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The governmental powers of welfare e-administration

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Abstract

Governments are rapidly reconfiguring their activities and services in order to make use of the opportunities provided by the internet and new information and communication technologies (ICTs). This paper draws on Foucault's account of various forms of governmental power to dissect and interrogate emerging e-government forms, as evidenced in reforms in welfare policy and administration. While the neo-liberal, neo-conservative and authoritarian character of recent welfare *policy* has received considerable attention, changes in welfare *administration* and governance have scarcely been analysed. Through one-stop shops, joined-up government and individualised service delivery, new ICTs are being enrolled in public administration and entangled with its reform. This paper examines the way these technologies are transforming the delivery of welfare services and the governance of welfare agencies, staff and subjects. Following Foucault, we examine the extent to which welfare e-administration involves a 'tricky adjustment between political power wielded over legal subjects and pastoral power wielded over live individuals'. Our analysis draws on case studies of the EDGE decision support system and the Community Connect programs' extranet site developed by the Australian government service delivery agency, Centrelink. The paper concludes by discussing the governmental tensions evident in the contemporary welfare state.

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The well-known 'welfare state problem' does not only bring the needs of the new governmental techniques of today's world to light. It must be recognised for what it is: one of the extremely numerous reappearances of the tricky adjustment between political power wielded over legal subjects and pastoral power wielded over live individuals. (Foucault 1981, 235)

Introduction

Developments in information and communication technologies and the internet, in particular, are rapidly transforming the way in which government by the state is thought, administered and practiced, with resulting transformations in public policy, public administration and the nature of citizenship. Rationalities of e-government are replete with ideas of networks, joined-up governing, one-stop shops, individualised service delivery, and government transparency. In doing so, they embrace and mesh with wider governance and new public management discourses. Such conceptions of e-government entail the deployment of certain forms of power and power relations.

Much of the analytical focus of recent welfare reforms have been on the rationalities and policies underpinning such reform. Such work has regularly pointed to the neo-liberal character of the reconfiguring welfare state and the values guiding reform, such as marketisation and privatisation, the individualisation of risk, targeting 'at risk' groups, and consumer choice. Others have pointed to the neo-conservative values of some aspects of welfare reform policy, especially the remoralisation of welfare through the enhancement of responsibilities and obligations. Contrasting this body of work, this paper puts the largely un-examined administration of welfare under the analytical gaze. Reforms in welfare policy and public administration, as well as technological developments, have recast welfare administration. This paper will identify the governmental powers emerging from the new configurations of welfare e-administration and the extent to which they reproduce and reinforce, or contrast with, the nature of welfare policy reform.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the ways e-government contributes to the constitution and formation of certain forms of governable subjects and the operation of forms of power. In this respect, we draw on and extend Foucault's accounts of pastoral power, liberalism and neo-liberalism. The analysis is based on case studies of Centrelink's EDGE decision support system and Centrelink's Community Connect program's extranet.

The paper opens with a review of the Foucault-inspired governmentality approach, which is followed by a summary of how recent welfare reforms have been analysed. The paper then examines two recent e-government initiatives in Centrelink, the Australian government's service delivery agency, to identify the way in which they variously constitute welfare subjects and embody certain forms of power. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of this analysis for conceptualisations of power operating in contemporary welfare regimes.

Foucault and Governmentality

Foucault's writings on governing flow from his more well-known work on power. In contrast to the dominant conceptualisation of power as a zero-sum game, whereby it is wielded over people in order to control or repress them, Foucault also pointed to the heterogeneous, ubiquitous, and productive elements of power.³ In this light, power is seen in the formation of subjectivities and identities, and the constitution of norms of behaviour and conduct. Foucault argued that such 'capillaries' of power are integral to the constitution of the modern social and political body and sort analytical tools to make them intelligible. This work on power underscored Foucault's latter study of government, which would eschew the conventional concept of government as the concentrated locale for exercise of sovereign power over its citizen-subjects, i.e. *the* government.

Foucault's seminal work reconceptualised government and governing as practices evident throughout society rather than simply those conducted by

the state (c.f. Rose and Miller 1992). Government – defined as the ‘conduct of conduct’ rather as regime, institution or apparatus – is as much a practice of bosses, managers, parents and the individual self as one of monarchs, presidents and parliaments. In his later work, Foucault became interested in the ways in which government is thought about, that is, as a rationality of government which is ‘a way or system of thinking about the nature of the practice of government...capable of making some form of that activity thinkable and practicable both to its practitioners and to those upon whom it is practised’ (Gordon 1991, 3). These ‘governmentality’ writings have generated a renewed interest among certain political and social scientists in processes of governing in the modern world.⁴

This analytical approach, and the observations found in studies of governmentality, help to provide new insights into the nature and practice of the welfare state. In particular, its sensitivity to governing practices and forms of rule – how they are conceptualised, articulated and given an enduring materiality – sheds new light on the nature and operation of the welfare state. Much of the governmentality literature emphasises the way in which the domain of ideas constitutes a certain way of thinking or rationality about the practice of government. Such ‘rationalities of government’ are evident in discourse and forms of knowledge, especially in the ways in which governmental ideas are spoken about and justified. The governmentality literature is also significant for giving attention to the more material means by which governmental objectives are realised. Diverse inscription devices and routine calculative practices and procedures (from architect’s plans, maps and flow charts to accounting spreadsheets and statistical tables) all participate in the constitution of governable domains.⁵ Less obviously, however, technologies, in the more conventional sense (machines, computers,

³ See, for example, Foucault (1978, 92-102; 2001).

⁴ Key works include Foucault (1981; 1988; 1991; 2003), Dean (1999), Gordon (1991), Rose (1999), Burchell *et al.* (1991), Barry *et al.* (1996) and Dean and Hindess (1998).

⁵ See, for example, the way in which accounting practices and technologies construct governable and calculable domains (Miller and O’Leary 1987).

weapons etc.) also provide means by which new domains are constituted and made calculable, thereby giving rise to new objects for governing.⁶

In his work on governing, Foucault discussed a range of governmental rationalities and forms of power. Here we refer only to liberalism, neo-liberalism and pastoral power. Foucault paid particular attention to the way in which certain **liberal** forms of governmental rationality emerged during the early modern period. Rather than viewing liberalism as a political philosophy of liberalism concerned with the limits of sovereign rule by a private sphere of individual liberty, Foucault examined it as a practical rationality and art of government. This means that he focused on the ethos of review of liberalism, its founding suspicion that we might be governing 'too much'. And rather than regarding individual liberty as the centre of a political philosophy, he analysed the way in which liberty became an artefact of government, a means through which governing might occur. Choice, desire, and aspiration becomes means to governmental ends, and elements to be shaped by governmental programs and practices. In this latter respect, liberalism seeks to govern through individuals by means of shaping their capacities and thus constitutes them as citizens. As a rationality of government, however, liberalism also continues to link freedom to question of security – of nations, of populations and of individuals – in many different realms such as health, welfare, education and national defence.

The contemporary practices, programs and rationalities of **neo-liberal** forms of rule which involve indirect methods of governing conduct have much in common with the account of liberalism just given. Prohibition, force and coercion are displaced by forms of inducement, incentive mechanisms, persuasion by experts and discipline through surveillance. Individuals are regarded as free subjects who are able to choose their forms of behaviour, but their choices are made in settings that have been constructed by a whole barrage of carefully-calculated tactics, such as performance indicators and

⁶ In the present case we are discussing computing and information technologies, with their attendant hardware and software and the skills and forms of knowledge with which they are

audits, incentives and expert advice (eg. Dean 1999, Ch 2; Rose 1996a; Miller and Rose 1997; Power 1997). As Nikolas Rose puts it, we are now 'governed through freedom' (1999). Thus, in contrast to the usual assumption that liberalism and neo-liberalism limit the operation of government to allow a sphere of freedom, studies of governmentality have shown how liberal and neo-liberalism use freedom as a particularly creative ways of constituting strategies for the indirect shaping of conduct. In contrast with liberalism, neo-liberalism regards the market as less a natural and necessary feature of society and more as a set of techniques and mechanisms which can be applied to all domains throughout society including those earlier thought to be of the public sector. And while earlier liberalism developed a social sphere to complement and support both the operations of the market and individual citizens, neo-liberalism will try to reconstruct the social as series of markets in services and expertise.

However, more recently certain authors have noted that the current hegemony of neo-liberal forms of governing through freedom occurs alongside and in complex relation to more **sovereign** modalities. (Dean 2002; Hindess 2001). Neo-liberal or advanced liberal forms of government are often underscored by and operate in relation to the use of more coercive forms of domination, National states exercise sovereignty defined in terms of deciding the 'state of exception' to liberal forms of legal and political individuality and citizenship as, for example, in the internment of categories of asylum seekers in detention camps (Agamben 1998). The question of the relationship between neo-liberal forms of government and authoritarian rule remains a highly intriguing one in relation to the treatment of indigenous populations, refugees, prisoners of war, civilian non-combatant populations in occupied territories, and so forth.

Foucault's notion of pastoral power is particularly useful in understanding the welfare state. In a key discussion of '**pastoral power**' he argued that the development of the modern state must be understood as the interplay of two configurations which he called the 'city-citizen game' and the 'shepherd-flock

combined.

game'. The city-citizen game concerns the legal-political relationship of the autonomous individual to a self-governing political community; the 'shepherd-flock' games refers to the pastoral care of the living subject. Here, pastoral power emphasises the care for the welfare of each individual, which involves a detailed knowledge of every person (Foucault 1981; 1982; cf Lippert 2004). While originating in theological conceptions within Hebraic and early Christian traditions, Foucault regarded the development of the twentieth century welfare state, with its care for the poor and destitute within the government of the state, as embodying a reconfigured and secular form of pastoral power. However, as the paper's opening quotation might suggest, Foucault did not regard the welfare state's deployment of pastoral power as necessarily benevolent, for this kind of pastoral power also involves such things as the authority of expertise and the obedience of the subject to the one who knows better. From a citizen-oriented perspective, such pastoral power can often involve a paternalist pressure to be reformed for 'one's own good', an invasion of the sphere of personal autonomy, and so on.

Contemporary welfare government

Foucault's examinations of power and government and its subsequent elaboration provides a fruitful analytical framework for examining contemporary transformations in governmental practices resulting from the use of the internet and new networked information and communication technologies.

Many governmentality studies have pointed to the neo-liberal character of the contemporary welfare reform, especially in Anglophone liberal welfare state regimes.⁷ This is evident in the widespread use of incentives, choice, marketisation, the individualisation of risk, the focus on human actors and not social structures, and the reduction in state intervention. For example, Walters' incisive analysis of the British New Labour's New Deal policies of the late 1990s concludes,

⁷ We refer here to Esping-Andersen's (1990) classical characterisation of capitalist welfare states as liberal, corporatist and social democratic.

The government's welfare-to-work programme presupposes that its subject is a rational economic actor who will respond to market incentives. It seeks to act on an individual [welfare subject] located in a field of economic rewards and incentives (2000, 142).

In a similar analysis of Australia's active labour market policies, Dean (1995; 1998) points to the way in which the policies and related tools (such as dole diaries and Job Compacts) seek to actively construct unemployed subjects as rational, active and 'job-ready' actors.

While these two analyses point to the individualisation of risk in the contemporary welfare state, Rose (1996b) observes that the de-socialisation of welfare associated with neo-liberalism has also led to the focus on local communities as the domain of governmental action. This is evident, for example, in Britain in the New Deal for Communities and various action zones.

It has perhaps now become commonplace to conceptualise the contemporary Western welfare state as neo-liberal, especially in the welfare state regimes traditionally characterised as 'liberal'. McDonald and Marston (2002) explicitly speak of a 'neo-liberal welfare regime'. George, for example, surveys changes and attitudes in European welfare states and notes that within a dominant neo-liberal discourse, 'pressures of economic globalisation and of national structural factors have led to the replacement of the dominant social democratic expansionist model of welfare with the neo-liberal contractionist model' (1998, 17) noted by increasing use of tax incentives, stiffened eligibility for social security benefits, reduced generosity of benefits, employing user-pays, privatisation, new public management and others.

Ferge (1997) characterises the shift to the 'individualisation of the social', whereby risk management is delegated to individuals, as a shift from the ideal type of the modern welfare state to a 'neo-liberal' or 'post-modern' one.

Weiss (2001) similarly characterises 'charitable choice', a central element in USA welfare policy that allows religious charities to compete with government organisation in the delivery of welfare.

Charitable choice actually represents the triumph of neoliberalism in domestic policy, which is a bipartisan effort to unbridle market forces and free government of its remaining responsibility for social justice. ... Charitable choice reinforces the centrality of the labor market in determining the economic well-being of Americans (2001, 38, emphasis in original).

Meanwhile, Esping-Andersen argues that the 'liberal' welfare state regimes have undergone a 'neo-liberal route' in welfare transition characterised by deregulation and market-led strategies (1996, 15-18). Finally, referring to Schumpeter's seminal influence on neo-liberal thought, Torfing (1999) characterises the today's welfare states as 'Schumpeterian workfare postnational regimes'.

This paper argues that this focus on neo-liberalism overlooks some important aspects of recent welfare reforms. Firstly, there has been a revival of moral discourses in recent welfare reform. Politicians make repeated reference to the 'responsibilities' and 'obligations' of welfare subjects encapsulated in phrases such as 'there are no rights without responsibilities' and 'mutual obligation'. Rather than evidencing a neo-liberal rationality, these discourses may be more accurately understood as 'neo-conservative', or 'neo-paternal' (e.g. Mead 1997).

Secondly, in emphasising the neo-liberal character of welfare reform – as evidenced through individualisation and 'governing through freedom' – the analyses have tended to overlook the coercive elements embedded in it. Welfare assistance is provided under the threat of the loss of benefits should the welfare subject fail to meet all their obligations, such as actively looking for work, attending government interviews, responding to government letters and undergoing training or workfare programs. This coercive aspect of welfare

reform would be better conceptualised as a redeployed form of sovereign power, or as what one of the authors of the present paper has called it 'authoritarian liberalism' (Dean 2002).

Thirdly, coinciding with the significant policy reform in the welfare state has been a raft of changes transforming public administration. While some of these relate to technological innovations, many relate to new rationalities for public administration. Under the banner of the New Public Management, these include managerialism, outsourcing, the creation of public-private partnerships and purchaser-provider relationships, performance indicators, and so on. As with the neo-liberal character of welfare reform, so too welfare administration reform is also neo-liberal in character. However, this is not a complete account of the contemporary welfare state. Following Foucault's observation of the welfare state problem of a 'tricky adjustment' between political power and pastoral power, there are steps to use new technologies to reconfigure welfare administration to provide individualised, holistic and more supportive services. It is to these developments, through the examination of two Australian welfare e-government projects, that we now turn.

Governing through E-administration in Centrelink

An examination of the forms of power that e-government embodies is greatly enhanced by detailed empirical studies. The following case studies of two e-government projects in Centrelink – Australia's national benefit delivery agency – are part of a broader project examining e-government in Australian social security, taxation and health. Data were obtained during 2002-04 from 20 semi-structured interviews with a range of senior executives, national managers, IT professionals and front-office staff of Centrelink and the Department of Family and Community Services. This was supported by field observation of the use of the technologies and examination of relevant Centrelink documents.

EDGE

The EDGE system is a decision support system or expert system used to assess eligibility for family-related government benefits provided by the

Australian Commonwealth government.⁸ Processing such benefits through EDGE contrasts starkly with the former approach directly through the mainframe system. Apart from a graphics and natural language interface, EDGE provides explanations for why each question is asked and provides a detailed account of how it arrived at its decision. In making a claim, questions are asked, not in a standard sequence, but are tailored as a result of earlier responses and information already held by Centrelink. Furthermore, when used with claimants in an interview situation, the system provides a personalised claim form for signature and a preliminary assessment notice for the claimant explaining the assumptions on which benefit eligibility and rate have been calculated.

EDGE is currently being used in only 28 of Centrelink's almost 300 local offices and none of its telephone call centres, although widespread use of EDGE is planned.⁹ Furthermore, it is envisaged that EDGE could be installed into Medicare¹⁰ Offices as part of their role as the virtual Family Assistance Office (FAO). Currently, claims for family-related benefits lodged with a Medicare Office are simply posted to Centrelink for processing. Consideration is also being given to an on-line version to allow self-assessment and to enable community groups and other welfare bodies to help assess a client's eligibility.

EDGE can currently be deployed by Centrelink staff in back-office processing of paper claim forms, or can be used in a claimant interview situation. It is this later mode that is analysed here.¹¹ In the constitution of governable welfare subjects, the EDGE system represents the deployment of liberal, neo-liberal

⁸ The actual benefits are Family Tax Benefit (Parts A and B), Child Care Benefit, Maternity Allowance and Maternity Immunisation Allowance.

⁹ Postscript: In November 2003, Centrelink ceased use of EDGE. This development does not affect the analysis in this paper, which examines the way EDGE constituted welfare subjects and corresponding directions for future e-government development.

¹⁰ Medicare is Australia's national health insurance scheme providing universal subsidised (or free) health care by doctors outside hospitals. Medicare offices receive and process patient claims to meet health costs.

¹¹ In reality, it has been rare for Centrelink staff to use the technology in this way.

and pastoral forms of power.¹² Claimants to Family-related benefits are variously and simultaneously configured as individual citizens with legal rights, self-governing subjects who make rational choices, and as 'sheep' in need of pastoral care.

The primary purpose of introducing EDGE was to improve the accuracy (and consistency) of decision-making in Centrelink. Indeed, in 1997, following many complaints about the accuracy of decision-making and the recording of oral advice, the Commonwealth Ombudsman specifically recommended the deployment of an expert system for this purpose (1997, 61). Related to this concern with accurate decision-making is the enhancement of appeal processes. To this effect, for each claim assessed, EDGE produces a decision-tree delineating the exact legislation invoked in making the decision and the claimant information on which the decision is based. Such a decision-tree is available for review internally and externally (eg. welfare rights, Social Security Appeals Tribunal, Administrative Appeals Tribunal, claimants). Such information represents a significant improvement over what was previously available, whereby past decisions had to be reconstructed from disparate and perhaps missing data from paper and electronic media.

This focus on improving decision-making and appeal processes constitutes the welfare subject in a liberal manner, that is, as one who is invested with rights to benefits and a capacity to question the decision of the state. It is liberal in that liberalism can be understood as 'a form of critical reflection on governmental practices', one that is intensely concerned with 'governing too much' and seeks to regulate government through the law (Foucault 1997, 73-79). In its focus on enhancing the capacity to review benefit decision-making, EDGE embraces these liberal concerns. It helps to more fully realise the goal of constituting welfare subjects as citizens with both benefit and appeal rights and claims on the state to ensure it acts according to the law.

¹² This paper only discusses the government of claimants, and not the government of Centrelink staff.

The neo-liberal aspects of e-governance of claimants are exemplified in the way EDGE deals with the payment of family benefits. Australia's main family benefits – Family Tax Benefit Parts A and B and Child Care Benefit – are means-tested, that is, eligibility and the rate of benefit are based on the household's annual income. The amount a family receives in a given financial year is based on the income earned during that same year. Families therefore have to estimate their household income from all sources beforehand. If income is underestimated, then a family is paid more than they are entitled to receive. On the other hand, if they overstate their income, they are underpaid. Reconciliation of any overpayments or underpayments are made at the end of the financial year. As the difference in the amount received and amount entitled can be as much as 30 per cent of the difference between the estimated and actual income,¹³ this provides considerable pressure on families to give an accurate prediction of their income.

In order to avoid future surprises, families must be fully aware of the complex policy and its administration, and accurately predict their earnings over the coming 12 months – including pay rises and promotions. Alternatively, beneficiaries must be skillful in financial management so that they are able to pay for any unexpected overpayment.

EDGE manages this situation by providing options for claimants in the way they choose to be paid their benefits. Claimants are given the option of receiving their full amount or a smaller amount, which can be specified by the claimant. Furthermore, Family Tax Benefit Part A is divided in a 'base' rate, which is paid to all but high-income families, and an 'additional' rate paid to low-income households. With EDGE, claimants can choose to receive the base and/or additional rates. Claimants can also apply at the end of the financial year for the full amount and receive nothing in the intervening year.

¹³ For example, if a family underestimates their annual income by \$2000, then they could be overpaid as much as \$600 *for each benefit*.

EDGE's presentation to claimants of a range of choices in the payment of family benefits configures and presupposes the claimant as a rational, self-governing and risk-managing welfare subject.¹⁴ In contrast, the previous situation was a dangerous void with very little scope for claimants to act rationally. The provision of payment choices unambiguously signals to claimants that the receipt of family benefits is something that they have some control over, and indeed, is a domain in which they must exercise their judgement, and that deliberations can and should be made. In doing so, the provision of options signals that different choices have different effects, thereby indicating that these effects must be considered, assessed and decided upon. EDGE thus constitutes and embraces a neo-liberal form of power, whereby effective risk management operates through the devolution of risk to individuals and families.

While advanced information technology is not essential for the provision of payment choices – indeed, the printed claim form for family benefits and associated mainframe processing now provides the same options – such technology provides new ways in which to make real the effects of choices in a complex policy environment. Indeed, it underlies the growth in decision support tools, computer models and publicly-available rates calculators.¹⁵ Information technology is the means by which the implications of choices in a complex environment are made calculable, visible and governable (cf Henman 2000).

The neo-liberal construction of the welfare subject is also evident in visions of how EDGE will be used in the future. On-line versions of EDGE are seen to enable citizens to self service welfare benefits. Prospective claimants could use an on-line EDGE system to: test their likely eligibility to family benefits; to lodge an electronic claim form; and consider the family benefit implications of

¹⁴ To be accurate, claimants using printed claim forms are now provided with the same payment options as those using EDGE. Accordingly, the foregoing discussion is not directly an outcome of electronic forms of administration, but is indicative of further developments in e-administration.

¹⁵ This is particularly evident in the vision of former Minister for Social Security, Peter Baldwin's (1995) vision of customised benefits.

various hypothetical situations. In this setting, the neo-liberal construction of welfare subjects is evident in two ways.

Firstly, the shift to self service by governments (and the private sector) is part of the neo-liberal strategy that combines cost cutting with customer service. This strategy contrasts paternalistic welfare states, whereby welfare subjects are conceived as passive, to self service provision in which active welfare subjects take their own initiative to engage the welfare state without bureaucratic assistance and to ensure that they obtain the benefits and services they need and to which they are entitled. Although an on-line version of EDGE may not significantly alter the process of applying for family benefits, it should improve customer service by providing 24/7 access to Centrelink and reducing the need to a visit Centrelink office.

An on-line version of EDGE will also enable prospective claimants to assess the benefit implications of a range of household circumstances, such as being a full-time carer, working part- or full-time, or separating.¹⁶ This facility clearly seeks to constitute individuals as neo-liberal welfare claimants in that they are regarded as rational, calculative decision-makers that make choices about household relations, structure and activities having given due consideration to the government benefit effects of alternative scenarios.

EDGE also deploys pastoral forms of power in a manner quite distinct from the usual approach in the Australian social security system. The latter is based on a range of benefits targeted to the different situations people may find themselves in. The payment of benefits is demand led. That is, the onus is on people requiring financial assistance to identify the payment that reflects their situation and to apply for it. If they apply for a payment for which they are ineligible, they receive a notice of assessment stating that they are ineligible. There is no follow up to see if the applicant's needs have been met, nor is

¹⁶ This facility has recently been made available by Centrelink in the form of an on-line Family Assistance Estimator. Although it does not have the full capacity to assess eligibility, it can calculate likely benefits based on household structure and income. See <www.centrelink.gov.au> then 'on-line services'.

there any advice regarding other payments which they may be eligible to receive. In short, there is no duty of care.

The EDGE system breaks new ground in this respect. Applicants for any one of the benefits that EDGE administers are advised by the system of any other payments to which they might be eligible to receive, and the conditions for their receipt. This information is provided in the preliminary assessment notice produced at the end of an EDGE claim session. This process is made possible through the use of information technology to link the claimant's data with the requirements of other payments.

This new approach, though rather simple and rudimentary in nature, at this stage represents a form of pastoral power emerging within a dominant bureaucratic or possibly neo-liberal form of operation. The older, demand-led approach presupposed that individuals requiring assistance had an awareness of the range of assistance available and would be able to correctly identify the payment to which they were most likely to be entitled to receive. While this may have been a realistic assumption for most of the twentieth century when benefit policy and its administration changed slowly, since the 1980s there has been rapid policy and administrative change that have made this assumption unrealistic. New benefits have been created, transformed, combined and continuously renamed, their administration has moved repeatedly between the taxation and social security systems, and a new, more complex, administrative apparatus has been created. As a result of this new, complex and ever-changing policy environment, individuals are much less likely to be aware of the benefits on offer, their names and policy details, and are much more likely to apply for the wrong or less appropriate benefit. When a letter advises of their ineligibility, claimants are likely to be unsure of their alternatives, and may give up trying, thereby foregoing their benefit entitlements.

EDGE's innovation, by contrast, is to use information technology to automate pastoral power. It does this by seeking to know the individual situation and needs of each claimant and by providing for those needs (within the confines

of policy eligibility rules) through individualised claim forms and alerting claimants to other benefits to which they may be eligible.

Community Connect

This electronic deployment of pastoral power is also evident in another e-government initiative of Centrelink's – Community Connect. Community Connect is a program aimed at improving the holistic service offered by Centrelink. Part of the program includes an internet site hosted by Centrelink (www.communityconnect.gov.au). While the public can gain access to some of the website, access to many aspects are password-protected for participating welfare agencies, including the Smith Family, the Salvation Army and Lifeline. As of early 2004, the site provides access to some benefit tools used by Centrelink, such as benefit rates calculators and electronic versions of the *Social Security Act* and the *Guide to the Act*. It also includes a searchable directory of approximately 16,000 welfare service organisations in Australia. The site also hosts discussion forums on various aspects of welfare service delivery. A rudimentary electronic referral system between Centrelink and other welfare agencies, is also available on the site. The referral system enables an electronic message to be sent by a welfare agency when welfare recipients are referred to another agency.

By providing these tools to relevant welfare organisations, Centrelink is hoping to develop more joined-up services to its clients through the creation of partnership relations between Centrelink and welfare agencies. While the Community Connect site is yet to reach its full imagined potential, Centrelink hopes that other agencies will provide useful tools on the site to share with the welfare sector.

In the long term, Centrelink hopes that the extranet site would lead to the development of a personal electronic data vault, where individuals are able to control the information held by themselves and to what aspects of it is accessible to who and when. Accordingly, Centrelink sees that the extranet site could become the means by which personal information in the data vault

might be transferred – with client consent – between organisations to enable speedier and more accurate service provision across different agencies. For example, many non-for-profit welfare agencies assess eligibility to their services according to receipt of Centrelink benefits. Accordingly they require evidence of such receipt before a service can be provided. It is this data which it is envisaged the Community Connect system would be able to transfer.

The development of the Community Connect program and its extranet is a significant change in the way Centrelink (and its predecessor the Department of Social Security) does its business. Typically, Centrelink concentrated on assessing and delivering benefits and ensuring that only those who are eligible receive them. The benefits Centrelink offers define the prism in which it views claimants. This has meant that Centrelink has limited services to offer to unsuccessful claimants or those in crisis situations. For example, if someone in a financial crisis approaches Centrelink, they are typically referred to organisations offering emergency relief (such as the Salvation Army, the Smith Family and community groups). As it is not the responsibility of Centrelink, its staff are not trained to have a good understanding of the services these agencies provide and are therefore unlikely to know the possibility of the person obtaining help. There is also no follow-up to see if the person's needs have been met and, of course, there is no wider 'duty of care'.

The rationale for more integrated approaches argues that people's financial and personal problems do not fall neatly into organisational boundaries. Such fragmented services may be able to be self-managed by many people, but for those with complex and multiple disadvantages – such as illiteracy, substance abuse, homelessness and mental illness – they have little chance of producing positive outcomes for themselves. A more holistic or 'joined-up' approach to welfare service delivery is thus presented as what is often required.

This emphasis on looking at welfare services from the client's perspective, and not from the narrow definition of Centrelink's business to deliver

government benefits, reflects more than just a neo-liberal emphasis on customer service. Neo-liberal customer service is often equated with quick, efficient, courteous and accurate payment of benefits. Furthermore, the new welfare service agenda it is not Centrelink's core business. It involves a rethinking of what it means to be a key government welfare service provider. The new service agenda articulated in Community Connect is a reflection of pastoral power, in its concern and support for the well-being of the individual and the efforts to minimise destitution. This is expressed by the intention of Community Connect to enable staff from Centrelink and other welfare agencies to identify which agencies are likely to be able to address their client's unmet needs, and to provide a referral system which is able to track clients to see if they follow up on the referrals. While this helps to reduce the run-around clients may encounter, it importantly acts to provide a level of duty of care, not previously evident in Centrelink (and the former Department of Social Security). Of course, there are limits to the capacity of Centrelink and other welfare agencies to meet the needs of an individual. Within Centrelink, these limits are defined by legislation as the benefits that Centrelink can offer and the terms in which individuals are eligible for such benefits. While non-government welfare agencies may often have greater flexibility to meet individual needs, they too are constrained by agency policies, resource restrictions and government funding requirements.

The intention of Centrelink to use Community Connect to provide the electronic mechanism to transfer client data – with client consent – between welfare agencies also deploys pastoral power. It clearly is a form of neo-liberal customer service, in that it provides a simpler, more efficient means of transferring the required data between welfare agencies, and in doing so, saves the client from going back and forward between agencies to obtain and present the data. It is also neo-liberal in that it allows clients to have power over their personal data vault and to whom their personal information is made available. But more than that, this facility, operated by Centrelink and welfare agency staff, would provide pastoral support to clients in managing the complex relations and data transfers between welfare agencies, a task made evermore difficult by clients with literacy and numeracy problems, including

poor English language skills. This is because the technology transfers from the client to welfare professionals the responsibility for correctly identifying the data required and transmitting it to another agency. Seen from a neo-liberal perspective of active, rational and knowledgeable individuals, this process is perhaps paternalistic and thus the hallmark of pastoral power. Seen from the client's perspective, it is a sensible delegation of responsibility and authority to those can more easily and expertly undertake the necessary task to coordinate accurate communication between welfare agencies.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis of these two recent e-government initiatives at Centrelink highlight how new networked ICTs are involved in supporting and enhancing several modes of governing. In particular, whilst there is a clear connection between the broader neo-liberal policy and public management agenda, there is strong evidence that new ICTs are being used to provide more supportive, individualised and holistic (ie pastoral) welfare services and to reinforce traditional liberal concerns of citizenship rights. Their co-existence should not be surprising, given Foucault's perceptive observation of the 'tricky adjustment' between political and pastoral power quoted at the start of this paper. However, dominant governmental discourses and scholarly analyses would suggest that neo-liberal mentalities provide a full account of the contemporary welfare state, particularly in 'liberal' welfare state regimes.

E-government technologies thus incorporate a range of welfare objectives demonstrating that the welfare state embodies competing governmental rationalities and objectives with associated forms of power. In particular, a pastoral power with a rationality of duty of care operates alongside the constitution of liberal concerns of citizen rights and rational independent neo-liberal subjects.

That new ICTs are being used to support pastoral forms of service delivery, is however not surprising to those versed in the e-government rhetoric extolling the virtues of networked governance. It is repeatedly mentioned that the new

electronic networks will bring about an end to silo nature of government services; instead providing holistic, seam-less and joined-up government that provides individualised service delivery that addresses the whole person (eg ISSA 2002; NOIE 2002). What is surprising for long-time analysts of governmental use of IT is that these visions may be becoming a reality, if only partially. In the past, ICTs were extolled for their capacity to increase customer services, precisely in this same manner. However, with the exception of faster and more efficient claim processing, organisational objectives dominated the improvement of client services. Previous IT strategy in welfare was of automation to enhance efficiency, compliance and fraud detection. In contrast, the analysis above suggests that the new network technologies appear to involve different strategies which may be more readily suited to the exercise of pastoral power.

It is not just technology that constitutes the relative presence of neo-liberal, pastoral or other forms of power. Technological objectives and uses are very much intertwined with political objectives. Governments, management, leaders, administrative arrangements, staff and clients all have a role in constituting the way in which technology is used. These ongoing politics will determine the shape of e-government to come.

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