



Ian Taylor MBE

Ian Taylor, previously a Vice chairman of PITCOM and Executive Committee Member of apComms, retired at the 2010 General Election. Richard Sarson pays a personal tribute to him, and fears that his experience will be missed in the new Parliament.

At a PITCOM conference in 1995, I came in late in the middle of a speech, which showed so much command of technology that I thought the speaker must be an IT professional. I was wrong. I discovered at the end of the talk that he was the Minister, Ian Taylor.

A pioneering Minister

Ian notched up several firsts, when, in 1995, he became Minister for Science and Technology in John Major's government. He got himself an email address. He remembers "the Civil Servants looked at me as if I was slightly unbalanced".

He got much the same reaction from his civil servants, when he set up a multimedia advisory council bringing together for the first time people from the IT industries, radio, television, print media and Intellectual Property Rights. "I got the impression that they had never met each other, except perhaps at Ascot. Now they own each other!"

He launched "IT for all", the first initiative to try to tackle the digital divide. The idea for an auction of radio spectrum was his idea. He expected to raise £2 billion. In fact, in 2000, when Labour got around to auctioning 3G mobile phone licences, it raised £22 billion. This vast sum, Ian Taylor found to be over the top, and deprived the mobile industry of funds for the development of 3G networks. He still feels guilty about it!

He also claims that the original plans for digital switchover, only now coming to fruition, were laid on his watch. And he put the first British money into the Large Hadron Collider.

In February 1997, Taylor's colleagues in the Cabinet Office launched *government.direct*. This proved to be the sketch-plan for Labour's e-government initiatives over the next thirteen years. Taylor looks back on his three years as Technology Minister with pride. "We did see the shape of the future; they were pioneering days."

Almost single-handed, he privatised European Telecom

But to me, his greatest achievement as Minister was not in Westminster, but Europe. In 1995, Martin Bangemann, the European Commissioner for Industry and Telecommunications, decided to try to persuade the Member States to liberalise and privatise their national telecommunications companies, as Mrs Thatcher had privatised BT in the 1980s. This was an uphill struggle, as France Telecom, the Deutsche Bundespost etc were all deeply embedded in their countries' government establishments. Bangemann looked to Britain to sell privatisation. Ian Taylor found himself criss-crossing Europe selling the benefits of the UK liberalised experience to his reluctant opposite numbers. Ian was ideally suited to this task, fluent in French and German and a passionate European.

According to Ian, the turning point came one day when he had flown from Luxemburg to Paris for a meeting with his French opposite number, Francois Fillon – now Prime Minister of France. On the plane he read an article in the Figaro about how French industry had got fed up with France Telecom for its high prices and slow rate of technological change. At the meeting, Fillon read Taylor a lecture on how a BT-style privatisation would not work in France, because French industry thought France Telecom was doing a splendid job. Ian pulled his Figaro from his briefcase. Collapse of French politician!

From then on in, it was all downhill! France Telecom was partially privatised in 1998, and most of the other national carriers across Europe by 2000. Two people, Martin Bangemann and Ian Taylor had changed the shape of Telecoms in Europe. It was the only time, before or since, that a European Commissioner and a British Minister have ever together made Europe dance to a British tune. And he did it when most of his Tory colleagues were becoming more and more Eurosceptic.

Philip Virgo remembers being told of another of Ian's linguistic coups, "a meeting in Paris where translation had not been laid on, and Ian acted as the interpreter between the French and the Germans. Apparently they were so astounded at such an unusually helpful and informed British minister that they happily accepted his suggested compromise between their positions - which just happened to equate to the UK position that the DTI officials had previously assumed was unacceptable to both. He had a well-earned reputation for getting more by negotiation than his colleagues wanted to achieve by "force"."

Ian's successes in Europe prompt the speculation that if a junior Minister in a Eurosceptic government, who can speak three languages can achieve so much, what will a Deputy Prime Minister who speaks five and has an intimate knowledge of the workings of Brussels be able to negotiate!

In the wilderness

After the New Labour landslide in 1997, as it implemented the direct.gov plans under the "Modernising Government" brand, Taylor was rather flattered whenever he recognized as his own certain phrases in Tony Blair's speeches about 'e-government'. Clearly a civil servant had pulled Taylor's old speeches out of a drawer, and dusted them down for use by the new Prime Minister.

During this time all sides of the House listened to his speeches in the Chamber with great respect. Labour members would interject ribaldly “why don’t you come over and join us?” As an outsider, I like to visualise what would have happened had he done so. The combination of Ian and Stephen Timms might have driven e-government along faster than other less IT-oriented New Labour Ministers!

He was very generous to his political opponents. He often complimented Stephen Timms for “getting a grip” on the technological problems confronting him, and at a lunch in Nova Scotia during the 1998 PITCOM study tour of Canada, he amazed the New Labour members by saying that Tony Blair had carried out a master stroke by appointing Peter Mandelson as DTI Minister!

But Ian Taylor got no credit from his own party. He says himself that John Major, when Prime Minister, “showed no interest in talking up our IT-policy successes”. Nor, after the Tory defeat of 1997, did William Hague and Ian Duncan Smith, “recognize what we had achieved for IT in Government.” Taylor also had a problem; he was a notorious pro-European. Except for a short spell as a junior Northern Ireland Minister, he ruled himself out of a shadow job in response to the party’s increasingly Euro-hostile stance. His constituency party even tried to deselect him for “heresy”. Finally, in 2006, David Cameron appointed him as chair of the Conservative Party’s Policy Task-force on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, and Ian is pleased that “a lot of the ideas have been picked up as Tory policy”.

However, he did find somebody who did appreciate what he had done as Minister. When, attending a conference in Madrid a year or two into the New Labour era, he, much to his surprise, was summoned to the office of the Spanish Industry Ministry. The Minister shook his hand warmly, and thanked him personally for persuading the Spanish Government three years previously to privatise and liberalise Telefonica, now one of the main global telecoms companies. Yet, at home and in his own party, he remains unrecognized and unthanked. Indeed, “a prophet is not without honour, except in his own country”.

The trouble with Parliament

He is also disappointed that Parliament in general has still not embraced IT. Ian Taylor worries that although MPs have more knowledge of technology than they had in 1997, they show little interest in IT policy. He claims that “people in the House think that you shouldn’t show too much expertise in case you are written off as a ‘bit of a boffin”, and you might be accused of having ‘outside interests’. “No one looks at Technology and Science as a career-enhancing move.” In 2006, he complained that “I am the only person in the Tory party who sees understanding of IT policy as a necessary qualification for political advancement!”

He has spent much of his time since being a minister involved with All Party Groups like PITCOM, EURIM, apComms and the Space Committee. He finds them important to Parliamentarians because “they interface with the outside world”. In an article in “PITCOM at 25: a short history”, he confesses that as a Minister, he “had to seek out, with some difficulty, willing allies to help what I was trying to achieve – in particular to expand awareness of the potential of

ICT in the internet world” and found it in the All Party Groups. (in the same publication Stephen Timms, then Chief Secretary to the Treasury, said much the same, that “lessons from PITCOM will be at the forefront of my thinking”.)

Ian Taylor worries that government (with a small g) still thinks of what technology can do TO people rather than FOR people in matters like CCTV and ID cards. Another worry for him is that young people, who should be designing the technology are now just consuming it in the form of YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. He would like to see schools relearn how to generate the engineering culture: inquisitiveness and the excitement of understanding and designing gadgets and software. Another debate which fascinates Taylor is the abuse of the openness of Wikipedia. Just how much editorial control is needed, to make the Web a reliable source of information, without jeopardizing its expansion?

Ian attended the two most recent Internet Governance Forums in Hyderabad in 2008 and Sharm el Sheikh in 2009, where he joined his Labour colleagues, Alun Michael, Andrew Miller and Derek Wyatt in emphasising the UK’s progress in encouraging best Internet practice and in helping African countries to widen the use of the Internet.

Alun Michael – whose last Ministerial office was at the DTI at the time of the World Summit, which established the IGF process - pays particular tribute to Ian’s collegiate approach across parties in the House of Commons. “It reflects a generosity of spirit as well as a deeply practical enthusiasm for pursuing ‘what works’”, he says.”

There is much unfinished business, and Ian Taylor hopes that his successors, the new IT champions, will realise that the politics of the Web are fascinating, important, and maybe even a way to political advancement.

We can only lament that he will not be in Parliament to train up these new champions.

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