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AT THE HEART OF COMMUNICATION
across disciplines and around the world

International Plenary Panel:
Plain Language Progress Around the World

United Kingdom & European Union

Martin Cutts, Research Director, Plain Language Commission, UK

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It's my pleasure to welcome you to this international plenary on plain language progress around the world.

This is not the post-lunch siesta slot. Please don't even think of having a quiet snooze at the back. We have some cracking speakers for you, from all corners of the known world. Their every sentence has been carefully crafted for clarity, laconicism and pith. However, we have only 90 minutes between us, and there are nine speakers, so the more mathematically endowed will know this means 7.5 minutes each...plus a bit of time for questions.

I want to lead off by saying a few words about what's been happening in the UK and EU. First, four recent highlights from the UK.

1. Last year every household received an apparently clear and well-designed census form that had benefited from extensive pre-testing of the questions and wide public consultation on wording. As a form, it looked like a success, and it will be fascinating to see whether people coped with the form better than the 1991 version, which was widely reviled.
2. Since 1995 our tax ministry has been rewriting 6,000 pages of tax law into plainer English and the new texts are now being enacted. There is also a new page layout for these texts, using better navigational aids, clearer type and more white space. The work has been done by a 40-strong team led by legislative drafters from the parliamentary counsel's office, and it responds to cries of anguish from disenchanted

tax and accountancy professionals, and outsiders like me. So well done the Inland Revenue: now we all just love to pay those taxes you impose.

3. Around 15,000 documents carry a clarity badge from one of the three organizations that give them. Our badge is the Clear English Standard. Documents can display it if they've been through our editing process and met our published criteria. Basically we act like an editorial oyster, filtering out all the slime, excrement and grit. Among our customers is the Financial Services Authority, the main financial services regulator in the UK, so most of their public leaflets and information factsheets about pensions and investments carry our logo, and we also have a version of the logo for use on accredited websites such as theirs.
4. An English product is starting to revolutionise writing-skills training. It's a product we sell (demo from www.clearest.co.uk) although we didn't make it - I only wish we had. It's called StyleWriter and it's an electronic editing program that everyone can have on their PCs. In the USA, the Federal Aviation Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency have installed it almost universally, alongside a customized one-day electronic writing-skills course. Truly I believe this will change the world and make the manufacturers very rich indeed!

Twenty words, now, about progress in France, Germany and Italy. Here it's fair to say that plain language is not all that hot, but things are warming up. Clarity magazine no. 47 (www.clarity-international.net) gives more details. In the EU bureaucracy, the European Commission's translation department, headed by Emma Wagner, has led a popular and influential Fight the Fog campaign. We at Plain Language Commission have helped her by publishing 'Clarifying Eurolaw' and latterly

'Clarifying EC Regulations' (both on free download from www.clearest.co.uk). These show that what some EC lawyers regard as mission impossible is really just a stroll in the park.

I come to an event like this almost as to a religious retreat, to revitalise my belief in the cause. For me, the conference has succeeded in doing that, and I hope it has done the same for you.

I have no doubt about it - as Joni Mitchell and her friends used to sing in Cabbagetown - 'we shall overcome'. Or should that be 'we will overcome'?



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Martin Cutts (Panel Chair)

<http://www.clearest.co.uk>

Martin Cutts, Research Director of the U.K.'s Plain Language Commission, has long been at the heart of the plain English movement. Recently he has been working with the Financial Services Authority (www.fsa.gov.uk) to prepare consumer guides and fact sheets. In 1998, Martin lectured on plain language to European Union officials and politicians in Brussels and Luxembourg and addressed the International Legislative Drafting Institute at Tulane University, New Orleans. In 1997, he gave papers at the *Plain Language in Progress conference* in Calgary. Also in the 1990s, Martin visited India four times, lecturing and giving courses on plain language; he maintains his links there through occasional consultancy work for consumer groups and insurers. He is the author of several books and many articles about plain English and about plain language in the law. A member of Clarity and the Information Design Association and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, Martin graduated from Liverpool University in 1976. He co-founded the U.K.'s Plain English Campaign in 1979.