ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Improving Access to Victorian Public Sector Information and Data

Canberra — 13 August 2008

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<u>Witness</u>

Mr P. Callioni, Division Manager, Australian Government Information Management Office, Department of Finance and Deregulation.

The CHAIR — I warmly welcome Mr Patrick Callioni from the Australian Government Information Management Office. You are the secretary?

Mr CALLIONI — I am the no. 2.

The CHAIR — No doubt you have had the chance to read our paper, which outlines why we as an all-party parliamentary committee are taking evidence into improving access to Victorian public sector information and data. Mr Callioni, could you please give your name, your title, your business and address and if you are speaking in a personal capacity or representing an organisation?

Mr CALLIONI — My name is Patrick Callioni. I am a division manager in the Australian Government Information Management Office, which is part of the Department of Finance and Deregulation. The business address is the John Gorton Building, King Edward Terrace, Parkes ACT 2600. I am here speaking in an official capacity.

The CHAIR — Thank you. We will pass over to you.

Mr CALLIONI — By way of prefacing what I am going to say, the broad range of issues that the committee is covering in a true sense will probably be within the purview of our Department of the Attorney General; however, there are matters covered in your terms of reference on which I may be able to assist the committee.

The CHAIR — Thank you.

Mr CALLIONI — Our primary focus in the Australian Government Information Management Office is the effective and efficient use of technology. I stress the use of technology; we do not have that many geeks on staff. For example, I am a lawyer with a degree in law and psychology, and most of our people are more focused on the business end of technology than on technology itself, which means one of our chief concerns is what people do with government information. I think the new term these days is 'knowledge services'. That seems to be the jargon that is coming into vogue at the moment. In other words, what data, information and material government has that could be provided for citizens in the form of services that citizens — I use the term broadly to include business and the not-for-profit sector in that — can use for their own legitimate purposes.

As you would know we have had a relatively recent change of government, and this government is still to settle its position on a variety of matters. At the moment an independent inquiry is being conducted by Sir Peter Gershon, which has been commissioned by our minister, Lindsay Tanner, the Minister for Finance and Deregulation. Sir Peter will report at the beginning of September on how the government uses its technology and will make recommendations on how the government might better use its technology. I expect that his recommendations will not focus purely on the hardware and the software.

Mr DAVIS — Is it technology or is it information?

Mr CALLIONI — Information and communication technology. I expect his recommendations will look at soft issues, like information, knowledge and data, as much as they will the actual hardware and software that is used in government, which means, again, that what I am saying is qualified by the understanding that the Government's position is still in an evolutionary phase. I understand the committee is particularly interested in the use of open source.

The CHAIR — Yes.

Mr CALLIONI — In the Australian Government for a long time there has been a bipartisan approach to technology use in government that is agnostic — in other words, the Government does not have a position for or against open source or proprietary solutions. The

position adopted by the former government and by the present government is that agencies should use products that are fit for purpose and best suited for the purpose and that represent value for money, be they open source or proprietary — Australian, Japanese or Martian is fundamentally not relevant. However, it is the case that proprietary applications are still dominant in the Australian Government, and there is a range of reasons why that is so, and I could canvass those if the committee wishes.

The first reason is that humans are prone to form habits. With proprietary products I think Mr Tee mentioned VHS and Beta. The view is that Beta was superior but VHS became dominant. Because it was the most widely used product people formed a habit of relying on VHS and it became the only product. The same things happen in government. People get used to using Microsoft products and it becomes then very difficult for them to contemplate alternatives, particularly when — and this is the second reason why open source is perhaps not as widely used in government — there is a little bit of apprehension and fear about the unknown. To most people in government, be they technologists or policy or managerial staff, open source remains a bit of a black box. As the Chair remarked, public servants do tend to be somewhat risk averse. Partly because of habit and partly because of fear of the unknown, there is a tendency not to look at alternatives to proprietary solutions unless there is a — —

Mr DAVIS — Overwhelming.

Mr CALLIONI — A reason to do so. What we have tried to do is try and redress that balance of knowledge and understanding, which is why we produced *A Guide to Open Source Software for Australian Government Agencies*, for example, which is why we recently did a survey of use of open source in government, and we have subsequently run discussion sessions with agencies, which is why we produced advice for agencies on how to compare total cost of operation of open source and proprietary solutions so that people who make decisions in agencies based on value for money can start putting things on a level playing field. In other words, our effort has been to both try and change some established habits and try and fill some of the fear of the unknown that remains in agencies. What the survey that we did told us is that there is quite a lot of use of open source in government agencies. A lot of it is not evident and not visible but it is there. Sometimes it is within the information technology shop where the IT people work, sometimes it is actually within the agency itself when someone has championed a particular approach. If one adds up all the use of open source across the Australian Government it is quite significant. But it is haphazard and patchy and if you were to look at what people have on their desktops, you would be primarily looking at Microsoft products.

The CHAIR — That is what you would like to convey?

Mr CALLIONI — If your primary concern is use of open source, that would be the fundamental point.

The CHAIR — We will go to questions. Is that all you want to say by way of preamble?

Mr CALLIONI — Yes.

The CHAIR — Good, thank you.

Mr DAVIS — On the issue of proprietary product, there is obviously a legal agreement on the product or purchase that occurs and potentially litigation if something goes wrong. Is that ability to defray risk a driver in the decision to use proprietary or is it just simply the stickiness of familiarity?

Mr CALLIONI — I think it is there more as a concern than as a driver. Whenever that issue is raised, and sometimes it is in agencies, no-one can ever point to a situation where it has become a real problem. Litigation against an administrating government over the use of

information and communication technology would be a rare bird. I am hard put thinking of a case in the last 30 years and I have been around when it has happened.

Mr DAVIS — It is perception, right?

Mr CALLIONI — It is perceptions.

Mr TEE — The reality is that you could sue IBM just as quickly as you could sue Microsoft, and one is open source and the other one is not.

Mr CALLIONI — Indeed, but that is perhaps where the open source community does not help itself in addressing perceptions. I have spoken at a lot of conferences and I have a lot of friends who work in open source space. My message to them is, 'If you want to deal with government, you have to present a solid, reliable image'. In other words, you have to look like the two persons who were here before.

Mr TEE — Wear a suit.

Mr CALLIONI — Not be a casual person who turns up wearing casual clothes, someone who does not understand business and who does not understand the kind of question that has just been put and why it might be a concern in the minds of the people who are contemplating spending taxpayers' money to deliver services to taxpayers and who therefore want a long-term reliable partner. The fact that the open source community is often incapable of presenting that image does not help to allay those concerns however ill-founded those concerns might be. The involvement of companies like IBM in open source in the medium term will be helpful because it will help to change that kind of image — and I say 'like IBM'; I am not sponsoring IBM in any way here but just using it by way of example.

The CHAIR — It is an interesting observation in terms of image. In terms of evidence, governments of all persuasions in all jurisdictions have been burnt by those who arrive in suits.

Mr CALLIONI — Of course. Indeed.

The CHAIR — On IT, in the way of mega-bucks.

Mr TEE — I just wanted to take up one of the issues that we looked at yesterday and that was the issue around the release of information. The government in Queensland, where we were yesterday, was looking at the issue of trying to release more information — government information, government data — whether it is in databases or elsewhere. I take it from your evidence that that is one of the areas that you are involved in. The evidence was that Queensland was releasing that data but keeping some control over it by way of Creative Commons as a way of saying, 'We will release the data but if you are going to use it for commercial gains, you will need to come back to us because we are trying to keep that under control'. I am wondering where you are up to in terms of the release of information that is collected by government and whether you are looking at mechanisms of restricting the basis on which that information is released.

Mr CALLIONI — Again, both the former and the present governments have taken steps to liberalise access to information, for example from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The former government made it so that the information produced by Geoscience Australia — and geospatial information is becoming a fundamental asset for Australia, both economically and socially — should be made available freely. The present government, however, as I indicated earlier, is still going through a process of reflecting on its position. I know from discussions with our minister that this is an issue that he is focusing on. He recently visited the United Kingdom and met with Richard Allan and with the people who have been driving the work over there on the *Power of Information*, and there are quite a lot of interesting things happening in the United Kingdom in that space. Our minister has expressed interest in us contemplating steps in a similar

direction, but he is now going to be waiting for the recommendations that Sir Peter Gershon makes before considering the final position that the government might take. But if I had to — —

Mr DAVIS — That is Minister Tanner?

Mr CALLIONI — Yes. If I had to make an informed guess, I would say that the Government would be proceeding towards the direction of releasing information; in other words, increasing access to government information and data from the present position. That is also evident from work that the present government is doing in the area of review of privacy legislation and the review of the Freedom of Information Act that one of our other ministers, Senator Faulkner, is also considering — and Senator Faulkner is also in our portfolio. We have two ministers in our portfolio who I think have a broad philosophical position that would lead them towards releasing more rather than less information. However, there will always be a constraint from the intellectual property angle in terms of the government safeguarding assets it holds on behalf of taxpayers. There will always be, I think, some restraints and constraints in terms of people being able to use information held by government for private gain, and there will always be an obligation on government to protect — —

Mr DAVIS — Strictly it is the Crown who would hold the information.

Mr CALLIONI — We do not use that word anymore, but technically, yes, you are quite correct. It is information held by the Crown. That seems to be a term that has gone out of favour in Canberra. There is also an obligation on the government to protect private and personal information, so there will always also be restrictions aimed at ensuring that whatever information goes into the public domain is depersonalised and is not capable of being used or misused in a way that would threaten anyone's privacy or other rights. They are the two primary constraints that would always remain. The extent to which that would be applied is not a matter to which this government has yet turned its specific attention.

Mr TEE — Has there been a concern, in terms of those proprietary rights, around complexity, in the sense that different departments release information on different bases? Is there a view that there is complexity, and is that something that the government is looking at as well?

Mr CALLIONI — It is, and the Australian Government agencies have a very significant degree of autonomy: making decisions about intellectual property held by an agency on behalf of the Crown is a matter for the chief executive of the agency within the confines of — —

Mr DAVIS — Government.

Mr CALLIONI — government policy. Yes. Again this Government has shown an inclination towards having a more coordinated approach to issues and I suspect that will include this area, but as yet there is no position. But, for example, we have recently taken steps to coordinate procurement of information and communication technology across government, which we did not do before. Again, I would think that is a place where the Government might want to go. If this Government were to take a view to liberalise the access to information and data, I suspect that it would want to do it in a more coordinated fashion than might have been the case with the former government.

Mr TEE — Just finally on that, has there been any work done by government in terms of the economic benefit from making information more freely available; is that something that has been looked at?

Mr CALLIONI — I would think if it has been done, it would have been done either in the Department of Innovation or in the Department of digital economy. Senator Conroy — —

Mr DAVIS — Treasury might not have been interested at all?

Mr CALLIONI — I am not aware that Treasury has done any work in that area. That does not mean to say it has not, but I am not aware of it.

Mr CRISP — I want to explore the coexistence issues. We have got propriety and open source, and I think it is very likely that both are going to have to coexist within government structures as we go forward. How do you see the issue with having two systems operating together?

Mr CALLIONI — Ultimately if the designers of the system, using the word 'system' very broadly, and if the managers have done their jobs properly, there should not be a problem, because the open source code, just like the proprietary code, should be effective, efficient, documented, with appropriate safeguards, including legal safeguards, around it. It should be able to be managed just as proprietary software can be managed, and in some ways perhaps more easily than proprietary software can be managed because with open source software one can have direct access to the code, whereas with proprietary software the code remains a black box and therefore cannot be seen except by those who have the key, which is not those in government. If the job has been done properly, there should not be any issues.

However, because often in government, and certainly in the Australian Government, we have a lot of legacy systems and a lot of complexity in the arrangements that the agencies use to manage information and communication technology, I would say there is no guarantee that appropriate arrangements will always be in place in agencies to make sure that the job is done properly. I would say in principle there should not be a problem. In practice, if the agency's maturity and level of sophistication in managing its own assets is not as good as it should be — and audit reports suggest that it is patchy, let us say, across government — then there may well be some issues. But I would hazard to say that there would not be issues of a first or second magnitude, that there would be just another set of issues for information and communication technology managers in a very complex environment already.

The CHAIR — Can I build on that question? When these systems go down or are not delivered punctually there are huge financial and political risks. Have you got examples — a similar question to what I asked before — —

Mr CALLIONI — I heard, yes.

The CHAIR — Have you got examples of where open source has been a means of solving problems quicker than proprietary?

Mr CALLIONI — Not in the Australian Government.

The CHAIR — Have you heard of them in any state or territory? I do not want you to mention cases, but — —

Mr CALLIONI — No. I mean, from first principles I would think that your assumption is correct and there must be such examples, but I am not aware of any, largely because I think, certainly in the Australian Government, open source software is not at this stage used for large production systems.

The CHAIR — The questions that I want you to address, please, would be: on the practical rollout that you have undertaken already, on habit and fear of the unknown, are there any lessons that the Australian Government and your agency has found that you think might be useful to be implemented in Victoria?

Mr CALLIONI — Firstly, it is a long-term project. Inertia is a very powerful force, and changing established patterns is difficult. Also we do not really have a baseline from which to measure. One of the reasons we did the survey last year was actually to try to establish a baseline of use of open source technology in government so that at some later point we could see whether

the initiatives that we and our successors are going to take are having some impact. At the moment I could not really give you any more than an anecdotal or subjective view.

As I say, the points I would make from that are, firstly, that it is a long-term process; and secondly, as I say, we were a bit surprised to find that perhaps it was a more fertile field for open source than one might have thought, because we found that open source was much more widely used than we expected it would be, which means perhaps the problem of ignorance and fear might not be as great, at least in some organisations.

If one were to look at organisations like the Australian Bureau of Statistics or the Bureau of Meteorology, for example, they are very big users of open source, they do it well, they do it cleverly, they have had no fundamental problems in using it. But even large organisations like Centrelink, for example, have quite a degree of use of open source in various places. They have integrated it quite well, to go back to your question, into their business processes. It was comforting in a sense. One of the lessons would be that things might not be as bad as one thinks when one actually gets the evidence. The third lesson would be it is useful to have a baseline because as in anything, both within the public service and with government, it would be useful to be able to say, 'We were here, we did X, we got this far', or we did not, whereas without the evidence or without a baseline it is very difficult for us to formulate good evidence-based policy.

> **The CHAIR** — Thank you. That covers the surveys that you outlined. The info sessions?

> **Mr CALLIONI** — All I can say there is that subjectively there was very high participation; very well received. We do a lot of info sessions on a variety of topics, and will always collect feedback and analyse it, and those sessions, as I say, were both well attended and the feedback was good. What I cannot say is whether they caused any behaviours to be modified.

> **The CHAIR** — Thank you very much. You would be familiar with the system.

> **Mr CALLIONI** — Yes.

> **The CHAIR** — Within about a fortnight you will receive a copy of the Hansard transcript. Any typographical errors can be corrected, but substance must remain.

> **Mr CALLIONI** — Of course.

> **The CHAIR** — Thank you very much. We do appreciate your time, Mr Callioni.

> **Mr CALLIONI** — Thank you.

Witness withdrew.