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Voice Over: Welcome to InTransition, a program dedicated to the practice of content marketing in government. Here's your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke: Hello and welcome to the first episode of In Transition, a podcast dedicated to the practice of content marketing in government. My name is David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me.

As this is our first program, we do have a very special guest lined up for you. First, I thought it might be useful to explain why we're making this program and what we will achieve in the weeks, months and years ahead. Communication is a fundamental priority for all governments. On a daily basis, all over the world, at a municipal, state, federal and international level, governments interact with hundreds of millions of citizens and stakeholders with the objective of building stronger, more sustainable communities and improving the well-being of citizens. If government gets communication right, they can take big strides to achieving this simple and compelling goal.

Content marketing is a strategic and measurable business process that relies on the curation, creation and distribution of valuable, relevant and consistent content to engage and inform a clearly defined audience with the objective of driving a desired citizen or stakeholder action.

This definition is an adaptation of the Content Marketing Institute's formal definition of content marketing and I have amended it so as it relates to the government sector. The content marketing process includes research, strategy, the setting of objectives, the understanding of audiences, selection of media types and channels, publishing, monitoring, measurement and evaluation. It's precisely the process that people working in government communication need to take in order to be more effective in their engagement with citizens and stakeholders.

If I might, just as a small piece of advice to all of you out there, encourage you to visit the Content Marketing Institute's website and become part of the community and access the vast resources that they've assembled on their website.

The purpose of this podcast is to improve the quality and effectiveness of government communication around the world. We'll explore the changes in communication brought about by technology and discuss how government can use content marketing to move effectively engage citizens and stakeholders.

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We'll speak to the world's leading experts in government communication and encourage them to share their stories, their experience, their triumphs and their setbacks so we all learn and we all become more effective in telling the story of government.

Now I promised you a big name for our first program and here he is. Alex Aiken is the Executive Director of Communication in the UK government and he joins me from London. Alex, hello and thanks for being In Transition.

Alex Aiken: Morning, David. Delighted to be on your program.

David Pembroke: Alex, before we dive into the subject matter, I wonder if you might introduce yourself to the audience and tell us a little bit about yourself.

Alex Aiken: Yeah. I think I may be a bit familiar to some of your audience because colleagues of mine from the UK have worked in Australian government communications over the years and I've met lots of Australian communicators; they'd come to the UK. It's a pleasure to be talking to old colleagues and new friends, I hope.

Fundamentally, I do three things: strategy, management and head of profession. As the director for UK government communications, I set the government's communications strategy, which is born after the coalitions agreement and that is set out in the government communications plan. We have three big priorities - building a strong economy, a fairer society and the extending police influence in the world. They are set out in the government communications span and that's a strategy.

Second, management. I manage the Cabinet Office and No. 10 communications team. Third, head of profession. As the leading professional in government communications, my role is to make the best practice of our work the standard. I take that professional role extremely seriously because communicators are professionals and therefore raising professional standards is something that I think about every day.

David Pembroke: Alex, there's no question that the UK government has been an exemplar in how you have modernized the approach to government communication over the last few years. Can you describe the changes that you've made and the principles that have underpinned those changes?

Alex Aiken: I'll start with the one-billion-pound sterling question and that was the challenge my predecessors faced in 2010 when they were asked by the

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incoming government, by the coalition government, "OK. We spend one billion pounds on government communications, that's a lot of money. What do we get for a billion pounds?" My predecessors found out that very difficult question to answer. The government ministers said reasonably, "All right. Well we don't know what a billion pound does. Let's try doing it for half that, for 500 million and we will see what we get for that."

Therefore, the failure of government communicate just to adequately demonstrate the value of their work to evaluate the impact they had on public and community, as you mentioned, meant that it cost good communicators their roles that meant we couldn't continue with some of the communication programs we did. My drive, essentially, has been to prove the value of communications through improvement programs that are designed to drive up professionalism; to deliver across government communications; to improve internal communications and that unmistakably a hugely important part of government [inaudible 00:05:58] and that program is ongoing.

David Pembroke: How did the communicating community respond to that rather massive challenge, that sort of burning platform that they were standing upon?

Alex Aiken: I think with any major campaign you get about 10% of the audience who are determined to help you because they can see it's absolutely right. You have 10% in the audience who are going to oppose you because some people oppose most things. Then you're going to win the hearts and minds of the group in the middle. Doing that was by saying "We are a profession. This is the communications profession. This is not some sort of add-on to government business. This is core. Government essentially does four things. We can tax, we can regulate, we can legislate and we can communicate. This is one of the four essential tools for government and getting it right is something that will improve, enrich and in some cases, save the lives of the citizens that we serve.

David Pembroke: That certainly drove the change was that this ability that things had to change. It wasn't an optional thing. Change was coming.

Alex Aiken: Well the change was coming. Of course, the other thing we found is that communications is changing. My challenge to the many good press officers we still have in government is to say we don't need press officers in the future and those old skills about writing and crafting and drafting, they'll still have a role. Communication channels and tools don't go away. What I need from the future communicator is the ability to analyze data, to create great shareable content, to build movement of allies that create

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advocates for our public policies underneath people who will speak truth to power, to be the conscience of the organization. That all-around communicator is a long way from the traditional view of the government press officer crafting and drafting and sending out press releases.

David Pembroke: How difficult has it been to transition from the old to the new and to update the skills of the traditional press officers, as you describe them, to the modern content creator and distributor?

Alex Aiken: You've got to be a bit Marxist about this. You go to set out that there is a clear goal and that destination is worth it for those who go in the journey, and then you go to mandate the change. We ran the first government communication service, that's the GCS Change Program through November '13 and finished last month in October '14. That was 12 programs of activity. Proper project management and deliver the changes we need. At the heart of that was our professional development program, the ASPIRE course. We've put on 2,400 courses in the core discipline areas where we need people to improve. Campaign delivery, evaluation, digital communications, all related to your theme of content marketing. We've got people through those training courses.

We've also required as part of their professional membership of the GCS that they undertake alongside that four pieces of training and professional development of which two have got to be focused on evaluation and digital because those are the skills where we were most lacking.

David Pembroke: I'm sure a lot of people listening to this would probably think this is incredible that you can actually get across departmentals, you can get across agency and get everyone to buy into a singular program where they can surrender their self interest. The ministers and the staff of those ministers surrender their interests in the interest of the central narrative and the capability. Can you just describe how again that you went about building that unity.

Alex Aiken: Look, it's easy. In a word, it's leadership. Leadership is not something that I just practiced. Leadership is the responsibility of everyone who works in the government communication service in the UK and in Australian public service communications. Leadership is about you doing your job to the best of your ability and accepting that we're better together, working collectively and not trying to do someone else's job or manage up or manage sideways, but do your job brilliantly.

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When you get people in the room and you lead them by saying, "All right. What are the interests that we have together?" For example, an area where Australia and the UK government working closely together to deal with an important international crisis, Ebola. Getting our foreign ministry colleagues in the room with our Department of Health colleagues, they wouldn't necessarily see what the obvious benefit was. Setting out a campaign plan and starting with the objectives and being very clear about what we are trying to achieve, reassurance of UK domestic audiences about the threat and the lack of threat of Ebola coming here, but also showing how we are tackling the problem at source in Sierra Leone, primarily for the UK; and showing how they could work together and showing they are better together is absolutely critical.

The methodology behind that, we summarized, as OASIS. Every campaign, every communications activity we undertake should have an Objective that's the O; a clear Audience; a Strategy; Implementation milestones; and then Scoring or evaluation. To get people to work together say, "All right. How was our approach defined? What's our OASIS answer to this problem?" is the basic way we get people to work together.

David Pembroke: Again, I believe that you have very strong buy-in from all the way at the top, from the Prime Minister Cameron, who noticed or understood the power if you're able to collectively work together.

Alex Aiken: Yeah. I mean look, everyone in governments all around the world know that working together, treating communications as a profession, doing evaluation, these are all sensible things. I sometimes think the issue is that communicators need to be more brave, more robust in explaining to the people they serve - chief executives, political leaders, minister - about where we are trying to get with communications, changing lives for the better, how we get there, best professional practice.

Practically, when we started the improvement program last year, the first thing we did was what we call in the UK a right round where my minister, the minister of the Cabinet Office, writes the Prime Minister and that letter is copied to all the cabinet ministers saying, "This is what we intend to do and this would change communications for the better." Of course, we brief all the departmental direct communications on what we were going to do. Of the, I think 20 letters we sent out, we have four or five letters back from section states saying, "Well how will this affect my press office? I don't want to lose my press office. How can you guarantee that I'll retain a degree of independence of actions and so on?"

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Therefore, there were challenges and we dealt with those challenges. I will also emphasize that this is not about me or the PM of the Minister of the Cabinet Office saying, "This is how it will be and it's my road or the high road." It's about saying, "We are better together. These are the professional arguments for doing it and they are pretty compelling. If you have better ideas then we could go that way, but we can't see where that is." The docs and the section state came onboard and that's how we proceeded with the program.

David Pembroke: Congratulations! It's a stunning achievement. At this point in time, how far developed along the path do you feel that you are at the moment? That sounds like a vast training program that you have implemented so far.

Alex Aiken: Yeah. 60% of the way along the program in terms of communication delivery and 80% of the way along professional development. I can say that because we produce the government communications plan. It's there on the GCS website. Every quarter we monitor the implementation of the plan and we ask departments to assess their professionalism against the GCS criteria. The last quarterly returns that came in in October said that we're about 60% of the way on campaign delivery against the objectives in the 14/15 plan. Departments assessed themselves of about 80% of professional standards.

Those are self assessments. They're done by professionals. It's never an interest to do them properly. I think they're roughly right if you think about that. If government communications is spending about 500 million pounds a year in the UK, then we're spending 60% of it well. There're issues there but frankly, if we're all meeting 60% of all our targets at this stage of the year, we can drive back, in terms of delivery, to 80% or 90% by the end of the year. I think that's money well spent.

David Pembroke: It seems like you're doing a great job in building up the capability and obviously, getting that alignment right. How then do you look upon the traditional communication practices such as public relations and advertising? Where do they sit in terms of your plans for the future?

Alex Aiken: I heard someone say at the conference I was at recently, "We need to put the public back into public relations." I think public relations got reduced to media relations and actually got released to press in terms of newspaper relations. Therefore, looking at public relations as the full ability to deal with all media, I mean media as either tri-media or express broadcast and digital or it's actually uni-media as all digital effectively now, and therefore moving from position where we craft and draft a

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position where media officers can produce content and tweet and blog and write briefings where they need to.

The traditional skills remain important as the core, if you can't write, you can't communicate, but is actually we've moved forward. The most compelling pieces of communication I see are pictures or videos. Pictures are very ancient. Probably the first form of communication. Video is of course effectively the most modern, but we are moving forward rapidly.

We did a review about these communications last year and it showed that government communications in terms of digital output was improving, but society's use of digital was improving faster. Therefore, we have to make more progress to keep up with the way that you and I and your audiences are using digital communications.

David Pembroke: In terms of your relations with the press and with the media, how have they responded to the UK government communications getting their act together? Have they responded well or have they been hostile to the changes?

Alex Aiken: We will always have an adversarial relationship with the main political press because that is their job and we respect that and an essential part of the diplomatic process. I think many journalists will be generally pleased with the service they get from UK government media officers. There will always be issues about that lines and that sort of thing. Across from the purely political press, the [inaudible 00:17:29] press and broadcast and so on, relations are generally good. They are less interested in how we are changing. What they're interested in is the stories and the information they get in a timely and effective way.

Certainly, in part, my role is head of profession in making sure we keep stand us up and making sure we stay on the right side of the divide between government, which is what I am responsible for, and politics, which is what the political parties do, is hugely important. My job is to promote, explain and justify the policies of the elected government. What I don't do and what my press officers don't do is attack the opposition. That is a job for the political parties and press officers.

David Pembroke: Looking to the future now, what are some of the changes that you think will dominate your world in perhaps the next two or three years?

Alex Aiken: We've had a project looking at this and considering this. It comes down to things that your readers will be familiar with, how we use data or information about audiences to the best affect; how we create really

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compelling content that can be shared and used; and how we build alliances that run government campaigns jointly with people. Just looking at a couple of those quickly.

In terms of building alliances, in our public health work, we've had some very effective joint campaign with big organizations, big supermarkets, with Disney; in one case, have allowed us to use their channels and their brands to get across public health messages effectively to children and adults.

In terms of the content we create, the Scotland Referendum, which you will know about, was a fascinating moment where there was a proper campaign for the heart and soul of the United Kingdom. That campaign, a lot of the debate and the information and the campaign work that we did was on Facebook and Twitter and throughout [Udecide 00:19:25] website and through those channels.

It was the first major campaign I've been involved in where you recognize the actually in the newspaper, voice wasn't so important. Most of the newspapers has gotten in favor of the union position and against separation, but nevertheless, they didn't seem to have the impact that digital channels have had. Therefore, the content we create for the Facebook, some pieces of content, we got 10% engagement rates where it was more widely shared. Some pieces of content we got not .1% engagement. Therefore, understanding what content would appeal to audiences was a huge piece of learning from that campaign.

David Pembroke: What sort of content creation capabilities do you have inside the government?

Alex Aiken: As part of the reform program, we've changed our corporate team for the government communications service and grouped under four Is. It's four Is - impact, ideas, implementation and insight, because those are the four competencies we expect government communicators to demonstrate. We start with insight. We have an insight team that provides the research about audiences. Then we have an ideas team and that is content team. We created and asked questions a team of content creators who can then look at a campaign and say, "What is the most effective way to get this across to the audiences we are trying to reach?"

Often, this is not about direct, bombarding them with emails or tweets. This is about saying, "Can we put something out there. I think about Building Britain campaign, which is about the infrastructure that the UK government is creating across the country." Then saying to builders and



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project managers and manufacturers, "Show us, tweet us, blog, post images and stories about how you are building the infrastructure projects that will help improve lives and help improve infrastructure in the UK over the next five, ten, fifteen years."

That sort of campaign gets a great response because people are proud of their projects and they want to show them off, which helps government illustrate how it has a multi-million pound infrastructure program through the people who are deliverer, run through direct communications.

David Pembroke: It's a fascinating program that you outlined. Most people aren't there. Most governments are really not operating with the degree of maturity and sophistication and the effectiveness, obviously, that you are operating with. What advice would you give to some of their listeners who are sitting in sideload operation, perhaps a bit dispirited thinking this Utopian world is impossible. What are the simple steps that people could take to start to bring about some change and bring about some momentum?

Alex Aiken: Yes. We are not perfect. We have got a long way to go. I said the moment, over this year 60% campaign effectiveness. We need to drive that out. What your colleagues can do is you start with the first steps. The way to eat an elephant is piece by piece, not trying to do the whole thing together. If Australian communicators want to look at some of the materials, I think the most important single thing I'd point them to is the government digital services design principles, which is about digital work but is applicable to communications. It says start small; it says iterate; do things gradually; don't just try and do the whole thing in one.

It also says start with the use and need. I think the most important single thing I'd say is think about the needs of the audience, not about the needs of the chief executive or politician as the starting point. Thinking about the use and need is critically important. As a practical thing, you and your colleagues, the Australian government communicators are welcome to join the UK government communication service. You can sign up on the GCS website because we encourage people to sign up and get the emails, the information that we put out. It's something that's from the UK but I think it has international application and so on.

I think starting with the use and need, realizing you represent the needs of the audience not as the primary goal, and then building up other ways that people can move forth. It's their careers. You have some very, very talented people and therefore, then making the most of their careers,

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they can't just sit back and say it's all impossible. They've got to build and build and iterate and learn and you learn from your mistakes and from that springs success.

David Pembroke: It does take courage to speak to power, doesn't it? Sometimes that agenda doesn't support the agenda of the political masters.

Alex Aiken: Yeah. When I was fairly new in this job, I went into a board meeting and there were 11 people in the room and me. I gave the communications report and I quickly realized there were 12 communication experts. At least there were 12 people who thought about of you about [inaudible 00:24:33] communication. That was a bit of a wakeup call coming to government.

The next time, the following month I went back, I armed myself with data. It was a board meeting about internal communication and civil service communications and we just did a SurveyMonkey poll in between the two meetings to illustrate why the communications approach we were proposing was the right one. The insight that I as a communicator provided from that, meant that the rest of the board said, "All right. We get it now." What was interesting was the insight was around more why won't civil servants be more favorable toward civil service reform and improvement and is it because they just don't want to change.

The polling that we did prove that civil servants were probably in favor of reform, but because their IT was so crap, they couldn't do the things in terms of being faster, flexible or more customer responsive that they wanted to do. Providing that information to board it's the IT you need to fix, not the communications, was a big win for the credibility of government communications.

David Pembroke: You still need that centralized buy-in by the certain things. To succeed with the program like yours, you really do need that agreed centralized let's do this together, we are one government, we have one story to tell and let's tell it well.

Alex Aiken: I think you need a story to start with. I think you need to have a clear story that has a mission what we are trying to achieve and a destination what this will look like when it's done. You got to be able to set that out in less than 100 words. Communicators are occasionally guilty of writing over long, verbose campaign plans with endless top lines and lines to take. Our ability to sync'd into the point and set out the destination and goal is something that I think will convince the C-Suite, the leadership of the validity of our plans in most cases.

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David Pembroke: Alex, congratulations for everything that you have achieved there with the UK government; certainly leading the way in the change and reform of government communication and the way that you are able to use the techniques and practice of content marketing to bring about the changes to the effectiveness of the communication with both citizens and stakeholders.

Thanks very much for joining us. There is a bit of history in podcasting around the world that the first guest comes back on the 100th and I look forward to inviting you back then where we can discuss a little bit more about the practice of content marketing in government. Thanks again for your time today.

Alex Aiken: Thank you very much, David.

Voice Over: You've been listening to In Transition, the program dedicated to the practice of content marketing in government. For more, visit us at [intransitionpodcast.com.au](http://intransitionpodcast.com.au).