


## SOFTWARE

# Kelsey Hightower: If governments rely on FOSS, they should fund it

Kubernetes doyen talks to *The Reg* about keeping coders coding

 [Richard Speed](#)

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**INTERVIEW** Acclaimed engineer Kelsey Hightower, who stopped coding for money in 2023, remains an influential figure in the world of software, and he's proposing something that might stir up the open source community.

Funding open source is an ongoing hot topic. During a chat at Civo's recent Navigate event, Hightower joked with us how companies were happy to spend big on cloud subscriptions but tended to skimp when it came to paying a comparatively token amount for open source.

Open source developers, however, require reimbursement, and Hightower has some interesting ideas on how that could be accomplished. "I think we have all got a little complacent," he tells *The Register*.

"If you think about the current model ten years ago... We're going to let the startup that's funded by a VC handle it: they will pay the developers, fix the issues, deal with security compliance, and deal with the integration work.



Kelsey Hightower (pic: Civo)

"Then you end up in a situation where *only* they can do it because they have the skill set and expertise."

Hightower reckons there will be several models in the future of open source. One is where the project starts out as a managed service, and another where governments get involved.

"Governments today tend to subsidize utilities: internet access, water, sewerage, drainage – because all that stuff is truly utility, and it has to exist no matter what," he says.

"And if you think about some open source projects like the Postgres database, it probably needs to exist at this point, no matter what.

"I think if you're a government and you believe that Postgres is a database that you will use, you will probably independently fund it as well; you would say, 'Look, we want to figure out who do we employ or pay to make sure that it exists forever.'

"This could be something like the United Nations. This could be something like the way we think about waterways that are shared by multiple countries, the way we think about borders, how those are shared, intercontinental payments. I think at some point you'll have that model where we know certain things need to exist, and maybe the role of a foundation changes, CNCF, Apache Foundation, do they become a place where we can distribute these things?"

There are the other models: The service model, for example. Or one where a VC will cut a \$30 million check for something ambitious, new, and innovative. Hightower asks: "How do you sustain that?"

"Is there a world where someone like Linus Torvalds shows up and says, 'I'm going to change the software development game twice' – Git and Linux – and then just go away?"

Of Torvalds, Hightower adds the proviso: "A lot of his work is largely funded by the foundation that takes contributions from lots of other companies."

"Or do you get more of the 'I would rather go raise money, do my innovation ... and become a billionaire?' Do we get more Linus Torvalds or more Mitchell Hashimotos?"

"They come from the same place, right? Mitchell starts HashiCorp – he starts with a very free and open source tool called Vagrant. Lots of developers use it to create development environments on their laptops. But it became a large enterprise, selling to enterprises, and that means they become your primary customer, and they dictate a lot of the roadmap.

"Or do you say, 'This technology should exist, and I don't make much money on it. So be it.'"

With the Paris Olympics of 2024 fresh in everyone's minds, Hightower uses the sporting event as an example of how things might work: "There's an Olympic Committee that makes

sure the Olympics happen ... everyone shows up and competes, and athletes come and go, just like software developers: we come and go. We don't stick to these projects for a lifetime.

"There are a lot of people ... that would love to make the exact same money they make as an employee, to just completely contribute to open source every day. This would be a dream come true for millions of developers, in my opinion. But the model hasn't presented itself. We don't know how to do it exactly, but I do think the Olympics is a decent model."

Certainly, there'd be no harm in presenting a gold medal to that person in Nebraska who has thanklessly maintained a crucial part of the modern digital infrastructure. Being paid to do so would also doubtless help. Yet, as Hightower says, creating a model to do so remains a challenge.

"Every country invests in their athletes year-round, and they show up to compete at the highest levels, and when they can no longer do so, then the next breed of athletes show up, and there's always a pipeline for them to train to get better, and hopefully we create nice things."

In agreement with Hightower's suggestions, Amanda Brock, CEO of OpenUK tells *The Register* that in her view it is better to "look to open source as a digital public good".

"By accepting this we accept the need for government and the public sector to fund software infrastructure through open source.

"Only last week we saw datacenters re-characterized as critical national infrastructure in the UK. I'd expect to see our database and platform infrastructure acknowledged in a similar way in the not too distant future and to see a shift in public sector funding."

In an email to *The Register*, Peter Zaitsev, co-founder of Percona, says public money is better spent on open source and governments have a role to play.

"I think governments could invest more in open source, yet it would be wise to do so with the right strings attached, so the end product is actually made available as open source and supported effectively.

"I do not think it is an 'either/or' answer. Even though we can complain about VC-funded companies that do not make everything in their projects open source - or that in a number of cases have changed the license - I think they have generally had a positive impact on the open source ecosystem. Without that funding in the past, we might not have the communities and options that we have today."

Zaitsev adds: "I think there is a lot of potential for more support and contributions from enterprises which is not happening at the moment. When enterprises won't spend directly, we should encourage more participation and contributions.

"There is a great opportunity for [foundations] to partner with private (or government) investment funds to invest money in the projects which will be profitable/sustainable but will be foundation-controlled, avoiding risk of bait and switch situations. This model would support projects that are essential in software but that don't have a pathway to support a profit-making business." ®

***Don't Miss: The Register has more on our chat with Hightower coming next week, including a surprising take on AI...***

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