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President of Estonia, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, extolled the virtues of Estonia's e-government infrastructure and IT systems and discussed trust and identity on Tuesday in a keynote speech hosted by the Legatum Institute in London.

The broad theme of Ilves's speech was that of identity and trust. Making reference to Peter Steiner's famous 1993 New Yorker cartoon, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog", he put forward that "it is the role of government to come in and provide you with a secure identity, there is no other way of doing it, unfortunately...in the same way, only the government is able to enforce traffic laws and food safety standards". "Otherwise," he added, "the banks don't know if you're really a dog or not".

"Big Brother" vs "Little Sister"

He spoke of the difference in the way data is used by intelligence services compared with private sector organisations, who collect information via free apps or supermarket loyalty cards. "A lot of information out there is being used by companies and it has very little to do with the NSA or GCHQ or any of the other traditional "bad" guys. I prefer to call this 'Little Sister' as opposed to "Big Brother". 'Little Sister' knows everything about you and then tells everybody."

A key point was his emphasis on privacy vs data integrity. "A lack of privacy means people can see what you've said – but what happens when someone changes what you've said? When someone cannot just see what's in your bank account, but change what's in your bank account? I think that will be the big issue in the future that we have to deal with."

When it comes to the future, Ilves wishes to see a "Lockean social contract for the digital world", as opposed to the Hobbesian outlook of states such as Russia and Iran where the government ostensibly makes life safer by means of state control. "We need a contract between the state

and the citizens. Hobbes's view of life before government was as a war against all and that we need a strong sovereign. This is the view we see coming from people like Vladimir Putin and from places like Iran. 'We're going to make our country safe by making sure that we control everything.' What we need to do in the spirit of our liberal democratic and enlightenment tradition is come up with a deal between us and government."

On Monday President Ilves gave the opening address at the Chatham House conference "Power and Commerce in the Internet Age" and met with the UK Minister for Digital Affairs, Francis Maude.

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