
InTransition Episode 100 – Alex Aiken

David Pembroke: Hello, Ladies and Gentlemen! Welcome to what is a very special edition of In Transition, the podcast that examines the practise of content communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke.

It's funny that when you start off on these little projects and you think to yourself, "Oy! We get it. This is a good idea. I really like to talk about government communications." I don't know if you ever really start and think to yourself, "I wonder how long this will go on?" It is such an area of depth and such an area of interest and there are so many fascinating people who are doing such great work in government communications around the world that I think we can run for many, many years to come. This is Episode 100 and we have a very special guest. Before we come to him, we start as we do each week with the definition of content communication as it relates to government and the public sector.

Content communication is a strategic, measurable, and accountable business process that relies on the creation, curation and distribution of useful, relevant, and consistent content. The purpose is to engage and inform a specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen and/or stakeholder action. There it is.

In podcasting, there is this tradition that for the hundredth edition of your programme that you invite the person who was on your first show. For me, that was Alex Aiken. Alex is the Executive Director of Government Communications for the UK government and a superstar when it comes to government communications around the world. He was appointed in December of 2012. He has been responsible for creating the Government Communication Services and developing so many of the UK's very successful cross-government campaigns. I won't go through his bio because I did that on the first edition and if you need to know a little bit more about Alex, you can go back there. He joins me now from London, Alex, welcome to In Transition once again.

Alex Aiken: David, it's an absolute a pleasure to be with you and many congratulations on your hundredth edition.

David Pembroke: Isn't it fantastic though that it is such a ... there is so many things that we can talk about and it's something that we should talk about more and we should promote more.

Alex Aiken: I hope that colleagues in Australian public service communications will utilise all of the hundred editions to date. Who knows, we might be two hundredth in due course. The content of communication knowledge that you have provided over the year, hundred editions, I watched the emails as they come in and learn from them, is hugely valuable because communications, I believe, is more science than art as you say in your definition of content communications. It is strategic,

measurable and if it is done with creativity and it is useful and relevant it will have the impact on the citizen audience that you set out in your definition.

David Pembroke: It's such an important time isn't it for government communications to become more effective in this day and age of fragmentation, of fake news for government to be able to effective in their communication? You guys in the UK, guys and girls, I should say in the UK, have really led the charge of a lot of that innovation. How about you just take us back to the beginning of the change programme that you introduced and then maybe fill us in with where you are at the moment and what are those big challenges for you at the moment that you're dealing with.

Alex Aiken: One of the things we're looking at the moment, David, is how we deal with those challenges around trusting government. I think it's right to start by saying that government is generally trusted in terms of public communication. There's always the debate in parliament in Canberra or in London and indeed around the world about the policies and the particular political take on policies. Most of the work of government communicators locally and state level at national or federal level is trusted public information. It's asking people to play by the rules, to do the right thing and so on. I think we should start by remembering that most of the time government is trusted by the citizens to help them do the right thing.

David Pembroke: Okay, but do you think though that there has been a challenge and that that trust is perhaps eroding? Or is it more perhaps the trust in politicians when you have a look at thing like the Edelman Trust Barometer that says maybe what you're saying is not quite as accurate as you would hope it would be.

Alex Aiken: I think at a time when we're all potentially content creators and distributors. I know there's time when the nature of modern society moves us from relative deference and I want to come back to that in terms of the history of UK government communications and history of public service communications, and when there have been some fairly well-publicized failings by public services around the world to tell the truth and obviously, in Europe and across the world, we look at the fallout from the financial crisis and people are rightly saying what is government doing to help me to live the life that I aspire to? If you look at the vote to leave the European Union in the UK, the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, says rightly that that is not just a vote for or against the European Union, it is a vote for change and a vote of people to say, "Can you listen to what we are trying to tell you? Can the political elite listen to what we are trying to tell you about the job prospects we have, about to see fairness in society, and yes also of course about the relationship with the European Union?"

I don't think government has been as nimble in the UK or elsewhere as it could have been to respond to the lessons of the past 10 or 15 years in the economic shocks and great shifts in society. Obviously, you've had a big debate on

immigration in Australia as we have had in the UK. I don't think government has been as nimble as it should have been to respond to those public challenges.

David Pembroke: What stops government being nimble?

Alex Aiken: I think that we do not listen as carefully as we should do to the public all of the time. This is quite a contested space because government, and I can tell you as Director of Government Communications, the UK civil service tries to listen to what people are saying all the time. It is a constant part of being in government about what are we hearing, how do we ensure the policy and the decisions we take over taxation, over the provision of public services both support our policy goals, consistent with our fiscal ability to fund services, and listen to people's concerns.

I think that generally, government should listen far more carefully and systematically using the huge variety of tools available on our line that enable us to gain an understanding of what people are saying digitally and also more traditional ways through consultations and through face to face engagement and using that data and saying what are we being told and rather than taking a position that listening is something that is an option or extra, it should be central to our communications practise and indeed to the creation of usable and useful content.

David Pembroke: This indeed has been some ... you have invested in some work in this area, the Australian communications academic, Jim McNamara has been involved in that, what's the big takeaway from Jim's academic research that people listening to this podcast could perhaps integrate into the advice that they might give to their policy and programme areas?

Alex Aiken: I think that we can come back ... we are very grateful for Jim's work. Jim has done some tremendous work in helping us understand where we can improve our practise. Recently, indeed, this month, the direct communications group which is the body that oversees the operations of the Government Communications Service took the conclusions of Jim's work and it's been turned into an operational series of recommendations. There were six recommendations and what those six recommendations come to is we are going to be systematic in the way that we listen and evaluate and bring that knowledge from listening into our communications.

What that means in practise is there is a new insight and evaluation group with professionals drawn from each department to make sure we share the listening. There's a set central library of research and best practise that enables people to see what is going on. Each department has been asked to put in place an approach to horizon scanning to looking to see what is coming up and what people are saying online that will help inform both policy and the delivery of operational services. I hope that gives you a flavour of trying to make listening systematic across government communications.

David Pembroke: It does but I think the other thing that I would draw our attention to, this is the lesson I think that a lot of people can take or a lot of government can take out of the UK is the sense of collaboration. People don't listen in silos. People don't listen around the Department of Education or Employment or Training. They listen around issues and therefore there is a need to share that rather than interrupting people for their views in 9, 10 different ways.

Alex Aiken: That's absolutely right. In April, we will publish the fifth cross-government communications plan. As we've been going through the process of looking at the campaigns that we will deliver in 2017-2018, we are a campaign-based organisation. We look at the objective and the audience and try and bring all the resources of public service to bear positively and productively on that audience.

As we've gone through the various groups we operate in in all these liberal communications plan, there's an economic group, there's social policy, there's foreign policy and so on, then it becomes apparent if you're the director of communications and ministry of finance and you got colleagues in the room from different ministries that we are far stronger together. That collaboration underpinning is the foundation of an ability to listen and respond to audiences. We're not perfect. Like any good sports team, we get things right a reasonable amount of time but we're not complacent and we realise where we make mistakes and got to improve.

David Pembroke: But the structure's in place, the decisions being taken, and as you say, now it's around execution as opposed to not even had that realisation yet that it is important that this collaboration take place. Anyway, I won't get on to my hobby horse because there are a number people listening who are nodding their heads furiously because it seems to be something that in Australia, at a federal level, we just haven't been able to get right. This podcast does have a global audience, I don't want to label the point too much. Domestically here at a national level, we've struggled to get people to understand that it's, as much as possible, a single story that people are looking to understand. A complex story no doubt, but a single story.

What advice might you have as to how in fact that we could have that realisation and get the lights turned on so our political masters may in fact see the benefit of these joined up approach?

Alex Aiken: This month, David, marks the hundredth anniversary of UK government communications in a formal sense.

David Pembroke: Very good. Well, congratulations to you too, Alex.

Alex Aiken: Hundredth podcast, hundredth years. Since February 1917, the Ministry for Information came into being in London. That was setup because the government at that day thought that the public required more honest, relevant, timely communications than they had been getting to date. As we've looked

back because we sort of almost by chance fell upon that anniversary, we've recognised that government communicators have struggled and have fought valiantly over the past hundred years to get their profession recognised by officials and ministers. There's always been quite a lot of pushback. I would say to all my colleagues in Australia that if you're worried about ministers and officials and chief executives being sceptical about digital media and content generally, then your predecessors in the UK in the 1920s have to fight quite hard to get new fangled media like TV and radio accepted as part of the government communications offer. We have perfectly good posters and newspapers, why do we need television and radio?

Communicators being at the forefront of technological change has been one of the consistent themes that's come out of this history and have been far more early adopters inevitably than some of the policies or the operational services. Communicators have also have to consistently demonstrate their value, and by value it is explicit in your definition of content communications. When we have forgotten how to do that in the UK historical experience then that is where we lose our licence to operate.

There's a recent example where government communications in the UK was cut back significantly after 2010 because we couldn't prove the value of our campaigns perhaps some more interesting example immediately after the second World War when Churchill, the outgoing Prime Minister actually wanted to close down the Ministry of Information but the incoming Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, the famous performing labour Prime Minister who had in his early working life worked as a government communicator, he decided it was necessary to keep a government communications service, a government information service, in order to explain to the public the reforming agenda that they had. The consistent ability to demonstrate value is one of those things that gives us that licence to operate over the years.

David Pembroke: At the moment bringing that forward, and as you say, we are at a time of rapid transformation in technology, how is it that you are continuing to add value because you do point to that 2010 period where you were unable to do it. What are the changes that you've been able to make between 2010 and 2017, which has strengthened that licence that you have to operate in the UK?

Alex Aiken: I think there are five things which I'll cover briefly but I'll offer it to anyone who is looking at leading a communications team or improving a communications operation. First, you got to have a clearer idea of the destination. Certainly, I said when I took up this role, that government communications should be exceptional. Exceptional in terms of it should run highly effective campaigns that are efficiently delivered. Of course, you can run a campaign with twice the resources, the trick is to run it with limited resources effectively. Being exceptional was our goal and where I want us to get. Certainly, from a leadership perspective, just saying that does tend to reinforce those who want to give their best and does raise the performance of people.

Second is that absolutely rigorous focus on evaluation. While he was in the UK, Jim McNamara sat on the evaluation council which is the group I chair that routinely looks at the performance of government campaigns that says, have they been effective? To a point, how can they be more effective and how can we use the best evaluation techniques? That's the point about creating value.

Third is that collaboration. It should be just the de facto practise whether you're local, state or federal level that you cooperate and you learn from one another. Certainly, in the UK, as we got the national public health authority to work with local government on improving people's health, you can't just call from Whitehall to improve public health, you have to work with local governments. That practical collaboration has helped.

Fourth, celebrate success, and certainly by championing best practise, we have proved our worth. Fifth, practically it should be first rather than fifth, but understanding the political agenda and getting alongside the agenda of the politicians because the vast, vast majority of politicians want to do a great job for the people they serve. Understanding their goals and what they want to achieve and showing how communications could be a powerful force for good means that you bring the bureaucracy and the political side together in a way that I hope benefits both.

David Pembroke: Let's take them ... let's go through a couple of those. That last one, how are you best able to engage with your political masters around understanding the value of the government communications service? What are some of the tips that you've got for people to be more effective in that very important role that they have?

Alex Aiken: I think the first point, David, is they mean what they say, and certainly, it was very clear when Theresa May became Prime Minister last July and stood on the steps of Downing Street and talked about her ambitions for the UK. That was something that I listened to very carefully as did my senior colleagues. That is our destination, that is what we've got to use government communications to help achieve, a country that works for everyone and an economy that works for everyone.

I think I see both in UK and authorities and overseas, sometimes communicators are not quick enough to recognise the legitimate agenda of the politicians. Our role is promote, explain, and justify the policies of the elected government. Getting alongside that agenda early on will pay dividends. I think also, we've got to be much stronger in speaking truth to power, explaining the purpose of undertaking communication activities. It is not to get press coverage, although that might have an incidental benefit, it is to explain to people the direction we're going in, why we're taking the route we are and demonstrate the benefits to them. Too much communication can sometimes be very taxicial. We'll do this interview or we'll put out this press release rather than saying, we're doing this

because through media coverage you can develop a public understanding of your position but we got to think very carefully about the channels we use.

David Pembroke: But in terms of the practicalities of that, and I understand that notion of paying clear attention and appropriate attention to what is being said and then making sure that you can justify your position or the benefit that you can ultimately add, in a practical sense, these people are extremely busy. They've got so many issues running, they're got the media that they've got ... they got so much going, how can a public service communicator best represent their position and be able to be in the considerations set of their political masters?

Alex Aiken: Get up early, understand what's going on and keep your political master informed. My wife recently became leader of Westminster City Council, and it was interesting watching the Westminster City council team respond to a new leader involved and they got it right. I think they're a very good team.

One of the things that certainly helped my wife was the production of that early morning briefing about what's going on, what the council is doing, what the council's communications are for the day. It's interesting seeing that because that gave her confidence as new leader, the comms team get it and we're on it. Certainly, by 7:30 each morning, the cabinet office team have put together a briefing for the ministerial team. Obviously, the same happens with the Prime Minister. That early grip of the agenda is what I would offer in response to your question, David, as the starting point. If you get that point of the day right by 7:38, then you got a fighting chance for the rest of the day.

David Pembroke: Indeed. Let's go back to that top one which I really like that idea. You've obviously got to have a destination. I do like this notion of exception and being exceptional and really seeking people to get their chins up and look to the future. As you say, you'll identify the people who want to be involved in being exceptional and those who don't. How, in fact, do you judge that whether you're being exceptional? Do you have any definitions that help you to know whether you are being exceptional? Is it just an aspirational statement?

Alex Aiken: One of the first things I did when I took up this role was we accelerated the capability of use of government communication teams. That was a reasonably effective tool to understand what was good and what wasn't good between about 2013, 2015. In 2017, we started a new round of communication capability reviews where we go into teams and government departments and agencies and say, what's the strategy? Is the strategy aligned with the department's business objectives? How are the communications operations? Is the traditional media operation integrated with the digital operation? Is the internal communications working well? What is the skills and development programme for staff? Are they motivated by best professional development to give their best? Are the resources aligned with the goals?

That process of capability review raises standards, increases competition, works at where people need to improve, and that's the formal bit. There are informal things we have... you get your director of comms together each month, then there is a healthy competition and they all present their communication plans and they all want to do better than one another because they want to do the best. The monthly awards we have across government for most effective campaigns still they've been going a couple of years, produce a remarkable number of entries.

The evaluation council is there to pick up about the big campaigns about how successful they are. The quarterly reporting we have on our 25 main campaigns make sure we're on track on the big things. Each is this constant focus on are we getting better, which means that we perhaps get nearer our destination. I'm not entirely sure what I would do if I thought we had got there, but our ultimate judges are the public. I'm sure they will say we're not there yet.

David Pembroke: No. But again, at least you've got the structure and the process and the function and the accountability mechanisms built-in to your system which is at least going to give you some benchmarks to work from to see.

Alex Aiken: I think that's right, yeah.

David Pembroke: Without that, you have absolutely no chance. Interesting, I was in this discussion in a particular government department today. I was trying to introduce this notion of healthy competition between different groups. I was set upon by a couple of people that's like, "No, no! We've got to break down the silos. We can't have competition. We can't have people who up against each other." I don't agree with that. I tend to support your notion that you've got to establish some sort of competition. How do you keep the competition healthy without it becoming counterproductive?

Alex Aiken: You make people work together. We got 17 main departments but as I mentioned earlier, we have four groupings, economic, social, foreign and public services group. Seeing the director of comms work in those public service groups means that they have the economic ministries, the social policy ministries work together, and then we have cross government forums to look after our people and to make sure that we promote the best talent. We have a talent forum with various directors of comms sit on. We have other initiatives where they learn to work together. They have professional pride which create competition between the departments but they have professional discipline to jointly promote the profession in government, the profession of communicators.

David Pembroke: Fantastic. I think that's a great insight. I think I will borrow that and make sure that ... that gives me an idea for a couple of things. Thank you. There is one thing that's coming out of the hundredth edition is something that I can go and take forward with other people.

Just in terms of, as you say, the next steps, where are the best biggest sticking points you've got at the moment? I know that this is sophisticated hardworking, but where are your problems? Everyone's got problems so where are your problems?

Alex Aiken: Most effective use of data, embedding the listing agenda, and making sure that government communicators serve as ambassadors and help create advocates for the public services that we are promoting. There's a massive amount of data out there, all your listeners will be familiar with that, and making sure we make the best use of that data, online data, even traditionally underused resources like the correspondence, the email correspondence comes into departments, and understanding how we can then target our communications through understanding that data will be one.

We talked about listening which is a second. The third one about government communicators whether they're the most junior or the most senior, should be able to go out and communicate in their own right face to face with community groups, with students, with more senior groups, making sure that government communicators have the skills in order to go out and do that and talk to organisations, businesses and others who will then help us with public health campaigns, and with other source of ad campaigns. Most of the top three big challenges I have along with the day job which, as you know David, is relentless.

David Pembroke: Indeed it is. Just in terms of, we only got a couple of minutes to go, in terms of the skills that you have developed and that commitment that you've made to skills in training, obviously, an agenda that you are going to continue to invest in, what are the sorts of skills that you are looking for in somebody who can work effectively within the system that you've established at the Government Communications Service?

Alex Aiken: In the future of public service communications report which is able on GCS website, we said there are four. Content, which is appropriate in this hundredth broadcast, data, which I have mentioned, social marketing and understanding the science of behaviour change, then the fourth is the ability to create advocates for public service, people who can connect with your audiences. Content, data, social marketing, and advocacy are the four big skills.

We have a training programme that covers the whole of government communications to provide 2000 training places, three leadership programmes, numerous seminars and events, which I hope demonstrates our practical impact. We've bringing on forward new courses this year to better understanding site to undertake a rise and scanning properly to really understand digital marketing which is an area which is often talked about but less well-understood. Again, it's relentless focus. If you are a professional, you need to be as trusted as your doctor, your lawyer, your architect and therefore you need to have the best professional skills.

David Pembroke: In terms of that though, why is it that you feel you need to do that? Are the universities not preparing graduates or not preparing post graduate students with the requisite skills that you require?

Alex Aiken: I think that universities do some terrific work. Ann Gregory is one of the academics who advises us has been central, for example, to our leadership programme. The applied learning you get from running a campaign and saying I wonder how we could do that better, means that we have to build on it, and also, any professional you will talk to, in the UK, lawyers undertake regular and professional tests to make sure they keep up with their knowledge and I think the same should be true for professionals including communicators.

David Pembroke: Indeed. No argument with that at all. I think that that's a every good use of people's time. I think as the world continues to change as it no doubt will, we all need to be on this journey of continuous improvement, continuous learning and it just never ends. It's a good thing anyway. If you like it, which I do and obviously, you do and most, it's good fun.

Alex Aiken: I hope what I have in Australia, may I foresee some brilliant examples about content and content creation and professional development.

David Pembroke: I'm sure you will and that was ... my final question was going to be, there is an Australian tour of the Alex Aiken show where might people book in to see you when you're in Australia? Where will you be and how can people get across your roadshow?

Alex Aiken: First, it's an absolute pleasure to have been invited to Australia and speak at the Corporate Communications Conference in Sydney in May. I'm looking forward to that. I've got a couple of days in Sydney and then a couple of days in Canberra. I'm sure through you or indeed directly to my office, if there are people who want to be and have a chat while I'm there with you in Sydney and Canberra, I'll be absolutely delighted to do so. My purpose unfortunately on this trip is to come and work rather than see the so many beauties and opportunities Australia has to offer. I am available for breakfast and lunch, the afternoon teas and early evening drinks.

David Pembroke: Indeed. We will certainly keep you busy when you are here in Australia. I know there's a lunch planned, I need to talk you about a few other things as well. Certainly, I think there is so much that we can learn from you Alex. Congratulations again on your achievements. I love the fact that is the hundred years and to be able to have gone back through history to see the parallels that things really don't change a lot. The challenges don't change, the technology may but the lessons in history are always there. I think there are some great insights that we can learn from that. Is there a history written somewhere that we can perhaps rate at some point during the journey this year that will be put together?

Alex Aiken: Yup. We're just finishing it, proofing it, checking it, and all the-

David Pembroke: Great.

Alex Aiken: basic but essential things. It will be published on the 6th of March. I'll bring you a personal copy at Sydney.

David Pembroke: Okay. fantastic.

Alex Aiken: It will be available on the GCS website.

David Pembroke: Okay, GCS website as well. Fantastic. That's great as well. Okay, Alex, listen, I will let you get back to that very busy day job that you have. Thank you so much for coming back for the hundredth edition of In Transition. Special callout to my friend, Tom Burton, because in the very first edition, I remember when I was summing up, I said to Alex, "Listen, we'll get you back for the hundredth", and he very quickly got on the email and he said, "Pembroke, you're kidding yourself. You'll never get to a hundred." Tom, there you go my friend, a hundred episodes in the can. May there be many more. I think I'll keep talking about this for many years to come because I do enjoy it so much. I do look to my friends in the UK who have done such a wonderful job in setting up that infrastructure that allows this continual improvement and this commitment to exceptional performance, I think, is a great thing.

I think we all do need to have those very big visions in front of us so we can all aspire to do great things because in this day and age, ladies and gentleman, as we all know, it is so important that government does communicate effectively so that we can strengthen communities and improve the well-being of the citizens of the communities in which we live. Thank you very much, Alex Aiken to you, for joining us all the way from the UK.

Alex Aiken: David, thank you. Congratulations on your hundredth edition.

David Pembroke: Thank you very much, Alex, again. Thanks very much ladies and gentlemen. We have, again, gone over a few minutes but I'm sure well worthwhile listening to Alex Aiken and all the insights that he has there from the UK. For another week, thank you very much for joining us. I am delighted to have celebrated 100 editions of In Transition. To our very loyal listenership, wherever you are in the world going about your work, I do hope that over the past 100 episodes we have been able to deliver some knowledge that has helped you on your journey to become more effective. We will continue for many, many years to come on this mission of delivering content and valuable content to you on a regular basis. Thank you very much for joining us this week. I'll be back again at the same time next week. Bye for now.