HOW THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT WASTES OVER $400 MILLION PER YEAR
(and stifles an industry that could earn billions)

What's this about?

1.   At a time when the Australian Government is concerned with the level of debt, it is appropriate to bring to the notice of all elected representatives the fact that over $400 million dollars is wasted each year by government agencies at all levels, Federal, State and Local; paying for software that could be had for free.

2.   This behaviour not only wastes taxpayers' money, it stifles the growth of a truly indigenous Australian IT industry; an industry that would earn billions of dollars of taxable income and provide future employment for Australians at time when conventional industries, such as manufacturing, are in serious decline.

3.   This abysmal lack of imagination and leadership has other consequences which are not so obvious but are, nevertheless, vitally important to this country's, and, indeed, earth's future. Embracing and promoting the use of this free software would effectively combat the root causes of:

    a.   extremism (through providing people with unfettered access to information and education and by giving making available to them commercial opportunities);

    b.   climate change (through education, raising the status of women and hence reducing the rate of population growth); and

    c.   illegal immigration (by improving conditions in the countries from which these people are fleeing).

Open Source Software

4.   The free software I allude to is referred to as "Open Source Software".

5.   Open Source Software is software, developed by enthusiasts and by huge companies such as Google, IBM and Hewlett Packard (to name but a few). It is provided to users without charge and with all of the source code to the applications or operating systems being used. The only caveat placed on this arrangement is that if the user should modify the code and then distribute the application or operating system, they must make all of their source code freely available to other users. That is only fair. After all, they obtained the software under the same arrangements. This software licensing arrangement is called the General Public Licence (GPL).

6.   If you would like to see a fine example of Open Source Software go to http://www.libreoffice.org/ to see one of the world's best office suites. Largely built by volunteers and funded by donations. It runs on Windows, Apple and Linux computers.

7.   Similarly, you could go to http://www.postgresql.org/ to see the world's most technologically advanced and capable database which also runs on multiple operating systems.

8. The Linux operating system is itself Open Source Software, Its kernel forms the basis of the Android operating system, developed by Google. Android powers billions of smart phones, tablets and even notebook computers worldwide.

9. The kernel of Apple's operating system is Open Source Software.

10. A number of Asian countries, particularly China and Malaysia, have introduced Open Source Software throughout their government agencies; including to the desktop. The city of Munich commenced a program some years ago to replace all Microsoft software with Open Source Software. In doing so they have saved hundreds of millions of Euros.

11. Given this, one has to ask, "Why has the Australian Government not enthusiastically adopted such software?" Indeed, the Australian Government has done exactly the opposite! Whereas the UK government has mandated that document exchange between government and business should preferably be in Open Document Text format, the Australian Government has stipulated Microsoft's format; a "standard" that allows the inclusion of proprietary software.

12. *Importantly, the commercial model, upon which <u>Open Source Software is based, is the provision of services, not products</u>. As such it has the potential to be of enduring value to any economy that embraces it. It is particularly suitable for a country like Australia that is physically distant from large markets.*

13. The Australian Government, by using mainly proprietary operating systems and applications, largely provided by Microsoft and Oracle:

    a.   denies Australia's youth educational opportunities,

    b.   stifles the emergence of an indigenous IT industry which would be worth billions of dollars in export income, and

    c.   foregoes opportunities to significantly assist developing countries (whilst, at the same time, helping our own economy).

How is this so?

14. Foreign companies presently dominate the operating systems and software applications that run on computers commonly used in Government, business and privately. The use of proprietary software results in a huge outflow of capital to companies that pay very little tax in Australia. By using software applications covered by the GPL, where the source code to those applications is freely available, Australians would be able to fully participate with the world's best in this huge industry. This would be of great benefit to this nation's economy and its future security. It would also result in a substantial tax wind-fall once fully mature.

15. In addition to the benefit that Australians would accrue through this initiative, this software would also then be available to developing nations. Cost-affordable information technology has the potential to facilitate education and, through this means, assist in elevating the status of women in developing countries; thereby reducing the rate of growth of the human population - something that would go a long way towards addressing the ecological devastation this planet faces if the world continues on its present course. It also has the potential to provide unfettered access to information and commercial opportunities - essential enablers for any nation's development. Education and an informed viewpoint also has the ability to reduce extremism; largely the result of ignorance, prejudice and superstition.

16. With the help of the Bush administration and the World Bank I have played a part in demonstrating, beyond any doubt, the validity of this posit.

How to do this?

17.   It is not feasible for an Australian company to lead the way on this. It is most probably not efficient for even a State Government to lead on this. Instead, it needs to be done across the whole of Australian Government and it will take time but we must make the effort.

18.   At this moment, the Australian Government has been, at best ambivalent and, at worst, actively against embracing Open Source Software. Here are some examples of the bureaucratic obstruction that is in place:

   a.   The Australian Government Information Management Office has mandated that all office documents, exchanged between Government Departments and businesses, have to be in Microsoft's format.

   b.   The Australian Tax Office has, for many years, required all businesses and individuals use applications that will only run on a Microsoft Operating System in order to fully utilise the e-services it offers.

   c.   State Governments require that charitable organisations must use software that will only run on a Windows operating system to report on their activities and apply for funds.

19.   The first step is therefore to remove these artificial and wasteful practices/policies. The second is to establish test beds in order to determine where the inadequacies in Open Source Software lie and then to correct them. This leads neatly to the last part of this paper, namely...

How to support this?

20.   One of the objections raised by those who, for various reasons, are not enthusiastic about the prospect Open Source Software being adopted, is that it is not supported. They fail to appreciate what $400 million could achieve by way of support. What's worse, they also fail to appreciate what effect $400 million would have if it were spent in Australia, especially in regional centres, rather than being sent overseas to huge multinational companies who pay very little tax in Australia.

21.   If the Australian Government:

   a.   put a stop to these unthinking policies, and

   b.   took some part of the $400+ million it presently spends on closed source software and paid it as bursaries to gifted students in universities, to participate under supervision in relevant Open Source Software projects being conducted worldwide;

it could easily remedy any deficiencies that exist in the present Open Source Software applications it needs for its offices to function efficiently. Indeed, over time, it could make this software perfect for its needs.

22.   The results of this effort could be shared with the rest of the world to Australia's benefit and also to the benefit of those countries in need of aid, support and societal advancement.

23.   It's not often one is handed something that could be of such positive benefit to Australia whilst doing a great deal of good elsewhere. The only thing holding this back is that the Australian public, Australia's political leadership and its senior public servants are largely unaware of the existence of this asset and its potential. This paper is a small step in correcting this situation.

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