SPEECH BY STEPHEN TIMMS, UNITED KINGDOM MINISTER OF ENERGY, E-COMMERCE AND POSTAL SERVICES

Excellencies, Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen. My Minister, Stephen Timms, has unfortunately had to leave Geneva early and has asked me to deliver the speech he would have made if he had been able to stay.

When this Summit was mooted some 5 years ago, speakers regularly voiced the now all-too familiar thought that the Information Society and ICT were ubiquitous. But when they said it, it was a lot less true than it is today: the many countries represented at this Summit, the variety of fascinating applications of new technologies displayed in the halls around us and the multiplicity of issues discussed in numerous fringe meetings are all very clear signs of this.

The breadth of subjects discussed in the 18 months of preparation of this Summit, and the vehemence with which many countries advocated their positions, demonstrates how deeply into the fabric of government and enterprise the technology and the concepts of the Information Society have no reached.

As representatives of governments, we should be clear that the Information Society presents us with a wide set of issues to which we must find answers. But also, by its nature, the Information Society defies being fitted into those neat little boxes in which politicians and bureaucrats most like to work. In this context, I would like to offer a few thoughts on vvhat governments, in both developed and developing countries can - and cannot - do to harness the immense potential of the Information Society in their peoples' interests and welfare.

Information gives individual people the ability to make informed choices about their lives. Access to information, and the ability to pass on your thoughts to others are rights which governments interested in the social and economic development of their countries should not seek to undermine. Information is a vital force in bringing about democracy, and providing a true reflection of the views of individual citizens in the way governments decide policy. That is why the UK, and our colleagues in the EU, have argued against any watering down of those basic human rights of free expression and access to information in the political declaration and plan of action which we will adopt today. This is not just amoral imperative. There is quite simply a logical disconnect between using scarce resources in a country to encourage use of ICTs while at the same time seeking to restrict the access that these technologies give our peoples to the vast wealth of information available on the Internet.

A common characteristic of some of the world's poorer countries is that they suffer from limited resources and are a long way from their markets. The Internet is uniquely able to overcome these difficulties. Those same countries also suffer from lack of telecoms infrastructure and computer equipment. Yet we have seen, even in the poorest countries, where the market has been allowed to develop, it can unleash immense demand for ICT services, and a surprising ability to pay for them. We are seeing that at the moment in the growth of mobile communications in Africa. ICT services thus

provide an important a driver for development - as important as many other infrastructures - and they are indeed able to make up for deficiencies in, for example, road and other transport links.

We have argued hard over recent weeks about creating a Fund to bridge the digital divide. The UK Government and many other donors encourage countries to use the development aid we provide to bolster ICT projects. But we do not believe that a new international Fund could tackle the real underlying problems. Nor that it would mobilise even a fraction of the money needed to bridge the digital divide. It might indeed divert funds away from other areas of poverty reduction which developing countries have themselves identified as priorities.

A Fund is simply not the answer, and we should be clear that other options hold a lot more potential for bridging not just the digital, but the welfare divide we see in the world today. In particular, we need to allow enterprise - and I don't just mean foreign investors, but homegrown entrepreneurs too - the necessary policy space: policy space to use their talents and ingenuity, and their own money to the benefit of all. This is what the UK and many other countries in the developed and developing world have already done, and it has worked.

It is   an example of governments acting to create market opportunities rather than stifling them. In this context, I think it a lost opportunity that we have not involved industry and civil society more in this summit and its preparation. It is they who will be best placed to make the Information Society happen throughout the world. Governments cannot substitute this activity, but they can choose whether to encourage opportunities for it to happen - or not. This is not an argument for a laissez-faire policy. Governments have a vital role to play in ensuring that private operators work to the wider public good. This means developing an enlightened, but focussed regulatory approach to strike the right balance. Each country will of course need to decide which policies are best suited to its circumstances. But the UK Government and many multilateral agencies can offer technical assistance to create the necessary expert capacity to identify those national objectives and pursue them.

Looking ahead to Tunis, the UK, which will have the honour of holding the Presidency of the EU in the second half of 2005, believes that a light preparatory process will provide the best and most transparent conditions for a successful conference. We also hope, for the same reasons, that the conference will be open to the full participation of the private sector and civil society at all its stages

In conclusion, I know that many countries - indeed many individuals - are nervous about the Information Society and the immense changes it is bringing about to the way we live. There are good applications, and bad applications of such technology - it has indeed always been so with any innovation since Man gained the ability to make fire. But governments trying to hold back this tide, or to withhold its benefits from their citizens, are simply doomed to fail. Much better, and much wiser, surely to embrace the Information Society and trust in our citizens' ability to exploit it wisely, while, of course, protecting the more vulnerable from its abuse. This is the challenge which faces us all, and one I hope that this Summit will better equip us to meet.