

## **Summary of Political IT issues at Labour and Conservative Conference 2008**

Beyond the media spin, talk of the economy, and the leadership debate; IT was a big issue at both the Labour and Conservative Party Conference season. The theme seemed to be creating IT for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but interestingly each conference had a different focus.

Labour's IT message was one of equality and inclusivity, with a presumption to intervene and regulate to maximise the benefits of technology.

The Conservative IT priorities were Privacy, Piracy and Content. The message was far more one of fragmentation rather than centralised regulation.

It was interesting that Green IT was not mentioned at either conference, it is still limited on the policy agenda, even though Government set out a [strategy](#) in the summer of how to green their own IT in Westminster.

Read on for the key issues debated at both conferences:

### **Labour Party Conference**

#### **Future of Broadband**

At an [IPPR](#)/Virgin Media fringe event, Cabinet Office Minister Tom Watson predicted that a Minister for Broadband would one day be appointed. It was agreed that useful responsibilities for such a person would include delivering broadband to remote areas. The event was centred on the UK's digital infrastructure and the future of ultra fast broadband. Also on the panel were Dominic Morris of Ofcom, Kip Meek of the Broadband Stakeholder Group and Vic Keegan, Guardian technology journalist, chaired by Lisa Harker IPPR.

Kip Meek spoke about the importance of broadband, and most particularly next generation access, in terms of optical fibre broadband. He spoke of the consequences of changes in broadband technology for providers who had invested heavily in first generation broadband. Mr Meek stated his belief that while government intervention was not necessary at this point; strong leadership and collaboration from government, industry and Ofcom would be required in the future.

Dominic Morris stated that the UK has the largest retail market for broadband in Europe and that consumers spend more time online in the UK than their US counterparts. He noted Ofcom's role in providing a regulatory service and the supporting of competition.

Vic Keegan mentioned the future of Web TV, virtual worlds and video conferencing, all of which would be affected by high definition, and require greater bandwidth capacities.

#### **Online Equality**

At a [New Statesman](#) Fringe Event, 'Connecting the Disconnected: Does Online Equality Matter', Paul Murphy, Minister for Digital Inclusion praised Gordon Brown's announcement that families would be given £700 towards a computer and getting their children on the internet. He was joined at the event by Cabinet Office Minister Tom Watson, Helen Milner from UK online centres and Becky Hogge from the Open Rights Group.

Paul Murphy discussed the Digital Inclusion Action Plan that the Government will be publishing in October. He said it is clear that access to the Internet obviously helped people, whether it is helping unemployed people to find a job or housebound people to do their shopping.

Helen Milner highlighted the link between digital and social exclusion – explaining that 75% of people that are socially excluded are also digitally excluded. She explained how

important the Internet is to look for jobs online; search and apply for council housing and assist children in their studies.

However, Tom Watson, Minister for Transformational Government, which aims to wrap services around the citizen, stressed that not everybody in the country would want to access the internet and so services should still be available in a number of different ways. Helen Milner agreed with him and said that most people do have access to the Internet from UK online centres or their local library, and yet many do not use them. Tom Watson also said that he thinks the private sector should invest to boost digital inequalities, and it was the Government's responsibility to provide a regulatory framework. Helen Milner agreed with this saying that the private sector could look into particular projects, for example why only 75% people living in social housing have internet access, and what can be done to boost this number.

At a separate fringe, Dominic Morris from Ofcom suggested that a minimum service obligation price for broadband operators be addressed.

## **Conservative Party Conference**

### **Content and Use of the Internet**

At a fringe meeting about the Internet 'Connecting the Disconnected', sponsored by New Statesman and [UK Online Centres](#), Jeremy Wright MP spoke of the savings in administration costs that Government and companies could gain through services online, but they also needed to be easy to use. He said that Government should not create barriers in legislation, and need to provide sufficient funding to help run online services.

Mr Wright said it was not right that a third of UK households did not have access to the internet. He suggested that there could be progress through mediums such as mobile phone internet access for people who did not have computers.

At an event about a connected country, sponsored by Virgin Media and [Policy Exchange](#), Ed Vaizey, Shadow Arts Minister, debated the issues around regulation of content – suggesting he thought there was a strong argument to be had. He recognised that Ofcom, as a national body, was an inappropriate option, suggesting that a supranational body, with a light regulatory approach, would be his preferred option.

### **Data Protection/ Online Privacy**

At the 'Connecting the Disconnected' event, Becky Hogge of the Open Rights Group was concerned how the Government is trying to regulate the internet. She said that online privacy was becoming more prominent and that this could put people off using the internet.

Helen Milner said that the training programmes provided by UK Online centres teach about online safety and security.

At an event on Politics and the Future of the Internet, sponsored by Microsoft and the Centre for Policy Studies, Jeremy Hunt (Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport) warned that there was a low level of trust for people in Government to look after certain information. He said that a Conservative Government would establish protocols for the handling of government information. It was discussed at this event how industry was left way behind in terms of internet security, but was determined not be left behind in terms of privacy.

### **Piracy**

At the 'Connecting the Disconnected' internet event, Becky Hogge highlighted that issues such as copyright infringement and crime on the internet could lead governments to change the direction of the internet as regulation was applied.

**So what does this mean for the IT industry?**

IT is clearly an important issue on the political agenda this year, which is evident from the popularity of the IT fringes at both Labour and Conservative party conference. The focus was the future of IT, particularly the Internet, for 21<sup>st</sup> century society. With a general election looming, there are clear political actions arising from both Labour and Conservative IT policy.

The buzz words at Labour were social inclusion, equality and inclusivity - the IT industry needs to be able to demonstrate how it can help improve social objectives. Labour's remit seems to be to intervene and regulate to maximise the benefits of technology, which could provide threats for companies or alternatively positive opportunities for industry engagement.

The Conservative IT priorities were Privacy, Piracy and Content. The philosophy was to avoid centralised regulation, and the IT industry can have a big part to play here.

The fact that green IT did not feature at either conference demonstrates how this particular aspect is still limited on the policy agenda. IT companies need to be talking to policymakers now about the importance of IT for the wider green debate.