The big political idea of 2013 is government as platform. It is not a new idea, but rather one whose time has come. It is also an idea that will seem more and more obvious and valuable as the gap between government resources and public needs continues to increase. The divide between the societies that have the values and the resources to make government as platform work, and those that continue to work through command and control, will help define the political cleavages of the 21st century.

To understand government as platform, first think of government as control tower: an entity that sits above us, directs and regulates us. Then imagine government as vending machine, a metaphor coined by University of Maryland professor Donald Kettl, whereby citizens pay taxes in and get services out. Government as platform, by contrast, is government as iPhone, providing the basic hardware and software to enable citizen participation, innovation and self-organisation.

The iPhone image comes from Tim O’Reilly, who has been writing about government as platform (which he calls government 2.0) for a decade. One of the examples he draws on is the US federal interstate highway system, developed in the 50s and 60s, in which the US government created the physical infrastructure that allowed a huge economic and social leap forward as people responded by manufacturing cars for highway driving, building motels and gas stations, and organising themselves economically and socially along these state lines in ways that suddenly became much easier to do. Government provides the platform and regulates interstate transport and commerce (think speed limits, trucking rules and laws governing all manner of cargo, from food to chemicals to machinery), but otherwise leaves it to the citizens to use the platform to build their businesses and connect in any way they please.

Information and communication technologies are once again game-changers in this regard. Maps are transforming international development; the ability of political activists to self-organise on Facebook and Twitter has been an important part of the Arab revolutions. The winners in the tech industry are virtually all platforms such as Flicker, Tumblr or MeetUp – businesses that harness the power and creativity of millions of users who then figure out how to use the technology provided for their own purposes. Government-provided platforms are generally more directed than that, but they include initiatives such as the UK government’s Red Tape Challenge, which crowdsources policy-change suggestions. Or take the Grand Challenges programmes launched by the Canadian government, or the US Agency for International Development and the White House, in which prize funds are offered for the best inventions aimed at tackling specific subjects such as infant mortality, water purification and urban renewal. The New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition was announced by the leaders of the G-8 countries in May – it creates a platform for governments, international organisations, corporations, NGOs, research institutes and others to partner in many different ways to advance the cause of increasing food security around the world. Hillary Clinton’s US State Department has created a similar initiative involving hundreds of public and private partners with the goal of achieving the adoption of 100 million clean cook-stoves around the world by 2020. And many cities and regional governments are joining the open-data movement, releasing data and allowing programmers to build public-service apps on top of it. Aberdeen City Council has published data sets covering parking charges to public toilets and sports facilities, for users of Yelp or Pipes to remix as they please.

The move to government as platform is also a profound shift in mindset. O’Reilly and others point out that government 2.0 is built around a set of principles that are often the exact opposite of the way government traditionally works. These principles include transparency (open standards and data); simplicity (build a simple system and let it evolve); participation (design systems and programmes to be as inclusive as possible); open-mindedness (learn from your critics); experimentation (including the embrace of failure as the way we ultimately learn to succeed); and visibility (track all participation to be able to learn from data mining about aggregate behaviour). Governments that are able to adopt and act on these principles are going to be able to mobilise enormous economic and social power in the service of addressing problems ranging from education reform to environmental protection to resilience in the face of a terrorist attack. They will be governments