

# Technology on the Campaign Trail

With a general election looming, Tim Hampson looks at how technology could shape the campaign.

Almost 50-years ago Labour leader, Harold Wilson, promised that his government would bring to people the white heat of technology, with its own promise of a mass produced consumer society.

Back in 1997 Tony Blair envisioned a world which would utilise the potential of new technology.

He promised to wire up schools, libraries and hospitals to the information superhighway free of charge. There would be a national grid for learning and lottery money would be used to improve the skills of existing teachers in information technology.

Each leader was a winner and each used technology and its promise of a better life to persuade people to vote for them.

So what part will technology play in this year's election campaigning?

Already the political parties, like prize fighters preparing for a bare knuckle fight, are trading insults and shadow boxing haymakers and uppercuts.

Unlike previous eras the public purse is threadbare – the country no longer has the money to throw at grandiose technology projects. Both government and opposition parties alike are promising cuts in public services and the mothballing of high profile IT projects.

But rather than the white heat of technology - or even the information superhighway – this era could be remembered for a cloud.

The government says that it has been working on a new holistic telecoms strategy which could save the country £3.2bn over the next ten years. Labour plans to continue to evolve the online delivery of public sector services through the use of cloud technology and Web 2.0 processes.

It foresees a brave new world of multiple services, interoperability and data sharing via a government cloud – or G-Cloud – together with a government application store. These will enable sharing and reuse of business apps, services and components across the public sector.

And even though the Tories have said that the plan lacks vision – indeed, shadow Cabinet Office minister, Francis Maude, said that it was riddled with complacency and “will waste taxpayers money” - there

is much in it that the Tories are likely to support and even implement.

“We need a rigid insistence on open standards and inter-operability; a level playing field for open source software and for smaller suppliers,” said Maude.

Meanwhile the prime minister has promised hi-tech efficiencies will drive down government costs and give more power to people. An ambitious £1.3bn saving will be achieved by “streamlining central government”, indicating that certain programmes will have to be delayed or abandoned. He has conceded that the NHS IT system should be scaled back, but technology will be used to communicate with patients: “Using text messages to remind people of GP appointments can help save on the £600m annual cost to the NHS of missed appointments - equivalent to 24 new secondary schools, or over 13,000 nurses.

“In order to protect the frontline services we value, at a time when budgets are tighter, it means we need to do what households up and down the country do to prioritise the necessities and postpone the things we can do without.”

But he promised that more services would go online, central government would share more services, and departments would have common procurement practices

In the next five years, he said, government would shift large transactional services online to save £400m – he quoted the example that putting benefit advice online alone has saved the cost of 7,000 phone calls.

High speed broadband would be delivered to every home and £30m would be spent with UK online, “to get another one million online by 2012”.

In an eclectic roll call of populist public sector projects in recent months Mr Brown has said that online crime maps would be searchable by postcode allowing people to make choices about safe ways to get home. The Tell Us Once pilot will be “rolled out nationally” for births and deaths and all published service data will be put online “to drive better value for money”.

Meanwhile the Tories saw in the new year with the first chapter of their draft manifesto.

David Cameron promised to decentralise Britain and deliver a new era of transparency through technology: “We will



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create incentives and use the best technology to encourage and enable people to come together, solve their problems together, make this society stronger together.”

The Conservatives are loudly telling the electorate that they will put the identity card, NHS IT and the ContactPoint for children projects on the back burner – all contentious issues for middle England.

Shadow immigration minister, Damian Green, also launched an attack on the 28 databases that the government had set up which were undermining people's freedoms. “We should reform the use of some of the most intrusive databases; such as removing the innocent from the DNA database and reform the E-Borders scheme so that it does not hold information about the completely innocent for ten years,” he said.

He also called for an end to the dominance of suppliers which have led to the plethora of big government IT schemes. “We should be more creative and open-minded about how we procure and provide public sector technology, looking to localist and individualist solutions.”

He promised there would be no more big government computer schemes, “which these days are precisely the wrong approach. Just because technology has transformed the way government can use personal information does not mean that a sensible government will take that choice,” he said

“The bigger the capacity to collect and share information, the greater danger there is to privacy, and therefore to freedom.”

However, it is not all cut, cut, cut. The Conservatives have pledged that they will continue the public sector Total Place programme if they win the general election.

A Tory government would also allow the public to comment on legislation as it goes through parliament, in a bid to “throw open the doors” of Westminster to people. Shadow foreign secretary, William Hague, said that he wanted to create a “public reading stage” before Bills are implemented so people can express their views online. The party has also said every item of government expenditure over £25,000 would also be published online.

As never before, technology rhetoric will play a key role in the election battlechest.