

An Information Society at the Service of its Citizens

A contribution to the
Conservative
Policy Review

"No, most of our political elite has not realized that the world is flat."

Thomas Friedman

About the Digital Economy Policy Group

Developments in the digital economy are transforming all aspects of the economy, both the public and private sector. They are also having a profound impact on individuals, through social networking and the increasing use of e-commerce, on-line information and learning. Information technology is changing the face of business, education and training and is starting to have a big impact on the organisation of government.

The Conservative Technology Forum was founded nearly thirty years ago to provide policy ideas for the Conservative Party. Re-launched in 2003, it has been active in promoting policy debates on the digital economy. In November 2006, Rt Hon Oliver Letwin MP, who leads the Conservative Party's Policy Review, accepted a proposal from Malcolm Harbour MEP, Chairman of the Conservative Technology Forum (CTF), to provide input into the process of policy development by establishing a Digital Economy Policy Group. The Group's remit was to examine the future directions for the digital economy, and identify the key issues that a future Conservative government should consider. Following a review with Oliver Letwin, the group is now working on more detailed policies in the areas of security, citizens' information rights and local government.

To carry out this task, the Forum invited a number of experts to participate and add their perspectives. The group met six times, from December 2006 to July 2007. It also participated in a session of the Digital Economy Policy Group of the European Ideas Network, which met in London in March 2007. The recommendations are made by the CTF, and are not necessarily endorsed by all participants.

We would particularly like to thank John Purvis MEP, Syed Kamall MEP and Giles Chichester MEP for their valuable contributions to the report.

Conservative MEPs have been deeply engaged in EU digital economy policies. They strongly supported the Communications Framework legislation, and the drive for de-regulated, open markets. They have also promoted research support and underlined the need for the EU to develop a strong position in the global economy through innovation and application of IT.

Policy leaders Malcolm Harbour MEP and Giles Chichester MEP have also been active members of the Conservative Policy Group on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, under the leadership of Ian Taylor MP.

Summary of Main Recommendations

Information technology will continue to evolve at a rapid pace, and its applications will have a disruptive impact on society, the economy and government. The first 21st century Conservative Government will have the opportunity to harness that disruptive potential and use it to benefit citizens. It can do this by embracing IT in policy making and implementation, and by creating a policy framework that favours innovation, conscious that technology will always move faster than any legislation that may seek to control it.

In business, the digital economy is the economy. The effective use of IT underpins the productivity improvements in manufacturing and services which are essential to sustain the UK's global competitiveness. Government's role is to provide the business climate which will enable that transformation. The top priority is to ensure that we have the management and workforce with the right skills to grasp the opportunities and to understand and apply the technology. We also need a stronger research base and an innovation culture that encourages IT business start-ups. Creative industries have great opportunities in the digital economy and need to be embraced within mainstream enterprise policy.

In transforming public services, the evolving technologies are well aligned with Conservative policy goals of delegating more decisions closer to citizens. IT allows service providers to develop tailored systems responding to local needs and helps users make informed choices. Government's role is to set a "light touch" framework, ensuring that local systems can "inter-operate" with each other. Bold political leadership will be required, to encourage local innovation and to ensure that IT is used to help transform the way

things are done, and not merely mechanise existing practices. Local government must be deeply engaged, as it will have to play a central role in IT-driven change.

A Conservative Government should use social networks to engage citizens in reviewing policy choices and in getting fast feedback on the quality of public services. It should also engage the expertise of professionals - in health and education, for example. It must respond to concerns over the "darker" aspects of network society too. Government has limited means to control web content, but it has a clear role in encouraging responsible behaviour, including content rating and tagging schemes. **We should consider an enhanced role for the Information Commissioner, implementing a Citizen's Charter of Information Rights, covering data held by government and how it is used.**

A Conservative Government should set the goal of making the UK one of the safest places to go on-line. It must have a properly co-ordinated programme to police e-crime effectively and build citizens' confidence. This task must be led at Cabinet level and engage public and private sector. **We suggest a cross departmental task force, with an agenda including intelligence, investigation, skills and countermeasures.** We also recommend the establishment of a strong cyber crime co-ordinating unit. Based in London, it will work nationally and internationally.

We strongly recommend that all Policy Review teams evaluate the transforming and enabling potential of IT in their strategies, and ensure that innovation is encouraged. We have set out a number of areas where we see that IT can have a significant impact – in health, education, social inclusion, transport, environment and overseas development. We commend these ideas to the Policy Groups covering these topics.

About the contributors



Malcolm Harbour is Chairman of the Conservative Technology Forum, MEP for the West Midlands and EPP-ED Coordinator on the Internal Market and Consumer Protection Committee.

Giles Chichester is MEP for the South-West and Gibraltar and the EPP-ED Coordinator on the Industry, Research and Energy Committee.

Dr. Syed Kamall is MEP for London and Conservative spokesman on International Trade. He has worked as IT systems analyst and strategy consultant to the telecommunications industry.

John Purvis is MEP for Scotland and Vice-Chairman of the European Parliamentary Committee on Economic and Monetary Affairs.

Cllr David Hopkins is a Local Councillor in Milton Keynes, and the Council's e-Transformation Champion. He has over 30 years experience in the IT Sector.

Dr. Simon Moores is Managing Director of Zentelligence (Research) Ltd, a vice chairman of the Conservative Technology Forum and a Conservative councillor for the Isle of Thanet, Kent.

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Nicholas Beale is a social philosopher and strategic consultant advising the top management of FTSE 100 companies. His books include *Constructive Engagement* and *Cybernavts Awake*.

Fiona Clarke-Hackston is Director of the British Screen Advisory Council (BSAC), an advisory body to policymakers on all aspects of the audiovisual industries in the UK.

Nick Penston is Public Policy Manager at Cisco.

Agnieszka Matuszak is Parliamentary Assistant to Malcolm Harbour MEP, contributing to his work on the European Internal Market and the digital economy.

We have also taken evidence from the following organisations: Microsoft, BT, EDS, Experian, IBM, SAP, and Cisco.

The Conservative Technology Forum welcomes new members who would like to participate in its research work. It also holds regular meetings in the House of Commons, bringing together MEPs and Shadow Spokesmen with academics and business experts.

For more details contact the Secretary General, Terry Bowers at terry.bowers1@btopenworld.com.

The full text of the report is available at <http://www.conservativetechnologyforum.equology.com/html/>