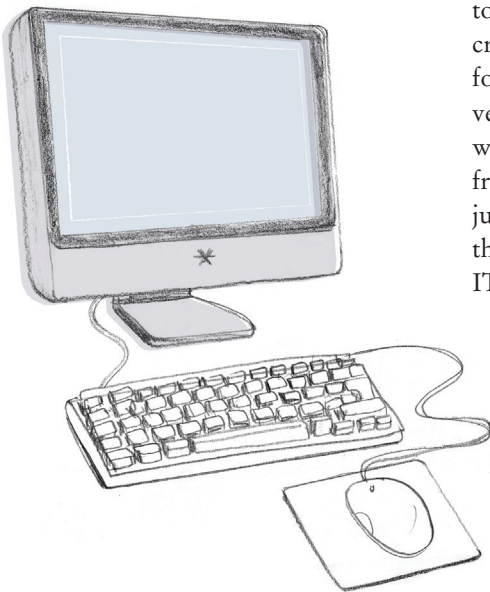


# ICT becomes an Election issue

The economy, healthcare, jobs, taxes, crime and education – these are the issues which politicians believe will win them votes on 6 May.

But this General Election, there is another sector taking centre stage which has never before been so widely discussed by Conservative and Labour – Information and Communication Technology (ICT).



ICT has earned its place as an election issue after a series of Government projects that many observers have criticised as failed, failing, absurdly late or obscenely expensive such as the £12 billion national programme for IT in the NHS (NPFIT).

Whoever wins power, significant cuts are expected in public sector ICT spending.

Should the Conservatives win, ICT investment will be driven by a very different strategy to that of Labour.

The Tories want smaller public sector ICT projects capped at £100 million and run on a decentralised and more collaborative basis. There will be more projects as a result but the procurement process should be shortened and each project should, in theory, be more manageable to deliver or contain if they go wrong.

This strategy is also intended to shake up the supplier landscape, creating procurement opportunities for SME's as well as the major ICT vendors and systems integrators. This would represent a significant shift from the current position, where just nine companies receive more than 60% of the total public sector IT spend.

The UK and Scottish ICT sectors are dominated by SME's so this move is intended to act as an incentivisation for such firms to compete for government business on a more level playing field.

Of course, it remains to be seen whether the Conservative strategy would be more successful than Labour's 'big bang' approach to ICT and whether it could meet the need of larger modernisation projects that may become necessary during the next parliament.

There are also some common themes between the two main political parties. For example, both want to introduce superfast broadband across the country (although they have different approaches to funding this project), make better use of open source software and make public sector data sets available online.

So the election battle lines have been drawn, and for the first time they include ICT.

The respective policies of the two main parties could be characterised as large scale, central control (Labour), versus a smaller scale, decentralised model (Conservatives). Which is better, or indeed, which will triumph come 7 May remains to be seen.

There is also a third scenario which is increasingly being supported by political commentators, where neither of these strategies would be implemented in their current form. In the event of a hung parliament, the carefully crafted policies making up the ICT strategy of our future Government could be traded, watered-down or even dropped, as the largest minority party negotiates with the smaller parties behind closed doors in an attempt to piece together a working majority.