

Digital Divide Splits Parliament

Tim Hampson reports from Westminster.

They say that a house divided is an unhappy house. Well there cannot be many people unhappier than most of the current occupants of the Houses of Parliament.

In particular the Commons is a melancholic place. Members are internally seething about the new rules on expenses, and most are still unable to grasp the public's anger at their claims.

Add to this the fact that half of them are counting the days either to retirement or unemployment and even the most hard nosed cannot be unmoved by the sight of colleagues shuffling down the corridors of power, muttering, "I've done nothing wrong".

However, if anything unites even despondent MPs it is a statement by a government minister, not in the Commons but in the other house.

One of the curiosities of what was once perceived as a radical government is that there are now more members of the House of Lords acting as government ministers than in the Cabinet of the silver spooned Alexander Frederick Douglas-Horne, Baron Home of the Hirsel who was prime minister for 12 months from October 1963.

Douglas-Horne was the only prime minister to have played first class cricket. However if around today he could have watched Baron Peter Mandelson bowling a googly in a statement on internet file sharing. The business minister wants to cut off illegal file sharers' internet connections.

The twice resurrected minister says that the government plans to look at increased action against illegal down-loaders, including potentially suspending the accounts of persistent offenders. From July 2011 if a 70% reduction in online piracy is not achieved by sending "warning letters", customers will have their connection subjected to technical measures. Which to you and me means they will be cut off.

Quite how this will be done remains unclear. The idea of disconnection was seemingly ruled out by the government's Digital Britain report published in June. But if a week is a long time in politics then summertime is an eternity – more than enough time for music and film industry barons to bend the ear of the business minister while sharing a water cooler

moment with him in one of parliament's corridors.

Unsurprisingly the statement has angered the internet service providers. Carphone Warehouse, which has more than four million customers and owns the Tiscali and AOL brands, said that the government's plan was based on file-sharers being "guilty until proven innocent" and constituted an infringement of human rights.

BT shrugged a massive corporate shoulder, yawned, and said it would take action if the government could outline what legal action would be taken against its customers.

Other antagonists shouted, "What about the 'human rights' of file sharers?" Such statements meet little sympathy in the Commons – too many MPs are still smarting at having their expenses files shared with the Daily Telegraph and then cruelly exposed to the oxygen of publicity.

But while the MPs procrastinated, few took much note of the series of parliamentary questions asked by former e-minister, Tom Watson.

The technologically aware MP asked a series of written questions on civil service plans to upgrade their web browsers from Internet Explorer version 6. The West Bromwich MP laid 18 questions before the house – asking different secretaries of state for their departments' upgrade plans.

On the face of it a simple question. The IE6 browser is widely regarded as technically insecure and at least 10 years out of date. However, forget upgrading and modernisations, say its proponents, "We are happy with what we got and what we haven't got won't cost us."

Both central government and local authorities are still big users of IE6 even though government advice is that it is an insecure medium. However, the way things are going the London Olympics will have come and gone and most government departments will still be using old legacy IE6 browsers.

Tom Watson wasn't happy. "Many civil servants use web browsers as a tool of their trade. They're as important as pens and paper. So to force them to use the most decrepit browser in the world is a rare form of workplace cruelty that should be stopped," he said.

The government's advice seems



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unequivocal; it says companies should upgrade from IE6. So why are government and local authorities not practicing what is being preached? Shouldn't more be using Firefox or Chrome or Safari?

Mandelson seems more concerned with hoodies and silver surfers downloading illegal music files than the fact that the British government and local authorities are underperforming because they are using a web browser first developed before Tony Blair was spun into life and became prime minister.

Perhaps the MPs about to leave parliament should ponder this - when they sit at home surfing the web, the chances are their home computer will have the most up to date browsing software, unlike the public servants they have denied it to.

Broadband tax

Scant details of what will be in the digital economy Bill were announced in the Queen's speech.

"My government will introduce a Bill to ensure communications infrastructure that is fit for the digital age, supports future economic growth, delivers competitive communications and enhances public service broadcasting," the Queen said.

But details of the expected phone line tax, to raise the money so that 90% of the population can access government websites from home by 2017 using broadband, were absent.

But that doesn't mean the idea is dead. The announcement will be made in the government's pre-budget statement with 50p charged on everyone with a fixed-line telephone.

However, will a government counting the days towards a general election introduce a tax for surfing the web?

The Tories are certainly against the idea. Tory MP John Whittingdale says he is confident the Conservative party will oppose it.

But don't discount the idea of Labour pushing on with the mouse tax, but setting a date for its introduction after the election.

By then the next government will need every penny raised in tax – and the measure will probably stay in place.