

CEB/OP 1

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c: Sir Robert Armstrong

- 1. MR WICKS
- 2. PRIME MINISTER

Shall we discuss this with B I and R.T.A on Monday?
N.L.W.
Yes

PRESENTATION

30.5.

In a discussion at Cabinet on May 22 of the presentation of the HM Inspector of Schools report, it was suggested that the practice of Chief Information Officers meeting weekly under the chairmanship of a Minister with responsibility for the coordination of Government presentation should be reinstated.

The Prime Minister, summing up, said that she would consider the best arrangements for achieving this.

This note sets out the background and suggests a way forward.

Background

The machinery for coordinating the presentation of Government policy is as follows:

- Liaison Committee under the chairmanship of the Lord President, comprising Chancellor of the Duchy, Lord Privy Seal, Chief Whip, Robin Harris, Stephen Sherbourne and myself; this meets intermittently on Tuesdays
- MIO under my chairmanship each Monday evening, comprising the Heads of Information of Government Departments; attendance of some Departments, notably Treasury, is poor and the value of the meeting is limited because of a history of leaks in the early years of this Government
- Ad hoc sub-groups of MIO under my chairmanship as required - eg Falklands; economic policy; these can be better value

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- Direct contacts between No 10 and Departments - hourly, but too often an uphill struggle on the part of No 10.

Liaison Committee is a relatively new phenomenon. It was established before the 1983 election, and tends to take a strategic view of presentation. MIO is a long standing official committee over which a Minister, usually a Junior Minister, has presided under both Conservative and Labour Governments.

The appointment of a Junior Minister with responsibility for coordinating the presentation of Government policy ended in 1979 when Sir Angus (now Lord) Maude took charge with a seat in Cabinet. He made it a regular practice to preside over MIO and this was appreciated by most Chief Information Officers.

This practice lapsed with the appointments successively of Francis Pym, John Biffen and Lord Whitelaw as Ministers with coordinating responsibility. Lord Whitelaw has preferred a more informal relationship with MIO.

Analysis

Coordinating the presentation of Government policy and measures is notoriously difficult for various reasons - eg:

- Cabinet government does not operate in a monolithic way to a single Gosplan; the presentation of policies and measures is - and has to be - extensively delegated
- coordination depends crucially on advance knowledge and a willingness inside Government to share that knowledge with the co-ordinator; that willingness fairly accurately reflects the cohesiveness of Government and that has been severely disturbed this year

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- even with the best will in the world, Departments under our semi-autonomous system tend to go their own way and have to be reminded from time to time of the wider interests of Government
- too often Departmental Information Divisions who might otherwise be willing participants in the coordination system are given no chance to consult with No 10 because they are kept in the dark or decisions are taken late in the day without presentational input; the DHSS mortgage interest debacle is a classic example of both.

As I have previously advised, the system has become slack this year and is due for being told to pull its socks up. But the situation is complicated this year by the consequences of Westland, one of which has been a weakening of No 10's authority. It is only slowly being won back.

But before we turn to prescribing for present ills, it is important to be clear about the limits of the coordination system.

As one part of their task, the Minister responsible for coordination, through the Chief Press Secretary, seeks to identify in advance sensitive political issues and to ensure that care is taken over their presentation. They do not normally get involved in detailed drafting of publicity material. Thus the DES press notice (attached) which was the focus for Cabinet discussion on May 22, would not in the typical course of coordination have been submitted to them for clearance.

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This is because responsibility for the presentation of Government policy and measures must rest - and be seen to rest - with the relevant Department. Neither the coordinating Minister nor the Chief Press Secretary is equipped to vet all press notices. There is no substitute for Departmental sensitivity and efficiency.

Against this background the keys to an improvement in the Government's presentational performance are:

1. A much more positive approach by the Government generally to presentation and a determination to take greater care over it.
2. Following on from that, a willingness to share advance information with Chief Information Officers (who have real policy and operational needs to know); secretiveness at the expense of presentation was in part, if not wholly, responsible for the GCHQ and 1985 Review Body presentational disasters.
3. A requirement on Departments to give the coordinating Minister and Chief Press Secretary advance notice, with presentational material, of all sensitive issues; it is only then that the other benefits of coordination - eg timing, orchestration - can flower.

Recommendations

The essential questions are:

1. Does the present coordination system need reform; and if so how?
2. If not, what needs to be done to make the present system work better?

The suggestion at Cabinet on May 22 probably arises from the view circulating in Conservative Central Office that the Chief Press Secretary has for too long been carrying an excessive burden for an official and that this should be eased by the appointment of a Minister who would take a direct interest in MIO. It is recognised that this could not properly fall to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster as Chairman of the Conservative Party. Consequently, the appointment of a Junior Minister is being canvassed. This is seen by some Ministers as the means by which the Chancellor of the Duchy would effectively control presentation.

I would advise against the appointment of a Junior Minister on the basis of experience. History shows that Junior Ministers in this role exercise little authority. Coordination can effectively be done only with and through the authority of the Prime Minister and, if he or she chooses to delegate that responsibility, then only through a Cabinet Minister without substantial Departmental responsibilities, or one with equivalent standing.

The Prime Minister could directly delegate responsibility to her Chief Press Secretary but that would leave him even more exposed.

Thus, if the Prime Minister lacks the time - as she does - to take direct responsibility for coordination there is a limited number of alternatives to the Lord President, whose advice, support and protection I greatly value, though I know he now feels somewhat removed from the heart of politics.

In practice there are only three:

- Chancellor of the Duchy (Chairman of the Party)

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- Lord Privy Seal (has already held the post of coordinator and took no interest in it)
- Chief Whip (who is in a strong position to exercise the necessary control).

You will wish to consider carefully the desirability, in advance of any September reshuffle, of relieving the Lord President of his present responsibilities for coordination in favour of the Chief Whip. The Chief Whip is undoubtedly strategically placed to coordinate presentation and would bring a new and fresh mind to it, but his appointment might generate strains within Government.

It follows from this that I do not believe the present system is in need of substantial reform. But it does need tightening up. We now need as a minimum a note from the Minister responsible for coordination to all Ministers, copied to Chief Information Officers:

- emphasising the first importance of good presentation
- stressing the prime responsibility of Departments for it
- re-stating the requirements of the coordinating system first in identifying with No 10 Press Office sensitive issues and then in preparing the appropriate response (see Questions of Procedure for Ministers)
- requiring Departments systematically to report to No 10 on their presentational problems and opportunities to ensure the most effective timing and orchestration of the presentation of the Government's case
- laying a duty upon Chief Information Officers in person to attend MIO

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- ordering a review by the end of the year of the Government's performance over the next six months.
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BERNARD INGHAM

30 May 1986

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