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CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

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Dear Stephen,

Talked to DW  
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I am sending you the attached note on the Election campaign on a personal basis. Perhaps we could have a word about it some time.

Best wishes,

David Willetts

## REFLECTIONS ON OUR CONDUCT OF THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN

### Launching the Manifesto

In 1983 we were criticised for our bland manifesto. We were determined to refute that charge this time. A manifesto full of radical proposals was inevitably a high-risk strategy, as the campaign showed. But better staff-work and less secrecy early on would have reduced the confusion. Instead we got the worst of all worlds, with the main themes public months in advance, but people who would have to explain or present the policies left in the dark about detail until very late on. It just is not possible to shift within one week from treating proposals as highly secret to getting a wide understanding of them amongst journalists, MPs, candidates, etc. Work on the manifesto briefing should have begun earlier and involved more people agreeing exactly what the policies really meant. Instead, these discussions took place on an ad hoc basis as crises grew up or in the Questions of Policy committee which seemed to be seriously overloaded during the first half of the campaign. And when the material did appear - even if the quality was high - it was too late for people busy campaigning actually to read it.

### Press Conferences

The first press conference launching the manifesto looked a shambles. The room was overcrowded and there wasn't enough room on the platform for all the Ministers. Microphones were left on for a minute or two after the press conference was over [as

happened all through the campaign]. Fortunately, no gaffes were picked up and it may be that the microphones were only broadcasting inside the building. But it was a good example of the risks we ran throughout the campaign.

The Prime Minister's performance at her press conferences every morning, was very impressive. The mood was often good-natured. She and her colleagues were never stumped by questions. She seemed authoritative and confident. But we did not get as much benefit as we should have done from the press conferences. It was never resolved whether the Prime Minister or the Party Chairman was actually chairing them; this created confusion and opportunities for the television to show a "bossy" Prime Minister intervening over the Chairman and other colleagues. Some of the Prime Minister's answers were much too long - the record was six minutes.

The press conferences rarely ended at 10 o'clock as they should have done. Our most serious mistakes were made after then as concentration started to flag. The excessive time for general questioning after the consideration of the theme of the day, meant that we were rarely able to get coverage based on the chosen theme as the media had so much other material to select from.

#### **Morning Briefing for the Prime Minister**

The Research Department in general did a good job preparing briefing material for the Prime Minister's press conference,

daily notes, etc. The briefing for the Prime Minister probably covered too many subjects and was too detailed. A disappointingly small proportion seemed to be drawn on at the press conference itself. On the other hand, the Prime Minister needed a review of the main news stories with the key points to draw on all through the day. As the material we prepared was of pretty high quality, we could have made more use of it by circulating it to say all Cabinet Ministers.

Moreover, one important purpose of the briefing meeting was as much to help the Prime Minister to get into the right mood for the press conference. When she is under stress she finds detailed factual briefings and assured handling of material a source of comfort. She feels confident that she has covered all the points a questioner may raise. So good briefing serves a psychological purpose even if it is not actually used publicly.

The Prime Minister's briefing meeting should have been a lot smaller. That would have reduced the tension. It would also have enabled us to prepare her in a way that she finds very useful - acting as devil's advocate and putting tricky questions to her. I found that we could only do that when two or three of us were alone with her in the study at No. 10 or once at Central Office when the room was entirely cleared apart from the Chairman, myself and two others.

## The Campaign Machine

Overall, one did not feel one was a cog in a well-oiled machine with a clear direction. Instead, it became increasingly clear that individual enterprise was the best way to help the campaign. So one found oneself briefing the Prime Minister before major television interviews and discussing the best line to take without any knowledge of the approach which was being developed back in Central Office. Perhaps my own most satisfying piece of enterprise was initiating and running a special press conference on health when we got distinguished doctors to deal powerfully with bogus criticisms of the NHS. They successfully neutralised a lot of the criticism from the junior doctors until the problems of the last week. The most successful individual case of enterprise during the entire campaign was the attack on Labour's tax plans. This did not reflect any strategic decision taken by the top of the office. It was a freelance operation by the Chancellor and his special advisers. Strategy meetings and the Press Office were bypassed and the press was lobbied direct.

Labour's regular press notices setting out who would be campaigning where and on what sorts of issues told me more about their campaign than I knew about ours from reading the highly secret and largely useless campaign calendar. Our secrecy gave us no advantage [though there were obviously security considerations for the Prime Minister]; it just increased the impression that we did not know where we were going and what we were up to.

### Choice of Party Spokesmen

We didn't have our best performers on television. The Prime Minister was rightly prominent but thereafter the main appearances seemed to go to those people at Central Office who have power over the allocations. There seemed to be a strange reluctance to trust Nigel Lawson - one often had to argue hard in order to get him used - and there was even more aversion to Ken Clarke who was particularly forceful on North-South questions when he had the chance. Other good Ministers were allowed to spend much too much time in their constituencies because they believed they were at electoral risk - John MacGregor and Tony Newton, for example, should have been instructed to take a more active part in the national campaign.

### Setting the Themes

Even if themes were occasionally agreed on at the top of the office, there seemed to be no arrangements for putting them across powerfully and coherently throughout the day. That would have required sustained effort linking together the theme at the press conference, the photo opportunities from the Prime Minister's campaigning, statements issued during the day from the campaign bus, speeches by other Cabinet Ministers, and the sections released from the Prime Minister's major speech that evening. Such an organised blitz would get coverage - not least because the Press would write that the Conservatives were trying to emphasise that particular issue. But there was no such

blitz. The Prime Minister's photo opportunities during the day, for example, often had no link to the theme of the press conference. Others were utterly meaningless [visits to funfairs, feeding animals, etc.] My impression was that we had more of these totally fatuous pictures than the Labour Party, who were more skilled at putting Neil Kinnock into the right picture for the day - eg., visiting a school on a day when education was the theme.

The theme for the day's press conference was often not decided until the previous evening. There was a lot of chopping and changing which caused confusion. The trouble we got into on health on "Black Thursday" was particularly tiresome because the theme of the day was supposed to be pensions - we had some good strong material attacking Labour. Apparently, the Prime Minister or her office had told the Chairman or his office on the previous afternoon that she wished to cover pensions but this message had not been transmitted to the people preparing the press conference. As a result, we were totally unprepared for the stress the Prime Minister put on the health issue. Mr Fowler and the briefing team thought we were covering pensions. We had no discussions with the Prime Minister or anyone else of how to handle health - had she had an opportunity to try out the points she wanted to make, they would have come over much better.

### Links to the Campaign Bus

Most of the high technology seemed to be wasted. The mechanisms for communicating with the campaign bus were so secret and arcane that most people were put off using them. Moreover, it was not clear whether Mrs Oppenheim's office was the link for communications with the campaign bus - a sort of Prime Ministerial office inside Central Office - or not. In the end, a lot of the Prime Minister's information came from her private secretaries at No.10 ringing up to tell her assistants what they had read on the PA tapes.

### Messages from the Real World

Operation Fast Feedback was rather helpful, though so unrigorous that one never knew quite how much store to set by its messages. My best advice came from personal arrangements with candidates in different parts of the country who rang at regular intervals to report what messages they were picking up on the doorstep. The network of regional and national agents seemed to do nothing either to transmit news from the doorstep up to the centre, or to transmit messages from the centre down to the localities. One senior agent was sent a press release of a book due to be published on poverty in London which led to an enormous amount of fussy minuting backwards and forwards to ensure that a proper brief was prepared on a book which the desk officer and I knew about already. It was the only point at which I noticed any of the senior agents doing anything.



### Media Monitoring

The general media monitoring exercise was too slow. Reliable transcripts were only available after long delays. The hard-pressed members of the Media Monitoring unit did not have the time to spot all the crucial points and pass them on to desk officers. John Houston and Linda Rowse in the Media Monitoring unit both worked very hard and very ably- but they were overstretched. By contrast, the Research Department, especially after the early morning rush, was if anything overmanned. I conclude that we should have provided extra staff to reinforce the Media Monitoring unit. This would have meant that we could have picked up and dealt with television stories much quicker.

### Handling the Press

The press office was a particularly weak point in the campaign. The staff did not understand the policies set out in the manifesto, nor did they consult desk officers when necessary. There was no evidence of any attempt privately to brief specialist correspondents about what we were up to. Many politicians have good links with the political correspondents but the specialist correspondents - education, health, labour - were allowed freedom to make what mischief they wanted.

We also missed many opportunities to get difficult questions put at Labour press conferences to exploit weak points that we had spotted. This should either have been done by tipping off sympathetic journalists with good questions [not necessarily

Bruce Anderson); alternatively, we could simply announce publicly that these were the questions which should be put to the Labour Party. Neither approach seemed to be used much. Some Research Department desk officer with good judgement should spend stints in the press office over the next few years so that they can be brought back to work there full-time in the next campaign.

#### Overall Assessment

We should not allow the marvellous size of our victory to blind us to the failures in Central Office during the campaign. We won despite our campaign, and Labour lost despite theirs. Hostility to Central Office amongst local associations and MPs will have increased. It will be more difficult to raise subscriptions for central funds. The whole central machine needs a thorough overhaul. We must do better next time.

David Willetts