

**A tribute to Derek Wyatt, founder of APIG  
and Joint Chairman of apComms 2006-10  
By Richard Sarson**



Parliament lost one of its most passionate IT champions of recent years, when Derek Wyatt decided not to stand for re-election this year.

When Wyatt entered Parliament for Labour in 1997, he was already an early adopter of email, sending about five a week to his constituents alongside 200 snail-mail letters. By December last year, the proportion had changed, and he sent 150 emails and only two letters. Whereas answering a constituent's query by letter takes a week, he believes that an email demands an instant response, and tries to answer any constituent contacting him this way within 24 hours: Radio 5 live once described him as "the fastest emailer in the west".

Wyatt, a larger-than-life figure who gained a cap for England playing international rugby, never made it to ministerial status, his chief legislative achievement being amendments to the Computer Misuse Act, which won him the Internet Service Providers' Association Hero Award in 2006.

His influence, however, has been greatest in activities outside the Chamber. When he arrived in the House in 1997, he felt no-one in Parliament was paying enough attention to the emerging internet, and formed the All Party Internet Group (APIG). The group held select-committee-style inquiries and published influential reports on topics such as spam email, the retention of communications data and digital rights management.

By 2006, however, it became clear that there were too many all party groups dealing with IT, fragmenting their power, and Wyatt merged APIG with the Communications and Mobile Groups to form apComms (<http://www.apcomms.org.uk>). He now believes that further mergers of the IT-oriented All-Party Groups will present a more coherent face for IT to the new wave of MPs.

Perhaps Wyatt's most lasting achievement was to help create the Oxford Internet Institute (OII), which now churns out DPhils and MScs in the Social Sciences of the internet. He obtained funding for the body in under three months, largely by threatening to go to Cambridge if he did not receive a quick decision, and the OII is now one of the most influential internet research institutions in the world.

Wyatt is a multiple award-winner for his Parliamentary website (<http://www.derekwyattmp.co.uk/>), which passed through five iterations since 1997. He explains his success with several "musts" for MPs' websites. They must be updated four or five times a day. They must have 'stickability', which means covering every aspect of constituency life, from bus passes to link roads. More important, they must offer constituents, as he did through his blog, the opportunity to argue with their MPs, and vote on local issues. He also started a virtual surgery for his constituents, and offered a local news service on his site, which he claimed to have reached a higher circulation than the local newspaper, with 12,000 visitors a week.

Wyatt did not expect to retain his seat at the 2005 General Election, and believes the main reason he scraped home by 79 votes was because his website “was accessible, entertaining and honest”.

In a further bout of innovation, Wyatt went live at the beginning of this year with the first ever iPhone app for an MP, ‘MyMP’ (<http://mymp.publiczone.co.uk>), which allowed constituents to engage in debates with him on key issues. He hopes services like this will add a new mobile dimension to the way citizens interact with politicians. Already several dozens of MPs have set up their own ‘MyMP’ apps.

Wyatt was one of the House of Commons’ earliest adopters of social networking, with a presence not only on Facebook but also on Second Life, MySpace, LinkedIn, Bebo, Flickr and Twitter. He feels that, although it is still too early to find any evidence of electoral advantage from joining such networks, it is better to try anything to reduce the gap between the MP and his constituents than to do nothing, as most MPs do.

Wyatt has always believed there is not much the UK can do on its own to regulate a global internet, and since 2003 he has led regular delegations of MPs to the Senate’s annual “internet caucus” in Washington. On one of these visits, he surprised his hosts by pointing out that much of the world’s spam came from the US. On his last visit in February, he rocked the boat again, by telling the caucus that the vast data-centres underpinning cloud computing would eat electricity and fail “green audits”.

Wyatt worries about how the internet will be governed in future. In November last year he attended the UN Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt, as part of a UK Parliamentary delegation. The annual IGFs – monster gatherings of the net’s many stakeholders – are the nearest that the internet gets to a world Parliament. At Sharm el Sheikh, there were 1,200 attendees: civil servants, telecommunications carriers, freedom of information activists, domain name registrars and regulatory bodies. But the UK is usually the only country which sends Parliamentarians, and Wyatt believes that this helps the nation punch above its weight in a vital ideological battle.

All this is unfinished business, and he hopes that his successors, the new IT champions in the House, will realise that the politics of the web are fascinating, important, and maybe even a way to political advancement.

Overall, Wyatt feels the amateur culture at Westminster when it comes to IT stopped him making full use of his technology understanding for his party and country. He would have liked to have been a minister at some stage, and at one point last year thought he was going to be. Ultimately perhaps, he was simply too much of both a maverick and a nerd for Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, but he leaves Parliament a more IT-savvy place for his interventions.

Richard Sarson is a technology journalist who specialises in the politics of IT.

A version of this Article was originally published in *E-Government Bulletin* issue 311 in May 2010.