



# The Godmother of British ITS



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Jennie Martin is one of the most recognisable people in our ITS industry. She's been involved in ITS (UK) since 1998 and is seen at almost all the interest group meetings, breakfast seminars and on the ITS (UK) stand at major industry exhibitions. She's of course also a columnist in Smart Highways. So I caught up with her to find out how a woman from Sweden became one of the most influential people in the business.

INTERVIEW BY **PAUL HUTTON**



So the secretary general of ITS (UK) is Swedish. Before we get to ITS, how did you get from

growing up in Sweden to living and working here?

Like many Swedish women of my generation, I took what would now

be called a gap year and went abroad to see a bit of the world and become fluent in another language, in my case “north Leeds” and “English” though it did take me a few months to get to grips with the particular form of English I encountered. Also like many others I met somebody and ended up staying. It is a wonder that there are

any 40-and-50-something women in Sweden today. This meant that I studied at Kings College London rather than at Uppsala University as planned, which I think was a result for me since the much less organised and regimented arts faculty regime in the UK in the 80s suited me very well. I believe that students today actually



petition for lectures and tuition time. We had a total of three hours a week as our norm and were very happy with that. You either applied yourself or you did not, and got what you deserved in your finals three years later. A very good lesson for life in general.

**Q** And how did you get into ITS?

My first encounter with ITS was when I got a job as Technical Administrator to the City Engineer at the Corporation of London in the 1990s. The City of London is well known to be a special place and its local authority, “the Corporation” as it is fondly known, is definitely a special Local Authority.

Its processes are quite different - it has no party politics, and the activities of the Liveries and the Lord Mayor lend a lot of colour and interest. While I was there it was also a Local Authority almost without residents but that has

all changed with the general drift back to living in the city centres which all our urban centres are enjoying. When I was there, we were strangers to antisocial behaviour and dog fouling, but very used to issues along the lines of “the street containing our entrance cannot be designated a Red Route since our CEO’s chauffeur must be able to drop him less than three metres from our door”.

The engineers there were an enthusiastic and sharing bunch and when I showed the slightest interest in what I was beginning to know as ITS, everything would be explained in detail and with relish. At that time, before Transport for London, the Corporation managed the TCSU (Traffic Control Systems Unit) in Smith Square on behalf of the whole of London, so there was plenty to learn. ITS in public transport was less advanced in those days, but the public transport officers were also

**“ Some... find it strange a national association can be led by a foreigner, but I think this is one of the strengths of the UK labour market – ability counts for more than educational qualifications and background here ”**

Jennie spurned the opportunity to study at Uppsalla University to stay in England, and 1980s Leeds

evangelical about their modes and I now smile when I remember them telling me about Thameslink 2000 and Crossrail, both projects which had been in development for years already and were imminently around the corner in the late 1990s or so they believed or at least hoped.

The whole area of ITS seemed fascinating to me and had the added pull of that everybody working in it seemed to be enthusiastic and friendly. The Corporation was a founding Member of ITS (UK) and when ITS (UK) looked for an assistant to the then Secretary General, coinciding with the disappearance of the City Engineer’s department at the Corporation, I applied and moved across. ITS (UK) was one of only about eight or ten national ITS associations at that time - there are at least 60 now - so it was a pioneering and exciting place to work.

**Q** I saw you chatting to Kristina from FaltCom at an event late last year and you were talking Swedish, so you’re not the only Swedish lady in the business, is there a secret group of you plotting to take over everything?

The Swedish ITS ladies are in fact organised into Kvinnor i ITS, Swedish for “Women in ITS”, and I am honoured to be allowed to participate in that group. The CEO of ITS Sweden, Christer Karlsson, and I often joke that there are two national ITS associations led by Swedes, and maybe there will be more. Some of my international colleagues find it strange that a national association can be led by a foreigner, but I think this is one of the strengths of the UK labour market - compared to many other European countries, ability counts for more





than educational qualifications and background here.

**Q** What can we in the industry, and Britain as a whole, learn from your homeland?

The two countries are very different once you get a proper understanding of how they function. Sweden is more centralised in terms of how it is governed, its society is much more homogenous, there is a general acceptance of environmental priorities which is absent in the UK and which I would explain by that urbanisation, industrialisation and wealth creation in Sweden only took off after the second world war, as opposed to 200 years ago in the UK - Swedes are still very connected to the land and to nature. Short of dismantling history and starting again, I think the scope for learning and applying from one country to the other is limited.

**Q** But we're obviously doing something right here because you live and work here - what do you love about Britain?

Having a Swedish style homogenous society is for bad as well as for good - you avoid the wide gaps in terms of income, education, political influence and even health and life expectancy of the UK, but you also get a much narrower band of acceptable behaviour and appearance. Like many stereotypes, that of the "English eccentric" has a little bit of truth in it.

British society is very open and accepting compared to many others including Sweden. When I go home now I have to spend my first days weaning myself off speaking to people on public transport and in shops - I find myself scaring local people half to death. Even saying hello to neighbours on the staircase of the flats where my father lives is problematic. And my Londoner husband looks around in disbelief and says, "They are all dressed exactly the same and they have the same hairstyle..."

**Q** We often run comments about how ITS in the UK is a middle aged man's profession, has being a woman at the helm of the trade organisation

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**been a help or a hindrance?**

This question calls for a diplomatic answer - in certain parts of the world and when dealing with certain demographics, being female can be an asset, and conversely, sometimes a problem. I have certainly chaired international meetings where a few participants simply would not be chaired by a woman and talked over me. Equally I have been given preferential treatment on other occasions, invited to speak first, sit in the most prestigious seat and so on.

After fifteen years I can state with certainty that by and large, gender difference matters less at work as time passes, which we hopefully all agree is a good thing. But we need to keep working on making the ITS workplace more diverse, not just in terms of gender. Since the ITS customer is nearly always the travelling public, the ITS workforce needs to reflect that public in order to deliver the most suitable services.

**Q** Of course for a couple of years you had Sharon Kindleysides as chairman, how did that change the industry's dynamic?

Sharon is a great role model for young

women starting out in the ITS sector. She is technically competent but also very experienced in the commercial side of things, and has advised the UK government several times over the past few years. She is also proof of that you can work successfully in a 90 per cent male industry but be yourself - no need to conform to male norms of behaviour or male expectations of female behaviour.

I think this is an unspoken issue which can keep young women away from areas of work which are male dominated, and I guess that the same would be true for young men considering traditional female careers. You are unlikely to opt for work where you think you will be forced to misrepresent yourself in order to be accepted.

**Q** The issue isn't just of women in ITS, but young people too - what should we do about this?

The shortage of young people seeking an ITS career is a major concern but we in the industry must not lose sight of the fact that the whole transport sector and indeed STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) careers overall suffer from the same problem. We need to apply this understanding and work together with other STEM sectors to promote the fact that working in engineering, science and technology can deliver all the things you might want from a career - interesting work, socially valuable work, well paid work, work which enables you to see the world, work which you can do in an office 9-5 or work which you do with heavy plant on motorways in the rain - whatever your motivation and interests, there will be a career path to suit you. The common perception of an engineer of any sort seems stuck in the 1960s - a middle-aged man with dusty drawings in a brief case who sits in long dull meetings all day. We need to get the message across that the sector offers lots of different opportunities.

I am particularly keen on the emergence of apprenticeships in our sector. Many engineers used to leave formal education at 16 and then come up via this type of route, sponsored by their employers, and I think we

**Jennie is disappointed there has not been a wider adoption of Intelligent Speed Adaptation technology**





went wrong when we assumed that the best engineers-to-be are young people who choose to do A-levels and spend three years at university before starting work. Particularly now that taking a degree involves a level of expenditure which ordinary families just cannot meet from their funds, or alternatively a level of debt which ordinary families with no experience of taking out mortgages or other large debt consider simply reckless.

**Q** In your opinion what have been the big successes and disappointments for the industry as a whole while you've been involved?

It is always easier to think about the disappointments but these have been caused by policy decisions which means it is wrong to regret them - we live in a democracy and should accept that the use of ITS like everything else is subject to final political decisions. I personally was very excited about the ISA (Intelligent Speed Adaptation) work of the early and mid noughties, and remember the upbeat final conference of the large ISA trials in Sweden where the trial subjects, ordinary drivers who had used ISA for a time, spoke so engagingly about how they valued the system because it meant they would never lose their license due to speeding.

The smaller UK trials by MIRA, the University of Leeds, and Transport for London also went well and demonstrated significant accident reduction potential for the ISA technology. ISA is not off the agenda by any means, but it has not had the level of adoption yet that I would have hoped in those early days. But I believe public opinion is shifting from suspicion of "interference" with car driver autonomy to an acceptance and appreciation of "assistance" with braking, lane and distance keeping, parking and so on - so why not with keeping to the speed limit.

There are rarely "big successes" in ITS in that we don't tend to produce things which can be opened by Ministers and shown on the news. But if you look at the adoption of ITS backwards and ask yourself questions like "What would London's traffic look like without SCOOT or without the



Congestion Charge?" or "How much would it cost me to take the train from Glasgow to Bristol if there were no electronic ticketing systems and hence no advance purchase rates?" then it is easy to come up with lots of quiet but still big successes.

**Q** And what are the most exciting opportunities coming up?

Again, no big bang or ribbon cutting, but connectivity and integration of information and services will continue and particularly user-generated information will make our travel smarter and therefore more convenient for us.

Connected vehicle technology will create an important new source of accurate and completely real time information for drivers, and the days of stepping off the bus, walking for five minutes to the rail station and then finding out that the service is suspended, will be gone. But there needs to be a lot of hard work on the underpinning IT and communications technologies, on standards and on protocols, to enable this. And then there is the issue of who owns information, who pays for its creation, and who pays for its use.

**Q** Of course we've got the ITS Europe conference in Glasgow next year - I take it you're already hard at work on that one?

Yes, we are very much looking forward to Glasgow 2016 and working hard with ERTICO, Transport Scotland, Glasgow City Council and the marvellous team at the Glasgow Convention Bureau to make the most

**“ As I know from the TV license inspectors I've entertained on my doorstep over the years, three per cent of UK homes do not contain a TV set so there are a few of us ”**

How could the congestion charge have been implemented without ITS technology?

of it. Around 300 UK people usually make it to the Congresses but now that it is on our own soil, we will make it our mission to make sure that those who would not normally get the permission and funding to go, realise that in 2016 they can go for the day as an exhibition visitor and only pay their travel cost. It will be at least ten years before the opportunity comes round again. This is the Olympics of the ITS World after all and not to be missed if there is a chance of attending even if only to have a look around and lots of chats with colleagues from all over the world.

**Q** You told me once that you don't have a television which I find rather refreshing because too many people spend too much time staring at the box in the corner of their living rooms - what's do you do to fill your leisure?

As I know from the TV license inspectors I've entertained on my doorstep over the years, three per cent of UK homes do not contain a TV set so there are a few of us. If it isn't peculiar not to read a daily newspaper or novels or never to go to the theatre, I think we three per cent should not be considered as weirdos either. And yes that is a big chunk of where that saved time goes.

**Q** And in travelling for work so much and also heading north to family, do you do much travelling socially apart from that?

No, I was staycationing before the word was invented. When you spend as much time on budget airlines as I do, the thought of heading for the airport in your own time does not appeal. I am lucky in that I get to visit lots of beautiful cities as part of my work, and I've never been interested in the sun and sand type of holiday.

JENNIE MARTIN  
is Secretary General  
of ITS (UK)  
jmartin@its-uk.  
org.uk