

PRIME MINISTER

Presentation of Policy

1. You are to hold a meeting on presentation with the Lord President, Chairman of the Party and the Chief Whip on your return from the Middle East. This paper sets out the background to the present publicity effort by the Government and identifies the problems which remain.

Machinery

2. The first point to be made about effective presentation is that there is no substitute for the responsible Minister and his Department. They are in the lead and it is on their performance that the Government's day-to-day fortunes depend.

3. But there is also a continuing need to paint a bigger picture - to explain the Government's overall strategy; to show how individual policy decisions relate to and reinforce that overall approach; and to shout the Government's achievements from the housetops.

4. This Government has never been so well equipped over the last 6½ years than during the last 9 months with the machinery to:

- (i) spur Departments on to better efforts;
- (ii) ensure that the messages about overall objectives and achievements are put over;

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(iii) keep the Government and party machine operating in step and in a complementary fashion;

(iv) involve Backbenchers in the important task of selling the Government's policies and record up and down the country.

5. This machinery involves three fora:

(i) Liaison Committee under the Lord President's chairmanship, which brings together Government and Party to review performance, identifies forthcoming problems and opportunities and keeps an eye on longer term on presentation.

(ii) Ministerial Group on Presentation of Economic and Social Policy: formed late last year under the chairmanship of the Lord President to improve presentation in this important area of policy; to secure more public credit for what the Government has done; and to put a more caring face on the Government's reputation, for example by attacking the idea that the NHS and the education service have been cut. The Chief Whip has helped to organise teams of Backbenchers with a wide regional spread, "accredited" to individual Departments, to take the message to the people, especially through local radio.

(iii) MIO - the official Committee which meets every Monday evening under my chairmanship to coordinate the Departmental effort.

6. The general feeling is that presentation of the Government's overall case has improved this year though there is still a lot more to be done in a number of areas. The judgement is however more impressionistic and anecdotal than firmly rooted in research. We have only the sketchiest information on the true extent of the Government/Backbench/Party effort. And we probably never shall know how much, if any, worse the Government's standing in the polls would have been this year but for that unquantified effort. All we can say with confidence is that the effort is better coordinated and should be greater and more systematic than ever before in the last 6½ years.

Outstanding Problems

7. The first point to be made is that getting message from Ghent to Aix, and ensuring it is received and understood, is a most frustrating occupation. However great the effort, some activist will remain disgruntled and critical because, for one reason or another, the message and the material conveying it has passed him by. We need to keep criticism in perspective.

8. Similarly, we should not exaggerate our problems. In general, there are relatively few difficulties over:

- (i) devising the message and translating it into punchy language (though sometimes reaction could be a little quicker).
- (ii) Ministers appearing on radio and TV to present their policies or measures and to correct false impressions. (This Government has had a positive

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approach to news broadcasting from the outset. BBC, ITN and IRM use me as a court of appeal when they cannot secure a Government voice, and they seldom have to resort to it;

(iii) involving supportive Backbenchers - a need which was met early this year.

9. In addition, Ministers' long voluntary exile from BBC Radio 4's "Any Questions?" programme has ended this year. This is an important gain.

10. And, last but not least, the reshuffle was conducted with the conscious objective of improving the Government's capacity to communicate.

11. So what is wrong? The outstanding problems fall under three headings:

(i) political

(ii) attitudinal

(iii) organisational.

12. On the first - political - I can merely report my impressions from your recent tour of Scotland and the North of England. I ran into much criticism of the Party machine and found ample evidence that the Party's supporters, and not least MPs, are their own worst enemies. It goes without saying that any Government efforts will be less than effective against that background. Regional campaigns led by a designated Backbencher may be required.

Attitudes

13. The problem throughout this Government's life, until recently, has been that it has been strong on policy and weak on presentation. Put another way, it has been more concerned to take the right decision than to convince the people that the decision was indeed right. There is also a danger that the longer a Government lasts, the more Ministers become administrators and the less politicians.

14. The presentation machinery introduced by the Lord President this year, the reshuffle and the presentational awakening brought about by the top salaries debacle - combined with the approach of a General Election - present an opportunity to break with the past.

15. But that break with the past will need to be underlined both within Government and the Party by you. In Government, this might be done, over and above existing arrangements, by requiring one or more of the following:

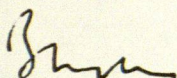
- (i) Cabinet and Cabinet Committee papers to include a section on presentational plans;
- (ii) Ministers to produce a plan of campaign for their Department for the next 6 months for consideration by the Lord President, Chairman and Chief Whip through the Liaison Committee.
- (iii) Ministers to report regularly - eg every quarter - to such a group led by the Lord President on the extent of the effort, embracing both Party and Departments as well as Backbenchers.

Organisational

16. The proposals set out immediately above would meet some of the organisational difficulties which are always the most intractable, even with the most positive approach to presentation. But we need to introduce other arrangements which ensure that:

- (i) the presentation of difficult issues is given particularly careful attention; the need for secrecy must not be allowed to get in the way of preparing effective presentation. GCHQ and top salaries emphasise the importance of arguing the case fully first time round;
- (ii) issues are not allowed to drift;
- (iii) the ground is carefully prepared before sensitive decisions are made public so that the "shock/horror" element is reduced; and so that negative elements in a story - eg Cecil Parkinson in relation to the reshuffle - are removed in advance.

17. I am copying this to the Lord President, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Chief Whip.



B INGHAM

16 September 1985