Politics and Trust

Kieron O'Hara

Intelligence, Agents, Multimedia Group
School of Electronics and Computer Science
University of Southampton
Highfield
Southampton SO17 1BJ
kmo@ecs.soton.ac.uk

I've been asked to speak briefly today about trust in public and political life, and the extent to which there has been a genuine decline in public trust over the last few years. To cut a long story short, I believe there has been something of a decline, although its properties may be a little different from those that some commentators have detected. I also believe that some of the remedies proposed for the decline are somewhat misconceived. In that context, let me begin by welcoming today's report, which, as well as being a solid piece of work and a good read, brings together many aspects of the issue which are often neglected in debate.

I understand that Canada has been having a debate or two about trust of late. I certainly don't want to comment on that directly. But if I may talk about my experiences in Europe over the last month, we see trust being central to a number of set-piece public consultations.

Sometimes the purported lack of trust is very generalised. In the last week, France and Holland each held referendums about whether they should ratify the proposed EU Constitution. In advance, it had been thought that each country would vote 'yes', because of the overwhelming support for the constitution across the political elites of each country. President Chirac even advanced the date of the French referendum to increase the pressure for a 'yes' vote in other countries. However, in each country, the campaign rapidly focused on the supposed deficiencies, not of the constitution, but of the political classes who had recommended it. And ultimately, as we saw, the voters voted 'no'.

This tells me that, at some level, there is certainly a lack of trust, in that the voters, given an opportunity to humiliate their leaders of all parties, took it with both hands. In neither country could it be said there had been no warning. The French Presidential election of 2002 saw the surprise elimination of socialist Lionel Jospin in the first round of voting, leading to the anti-establishment hard right winger Jean Marie Le Pen standing against Chirac in the run off. In Holland, the maverick anti-immigration politician Pim Fortuyn would have been a major force following the 2002 election, had he not been assassinated.

Lack of trust can also be very specific. In the UK, debate in the recent general election focused on whether Tony Blair could be trusted, following allegations that

intelligence reports were read selectively in the run up to the Iraq war, in order to create a false impression that Saddam Hussein was more of a threat than he actually was.

Again, the lack of trust is real. Opinion polls have regularly fingered Mr Blair as the least trusted of the major politicians in Britain. On the other hand, the message is somewhat equivocal – after all, who won?

And we should expect equivocal messages. Trust – particularly public trust – is a simple-sounding word for a complex construct. One very welcome aspect of this report is its mature understanding of that complexity. Another is the emphasis it brings, not only on trust, but on trustworthiness.

The dual nature of trust, that not only do you have to trust me, but that I have to be trustworthy, is often neglected in the urge to improve, restore or foster trust.

We saw examples of that neglect in the UK election campaign. Mr Blair's strategy to increase trust was a mortification strategy. He would appear before very hostile audiences, who would be incredibly rude to him as he defended his position over Iraq and some other unpopular policies that he has been accused of driving through. With such ceremonies, we were intended to see his punishment and purging.

For the Conservatives, leader Michael Howard had a different strategy. His explicit strategy to create trust, apart from contrasting himself with Mr Blair, was to release detailed timetables of what he would do once in office. So he would say that on 26th September he would do x, y or z and that was a firm promise, and if the relevant minister couldn't do it by 26th September, he would be sacked.

Neither man significantly improved his trust ratings. They, or their strategists, seemed to believe that there was a magic bullet for creating trust. If I can just send out the right signals, then you will trust me.

There cannot be such a magic bullet, for the simple reason that if all I have to do is to send out the right signals to gain trust, then I have no incentive to be trustworthy.

There are many tragic aspects to the human condition, and this is one of them. I have control over my trustworthiness, but I don't benefit from it (at least in the short term). I benefit from your trusting me, over which I have no control. Conversely, you benefit from my being trustworthy, but all you control is your trust.

The important thing is not building trust *per se*, but rather in strengthening the links between my trustworthiness, and your trust in me. On these matters, the report before us today is admirably perspicuous.

To trust or not to trust. To be trustworthy or untrustworthy. The two parameters determine a 2x2 matrix. There are four possibilities. If I am trustworthy and you trust me, then all well and good; we can get on a cooperate productively. On the other hand, if I am untrustworthy and you don't trust me, then that's hardly a satisfactory situation, but at least no-one has risked or lost anything.

But what happens when there is a mismatch? The case where I am untrustworthy and you trust me is the one that gets the focus. You will lose the assets you risk. We have a case of fraud.

But there is another option, which is that I am trustworthy, but you don't trust me. No-one loses anything they already possess; you don't risk any assets. But what we have here is an opportunity cost. And this is the real cost, I believe, in the decline in trust. I wrote a book on trust a year or two ago, and here is one of the more surprising statistics I uncovered. In the 4th quarter of 2002, online fraud cost US retailers 160 million dollars. But they lost a further 315 million mistakenly rejecting legitimate sales because of over-zealous security systems. The opportunity costs were about twice those of the costs of fraud.

My worry, as trust declines, is that we are going to be avoiding fraud at a greater opportunity cost. But the evidence is equivocal. Let me close with an observation.

There has been an extraordinary ideological shift over the last twenty or thirty years. Back then, there were three political positions, left, right and centre. On the left there was socialism, the belief in class solidarity. On the right there was an authoritarian conservatism, a belief in the legitimacy of the existing social structure. In the centre was a paternal, Gladstonian liberalism. Each of these ideologies specifically links the individual's interests with those of the social structures around.

Nowadays, the ideological scene is very different. We still have left, right and centre. But on the left we have postmodernism, the celebration of diversity and the debunking of grand narratives. On the right we have neo-liberalism, the belief that the free exchange of resources encapsulates the preferences and interests of the individual. In the centre, we have Rawlsian liberalism, the view that people should be free to pursue their own ideas of the good (as opposed to the Gladstonian version, where people should be free to pursue Gladstone's idea of the good).

We also have an ideological fragmentation, with many different views that do not fit the left-right-centre model. We have green theory, feminism and other types of identity politics, Christian fundamentalism, Islamism, Islamic neo-fundamentalism, and so on. All these ideologies have in common the privileging of the convictions, beliefs or preferences of the individual.

This is a broad, worldwide shift, and there's little point bemoaning it. Indeed, there have been many gains from it. But as far as the trust debate is concerned, one clear result of this fragmentation has been a reduction in trust across ideological, interest or social barriers. We are much less likely to take the wise advice of American poet Richard Wilbur: "Go talk with those who are rumored to be unlike you". We have become increasingly cynical about the motives of those working politicians whose currency is compromise, and whose working life is devoted to the messy business of running a country of millions of people with diverse, and often opposed, interests.

Politicians seem to want methods for instantly restoring trust. Voters seem to want politicians to be hyper-clean. Each is cynical about the other. Neither attitude is realistic. As this report emphasises, the main action that any of us individually should take is to try to be as trustworthy as possible. The main thing that our public

institutions should do is to try to ensure that the intermediaries between trust and trustworthiness are sound. There are bound to be errors and mismatches; by definition trust is a risk.

But actually, today's democracies are relatively clean. Our cynicism is often overstated. Our societies could be more confident than they are, and less introspective. There are no quick fixes, but there is plenty of room for sober, careful, realistic discussion, and today's report is very welcome in that light.