outlines this in very, very significant detail. We have taken the approach of Open Government to this strategy. It is a large document. And it explains in detail how we are going to transform government services.

But to take some top lines.

We will accelerate the rollout of Verify, so that at least 25 million people will be using it by the end of 2020. That is a stretching ambition, but I would like to go even further than that if we possibly can. And what that does is give a verification platform, not only for government, but that we could use elsewhere and will give citizens an ability to operate in a digital economy which will be unrivalled anywhere else in the world. And you'll read the detail of that in the strategy, and I will be pleased to announce future moves about Verify in due course.

We also plan to digitise the passport service entirely, so that people will be able to apply online without the requirement of paper copies, which will certainly help me. I'm one of those people who's been caught finding out the day before that my passport didn't work.

And my aspiration is that 90 per cent of applications will be fully digital by 2020. Again, that will be a world-leading achievement. And we have the national census coming up in 2021, and I want 75% of people to have done that online by that point, which will be a very, very significant jump by, from the previous census.

Some of that is front end stuff, but it requires massive back end transformation in order to make it happen, and that's where I come onto my second transformation that I wish to see, and that is around the treatment of data.

Making best use of data

I don't need to tell anyone in this room that data is going to be the way

that we achieve the largest transformation in government as is the case across the digital economy. And again, we have achieved very significant things in the last few years, building on the considerable work of my predecessors.

I was at the United Nations in September last year where we are recognised as the leading open government country in the world. It is worth repeating that again. We are the leading open government country in the world.

The Open Data Barometer has ranked us top since 2010 in every single year. That is a remarkable achievement. We have so much more to do, We have already opened up 30,000 government data sets. The Digital Economy bill which is going through Parliament at the moment, nearly concluded in its passage, will allow sharing of data between government departments and on a limited basis between government departments and parts of industry.

So, for instance, we can identify customers living in fuel poverty so they can automatically receive support. A major change and one that people have been calling for decades: proper sharing of personal data across government so, we can maximise not only for their ease of interaction with government, but so that we can actually understand individuals in a way that government has not previously done.

And in the [Housing White Paper](#), which was published on Tuesday and which you all have seen, I know you would have noted the important news that we now have an ambition for Her Majesty's Land Registry to become the world's leading Land Registry for speed, simplicity and an open approach to data. And we will make significant strides to that by 2020. This is the most valuable land registry anywhere in the world by dint of the value of land in the United Kingdom and the change that will come about as a result of that commitment to open data is one that cannot be underestimated.

So, what are we going to do to add to that?

The first thing, as part of the Government Transformation Strategy that you will read, is that we will be appointing shortly a new Government Chief Data Officer. And to advise him or her, there will be a Data Advisory Board to ensure that we align across government the use and deployment of data so that we can drive our data transformation policies.

I am setting that Chief Data Officer four separate tasks:

- the supervision and encouragement of open data policy and infrastructure across government
- to arrange data analytics and the better data sharing between departments
- to look at the ethics, the legislation, public trust, so the interface and use of data with the citizen
- to ensure that we have the right people managing, and using data with the right skills

This would be the first time that we have one person responsible for data in

government and will, in itself, have a transformational effect on the way that we are gathering and then deploying data and big data across government.

And at their disposal, as well as at Kevin's disposal, we have our new Digital Academy which is providing skills not just in London, but in Hubs across the country training up to 3,000 public servants a year in digital skills.

We will further expand our Open Data registers. And I want our new Chief Data Officer to be giving a firm timeline of how they will be releasing data registers in order of priority so we can actually turn the handle and get through those data registers as quickly as possible, adding to the existing ones that we have done on countries, on registered territories, on local authorities and on so much more we can now get into more granular data registers.

I wish to see an expansion in the application of data science across health-related issues. To give an example, the Food Standards Agency has used data on tweets relating to symptoms of the food-borne disease, Norovirus, to predict the number of cases, and is doing so with 72 per cent accuracy. That is precisely the kind of way that we can use data more effectively across government in order to target resources more effectively.

I think probably the most important data challenge that we have ahead of us, we will be using data in a new way in the [Prime Minister's Race Disparity Audit](#), which I am supervising and will be releasing later in the year, where we'll be releasing all data which relates to race disparity on the most granular basis that we possibly can, in a way that will challenge government and the public, in a way that government and public has been probably reluctant to challenge itself ever before.

I've seen the first cut of this data platform and the data that will be released. It is very surprising. It will throw up a lot of confounding and difficult subjects and they are questions that we need to ask ourselves. And this is data being used really in the public service because we will be able to, as a result, be a government that serves everyone in this country that identifies where we are not yet doing that. And we can put that right as a result of that piece of work.

Making the Civil Service representative of the public it serves

Thirdly, I want to look at the way that we as public servants serve the public whomever they are and wherever they are.

Now, in terms of whomever they are, the Race Disparity Audit is part of that. But we're also keen to make sure that we are reflecting in the public service, the country as a whole.

[redacted due to political content]

Public servants should represent, and that means looking like, the people that we seek to serve. The same principle should be true also at the Civil

Service. And that is why I'm very keen to take forward the work that my predecessor started on the socio-economic background measures so that we understand for the first time what the socio-economic background makeup is of the Civil Service.

Now, that is not to change the way that we select people, or the way that we promote people. It is to change the way that we recruit people and gives everyone in the Civil Service the opportunity to rise in their vocations and in their careers. Only by identifying where we do not represent the public are we able to make changes so that we effectively do.

And that doesn't just touch on who people are. It also touches on where they live. We have made some difference over the last two years. Over 80% of civil servants are already based outside London. And we have done a great deal to be able to bring people together in Government Hubs. Some of those are within London – the new [government Hub at Canary Wharf](#) will see 5,700 public servants from different departments coming to work in one place – but we intend to do the same thing in major cities around the country including Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast.

And the One Public Estate programme within the Cabinet Office, is endeavouring to do the same thing on a local authority basis. Over 70% of councils are now signed up in England and we hope to have 95% of councils on the programme by 2018.

But I want to go further than that. I want to see arm's length bodies, as a start, reviewing their locations and, where they are in London, finding places where they could be more effectively placed so that they are encouraging clusters of industry or other similar public service functions.

And I outlined the broad detail of this in the Modern Industrial Strategy, but I would like to say here and make clear that my purpose is to do this not just to move buildings around, but to see senior Civil Service representation, not just a broad representation, but senior Civil Service representation outside London and in our major cities around the country. And that work will begin to bear fruit very shortly.

So, in doing all of this, I want to demonstrate that the Civil Service and public servants are representative of our nation, are inclusive and diverse in the way that we want our nation to be. I'm proud of the fact that we now have almost exactly – we've got one or two more appointments to make and we will be there – at 50% parity men and women in senior public service appointments and non-executive director appointments on government boards. That is a significant move just in the last few years.

Already 54 per cent of the overall workforce of Civil Service is women. But they only make up 40 per cent of senior civil servants, so there is a gap that we have to work on to improve there. And although we have a proportion of the civil servants who declare a disability of 9.2 per cent, and those who come from black or minority ethnic communities are 11.2 per cent, and although those are record highs in both instance, we need to make sure that we're going further so that those numbers match the figures across the

general population.

And if we're able to do that, if we're able to improve the numbers going into the Civil Service Fast Stream by my target of ensuring that we have risen year on year by a figure of 50 per cent compared with 2015, those from less privileged backgrounds going into the Civil Service Fast Stream or committed to delivering the 30,000 apprenticeships in the Civil Service by 2020, equivalent to 2.3 per cent of the workforce, something I announced two weeks ago, itself hoping to achieve that diversity in socio-economic background that I'm keen to see, we will have achieved both in terms of whom we are as public servants and also where we are operating, a diversity and inclusiveness which really does demonstrate that we are a government that works for every part of the country and not just some parts of it.

Driving efficiency and tackling fraud, error and debt

The principle of efficiency is one, as I explained, that is important, not just because we are saving money, but because it helps us to spend that money better on the frontline. We have done a significant amount. I announced last week, that in 2015-16 [we have saved £3.3 billion](#).

The profile of savings in this parliament would be slightly different from the next parliament because we are now going for deep transformation, the low-hanging fruit having been picked. And so, we will begin to see those numbers ramp up through the parliament rather than the profile we saw last time around where some of the earlier wins were earlier on, as early wins tend to be.

So just in the last three points – in 2015-16 of the £3.3 billion we have achieved, £1.1 billion of that has come through commercial reform, £805 million through tackling fraud, error and debt, and GDS and Kevin have achieved £339 million on their own, and on selling surplus government property [we have achieved nearly £1 billion. All of which has added up to that very significant number, which is money that we can spend on frontline public services.

And what I'd just like to touch on quickly is about property because this really has made a significant difference. The Crown Commercial Service is helping central government and local authorities and health trusts and schools and charities and colleges and universities look at their procurement within properties, having just achieved in 2015-16 £521 million of savings. And since 2010 we have achieved over £1 billion in terms of the government estate as a whole. But just in the last year, we have seen the estate [reduced by 300,000 square metres](#); that's seven Wembley Stadiums for those of you who are interested. The vacant space in the central estate has reduced by over a third. I mean, it does make you wonder where we came from. It is remarkable we did that in one year and we've made running cost savings of £176 million, a reduction of 7% in one year alone.

We have also achieved £1 billion pounds in capital receipts that we had hoped to have done. Now, you will have seen these announced some year ago, in terms of the sale of Admiralty Arch and the old War Office, we got the money in

last year and that adds up to £1 billion – that's a billion quid towards the £5 billion we hope to achieve in receipts by 2020.

What are we going to do next? Overall, we have promised in our manifesto to achieve savings across government of £15 billion to £20 billion by 2019/2020. We are going to start this year, the Efficiency Review, which I'm undertaking with the Chief Secretary of the Treasury, that will achieve a further £3.5 billion in addition to the spending review figures announced in 2015. It will be driven in large part by the better use of central functions across government, something that we also began in 2010.

But also by having a further go at fraud, error and debt. And that will be led particularly by my outstanding colleague, Chris Skidmore, the Minister for the Constitution.

And we'll be making further savings in property, the reduction of 800 buildings in the government estate as it currently stands down to 200 by 2023, generating overall savings of £2.24 billion in the ten years from the beginning of that programme, from 2013 to 2023. And further savings that we are going to make as a result of the Government Digital Transformation Strategy, which Kevin will no doubt talk about later.

So, to reiterate a point, this is not just savings for savings' sake, nor is this transformation for transformation's sake.

This is to change the nature of government so that we are serving the public who we seek to serve and who they desperately want to feel served by. If we can do that over the next few years, this will not be a mere accounting exercise. This will not be something just to provide an easier way of getting a passport, or a driving license, or to apply for a tax refund. This will not be just a way of managing hospitals better, or the interface between health and social care. This will not be just a way of ensuring that we can remove disparities between people of different racial backgrounds around the country. This will not be just a way of ensuring that we provide better opportunities to people from less privileged backgrounds.

All of those in ascending order are of enormous importance. It will be to do something which is of supreme importance to all of us which is to restore faith in our democracy, which will soon be 90 years old, if you take it from the point of which women got equality of the vote.

Wouldn't it be good if we could enter our second century as a modern democracy with a faith in our democratic institutions, most importantly in the government which people elect and the service that that government provides, so that people really can say, unprompted, that they feel that to govern is to serve.