

# GO INTERVIEW

# DR NEIL BENTLEY



**Dr Neil Bentley**, Director of Public Services at the Confederation of British Industry, speaks to *GO* Staff Writer Morven MacNeil about the role of the CBI within public procurement and the challenges ahead.



As Director of the Public Services Directorate at the Confederation of British Industry, Dr Neil Bentley is responsible for leading the development of the CBI's contribution to the public service reform agenda, promoting in particular the role of diverse, competitive and contestable supply markets in raising standards and delivering better value for money. He works closely with the CBI's Public Services Strategy Board to set the direction for the CBI's campaign and leads on communications with government and other stakeholders in reform.

Dr Bentley took up his present role in October 2005. Formerly he was Head of Skills and Employment at the CBI, with responsibility for policy development in areas such as basic skills, vocational training, diversity, trade union relations, employee involvement and working time.

Before joining the CBI in 2002 Dr Bentley was European employee relations consultant at EDS Ltd, a global IT services company, where he was responsible for advising on employment issues in public and private sector procurements and employee transfers.

Prior to EDS, he was a researcher on European employment law and industrial relations issues at Industrial Relations Services. His doctorate focused on trade union attitudes to racism and immigration.

**T**he Confederation of British Industry (CBI) aims to help create and sustain the conditions in which businesses in the United Kingdom can compete and prosper for the benefit of all. It is broadly acknowledged as the premier lobbying organisation for UK business on national and international issues and works with government, international legislators and policy makers to help UK businesses compete effectively.

*Government Opportunities* spoke to Dr Neil Bentley, Director of Public Services at the CBI, about the Confederation's role within procurement and what his key message will be when he addresses guests at National Public Procurement Practitioners Day (N3PD) on 6 June this year.

## **How does the CBI influence public procurement policy in the UK?**

We work hard to influence government at all levels, from Whitehall departments to the smallest local authorities. Working with organisations such as the Office of Government Commerce, the Cabinet Office, the Local Government Association and others, we try to use our experience and expertise to improve public procurement and help deliver best value for the taxpayer.

Over the last year or so, we have published reports on realising best practice in procurement and contract management, on the need for competitive neutrality in public service markets, on health procurement, and more. All of them are available on our website ([www.cbi.org.uk](http://www.cbi.org.uk)) and they continue to make an important contribution to the ongoing policy debate.

With our procurement and Private Finance Initiative working group, we are now engaged on a project examining lessons learned from the PFI and how we can sustain the model in the future. I look forward to sharing the project's recommendations when I speak at N3PD this summer.

The public procurement skills agenda is one we have long been pursuing and will continue to pursue, as there remain areas of the public sector where there are inadequate professional skills, and we want this to change. We have called for all central departments and large strategic-level public bodies to have commercial directorates, or their

reported savings must be treated as either 'uncertainties' or 'substantially inaccurate'.

At the same time as the NAO released this report, a CBI member survey revealed that a massive 88 per cent of UK firms do not believe the Government will be successful in meeting its £21.5 billion Gershon savings targets. This reflects in

over the next year, there is little doubt there will be work for smaller companies, both as prime contractors and as sub-contractors.

Smaller companies are often the most fleet of foot and innovative in their approach to service delivery, and the contribution they can make in improving our public services is not in doubt.

The Government can help further by streamlining tendering processes and cutting unnecessary duplication and bid costs. This is something companies of all sizes would like to see and something that would mean both better value for money for the taxpayer and the public receiving modernised public services faster.

### **You are set to address National Public Procurement Practitioners Day on June. What will be your biggest message?**

It will be a very simple one, but nonetheless one that is of fundamental importance: we all need to work together if public procurement is to be as effective as it should be.

I don't mean that the private sector should tell the public sector what to do. Far from it. I mean instead that we must foster a spirit of partnership and learn from each other. We all want to see best value for taxpayers' money and the best possible services delivered to the public, so let's combine our skills and experience to make it happen.

### **What do you believe will be the biggest public procurement challenges in the years ahead?**

The forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review will almost certainly usher in a period of fiscal belt-tightening, and all of us – clients and suppliers alike – must react accordingly. In many areas of public spending we have had years of feast, and while we do not face famine in the near future, we will still have to find ways to deliver more for less. Public expectations will only rise, and so the massive challenge for us is to still meet those expectations but in the face of lower spending growth.

Effective public procurement can deliver value for money, drive innovation, be environmentally sustainable and provide procurement professionals with a career path they can be proud to follow. But this is all about opportunity, not challenge. Let's seize it.

**Thank you for speaking to GO.**

## *CBI members have shown themselves to be ready and eager to help procurement in myriad ways through existing programmes and also more informally*

equivalent, to ensure procurement policy and delivery are joined up. Some departments, including those for health and education, have done this and this has made a huge difference.

But there is much more that needs to be done and CBI members have shown themselves to be ready and eager to help in myriad ways through existing programmes and also more informally.

### **What are the main benefits that end-users gain as a result of closer working between the public and private sectors?**

No one sector has all the answers – far from it. In fact, it is only by working together that end-users will receive the services they want. Closer working relationships at all stages of procurement from conception to service delivery and beyond is essential. The responsive, personalised services people want will not be achieved through adversarial relations or through the relentless pursuit of lowest cost, as we saw under the Compulsory Competitive Tendering regime.

Closer working will mean better, more efficient services. It can also mean enhanced job satisfaction for procurement professionals, and this is something we would very much welcome.

### **The National Audit Office recently released the report *The Efficiency Programme: A second review of progress*. What are your thoughts on its key findings?**

The NAO was right to highlight significant risks of inaccuracy with reported departmental savings. The CBI has long said that the measurement techniques being used by the Government lack transparency. Our concern was only deepened by the NAO assessment that 74 per cent of

part the Government's approach to reporting, which is completely inadequate. Departmental accounts should be no less rigorous than company accounts, and yet we see fudged figures and statistical conjuring tricks.

### **How much further do you think the public sector could go towards reducing waste in public services and how do you think it can achieve this?**

I am sure there are huge efficiencies that can still be made right across the public sector. But this should not be about a tick-box culture of hitting arbitrary targets and then returning to how things were done before. We saw this in previous efficiency drives in the 1980s and 1990s and we don't want to see further once-a-decade bloodlettings in years to come.

The Gershon efficiency programme, now in its final year, gives the opportunity for the public sector to entrench efficiency in its culture. Sir Peter himself never saw the £21.5 billion target as an end in itself, but rather as the first stage on a journey to more efficient and effective government spending.

### **Do you believe government does enough to encourage small and medium-sized businesses to bid for its contracts? What progress have you detected?**

As a taxpayer and as a service user, business believes that the more organisations there are competing in a market, the better.

Competition drives innovation and helps deliver better value for money. It is true to say that many smaller companies will struggle with the bid costs on the largest government contracts, but with government due to spend some £150 billion buying goods and services

#### **FURTHER INFORMATION...**

For further information, please visit:  
[www.cbi.org.uk/publicservices](http://www.cbi.org.uk/publicservices) and:  
[www.n3pd.com](http://www.n3pd.com)

#### **WHAT'S YOUR VIEW?**

If you would like to comment on this article, please email: [bip@govopps.co.uk](mailto:bip@govopps.co.uk)