



Tech at the 2014 Party Conferences

Political Intelligence & Hotwire PR Breakfast Briefing

Tech at the 2014 Party Conferences – Breakfast Briefing

Political Intelligence and our partner agency Hotwire hosted a breakfast briefing on the 2014 Party Conferences and the discussions around technology issues. The event was attended by a mixture of public relations and public affairs professionals from a range of technology companies representing a variety of sectors, including e-Commerce, printing & document management as well as mobile communication.

The briefing kicked-off with an overview of the key political announcements from the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat conferences. The key take-away was that technology issues failed to break into any major top line announcements. Whilst there were keynote mentions such as the Chancellor's comments on tackling tech companies who avoid tax and Theresa May's plans to resurrect the Comms Data Bill, the major policy announcements focussed on other issues more salient to voters such as health, the economy and welfare.

Despite the lack of top-line announcements, there was a strong feeling among attendees that tech issues did play a larger role during this year's conference season than ever before. The Tech discussions were predominantly focussed on the fringes and the main action took place at TechCentral, which for the first time provided a dedicated hub for discussing technology issues at the conferences. We were proud to sponsor TechCentral, which alongside other fringes, provided a platform to debate issues such as the use technology in healthcare, big data, privacy, security, data retention, innovation, the sharing economy or skills.

Each of the three parties adopted a different approach to tech at their conferences. Labour has not yet fully developed its approach. The Shadow Chancellor cautioned about tech hollowing out the labour market but there were also more positive noises, from the likes of Chi Onwurah MP and Stella Creasy MP as well as the launch of the Labour Digital report with more than 80 policy recommendations. Fitting for a party in Government, the Conservatives seemed to present a more developed approach and highlighted tech in a number of keynote speeches. There was also a lot more buzz at the Conservative fringe events than at the other conferences. The Liberal Democrats in turn tackled some of the big ethical issues, including the concept of a Digital Bill of Rights, net neutrality and surveillance being debated on the conference floor. The Lib Dems were also the only main party that put forward a strong positive case for immigration as a need to help develop the necessary skills for the workforce of the future.

The briefing concluded by providing a brief insight into the development of communications strategies. Tech is clearly relevant for all political parties but it is not a doorstep issue. The key recommendation was therefore to link tech to wider policy issues and to develop a conversation that touches on and incorporates wider policy issues that matter to politicians and voters. This is particularly relevant in areas such as health and transport as well as local and national government services.

Below we provide an on overview of all the key announcements. Get in touch if you want to discuss things further.



Top Tech Announcements of the 2014 Party Conferences



Miliband's commitment to green – Tech announcements were few and far between among the Labour front bench but Miliband did make clear his support for green technologies and committed to making the UK a "world leader in the green economy" by 2025. In addition, the Shadow Chancellor briefly signalled support for "clean technology and the creative industries" but did not provide any further detail.

Labour's Digital Policy Review – Shadow Cabinet Minister Chi Onwurah MP was very active on the tech fringe event circuit and is leading Labour's Digital Policy Review; a part of the party's formal pre-election policy review process. Key focus areas include digital inclusion, data sharing and public sector procurement.

Number One in Digital – Labour Digital, a self-described "network of digital experts", launched a report calling for the party to commit to a £10bn, five-year plan to make the UK the world's leading digital economy and society by 2020. The report contains 82 policy recommendations, was well-received by the tech fringe crowd and will likely go some way to informing Labour's Digital Policy Review. Once refined, some areas could end up being adopted as official party policy.

Balls: technological change – In his speech to conference, the Shadow Chancellor spoke of rapid technological change replacing traditional skilled jobs, and sought to link the changing skill requirements of the labour market with a Tory "race to the bottom". Balls outlined Labour plans to work with employers to introduce a gold standard technical qualification.

Creasy on disruptive technologies – At a number of conference fringe events Stella Creasy MP, Shadow Minister for Business, Innovation and Skills argued that the role of Government was to "crowdsource", not "crowd-control"; to understand digital not as a technology but as a way of working; and to create the environment in which "creativity can be unleashed".



Osborne targets tech tax avoidance – The Chancellor singled out technology companies as going "to extraordinary lengths to pay little or no tax" in the UK. He stated that he would "put a stop to it" through leading global work to change international tax rules, and would target avoidance schemes such as the "Double Irish".

May pledges to re-introduce Communications Data Bill – The Home Secretary pledged to re-introduce the Communications Data Bill, previously abandoned in 2013 following the Lib Dems withdrawal of support. Furthermore, May's scathing attack on the Liberal Democrats triggered an unedifying fight between the two coalition parties.

Independent Review of Sharing Economy announced – Business and Enterprise Minister Matthew Hancock MP, launched a new independent review of the sharing economy. The review will aim to make the UK a 'global centre' for the sharing economy. The findings are expected to be published this year.

Maude backs digital government – Francis Maude MP, the Minister for the Cabinet Office, stressed that he wants the UK Government to be the "most digital in the developed world" and, unsurprisingly, praised the work that the Government has done so far to meet this aim. He described the Government's online presence as 'a digital role model' that others should follow.



Javid argues UK broadband must rival South Korea – In his keynote speech, the Culture Secretary, stated his aspiration that the UK's broadband coverage will one day rival that of South Korea and Japan. Whilst the Government is making progress with its ambition of achieving 95% superfast broadband coverage by 2017, the UK still lags well behind the 1000 Mbps enjoyed in South Korea!



LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

Clegg's riposte on Communications Data Bill – The Deputy Prime Minister continued his war of words with Home Secretary Theresa May accusing her of playing "party politics" before adding: "Your Communications Data Bill was disproportionate, disempowering - we blocked it once and we'd do it again".

Calls for a Digital Bill of Rights – The party wants to pass a Digital Bill of Rights to define and enshrine the digital rights of the citizen, protect people from unacceptable intrusion by the state and by other organisations, and giving people more control over their data.

Cable highlights key role of innovation – Business Secretary Vince Cable used his speech to highlight the importance of the state in sponsoring R&D in innovation. The Lib Dems want greater public funding on a longer timescale for innovation, a ring-fenced science budget, more 'catapult' innovation and technology centres and the creation of a green innovation arm within the new Business Bank.


The Lib Dems would back net neutrality – As mentioned in their Pre-Manifesto, if in government, the Lib Dems will back the principle of net neutrality and "safeguard the essential freedom of the internet while ensuring the reasonable protection of individuals and businesses".

Clegg labels the Lib Dems the "party of education" – This declaration followed their pre-manifesto which indicated the party "will prioritise expanding digital literacy and connectivity" and aim to have one of the most "digitally confident and connected societies in the world by 2020".

Digital goods and services – Liberal Democrat members passed a motion on an Equalities Policy Paper calling for a review of anti-discrimination law, guidelines and standards on access to digital goods and services to ensure that they are fit for the modern age and to ensure fair access to digital public services, the digital economy and the workplace.



Key Policy Announcements of the 2014 Party Conferences

			
Economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aim of one million new jobs by 2025 in the 'green economy' Increase in the number of new homes being built to at least 200,000 homes a year by the end of the next Parliament Introduction of a Mansion tax and Tobacco Levy Reintroduction of the 50p tax rate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rise in the 40p income tax rate from £41,900 to £50,000, and increase of the tax free allowance from £10,500 to £12,500 Building of 100,000 new homes for first time buyers and the building regulations will be relaxed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduction of two new fiscal rules from 2017/18: Debt must fall as a proportion of national income every year except during a recession; and balancing the overall budget over the economic cycle with an exception to enable investment in projects that help UK growth The personal allowance to rise to at least £12,500 New Council tax bands
Business	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Boost take up of apprenticeships so they equal the number going to universities Halve the number of people in low pay by 2025 and raise the National Minimum Wage to £8 by 2020 Devolving £30 billion of funding and control over business rate revenue to the regions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tougher rules to be introduced in the Autumn Statement to tackle multinational companies that do not pay their tax. Ensure the UK has the most competitive corporate taxes in the G20 Scrap zero-hour contracts Aim of 3 million apprentices by 2020 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No support for the construction of any airports in the south-east after the leadership lost a motion in favour of expanding Gatwick Formation of a Workers Rights Agency Single National Minimum Wage for 16-17 year olds in work of 1st year of apprenticeship
Welfare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expansion of free childcare for working parents to 25 hours a week Scrapping the winter fuel allowance for the wealthiest pensioners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Abolishment of the 'death tax' on a pension pots, meaning inherited pension funds would be tax free if kept as pension savings Freeze of benefits paid to people of a working age for two years, and lower the cap on benefits from £26,000 to £23,000 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expansion of free childcare, moving to 20 hours a week for working families from the end of paid maternity leave right through to school. Discount bus pass for under 21s so they can afford to travel to college or work
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 20,000 more nurses, 8,000 more doctors, 5,000 more care workers and 3,000 more midwives in their NHS "Time to Care" fund. Repeal of the Health and Social Care Act 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protection of NHS budget in next Parliament GP appointments from 8am-8pm, 7 days a week by 2020 5,000 additional GPs available on the NHS Patient access to medical records 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduction waiting times for mental health and therefore bring it in line with other NHS services Introduce a new 'Carer's Bonus' so carers can take a proper break every year
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5 million new energy efficient homes in next 10 years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Announcement that the party is prepared to withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protection of early years and sixth form and college budgets. Introduction of five new green laws - A Nature Act A Heating and Energy Efficiency Act; A Zero Waste Britain Act; and A Green Transport Act.