

Graduation 2009

Oration for Honorary Graduand Neil McArthur

Orator: Professor Stuart Walker

Chancellor, the Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Neil McArthur.

Neil McArthur is currently Chairman of TalkTalk Technology which is the network operator and wholesale arm of the TalkTalk Group. Neil is responsible for the strategic development of the fixed line business. This area is one of international technical interest and continuing political debate. The word "talk" will reappear frequently.

Global Connectivity or, in plain English, the means for everyone talking to (or texting or playing games with, watching videos, etc) everyone else at once (perhaps not literally everyone and at once) has come about because of the efforts over the years of relatively small groups of far-sighted scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs. Who would have thought that this happy state of affairs could have come about when in 1876 Sir William Preece, chief engineer of the British Post Office famously pronounced?

"The Americans have need of the telephone, but we do not. We have plenty of messenger boys."

Moving fast forward in time, we have:

"I think there is a world market for maybe five computers."

-- Allegedly by Thomas Watson, chairman of IBM, 1943

And, a little more recently:

"There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home."

-- Ken Olson, president, chairman and founder of Digital Equipment Corp., 1977

I am sure that other gems can be thought of but it sets the scene which has confronted visionaries such as Neil McArthur ever since.

In fact, Neil was as student at the University Essex in 1977 (at the time of the notable quote) and graduated with a BSc in Electronic Engineering in 1979. He initially returned to the nuclear industry where he had originally trained as an engineer. Leaving to start his first venture in 1981, he spent the next 15 years building up a control systems and robotic automation business during time which he was awarded an MBE for services to the engineering industry in 1991. The robotics area still enjoys considerable interest, not least at the University Of Essex!

Arriving at 1996, Neil took advantage of the United States Telecommunications Act which amended the 1934 Communications Act; only 62 years delay, but it started a furore around Europe and in the UK. Having sold his robot systems business, Neil started the successful Opal Telecom venture which was acquired in 2002 (for £108M) by the well-known and respected Carphone Warehouse group. Opal Telecom is still the trading name the of the TalkTalk Group business operation.

Neil was appointed a non executive director of the TalkTalk Group in September 2008 and was responsible for the development of the fixed line business and strategic developments. Neil oversaw the successful implementation of a number of strategic initiatives to increase network capacity and maximise operational efficiency. This has produced benefits for the whole community including research studies such as that carried out here at the University of Essex. In 2005, the TalkTalk Company won the Queen's Award for Innovation.

Neil has seen fixed line revenues expand from £100m in 2002 to over £1bn in March 2009 following a period of rapid growth within the Telecoms business. This saw the introduction of the residential landline TalkTalk service in 2003 and latterly the design and development of the first mass market next generation network (NGN) in the UK – which apart from the copper loop (those wires coming into the home) uses Internet Protocol transmission and switching throughout. If all this technological talk needs a translation for some of our audience, quite a few CSEE graduates today should know all about it! This major engineering programme was achieved in just 27 months and as of August 2008; over 1.2 million customers were live on the NGN. Again, this is a great encouragement to many researchers and entrepreneurs across Europe. It stands as an added-value beacon for the networks research and teaching at this University and as a career incentive for those who choose this field.

Today, the TalkTalk Group serves over 3.9m fixed line customers comprising 2.8m broadband and 1.1m voice only customers. The acquisition of Tiscali UK, approved by our friends in Brussels at the end of last month, has made TalkTalk the largest residential broadband provider in the UK. This brings Neil and his entrepreneurial colleagues into strong competition with British Telecom, for example.

Neil hasn't been afraid to publicly criticise the incumbent powers-that-be. Earlier this year in February Neil said (amongst other things) that "while next-generation access (NGA) gets plenty of media and government attention - communications minister Lord Carter's "Digital Britain" interim report includes a provision for universal broadband access by 2012, for instance - there's less focus on smoothing the way for next-generation networks." Quoting Neil further: "NGA is a very political thing - it's a big headline government thing - but until we actually get the NGNs working having NGAs without NGNs is really pointless and really we do need both,"

This statement resonates perfectly with those of us across the UK and Europe who work in the area and for which we thank him.

Neil is not just a deeply successful businessman. He is, for example, also Chairman of the Hamilton Davies Trust. Established in 2004, this is a grant giving, registered charity which supports projects in the communities of Irlam, Cadishead and Rixton-with-Glazebrook south-west of Manchester. Grants have been made specifically for youth, education, sport and community projects. Through the trust, Neil is supporting an undergraduate student studying within Computer Science and Electronic Engineering here at the University of Essex. He is also one of a number of alumni/industry leaders working with our Professor Michael Sherer on the development of the University of Essex Business School.

Last, but by no means least, Neil's "need for speed" is not restricted to global communications. Formula Ford racing in the North West has enjoyed over 9 years of sponsorship thanks to Neil. There is also a strong rumour that Neil himself is a driver to be reckoned with as a member of the Formula Ford Van Diemen team.

Chancellor, I present to you Neil McArthur