

Open Letter to MP's regarding Development of Computer Science

8 February 2005

MP
MP ADDRESS

Dear MP,

I am writing on behalf of the UK Computing Research Committee (UKCRC) to ask for a statement of your Party's policy in the coming election regarding research and development in Computer Science. The UKCRC is a peer-elected body comprised of leading researchers from the industrial and university research sectors, and one which aims to promote the vitality, quality and impact of Computing Research in the UK.

While the UK is no longer the home base for a major manufacturer of computer hardware, it is a major player in computer-related software and services, from computer games to science-related knowledge software, and in microchip design and embedded computer hardware and software. It is because of the wealth of talent here that major overseas players — Microsoft, Sharp of Japan, Hewlett Packard etc. — set up major R&D laboratories near our universities. The UK is also the major player in the EU Information Society and Technology Program. It may also be worth emphasising that the majority of computing R&D is done outside what is traditionally seen as the ICT industry, i.e. computing plays a major role in all areas of manufacturing, commerce, finance, defence, etc. This is an important point that is often overlooked when measuring the size of the 'industry'.

However, our Computing Research base remains substantially under-funded compared to the US, where Defence Agencies provide a long term underpinning of much work in the best laboratories there, whether or not it is actually defence-related, and many of those laboratories in the US are strategic, government-funded, ones, which we also lack over here.

We realise that to expect any Government to raise our environment to the standards enjoyed by our US colleagues is unrealistic in the short term. However, we believe there are areas in which Government awareness and sensitivity will be vital, such the coming shift to a Knowledge-based economy, in which computational structures like the Internet will be socially and economically fundamental. One of these will be a steer in the Research Councils so that funding for Computer Science, in the broadest sense, will expand sufficiently to keep the UK in its pole position, in Europe at least. EU funding, as the Germans and French have shown, cannot replace well-founded national programs in Computing, eScience, eBusiness, eGovernment and so on. Such steer will need to ensure that Computer Science can retain funding in competition with older sciences, like Physics and Chemistry, that both cost enormously more and could be seen as less closely tied to our national technical and industrial future.

The other important area of policy about which we seek your views are features of our economy and law that inhibit the establishment of new small companies based on research-driven technology; there are still inhibitors here, legal and financial, even though the UK probably has the best environment outside the US, but this remains an area of concern since every survey shows that such companies are the lifeblood of the new economy.

On behalf of the UKCRC may I thank you for your attention at a busy time and we look forward to hearing your views.

Yours sincerely,

Yorick Wilks
Professor of Computer Science

Response from the Liberal Democrat Candidate for Gateshead East &
Washington West
Mr Frank Hindle

28 April 2005

Research funding is not an issue that gets raised on many doorsteps, so I'm not sure if we have a detailed policy on the optimal balance of research funding amongst different subjects, but the necessary role of Government in providing research funding is recognised in our policy paper on IT. We would also look to lever in private sector funding more effectively, and to foster stronger links between universities and industry in this sector.

Liberal Democrats would seek to encourage and increase the take up of R&D tax credits by companies working in the IT sector, and recognise that criteria for accessing R&D credits must not discourage small businesses.

Regarding IR35, Liberal Democrats propose to review the situation and develop new rules that will allow specialist contractors to properly charge reasonable training and equipment expenses against pre-tax income.

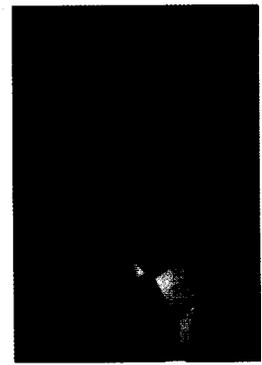
We will establish a Small Business Select Committee to examine Government actions and monitor the costs of bureaucracy for small businesses. We will review regulations to look to relieve small business of unnecessary 'red tape' in the first 18 months of existence - the most vulnerable phase for small business start ups. We would also introduce a business rates allowance (similar to a personal tax allowance) to reduce the costs of business rates for small businesses

As readers will already know, we will scrap first degree tuition and top-up fees. As well as encouraging more young people to take up HE and ensuring a supply of graduates that industry and the country need, this will remove the anticipated pressure for employers to offer 'golden hellos' to new graduates. To help close the skills gap at sub-degree levels we will expect LSCs to focus adult education on people without level 2 or 3 qualifications, and give under 25s a statutory right to time off work for training & education.

Frank Hindle
Head of Computing Division, Northumbria University, and
Liberal Democrat Candidate, Gateshead East & Washington West



TIM COLLINS CBE MP
Conservative MP for Westmorland and Lonsdale



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Secretary: Barbara Lewis

18 February 2005

Dear Mr Wilks

Thank you for your letter of 8th February. The British role in the history of computing science has been simply outstanding, and the country which produced Alan Turing and Tim Berners-Lee, to name but two globally significant pioneers, should never allow itself to be anything other than fully committed to this field of human knowledge and endeavour.

As you rightly say, computer science seems likely only to become even more significant in coming decades. I also agree with you that national governmental support will be essential, since reliance on EU or other supranational investment will not be sufficient.

You will appreciate that detailed line by line examination of individual budget items only really becomes possible when a Party is in office, rather than in opposition, but it is certainly the Conservative Party's commitment to increase investment in research in general, and in the sciences in particular. My own enthusiasm for the potential of your field is also, I hope, evident from this letter.

The second area you mention relates to the creation of the right environment in which small research-driven technology companies can thrive. As you rightly say, the model for this in the world at the moment must be the USA, and the Conservative Party is determined to emulate a number of the relevant characteristics of the US economy - specifically much lower regulatory and taxation burdens for small and micro companies, together with a determination to use the power of government to help such enterprises rather than simply the existing "big boys".

Thank you once again for writing.

Yours

TIM COLLINS MP
(Shadow Secretary of State
for Education & Skills)

STEPHEN O' BRIEN MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Professor Yorick Wilks
Professor of Computer Science Department of Computer Science The University of Sheffield Regent Court
211 Portobello Street
Sheffield S1 4DP

10 March 2005

Dear Professor Wilks

Thank you for your letter of 8 February which I have discussed with my colleague Michael Fabricant MP, Shadow Minister for Business. Following my discussion Michael has sent me the enclosed letter which I hope you will find helpful.

Thank you for contacting me.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Stephen O'Brien".

Stephen O'Brien MP
Shadow Secretary of State for Industry

Enc

Working for the people of Eddisbury

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Michael Fabricant MP

Stephen O'Brien MP
House of Commons
Westminster London
SW1A 0AA

24 February 2005

Dear Stephen

Thank you for sending me a copy of the letter you have received from Professor Yorick Wilks from the University of Sheffield. You may be interested to know that he has also written to Robert Key, who has passed the letter on to me. Perhaps you will reply to Mr Yorick on our behalf.

I share Professor Yorick's concerns regarding the development of computer hardware and software industries in the United Kingdom. I do not believe that Government policy has helped in stimulating as great a degree of knowledge-based economy as our Nation's potential might have allowed. There are a number of inhibitors to this.

A Conservative Government would, of course, seek to reform the tax system which often acts as a disincentive to new entrants. While the implementation of IR35 has driven some software developers overseas, it is the operation of the R & D Tax Credit which is causing us some alarm. The present system is difficult to implement for smaller companies and there is an inconsistency between different tax inspectorates. We would seek to rationalise the process so that the R & D Tax Credit achieves what it currently does not: a driver for the development of innovative software design and development.

Finally, we also believe that there needs to be a far more serious approach by government towards the knowledge based economy. The office of the e-envoy has not been a success. There needs to be a senior minister with cross-departmental authority to stimulate the development of computing research in the United Kingdom. Certainly, a more aspirational approach to Broadband Britain with a goal of delivering megabit, rather than kilobit, speeds to the home would be a useful first step.

I do hope this is helpful.

Yours

Michael Fabricant MP
Shadow Minister for Economic Affairs

from the Member of Parliament for the Constituency of Lichfield

including the City of Lichfield, Abbots Bromley, Alrewas, Armitage, Burntwood, Chase Terrace, Chasetown, Colton, Fradley, Hammerwich, Handsacre, Kings Bromley, Longdon, the Ridwares, Streethay, Whittington, and Yoxall. website and email form: www.michael.fabricant.mp.co.uk