

David Cameron speaks at Google Zeitgeist Conference

David Cameron will today address the Google Zeitgeist Conference in San Francisco. He will say:

(Please check against delivery)

"Last year I had the great pleasure of speaking to the Google Zeitgeist Europe conference.

Amazingly enough, you asked me back and I just want to start by saying what a tremendous honour it is to be here with you today.

Between you, you are responsible for a large portion of the wonders of our modern world...from the technology we use, to the products and services we rely on, to the innovations that improve the quality of billions of people's lives.

You create jobs, wealth and opportunity for our world and you should be proud of the amazing things you accomplish every single day.

NEW WORLD OF FREEDOM

Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of all is not something specific to any of the individual organisations represented here...

...but something that is the collective result of all your endeavours.

And that is the new world of freedom we live in today.

A world where people have more power and control over their own lives.

A world where people's horizons are broader and their ambitions are greater.

And a world where people expect to make more and more decisions for themselves.

Right at the heart of this new world of freedom is freedom of information - in the broadest meaning of that term.

In recent years technological advance - supported by a liberal regulatory regime - has transformed the amount of information that's available...

...the number of people who can get hold of it...

...and the ease with which they can do so.

As you have been debating at this conference, sharing information opens up tremendous possibilities for individuals and for business.

We can see it in the astonishing explosion of bottom-up content creation, revealing the vast pent-up desire that people have to express themselves and take control.

We can see it in the way leading corporations, including many of you here, are totally changing business models in order to allow personalisation of products and services...

...and the harnessing of talent and ideas through formal and informal networks that extend way beyond the walls of the firm.

Now I won't pretend to be an expert in those matters.

What I would like to do is give you my perspective on what these changes could mean for politics and government...

...for our sense of citizenship, both local and global...

...and for the responsibilities of politicians.

But most of all, what these changes can do for the thing I care about most: the politics of responsibility.

Because I believe that we are today on the brink of an entirely new era in public policy: the post-bureaucratic era.

THE PRE-BUREAUCRATIC ERA

To understand the scale and nature of the change, we need to go back to what we might describe as the pre-bureaucratic era.

A time when nearly all politics was local – because it had to be.

When it took days or weeks to get from one city to the next...

...when news travelled around the world not in seconds but in months.

In those days, over a century ago, the idea of a central government bureaucracy devising and implementing policy that would affect people's daily lives simply couldn't work.

The only things that the state would do were the things that only the state could do – like war and peace, foreign treaties, the money supply, weights and measures.

Everything else was local.

THE BUREAUCRATIC ERA

But all that changed with the bureaucratic era, which we have been living with for the past hundred years and more.

The intellectual father of the bureaucratic era was the German political theorist Max Weber, writing at the turn of the 20th century.

Weber described the shift from a traditional culture in which authority was invested in family and neighbourhood, to a modern culture in which authority is invested in the bureaucracy of the state.

Enabled by better communications, and the possibility of information being collected and held by public officials, the bureaucratic era is about faith in centralised administration.

Often motivated by noble impulses – to iron out inequalities and

differences, to promote fairness and progress, to achieve value for money
- central planners asserted a strong role for the top-down central state.

Of course this took its most extreme and virulent form in the former Soviet Union, with its crazed five year plans for everything under the sun.

But western democracies were not exempt.

In Britain as in the US, people were appalled by the mass poverty of the 1930s.

And they saw in the way the government organised the war effort what the state could do in peacetime.

They thought that welfare and healthcare and education could successfully be arranged in the same way as the production of munitions.

This trend was brilliantly exposed by Friedrich Hayek in his seminal book, the Road to Serfdom.

In it he argued that the logical consequence of the rise of the central planner, however well-intentioned, was the loss of individual freedom.

And in many important ways that is what happened as the focus of power

in the bureaucratic era shifted away from the personal and the local to the distant official...

...the distant official who kept hold of information and knowledge and more often than not denied it to the rest of the population.

In the United States, this trend towards centralisation of power was always limited by your constitution.

And your commitment to local governance is something I greatly admire, and want us in Britain to emulate.

But Britain today is one of the most centralised countries in the democratic world.

I don't think many of you would believe the degree to which a minister in our national government has top-down control of what happens in our schools, hospitals, roads and public spaces.

What's wrong with that, you may ask?

What's wrong with well-meaning public officials keeping hold of information so they can make wise decisions on behalf of the people?

DECLINING RESPONSIBILITY

To me, the answer is simple.

It's all about responsibility.

I believe passionately that social progress depends on social responsibility.

Parents bringing up their kids with the right values.

Neighbours looking out for each other.

Citizens treating each other and their surroundings with respect.

Corporations treating their communities and the environment with respect.

And governments recognising what is and what is not their responsibility.

I don't think responsibility is something you can impose on people.

I think it's within us all – it's one of the things that makes us human.

And the more you try to do things for people, the less responsible they become.

Indeed if you think about it, you can only behave responsibly if you have responsibility for something...

...and that means having the power to make a choice about how you behave.

So as the bureaucratic era marched ever onwards, with all those well-meaning public officials making all those top-down decisions for people...

...with all that information and knowledge they kept to themselves...

...they ended up taking power away from people - making them less responsible.

In the days before the information revolution, you could just about argue that you had to trust the state because it wasn't practical to share information...

...for people to make choices and take control.

But thanks to all of you, that isn't true any more.

In commerce and in our culture you are helping to make the top-down model history.

You have shown us the future - and it's bottom-up.

That is a wonderful thing for someone who comes, as I do, from the conservative political tradition...

...because we've always been motivated by a strong and instinctive scepticism about the capacity of bureaucratic systems to deliver progress.

Instead, we've always preferred to place our trust in the ingenuity of human beings, collaborating in messy and unplanned interaction, to deliver the best outcomes.

You might call it the wisdom of crowds.

Or as Edmund Burke put it more than two hundred years ago, "the

reciprocal struggle of discordant powers will draw out the harmony of the universe."

And that is the great opportunity that lies before us.

THE POST-BUREAUCRATIC ERA

Because if we get things right, we can now move confidently into a new, post-bureaucratic era...

...where true freedom of information makes possible a new world of responsibility, citizenship, choice and local control.

You're leading the changes in business and society: and we need a new generation of political leadership to make the same kind of changes in government and public services.

Let me give you two examples: the transparency of information, and the availability of information.

TRANSPARENCY

In the UK, my party is committed to transparency in government spending.

The next Conservative government will detail every item of government spending over £25,000 on a public website.

Now I know that over here you will soon be able to 'google your tax dollars', thanks to the Federal Funding Transparency and Accountability Act...

(...and by the way I also know that I can soon expect a letter from Google's lawyers telling me not to use Google as a verb...)

But I don't want transparency to just be about greater accountability, so citizens can become auditors of their government, pressing for efficiency and value for money.

Accountability is just the first step.

I also want transparency about government spending to promote greater responsibility, so citizens take on a more active role, deciding how their money is spent.

In the bureaucratic era, government tells you what you need, spends your money, and if you don't like it you can vote for a new government once

every few years.

In the post-bureaucratic era, you shouldn't just be telling government what you want.

You should be choosing what you want, and acting to get what you want, so your money is spent on your priorities, all the time.

We've drafted legislation, in the form of our Sustainable Communities Bill, that enables just such a transfer of power...

...not just giving people information about what central government spends in their area...

... but giving them the power to challenge that spending and change it to match their priorities, putting it to a local vote.

This doesn't just apply at home.

We should use information imaginatively to promote greater accountability and responsibility in how we spend money overseas, on international aid.

There are some who oppose spending on aid to poor countries, saying that

it's swallowed up in corruption and doesn't reach those who really need it.

But corruption shouldn't be used as an excuse to stop aid.

Instead we should use aid as a way to stop corruption.

In the post-bureaucratic era, we should tell the public in the countries that receive our aid exactly how, when and where the money's being spent - so they can hold their local politicians to account.

Literally this means publishing, for example, the amount that should go to each school each year, so local people can attack their government if it isn't delivered.

In that way they can start to take responsibility for their future.

AVAILABILITY

But I believe there's an even more powerful way in which we can use freedom of information to move decisively into the post-bureaucratic era.

That is by opening up the data held by government and the public sector

so it can be used to create new services for public benefit, and to create real choice and competition.

Crime mapping is a great example.

At one and the same time it enables you to hold your police force to account, get the government to spend money in the right places, and even to help choose where to live.

In Britain, there is a vast amount of information currently held or sold by the public sector that, if made freely available, would unleash social and commercial innovation.

Neighbourhoods getting together to commission local services.

Social entrepreneurs setting up in competition to existing public service providers.

And citizens being able to make informed choices about the options available to them.

We have barely begun to see the possibilities of a truly bottom-up approach to public policy...

...and that's because the political world has been slow to realise the scale of the change that's been happening.

CONCLUSION: REGULATION AND RESPONSIBILITY

If we want to make a reality of this post-bureaucratic era, an era only made possible by the information revolution...

...it's clear to me that political leaders will have to learn to let go.

Let go of the information that we've guarded so jealously.

Let go of the power that we like to exert.

And above all, let go of the idea that 'we know best' – that people can't be trusted to run their own lives and their own communities.

But if there are lessons for political leaders, there is a lesson too for business leaders.

It's about responsibility – corporate responsibility.

The argument for corporate responsibility is often made in terms of its benefits to business: that a corporation will have a better reputation, a more motivated workforce and more loyal customers if it does the right thing.

Well maybe that's true – but it's not my job to make that case.

My job is to make a different argument - and it's this.

If we share a vision of a post-bureaucratic world in which business has the freedom to succeed in a low-tax, low-regulation economy, we politicians need your help.

We need your help in reducing the demand for government spending, and the demand for regulation.

That means your help in cutting the costs of social and environmental failure.

We can't do it on our own.

We need your commitment, creativity and innovation to help tackle the challenges that confront humanity: from crime to climate change; from

poverty to pollution; from family breakdown to forest depletion.

We are all in this together, and if we work together, understand our responsibilities and embrace the opportunities of the modern world, there is no limit to what we can achieve.

Let me conclude by putting it another way, more than 40 years ago, John F. Kennedy said:

"Ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your county."

It was a noble cry then, and remains so today. But when he made it people didn't really have the information they needed, the knowledge to make choices and the power to take control of their lives. Today they do, they have that information, that knowledge, that power and so a new generation of politicians can help make that noble dream a reality."