

GTC: enabling trust online

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID MERKEL

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DAVID MERKEL has held senior US diplomatic positions at the Department of State, National Security Council, Treasury Department, Securities Exchange Commission and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Examples of his work include promoting democracy in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe, playing a key role in bringing former Warsaw Pact countries into European institutions, and recognising the importance of Afghanistan and Central Asia before the events of September 11, 2001. Mr Merkel has recently started working with the Global Trust Council, who are in discussions with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago about becoming a founding member of the GTC.

For most of your career you have focused on foreign policy and international finance, what attracted you to lend your efforts to the Global Trust Council?

The Internet, e-mail, twitter and mobile phones – these are all great innovations. Innovations that can keep friends and family in contact, enable people in remote locations to participate in long-distance learning, provide greater access to markets for small businesses and enable governments to provide services to citizens in a more convenient, cost-effective way. However, as we have learnt, there are challenges such as interoperability, protecting one's identity and protecting intellectual property rights. Almost all of us have been or know someone close to us who has been a victim of on-line crime, either through credit card identity theft or electronic bank fraud. We have also seen businesses and governments spend millions or even billions on 'solutions' that don't work because of problems such as interoperability or a lack of understanding of their business practices. Issues such as these prevent governments, businesses and citizens from fully utilising these exciting innovations effectively.

What is the central philosophy behind the GTC?

Our belief in the importance of the Global Trust Council and its mandate of enabling trust in digital communication comes from two reference points. Firstly, electronic interaction – communication via e-mail or on the Internet – is no longer a novelty but has become an integral part of our personal communication and business-to-business interaction, and is sought by governments as a means of delivering services to their citizens with greater convenience and reduced costs. In addition, we see more financial institutions using electronic banking and telecommunications companies to explore payment systems via cellular phones. The second premise is that the recent financial crisis has demonstrated the need for the Bretton Woods institutions to be updated in order to address the requirements of the modern world. These factors, the pervasive nature of electronic or digital interactions and the need for a new international organisation to encourage cooperation between countries and industry, point to the need for the Global Trust Council to provide a secure environment for digital interactions.

What makes the GTC approach different to that which is currently available?

Today, we are forced to give up unnecessary amounts of personal information, which is then stored on central databases, simply to interact digitally.

The GTC concept is based on a decentralised model, without the need for costly databases that need to be maintained by governments or businesses, thereby putting the individual in control of their own information and digital identity. In addition to reduced costs and improved effectiveness, it also reduces the risk of fraud, privacy intrusions, external attacks or loss of service due to technical failures, thereby increasing the robustness of doing business or delivering government services online because every interaction is legally traceable.

What are the main issues you think the GTC will need to address as it sets out to help governments and businesses?

I have already mentioned several but the one I would highlight here is the issue of legal interoperability. We need to help governments and businesses link between different systems, communicate effectively and quickly across borders and between legal jurisdictions. This is essential to see continued development of the professional Internet. The GTC addresses the issue of interoperability without the need to reinvest in new procedures or spend more resources upgrading existing equipment.

To make doing business on the internet as secure as doing business face-to-face, to have digital interactions supported within a legal framework that respects one's country's national legal system but can communicate beyond one's borders, to see the promise of greater access to government services in health or payment systems realised for the benefit of citizens, this alone ensures that business, communities and government services have a 'new space' in which to deal more effectively with customers, clients and citizens.

You are attending the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting and have been in Port of Spain recently for discussions with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago to become a founding member of the Global Trust Council. What made you choose Trinidad and Tobago?

Trinidad and Tobago is an attractive candidate as a founding member of the Global Trust Council

for a number of reasons. Firstly the GTC is a truly global organisation. The very nature of information and communication technology (ICT) provides the opportunity for anyone, from anywhere, who has a truly innovative idea to be successful. Trinidad and Tobago has shown itself to be a leader in the Caribbean and under Prime Minister Manning and his government's Vision 2020 programme, Trinidad and Tobago is poised to achieve great things for its citizens. The government has heeded the call for greater economic diversification, increased productivity and competitiveness and public sector reform. We believe that through mutual collaboration the government of Trinidad and Tobago has the opportunity to be a leader internationally, bringing legality and innovation to digital interactions while also safeguarding the rights and privacy of its citizens.

Through membership of the Global Trust Council, Trinidad and Tobago will have the opportunity to establish itself as a trusted financial centre for the Caribbean and beyond and will provide its citizens with greater access to government services in a more convenient and cost-effective way. The result will be that we will see the investment climate and business environment improve – which is in the interest of the entire region.

Why do you feel that CHOGM and the Commonwealth Business Forum is a good place to announce the arrival of such a revolutionary concept?

Firstly, it ties in so well with the theme of 'Partnering for a More Equitable and Sustainable Future' and the members' shared goals of democracy and development. Secondly, we call for a shift towards a more professional, transparent and trusted digital environment; a shift that will enable citizens, governments and businesses to verify the identities and roles of other parties, to act under an agreed legislation or policy, to protect administrations and businesses from digital misuse and to operate consistently within existing national legislation.

The GTC exists to balance the digital and physical worlds; to enable individual users, governments and businesses to reaffirm their legal rights; and to meet their obligations and responsibilities transparently and with integrity at all times.

As well as improved delivery of government services, how will this shift impact on doing business in Trinidad and Tobago?

The opportunity for all economies to develop new business models by adopting the GTC approach is exciting. Two successful, well-established organisations in the region have recognised this potential and are in the process of forming a joint venture to develop new

products and services, many of which will bring in citizens that are often excluded. First Citizens Bank and The TSL Group have joined forces in order to position themselves to become the first licensees to operate under the GTC Global Policy in the CARICOM region. They will be bringing exciting new innovations for use in the financial sector, for government and telecommunications – innovations that will enhance the trust we place in electronic interactions with these institutions.

Should all of the Commonwealth Heads be interested in what the Global Trust Council has to offer?

The GTC cuts across virtually all of the agenda items of this Commonwealth meeting: security, democracy, good governance, sustainable development, debt management, education, human rights, information and communication technology, law, and multilateral trade issues. By creating a trusted, safe and legally compliant platform, corporate social innovations are enhanced and new partnerships developed; financial governance worldwide can be strengthened: the regional and worldwide business opportunities are limitless. The GTC has been in development for the past 10 years and there has never been a better time for governments to take the lead in securing a sustainable digital environment for every citizen and business. There will be representatives from the GTC at the CHOGM and Business Forum events and they will be happy to discuss these issues further. Or alternatively, interested parties can visit www.globaltrustcouncil.org to find out more or to contact us directly. 

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The GTC offers a secure alternative to today's database world

