Liam Maxwell

Interviewed by

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Welcome to the Archives of Information Technology, where we capture the past and inspire the future. It is the 15th of October, Friday, 2021. I'm Richard Sharpe, and I have been covering the computing and then the IT sector since the early 1970s.
[00:19]
We have a lot of vendors, as I call them, in the archive, people who have done things and sold systems, computers, software, hardware, and telecommunications. We don't have enough users in my opinion, we don't have enough users about a very important area of use and application of IT, and that is government. So I'm extremely pleased to introduce to the Archives today Liam Maxwell. Liam, you were born in 1968, an important year for the IT industry in this country. ICL was born, but it had actually a minority of the market share, and 41 per cent, the Americans had, had the rest. Intel was found, founded, and IBM was considering charging for software and unbundling, creating an enormous area for software development. ARPANET was also under development, and a man called, a Brit called Ted Codd was working on some algebra in IBM to form what, but what, the amazing relational database. Where were you born, what was the background of your parents?

So I was born in Nairobi, in Kenya.

Right.

And, my parents, my mum was a nurse with the Flying Doctors, and my dad was a health officer with the, with the Government in Nairobi.

Had they been to university?

I'm sorry?

Had they been to university?

No. No, my mum was a nurse. She had been to Barts, round the corner from where I am now, and my dad had been to college in Nottingham.

[02:03]

And they sent you home for education?

No, we all came home. Just, after that, they went down to South Africa in… So South Africa from Kenya; in 1970 was quite, a different place. They stayed in South Africa I think for about a week, and went, this isn't for us, and went to Canada. And halfway on the way to Canada, where they were going to go and stay with my, my aunt, or go and live near my aunt, they stopped off in England, and my dad got offered a job, and we stayed in England. So I grew up in, just outside Southampton, and, yeah, and that's, that's the English, that's the English side of the family, we, we started there. So I'm a, I would consider myself, I was born in Africa, but I'm, I'm sort of, from Hampshire, I support Southampton FC, you know, I support Hampshire Cricket Club, so that's my sort of, that's my landing.

Do you have brothers and sisters?

Yeah, I've got a sister who's a very experienced, a senior nurse. So, she does, she's currently head of primary care at Wormwood Scrubs prison, which is a really, really intensive job, and she's, she's, I'm very proud of my sister. She's done a great job in nursing.

[03:15]
So you went to school in Horsham, did you?

Yeah, I went to Christ's Hospital, Horsham, which was a wonderful place to go to. Really, really different from what it is now, you know, a boarding school in the 1980s, but it was fun. There was an amazing theatre, so I did lots of theatre, and, I was a producer more than an actor. And there was a really huge theatre there that you could put on proper plays, so I remember doing *Tamburlaine the Great*, and, properly doing *The Merchant of Venice*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was, it was an amazing place where you could do huge productions, and, at a very young age. And I loved the sport there, amazing green fields. It was a wonderful time, I had a lovely time at school, I loved it.

And, were you guided, or did you choose to go into the classic science subjects of, of physics, chemistry and maths?

I wanted… So I wanted to be a doctor. So I went in, I decided I would go off and do maths, phys, chem, and get that going. So that was… And did that, got into medical school, and then, then stopped actually, and didn't, didn't go to medical school, because, and a very famous thing in my family with, you know, with a sister who's a nurse, and a mother who's a nurse, [laughs] they both came to me and just went, 'Look, are you really going to be a great doctor?' And I looked at it, thought about it, and thought, do you know, they've probably got a point, I'm probably going into this with, you know, for the wrong reason. And I took a deep breath and, and I withdrew. And I then went and took a year out, I went and became a teacher in Zimbabwe, and had a, and again had a completely life-changing time in Zimbabwe teaching really, really bright people who were, who had just come, you know, my sixth form had just come out of the Chimurenga war, they were, they had burnt all their papers and, and gone into, into the bush in 1979, and they had come back, and they were, they were the class of 1986, and I did, I did their A Levels with them. So I taught them A Levels. And they were amazing. So, it was a great, it was a, it was a good decision. And I went to, very lucky, got into Oxford, read chemistry to start with, and then moved into something called human sciences, which is a, a degree that fashions animal behaviour and ethology and demography. So sort of like, biological and anthropological subjects together, which, you make your own synthesis of the course. So that was, that was amazing, an amazing course to do.

And more sport at Cambridge, yes?

At Oxford? Yeah, I did some.

Oh Oxford, I'm sorry.

Yeah, I was, I was a fairly, I was a fairly, a fairly dreadful goalkeeper for, for New College, so that was, that was the summit of where we got to with the sport. But it was, it was great, no, it was really good fun.

[06:08]

What was the atmosphere at Oxford at that time?

[pause] It was, it was very can-do. It was sort of, if you want to go and do something, you can go and do it. We ran a theatre company, which was great; we, you know, would show [inaud] D Clarke, Matthew Blackstone[sp?] and I put together. There was… And, and you know, that, that was great, you could go and build theatre shows. We ran a scholarship programme for students from the developing world to come, we sort of set that up, and funded it. We… You know, lots and lots of things that you could go and do. And there were lots of other, you know, people who were really making their mark, you know, people like Luke Harding and Sarah Ryle[sp?] were doing *Cherwell*, the newspaper, and they went off and became really great campaigning journalists. You had all of that stuff. And then you also had the sort of like, the weird, you know, the sort of, the political side, who now made it into political life. So, you know, Steve Hilton, who was David Cameron's adviser, I mean he went through school and university with me, he was at Oxford. Michael Gove was there at that time. And, David Cameron had just gone up, you know, was, was, you know, he was leaving at that time. So, there was a sort of, there was still a sort of like, a really strong thing of the union where all this stuff happened, but, I mean I took no part in that, you just sort of like, watched it go on, it was a sort of soap opera in the corner. [RS laughs] And, yeah, and there was, it was, it was a really, it was a fascinating place. I mean it was a place where you could do things, you know, you sat there and thought, actually I can do that. So, so the thing it really gave us was confidence.

[07:44]

Had you seen your first computer yet?

Oh yeah, no, I had done, I had programmed, we had had a BBC Micro in, in, at school, in physics and chemistry. We were using it in class, and we would program it. And there was a, there was a, a very enthusiastic computer teacher at school called Mr Wolstenholme[sp?] who was trying to convince people this was the future and the way to go, and, and bless him, you know, he was, he was on the right track.

You always remember the name of inspirational teachers, don't you?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah I mean, the real thing with computing was, you know, learning how to, learning how to, watch how a capacitor expanded, was a guy, Chris Vincent-Smith was my teacher for that, and he was, he was a real, you know, he was a real shaper of, of what I then did. So I, I, yeah, I'd always remember him.

[08:35]
You went to Andersen Consulting immediately after university?

Sort of, yeah. No, I did a couple of jobs in marketing with GE and ICI when I was going through university, so they, they were really interesting, in Germany and Holland, just a European marketing of slightly arcane products. And then, software… You know, things like surfactants and silicone gel and things like that. And then I went to join the, the main scheme at Andersen Consulting as it then was. So I joined that sort of, factory that they had created of scaling business.

And did they find you, or did you find them?

I joined them in the milk round. So, you know, they were at university, we went to them. I had a choice between them and Bain, the consulting company, and Bain had just gone through the Guinness affair and they sort of pulled back in their recruitment. And so I, I, you know, I was tossing the coin and they made the decision for me, I went to Andersen.

[09:30]
We've recently had Keith Burgess, who you must have heard of…

Oh yeah, no, Keith was the managing partner. Yeah, and I, I met him in, in Government as well.

Right. And he says of course there was a really strong culture in Andersen Consulting.

Oh yeah. Yes.

Did you take that culture on board? Because you were only there a year.

I didn't like it. It was, it was… I think it was very good for them. I think they had a really good model, and a really good business going. They were employing huge numbers of consultants, it was great, but for somebody at my level in that firm, and what we were doing, it just didn't, it didn't work for me. And, I, I think I was too independent for it. So, so I left, and did a couple of start-ups, both of which failed, but both of which were really exciting to do.

[10:16]
You went to the energy company; that failed. Why did the energy company fail?

We got a really good contract with BT, but we realised it would take too long to, to fulfil that. It was, we were looking at building energy, experimenting with building energy sources in decommissioning telephone exchanges. Great idea, but, you know, great idea but the, the cash flow, the money, just didn't add up, and we worked out that, probably wouldn't, you know, we'd have to borrow, I'd have to borrow a lot of money to keep going, and it just, it just wasn't, wasn't going to work out. So, took the decision to cut and run at that point and went back into employment.

[10:56]
Your role then was consistently, was it, to, to build the IT infrastructure.

The, the next job I did, with Office Angels, was that, it was to, one was to go and build the, and computerise that. It was a largely manually-run company, but also bring in the, the computing and the IT that would help them build their sales business. So actually most of the focus within Office Angels, and then the [inaud] companies that we ran around Europe, was about building what was called an office automation platform, enabled you to assess and build the, the skills of people that wanted to come and work with you in an employment agency. So it was a really fascinating job, really fascinating set of skills. I think we trained about three million people in, in three years, and assessed them, and you know, worked out whether they could use the

products, enable us to build an entire company in Germany around office help. So it was a fascinating time to do that, and that was really really interesting. Early days though. Remember all of this stuff was, single instals on single computers, and, the old days of shrink-wrap software. So I remember thinking, wouldn't this be great if we could hook this up to some form of utility computer in the centre, where we could share this all and make it run. It was too early days for that.

[12:18]

You were there during the period of Y2K.

Yeah. Yeah, that was interesting. I remember there was a lot of, a flurry just before Y2K. I remember flying around Europe making sure everything was OK, and then when it happened it just went, just flew past. Nothing, nothing happened, we were OK. And, I think that was… There are many times when you're dealing with tech where if, if nothing happens, there's a massive success and nobody notices it, and that was one of those I think. It was, the great success of that was that nothing really went wrong.

We have a great span of opinion in the Archives about Y2K. On the one hand it's a massive con by the accountants – not by the accountants, by the consultants, to line their pockets, and on the other hand, it was absolutely essential. Where are you on that?

[hesitates] I mean I'm, I'm from the sort of, the, the side of, we're all adults, and I think there were people who could, you know, caveat emptor, there are people who were… You know, there was a sense of learned helplessness in a a large function of the IT market at that point where people felt they had to go and do something, and someone else would come and do it to them, and then they'd be all right. And then there were a whole bunch of people who tried to work it through themselves, to, to make it work, and use consultants where they needed to. And I think the latter group were the ones that did that in the smartest way.

[13:44]

You went on to… You were four years with Office Angels. You went on to Huntress?

Actually no, I was six, six years with Office Angels in all, and then we grew, and then we started a company called Huntress, yeah, which was an IT recruitment company, and a secretarial recruitment company. Borrowed several million pounds and set that up. And built an online and… It was bricks and clicks, it was an online and branch-based recruitment company. And, really exciting, really good experience. Found some fantastic people who worked with me at that stage. But when the dotcom bust happened, there was a huge move to go back to just bricks and mortar rather than the online stuff, so some of the online stuff we were building and developing, the investors didn't want to go that far with, and so we took the decision to, you know, take a step back. We turned it… It was a growing company, it had already opened four branches, it was going, you know, going great guns. But we thought, you know, let's take a step back, and… I, I wasn't allowed to go, under the shareholders' agreement, as a founder I wasn't allowed to go and work with the technology team that I had brought in. So they went off and built… They were all obsessed with travel, and, how you could get to Val d'Isère for the cheapest price, and working out how flight prices could work, and hotel prices, and, they went off and built something called Skyscanner. And I think one of the great reasons that Skyscanner became a great company is, I was nowhere near it [laughs] when they went off to do it. Gareth and Bon and Barry went and built this mazing firm, which they bootstrapped the whole way through. And, so I, I had… You know, it was wonderful working with them on Huntress to see how we could make that work, but, you know, you always saw they were, they were destined for much, much greater things.

[15:40]
Where were you learning these skills to be able to do these jobs?

[pause] You do a lot of reading and a lot of thinking, and a lot of trying stuff out. So a lot of it was self-taught. A lot of it was… And in particular, a lot of the business skills around the start-up was, was, I had a fantastic mentor in that, a guy called Laurence Rosen. So, Laurence was really the, the impetus. He was the guy, he had founded, he had run Alfred Marks, and then had founded Office Angels, and then asked me to come with him to, to set up Huntress. And, you know, he was just an amazing mentor to help me through that. And that was really the, the main thing I

would say at that stage in my career, was finding someone who, who would be a fantastic mentor, which he was, and remains actually, I mean I'm still, I still ask Laurence for advice.

And perhaps also this confidence you got from Oxford helps.

Yeah, probably, to be honest.

Probably. [laughs]

Yeah. Yeah, I don't, I don't think anyone's ever accused me of lacking confidence, so that's, that's probably where that came from.

What are the particular things that this mentor taught you?

Think bigger. Always… You know, when you've got an idea, think bigger, is it going to work? Always try and work out, is somebody, does someone really care about that? Is someone really interested in what you are building and what you are going to do? Is it really going to make a difference to them? And, also, can you do it in a classy way, I think would be… I mean anyone who has worked with Laurence would know that, you know, he was never one to stint on a marketing budget. He, he would always want to do things in the best way that was possible. So if you're going to do something, just don't mess, don't do half measures. Don't do… Just don't try and do the, the sort of, the half-cock version of it. Do it properly.

[17:37]
You left that after a year, and then you went to Capita.

Yes.

Not the best of reputations.

Well, yeah, I mean unfairly, unfairly I think in, in some ways. Capita was a, a really, really interesting company, and the thing I loved about it was the way that it was, it

was run. So Capita was, was like going to business school for three years, because, you were given master of your own destiny. You got your own budget to go and deal with, your own P&L as, you know, as a leading manager inside there, and you had to run that P&L. And every month you would have to demonstrate that, you know, where you, what your profit and loss was. And you would forecast for the next six months. So instead of having a budget, which you went through for the year, you, you got a budget at the beginning of the year but you could change it by changing your forecast, and the board that you went to every month would enable that to happen. And each month the board would, the board that you reported to would look at the forecasts you have for the next six months, and then they'd compare that to the forecasts you had in the next six months last month. So there were five things, the common five, and that common five was the way that they judged whether you were a good manager or not. Because if the common five went up and down all the time, you didn't really know what your business was, and you couldn't predict. And so what it did do is, it built a huge amount of financial discipline around the way that it did things. And, certainly on the stuff that we worked on, which was about, we took over the former Civil Service recruitment, we built a recruitment company, we built an HR company around social care. You know, that was, it was a place where we could really help people deliver the change they wanted in, in Government, and there was a, you know, it was a good, it was a really good business, good growing business to be in there. I was lucky because I had two people in there who were really inspirational, one of them was called Pete Kelly, who was really, you know, Pete was fairly hard-nosed, and, you know, wanted, you know, he called a spade a spade, and he would say, I, you know, I think, 'I want to do this.' You know, he was very very straightforward. But that meant that he had a lot of discipline about the way that he worked. And then, I worked for someone called Rebecca Ramsay[sp?], who was fantastically motivational, and enabled you to work out how to build a team more effectively and more, and more clearly. And those are the two things that really came through from that organisation. Just be completely straight and honest with the numbers. Don't try and gild the lily, just tell us what's there. Because if it's bad news, let's talk about it, and let's work it out. And then, how do you motivate people to come and work with you, and work with you effectively? And that, that was, that's what I learnt in those sort of three years. And, Capita delivered a lot of good stuff at

that point. I know they got a bad reputation in different areas of the business. I was really proud to work there at that point.

[20:33]

What is the Liam Maxwell style of management?

Um… Probably worth asking others. I mean I really like… We have a leadership principle at Amazon which is, are right a lot, which is, you know, it's really important that you can work out what you want to do, but also, define, and, and try and disconfirm your beliefs, that, you know, is this really the right way of doing it? So I like helping people build and, build their functions, and lead the functions that they run by giving them the capability and the, the ability to do that. But I also really like arguing with myself or with members of the team about whether this is really the right thing to do, based on what customers want you to do. And that's, that's something that's why I love where I work now, is because that's right, embedded inside that, it really suits me, it's, it's my style. I'm peculiar in that way. But that's, that's what I'd say, it's, you know, I'm really task-focused, I really like finding a goal, moving towards a goal, but I also, I really like working with people who debate and come back and go, 'I'd like to do that a different way.' Because, you know, my style of leadership is that I'm not the smartest guy in the room. I, I like having people who are smarter than me in the room who can fashion it and make it move in a different way.

[21:54]

Everybody genuflects in front of the customer and say, 'We're going to try and do what the customer wants,' but very often, for example, Amazon is a case in point, the customer has no idea what they want, and it's a matter of pushing technology to them, and then the customer says, 'Oh that's what I wanted. I didn't know that.'

That culture of innovation is really important, about being able to spin up ideas and test them with customers quickly so that they can identify what, what really works for them, and helping people express what they really want, is right at the heart of the culture. And it's the same culture that we brought into Government when I was [inaud], is, you build things around the user.

Yes, but, it's not what they want; it's what you know they want, or you hope that they'll want.

I think, there's an interesting… Lisa Rykard's[sp?] a really good person around this who, who, you know, defines similar, there are customer wants and customer needs. And the customer needs are actually the things which we build around. And that was, in the Government circumstance, that's what we did, plan user needs.

[23:02]
You left after three years, and you went to join Eton College as Head of Computing.

Yup.

There's a move. There's a move.

Dream job. Dream job. Yeah, well I had been a teacher, so, I had loved teaching. We had a small baby, we had another baby on the way. My wife went out, and… I was, Capita was going OK. My wife went down to East Street Market where we were living, and bought a, bought a copy of the *Times Educational Supplement*. I've no idea why she decided to that day. She just… I remember saying, you know, 'I thought you'd like to look at it.' And there was a job for Eton in there. I applied. They took me, and I had six years, firstly fixing the tech, and then building an academic computing department, and then becoming, you know, a proper beak really with all of those, all of the assigned, you know, things with that. There's a huge amount of [inaud] education there. It was really, yeah, it was a wonderful, a wonderful… You know, it was, six to eight years I was there, and it was, it was, it was glorious. And really, really fantastic colleagues. I mean, the staff meeting in the morning, you'd go in there, 130 staff, and there were probably about 60 doctorates next to you, [laughs] and you just, like, this is amazing capability. And the boys were really, really bright, really, really creative. And, that was it. So it was a wonderful job. Loved it. Absolutely loved it. Would go back to that instantly.

What was the state of their computing when you went there?

Fairly primitive. Boys weren't really using stuff. There was a lot of restriction on what boys could use. There was a 10 megabit connection out, which was, you know, great at the time, but soon to be overloaded. And, you know, management information, being able to write reports online, things like that, people couldn't do, you know. So, there was no… We were on the cusp of, you know, where some things were computerised, others weren't, and how did you enable that to become a, a managed approach to administration. And then also, using computing and teaching, it was the time when some people were really starting to, to use it really effectively. And, a lot of it was trying to work out what worked and what didn't, and what, what people wanted to, you know, where technology could help people move forward, and where it couldn't. And that judgement was quite finely tuned really. I learnt a lot about… I mean some of the, some of the best teachers in the world are at that school, and there was, it was, it was fascinating to just understand how they worked, and how you could help them improve the educational outcomes for children, you know, by using that, by using tech. It was great.

[25:45]

You say that a memorable achievement while at Eton College was Obama election campaign. What was that?

Oh yeah. Well that was… Yeah, that was… So, you're always encouraged to go and do something slightly out there, and, you know, we, we used to run a programme for the students, we made some good contacts at Microsoft, and we used to take students out to Microsoft every, you know, few years. And we'd do a project for a year and then take it out and show that to the, to some of the product teams out there, they'd get a fairly strong critique, and, and suddenly realised, you know, creative visits would be a good thing. So one of them, one of the boys' parents I discovered is, was close to people on the Obama campaign, so we went out, and, you know, the best way of understanding American politics is, is usually to go and experience it. So we went out, and they went out on the stump for the Obama campaign. And that was a really fascinating educational experience for the boys that were included in that. And I thought it was the, the sort of, the most, you know, involved, and sort of, out there

thing you could do to help move someone's education forward. And it really, it really really helped them do it.

But that's not your politics, is it?

Sorry?

That is not your politics.

It was…

Obama.

Obama is not my politics, or, I don't… Yes. [sighs] Oh. I don't know really. I mean American politics is, is completely different. It was, there was loads of things that they were doing which were really, really amazing to watch come through. So I, I don't know. I mean there were lots of things I massively agreed with with what he did, so it's not… You've got to remember, I mean, I was, I mean, I, at that time I had become an elected, you know, politician, very minor league, but elected politician for the Conservative Party, but, you know, the Conservative Party is around the centre of the Democratic Party [laughs], so, you know, it's… I mean, American politics is different. If you read, is it Jon Sopel's book about, you know, if only they didn't speak the same language, you know, it's, America is very very different to the UK, so, and there's no real comparison.

[27:49]
So what was your political role, what were you, a councillor?

Yes, I was a councillor. I was a councillor on the, gloriously, Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, and, it was a really reforming time, and we became the, the sort of, the petri dish for David Cameron's Big Society project. We tried out, fairly radical policies to try and see whether they would work, and whether you could move the needle in local and then central government. And by trying them out, we were able to demonstrate that things could work. So, you know, the famous one was, we

paid our residents to recycle, because we wanted them to recycle more, so we arranged a points scheme where they got points for more recycling; the more recycling they did, the more points they got. You redeem the points in local restaurants for discounts. So it helps the, the local economy get moving. But it also meant that we collected much cleaner recyclate and much more recyclate, which, which made the Council, you know, it reduced the costs enormously. So it was, it was a really good sort of win-win Big Society project about changing the relationship between the citizen and, and the service they had. And we did some other things with, you know, the tech. We also, I mean we changed the social care model, reduced the Council Tax, so we were the lowest Council Tax outside London in the UK, and still delivering great services. So it was, it was a really good experiment for what then became, you know, some of the, the ideas around Government. I mean the really big thing in there was transparency, forcing the Council to publish all of the spending that it did, and that then became the regulation for all local authorities. So that was, that was a big move.

[29:36]
You also contributed, I believe, to the drafting, the writing of the Conservative Manifesto for the 2010 General Election. What were your particular proposals?

[hesitates] So, it was to move away from the oligopoly of large IT providers, start delivering services that worked for people, and for citizens, and for the Civil Servants that were using them, and start building technology that, that worked, and delivered, in the same way that it would work and deliver for an insurance company, or work and deliver for a professional services company. And stop thinking that Government was super-special. Because most of Government service delivery is rather like the service delivery of an insurance company, or a great professional services company. And so start building the technology around that. Get rid of the silos that were, you know, how they had operated for, for many years, and those big, long-term outsourced IT contracts, and start being able to build and bring in the capability to build the services and put them together in-house. That was the approach. We did, there was a document called better…, you know, a book we put out called *Better For Less*, which outlined how to do that. And that's what we then implemented when we went into Government.

You think that that had, that document had a particular impact upon the outcome of the Election?

No.

OK.

[laughs] To be honest, no.

Oh dear.

It was quite an indecisive Election as well actually, when you think about it.

Yes.

I mean the… It was, you know, resulted in the, the coalition, which, which everyone thought, you know, when that started off, it was like, oh my goodness, it's going to be dreadful. The coalition was really helpful, it was a really, really good way of doing government actually, it turned out to be.

[31:32]
And eventually they turned round to you and said, 'OK, you've written for the Manifesto.' Presumably they then said, 'We actually want your skills in Government.' Is that what happened?

Yeah. Obviously I was way down the food chain from them. So, so I got a call one day from Ian Watmore, who was the, essentially the, the Chief Operating Officer for the Government in the Cabinet Office, and he said, 'Look, could you come in for a chat? We've read your stuff.' And I, I came in and decided, and agreed to do a sabbatical from my time at Eton, and went in to do nine months of work with the, with the Cabinet Office on, really trying to sort out spend control, understand what the future, you know, future strategy, and build that with, with and for Francis Maude. So that was, that's how we started. And, I then, after about, two months, Francis asked

me to come on permanently, and I applied for and got a job as a proper civil servant, resigned from Eton, and started work for the Government in 2012.

And that was Director of IT futures.

No, then I became, Deputy CTO – Deputy CIO, so, for the Government. So, under… And Joe Harley had just moved on. And then I became CTO in 2012.

[33:00]

What was the state of government computing at that time?

[pause] I think… You know, Francis famously described it as, in a competitive field, the worst in the world. But it was, it was very very expensive. We were paying way over the odds for what we were getting. We were not getting a good service, the citizen was not being able to access the services they need. It was costing about one per cent of GDP, and, and there was a, you know, growth wasn't growing by one per cent, so there was a definite drag. Large companies were selling into Government, and some of them were making a lot of money for what they were doing. Quite a lot of the systems integrators, who were being painted as the dreadful oligopoly who were doing the wrong thing, were, were shouting out, saying, actually, we, 'We don't want to do this either this way; we want you to change.' So there was a, there was a great opportunity there to change what was in place, and some of the more forward-thinking technology companies really wanted to, to move to a new model, and a model that was more effective and quicker and simpler and faster. And that's where we, we managed to get the momentum behind that. But, you know, I mean, Stephen Kelly, who was, took over from me and then was Chief Operating Officer for a while, I mean he famously recorded his laptop booting up and it took, I think it was like, 20 minutes for, for a laptop to actually start. And that was just the laptop. You can imagine what happened with the, with, you know, the state of the systems, and where they were. And, at the same time the Government was trying to move forward really quickly and started to develop new tools, you know, David Freud was bringing in Universal Credit, with Iain Duncan Smith, and that was a really challenging programme. The Revenue were trying to make sense of their Aspire contract that they had been in for many years. The Home Office were running a series of contracts

which really were not, you know, generating the, the return for what they were meant to be doing and were costing huge amounts of money. All the way through Government there were these things. I think, the classic was IBM's contract in, in the DVLA, was, you know, very very expensive, they felt uncomfortable even doing it. We wanted… You know, everybody wanted to change. So it was, it was a, it was a target-rich environment if you wanted to, to move, move the needle and, and change it and bring in different things. So it was, it was, you know, from, if you like change and disruption, you know, it was perfect. And, I'm afraid I like change and disruption, so for me it was, it was a really great experience.

So you and Cummings were together?

[pause] Sorry, I missed that. We, we broke up.

So you and Cummings were together in liking disruption.

[pause] Um… Yeah, I mean I've never met him. [laughter] He's not very… You know. Dunno. Dunno. I mean he was, he, he… Wasn't he working for Michael Gove at the time, reforming schools? So…

Yes.

Yeah. Yeah, I don't think I'd compare myself.

[36:22]
You're in your late thirties, early forties then, is that right, when you started?

Early forties, yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah, forties.

It's really, real youthful enthusiasm. What was the model you were trying to shift them to? You've described the problems; what was the model you were trying to shift them to?

Yeah. So, there's a diagram which probably shows it best, but you know, most government tech, you've got, you've got the digital public services which you work with the citizen; you've got mission tech which is the technology which runs inside the departments. Those two things running. And then, under the… And those things, you know, are defined and they hit the mission that you're trying to deliver. And underneath that you've got common infrastructure, and that common infrastructure, and those common services, the idea was, let's build a set of common services on which you can base and build the, the systems that you need to build for the departments. So, so build common infrastructure, and then leverage that so that you can focus on building the services that you need to build. That, that was the plan.

[37:27]

Who have you found are the best partners for government?

So the best partners that we worked with at the beginning would be, I mean, the companies that really wanted to engage with us, and work with us, were companies like Kainos and BJSS, which were at the smaller end of the market, but really really capable and huge amounts of, of delivery capability. So, they were, they were really, you know, [inaud] two companies that I had, I had spotted at that point. Later on, as things changed, some of the old-established, you know, systems integrators would become really interested in working with us, and, I still think, I still think that the one company that, that really spotted and bit the bullet, and realised there was a big change coming, and they, they'd need to work with us on that, was Capgemini. And I think they, they were probably, of all of the companies we worked with, they were the bravest, because, they had had a model, they had this sort of, wonderful, you know, wonderful model which was going to generate revenues, running the Aspire programme, was going to generate things for them forever, you know. And they stopped and went, OK, look, this is going to change. So that was real, you know, real… For a small business coming in, you know, you're always going to grow; for a large business where your market is going to shift underneath your feet, that's going

to be difficult. And the other company I thought that did, did that as well, and particularly, I mean they had a really good leader, a woman called Sharon Bagshaw, was IBM, where they came back and they said, 'Look, actually, we know, we know where you want to go,' and, you know, they, they had worked out, that's where you wanted to go. So I thought they were, they both had, they were great individuals in those firms to help drive change. And there's always other parts of those firms where people just, thinking, 'Well I just want to keep doing what I've always done.' But I thought they, those firms were… They, they helped change stuff. But Kainos, and you've seen what's happened to Kainos, I mean an amazing company based out of Belfast and Dublin, and just, just, you know, great. BJSS did some really great work with the health system, they were really interesting. And there were lots of others out there. DXW, which is a really, a small but very, very impactful group. Methods who started to really build great capabilities in those spaces. They were great. I mean there are, there are thousands of great British companies that couldn't work with the Government because there was just no route to do that. So, I found, we found great numbers of them by building, you know, making sure the GCab worked, and the GCab would come through.

[40:15]
If the general public is looking at IT, and it probably doesn't, what it's hit with is a history of disasters, particularly in the public sector.

Yes.

And, we've got the disaster of the Horizon desk system for the Post Office, which was…

I've got [inaud] think that's not so much to do with IT as…

[inaud].

[inaud] that's not just [inaud]. Mm.

Right. We've got patient records of the NHS.

But there were lots. Yeah.

One, is that image fair, Liam?

[pause] The… There were some, some major issues with quite a lot of programmes, and I don't think I was backward in pointing that out as we got our things to move, because there were things that weren't working. I, I remember walking into a fairly important… The data room that hosted the fairly important IT system, and, opening the door, the lights went on. I was just going in to have a look and see how it was run and what it was run on, I just wanted to have a look at the stack, and I tripped over somebody's golf clubs, and fell in… And this was a major outsource contract that we were spending hundreds of millions of pounds on. And that was the level of what was going on. I mean it was a… There was a big, it was the Augean stables we had to clear out, and, and bring in proper and effective ways of delivering IT, just by, by simplifying what was going on, and focusing on sharing common infrastructure. That was, you know, if you can leverage what, what's common and what's secure and what can work, that, that's what makes the difference. And, and a lot of that was about reforming the security estate, a lot of that, and approach, a lot of that was about changing the way that people bought and delivered the IT. But a lot of that was also about the culture of transparency and being open about what you're doing, and, and that's why spend control was so important at driving the reform, because it meant that you could, really understand what was there, and, and you have the situation awareness to, to make the change possible. I think the thing that shocked me when I went into Government first was the, the lack of situational awareness about what was actually going on. Francis Maude made the remark many times, that when they asked how, you know, what was actually there, the only way they found out what we were spending on the tech was by asking the tech companies. [RS laughs] And, and sometimes the question, I won't say the firm which didn't go… I mean like… So, so Microsoft, which is a fantastically well run organisation, delivered, you know, they pressed a button, they came back with a report, you know, in the afternoon, you know, they were fantastic. Some of the other people, [laughs] I mean just could never work out exactly what was there. And some of them, their business model relied on the fact

that they could always be ambiguous about what was there and what wasn't, and what they could charge, you know, it was a strange market.

[43:19]

I did a piece of research some quite long time ago, because, the Government had no idea what it had outsourced. They had no idea what the size of it was. And I, as a researcher, did a piece of research for a company you might have heard of, Kable, k-a-b-l-e, and we…

Yeah, a William Heath business.

Yeah.

Yeah.

Yeah. Yeah, and Karen Swindon. And I came out with a, with a number, and where it was, and Government were staggered. 'Oh really? Have we outsourced that amount?' 'Yes you have.' Grabbed the front page of the FT. But I'm just, not blowing my trumpet. What I am is, trying to underline your point. Didn't know. Just didn't know.

But, but often Government doesn't… I mean it's one of the reasons why when we built the performance dashboard in Government, and, you know, the performance dashboard was a fantastic tool to show what was actually going on. Because you could see how many people were actually using the services. You know. I mean, that's, that's a staggering thing to think about in a digital business, of bringing that in. I mean that was… I mean, Tom Loosemore and, and Mike Bracken and that team, brought in huge changes to, to the way Government worked, and the way Government thought. Right at the fundamental part of, of that was, you know, and our sort of, first common cause together was being transparent about what was being used, and how many people were using it, and, and who was using the website and where they went, and using that as the fundamental parts of service design. I mean I still remember a department coming to us and saying, you know, 'We've got a great website and a great call centre,' and I thought, well, one of those… Shouldn't… Both of those, you

know, one of those should be great and the other one quite small. [laughs] And the reason was, and when you looked at the traffic, you could see that everyone got to a certain part of the web service and then, they couldn't go any further, so they rang the call centre. And, and that, being able to demonstrate that, and show that happening, was one of the great changes that you would bring in. But that's the same for any digital business that needs to go through that process; it's just in Government it was more stark. Because remember, Government is for everybody, you know, it's not a market segment or anything, Government is for everybody, and therefore you've got to be open and transparent and accountable with it.

That's why some people have argued to me, the public sector projects are so difficult, because the Government cannot choose who its customers are.

No it can't. They've just got to serve… You've got to serve everybody.

Yes.

Because Government is for the people. You know, the fundamental right of a citizen to receive the benefits for which they have contributed in taxation, is there. You know, that, that's the fundamental right of Government service delivery.

[46:07]
I did think one thing was pretty good. They wanted a picture of me for my new driving licence, and they said, 'Do you have a passport, and what's your number?' All this was online. I put my number in, and they got my picture out of my passport file. I thought, that's good, well done. Somebody is thinking…

Yes.

A joined-up process there.

And also, have a joined-up process, linking these things together, have a think about, you know, all of the, did you notice all those stories about how the furlough scheme

IT fell over, or how the, the Revenue's IT fell over during the COVID crisis? Well I didn't, because it didn't happen, because it's now built properly.

Yes.

You don't have those issues of, you know, things falling over. It's, it's… You know, and, and you look at… You look at… I mean look, I, I work around the world now, you look at DWP and HMRC, and you see two organisations which, everybody is going to say, there are lots of issues with, with, et cetera. But those big failing IT services are not… What are they now? They have got great teams, they've got great people, and they've got a, a great capability to deliver, and you've seen that through the pandemic, that they stood it up and it worked. [pause] And nobody writes a story about that, do they? Nobody writes the story about, yeah, great, great tech actually worked, for the right price as well.

Right.

Just… You know, it's not news.

[47:28]
You took part in the formation of the D5 group. What was that?

So that was, we… [pause] So the open [inaud] D5 group is that, we were… It was a time when GDS itself was under significant budget pressure, and we could see that there was a, there was an issue coming where we would, you know, we, we needed to prove our worth comparatively with other governments. And, we also felt that there was a need to share best practice amongst governments that had actually bitten the bullet and started to reform. And so we created the D5 as a way of sharing capability and expertise between five governments who had taken that decision to make change happen within them. So the first one in there was Estonia, who were obviously, you know, way ahead of the curve, building citizen services digitally really effectively, and we shared with them a lot of code, and also a lot of experience. People from the Estonian government came and worked in my team. You know, we, we made a huge effort to, to make really close connections with them, and their expertise, and, just,

just intelligence and, and understanding, and being able to think things through properly like engineers was great. So Estonia were in. Israel, because of the approach they were taking with, and [inaud] Digital Israel, and, and Yai Shimler[?] and Shai-lee Spigelman were two people driving that. We worked with them. Korea, because of their work with telecoms, and the ability to really think about massive scaled communications infrastructure properly, and learn from that. And New Zealand because of their work on user research actually, and, and user design, and they were really, really way ahead of, of the governments that we had seen at the time. So we formed the D5 as a group where we could share things together, and, also, it was a good comparator, so you could see where the UK was in comparison to the rest of the world, which, which helped us.

[49:49]
So, no Japan, no Germany, no France?

No.

Why?

Well, the criteria for, the criteria for, for D5 was that you were willing to share and willing to work with, and also you were committed to the modern approach to technology, which was, open systems, open source, open data, open markets, so that you would always be able to buy from those. And, and principally, the most important thing was a commitment to open standards. And open standards was the big, you know, the first four years of government that I was in was a campaign to make sure that we had open standards at the heart of Government. Because if you were going to use a common resource to deliver your services, the Internet, you're going to need to have open standards so that you build things that people can use, and systems and services that others can use and share. And those were, those were the criteria that the D5 was built on, and that was the criteria that countries applied to join.

[50:53]

You specifically mention Microsoft, so did you dump Microsoft and save a lot of money by going open and free software?

[pause] Well I, I mentioned Microsoft earlier because of their amazing ability to tell us what you had bought from them, because they had a fantastically efficient accounting. And, and really, to say that they are an extremely well run business. We didn't drop Microsoft. We did have a long engagement with them over open standards, which, I was very pleased to say that they accepted our approach. And they agreed with us that open standards were very important and that the open standards should be themselves open, non-proprietary, not FRAND based, et cetera. So, we had a long engagement with them with that, and right to the highest level. I mean we used to meet with Satya regularly to just make sure that we were both pointing in the same direction. And I think Microsoft's commitment to open source has been really… You know, if you go back to the days of Steve Ballmer, it was a very different place, and their position in terms of open source is, is on the record as being a, you know, transformative under Satya Nadella.

But are they using Word and Excel on the desktop of Government?

[pause] That, that's happening in, in any organisation. I mean…

Yeah, but you can get it for free, can't you?

[hesitates] You can. And, I mean many countries you can do that. We brought in, famously brought in [inaud] into the Cabinet Office, and, and DCMS. It's a, it's a very open market, you know, it's a much more open market now, it's a really interesting market to be in. And there's great competition in those markets. I mean, I suppose the way… I think where you're going with the question really is, is, I mean the thing we were trying to bring in was competition, so that you could have open competition, and, and both the companies I've mentioned there are both, you know, firmly committed to really strong competitive approaches.

[53:01]

Mistakes. What mistakes did you make in your career, and what did you learn from them, Liam?

[hesitates] OK, so… One example, specific mistake, really good time. I remember sitting in December, beginning of December 2014, in the Rural Payments Agency in Reading, and, contemplating whether or not to proceed with the idea of building a service for farmers for the Common Agricultural Policy that would come through. And being, taking the decision to proceed when I shouldn't have done. I should have stopped that project. It was… It was… It was… I could see how we could get it to work. It had two or three dependencies that were very high risk, but, the data I had had at that point pointed to the fact that they would be able to work. And there was a very high degree of political will to make sure that the, a new system could come in and make life easier for farmers. And, I should have not done that. I should have, I should have… In the pit of my stomach, I should have said, no, this is, you know, we need to do this properly. Let's scale it back and do it in a different way. And, yeah, I was proved right on that, because one of the components of that fell over, and, and consequently we had to, we had to scale back anyway. But it was only much later down the track, much closer to the 2015 Election, I mean it was, it was really, quite entertaining to do it at that time. So that was, that was, that was one of those decisions. I think… [pause] I think if I had my time again, and I went in to do spend controls, I would have gone in and been much more collaborative after the first couple of months. You needed to be fairly bulldog-like in the first two months, you know, I thought, and that would have helped. I think we, we should have been much stronger on pushing for common tech standards, and common tech, you know, the use of more common tech across Government, and offered more across local government as an, as an offer, in the centre. And I should have thought bigger and done more when I was in Government, I think, to be honest. I think there were many projects we just didn't get the time, energy et cetera to do, and I should have taken a step back and, and really gone in much more strongly than we did on the reform that we were doing.

[55:50]
Would you go back?

Yeah, I would go back. I mean when I left I was, you know, it was one of the things that they did, you know… I, I'd go back if they'd have me. I mean, there are areas of government where it would be fantastic to work, because… You see, I suppose, we talked a little bit about this earlier, but, when you work in the Government, everyone is your customer, everyone is there, the citizens. You know, it's for everybody. And, and so you're, you learn so much, because it's a completely different field to working in a corporate place where you're segmenting your market and you're dealing with people. It's, it's very very difficult to work with, with people on that. And, and… For everybody. You, you work with incredibly bright people in Government, many of whom are very unsung, and you also find real pockets of just genius, which is… Goodness, this is bad. That's the light in my room. I haven't moved. But you find really, you find really good pockets of, of genius, and, people who really make, make a difference because of the mission, and, you know, it's, it's, working in an organisation where the mission is the thing, is tremendously powerful, and attractive, to me. I find, I find that really, really attractive. And I would go back in. I've always said that I would go back in.

It inspires you, does it?

Yeah, it does. It does. Because it's, it's… You can do more in a day if… So, so a friend of mine, Matt Lear, worked for, worked in the White House, and one of the things his, you know, we used to talk a lot, and one of the things that Matt said was, every six months he became twice as effective. Because you learn the system, you learn the way round the system, and you can become more effective. And, and if you are aiming to help people have a better experience of Government and have better lives, if you're in a situation where every six months you're doubling your effectiveness, it's, it's… I mean, tell me a business where you get that. Well, I will tell you a business where you get that, [laughs] because that's where I am now, but… But… And that's one of the reasons I came here, because, you know… But, but that's, that's, that's the amazing thing with Government, is that you are able to, to do that. And you are doing it at a scale which no company really can, can match.

Liam Maxwell, the object of the Archives is to capture the past and inspire the future. You have inspired us. It was an inspiring story. Thank you very much for your contribution.

Thanks very much for having me.

[End of Interview]