

100  
YEARS  
OF  
GOVERNMENT  
COMMUNICATION

AZ McKenna



*John Buchan, the first Director of Information appointed in 1917  
Front cover: A press conference at the Ministry of Information, 1944*

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## 100 Years of Government Communication

AZ McKenna

For my parents and grandparents



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The latter parts of the book draw upon a series of interviews I conducted with leading figures from the worlds of communication, government and journalism. It was a privilege to be able to speak to them. For me their candour and

eloquence brought the subject to life. I hope I have rendered their contributions in such a way that the reader is left similarly enthused. My sincere thanks therefore to Robert Armstrong, Conrad Bird, Robin Butler, Alastair Campbell, Michael Crick, George Eykyn, Chris Hamilton, Barbara Hosking, Howell James, Brian Jenkins, Sean Larkins, Sam Lister, Francis Maude, Christopher Meyer, Sheila Mitchell, Gus O'Donnell, Wendy Proctor, David Rose, Anthony Simon, Neville Taylor, Jacqueline Williamson and Simon Wren for their time and hospitality. Additional thanks must also go to Robert Hamilton of Channel 4 News and the Prime Minister's Spokesman James Slack. They not only agreed to be interviewed but also kindly showed me around the Parliamentary Press Gallery and Number 10 Downing Street respectively. Both of them additionally arranged for me to witness two separate Lobby briefings in Parliament, following Cabinet on Tuesday and after Prime Minister's Questions on Wednesday.

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*Alexander McKenna  
Bayswater  
September 2018*

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# PREFACE

## TRUTH'S BODY- GUARDS?

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“In wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.”

*Winston Churchill, 1943*

When Churchill declared that truth was so precious she should be attended by a bodyguard of lies, he spoke of course in the context of a country at war, fighting for its very survival. His arresting dictum is all the more pertinent given that modern British government communication was undoubtedly forged in the furnace of two catastrophic global conflicts. In both the First and Second World Wars the country's leaders realised that a mastery of information was crucial to victory and with it the preservation of the ultimate 'truth' of the nation's parliamentary democracy. Now, a century on from the creation of the first Department of Information, it is clear that the government's ability to communicate effectively with the world outside of Whitehall remains a vital component of the modern state.

However in charting the development of the field – from the often quite crude propaganda of the Great War to the sophistication of the present – there has been an evolution in both methods and philosophy. In the case of the former this can be seen quite obviously as a journey from the poster to the website and beyond. In the latter we see a shift from the Churchillian dictum above, where the ends justify the means to a realisation that broadly, the truth itself is actually the most effective protector of the national interest. Some might regard this as unfeasibly idealistic. On occasion, allegations of 'spin' have dented the principle. But an approach where professional communicators – bound by the Civil Service Code and rules on propriety – efficiently disseminate accurate information with clarity can in fact be seen as grounded in hard reality. In practice, a democratic government of a commercial nation needs above all to retain the confidence and trust of her own citizens, international partners and a global public. It would likewise be a mistake to characterise such an approach as purely a symptom of the relatively peaceful and prosperous post-war



period. This was after all a time when the undulating tensions of the Cold War provided a constant political soundtrack to daily life. Domestically too, new public health concerns began to arise while various technological advances showed their dark side. The latter two instances are now inescapable constants and while the Cold War has ended, Britain now faces the challenges of leaving the European Union and navigating a manifestly unstable world of high-speed communication and disinformation.

Much of the story can justifiably serve as an inspiration to members of the modern Government Communication Service. However, seeing the work in terms of simple lessons from the past informing to-do lists and how-to manuals of the future would be a mistake. It would rely upon the vain hope of history repeating itself. Moreover, Marjorie Ogilvy-Webb's *The Government Explains*<sup>1</sup> of 1965 was the last attempt at an all-encompassing study. A new appraisal could potentially be vast: examining global influences and covering each of the individual centres and outlets – foreign and domestic in turn – over time. This however is a determinedly concise study. It aims to capture primarily something of the flavour of the key institutions, within the sweep of 20th and early 21st century history. It is framed largely in domestic terms and avoids the massive associated fields of intelligence, special operations, subversion and black propaganda – as well as the governmental organisations responsible for those activities, such as the wartime Political Warfare Executive and the post-war Information Research Department – on which much has already been written.

The study aims to look beyond structures and chronology. It is, after all, the people who work within the apparatus who make things happen. From dealing with the press to masterminding government advertising campaigns; over a century this is a story that brings together household names

with those deeply embedded – and to the general public, largely anonymous – in the machine. In striving to ensure a motivated population during conflict and a well-informed one in peacetime, or in presenting Britain as an implacable wartime foe or a dynamic place to invest in the new millennium, these civil servants have brought their own ideas, methods and particular talents to bear. Instinct alone may have given way in many areas to rigorous statistical analysis but it still has its place. Many government communicators would be regarded by outsiders as workaholics. Some have seemed to conform to *Yes Minister's* vision of the civil servant as smoothie – ruthless and loquacious in equal measure – others more recently perhaps have kicked against this stereotype in cultivating an earthy ordinariness tempered with colloquial toughness. At the same time most have worked collaboratively – often across government – and can be seen to share many common traits. There have been both successes and failures aplenty since the Department of Information was first formed. Communicators have had to carve out a space in a complex governmental superstructure of transient politics and permanent officialdom – a world where, initially, policy was totally dominant and its transmission merely an afterthought. In perhaps the most traditional area of government communication, dealing with the press, Christopher Meyer – Downing Street Press Secretary between 1993 and 1996 – has argued that: “There is no average press officer. Temperament, character...thespian qualities are almost as important as the ability to learn stuff and regurgitate it to journalists.” During his time in the Foreign Office and Downing Street, the best practitioners “knew how to win the confidence of journalists...they had the gift of the gab”. At the same time though he agrees that there is a paradox in the successful spokesman being both a character and simultaneously an invisible presence: “Press secretaries who like to become the story are on the road to perdition.”



As a career diplomat, Meyer is also a strong advocate of recruiting communicators from within the Civil Service, as is the norm within the Foreign Office and Treasury: “I would still give priority to someone who was well versed in policy, who comes out of the bosom of a department and proves to be good at persuading journalists. There is no necessary correlation between someone who has been in the PR industry transferring into a government department and it all working like a charm. It’s a different skill.”<sup>2</sup> This is not though a call for opacity. On the contrary, as Meyer declared in a paper strikingly titled *Hacks and Pin-Striped Appeasers: Selling British Foreign Policy to the Press* – written while a visiting fellow at Harvard – “The maligned 15-second soundbite on TV news can be a vehicle without equal for illuminating an issue vividly and compactly.”<sup>3</sup> Individual communicators meeting the challenge of balancing detail with brevity for public benefit is something that particularly stands out in the latter periods of this study.

Finally though, no study of this kind can ignore one of the principal products of government communication: advertising. In the space of 100 years, this has obviously evolved, incorporating a wider and wider variety of media – these now often synthesised into a single campaign – and with modernisation has come a moderation in tone. And yet fundamentally, government advertising in the 2010s seeks to do many of the things that it did in 1918. Indeed the work of government communicators – whether in the Great War or on the GREAT Britain campaign today – can often be judged by the same standards. Are the different elements of a campaign eye or ear-catching to the public? Is it both easily comprehensible to them and genuinely comprehensive in exposition? Are members of the public prompted to alter their behaviour in response to it? Is there then a return on the government’s investment in some form? In other words, is a campaign actually effective? When work of aesthetic value

meets these requirements it has every chance of becoming an iconic piece of advertising. Beginning with the Department of Information through the first Ministry of Information, Empire Marketing Board, second Ministry of Information, Central Office of Information to the Government Communication Service, the government has been the midwife of numerous campaigns often spoken of in iconic terms.

A chronology of government campaigns – and indeed government communication as a whole – across the century is as much a social history of Britain as it is a political or administrative one. From pensions to gender equality, road safety to war, there is almost certainly a poster, newsreel or television advert on the subject. Modern Britain has shaped them, and they have shaped modern Britain.

# CHAPTER ONE

## ORIGINS

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“Most men and all journalists consider themselves to be born propagandists.”

*John Buchan, 1917*

Since the dawn of civilisation, the state has always sought to communicate with its citizens and subjects. From the Bayeux Tapestry to John Milton's *Eikonoklastes*, propaganda and polemic has often been the order of the day. At the same time, government has often tried to influence or control the diffusion of information from other sources, with varying degrees of both compulsion and success. Indeed in the late 17th century both King Charles II<sup>4</sup> and his brother James II<sup>5</sup> issued proclamations 'to restrain the spreading of false news'.

By the second half of the 19th century though – with the increasing size of government in Britain and the repeated extension of the franchise – the need instead for straightforward, mass-produced public information became apparent. This was exemplified by an 1876 Post Office campaign that distributed handbills advertising and explaining the functions of the Post Office Savings Bank. Similarly with the passage of the 1911 National Insurance Act a corps of lecturers was established to travel the country explaining the workings of the new system – in which the origins of the welfare state can be divined – to employers and employees alike. At this point though there was nothing that resembled a centralised communication and information apparatus.<sup>6</sup>

Our story really begins then in the midst of the First World War. In 1914 Lord Kitchener's imperious finger pointed not only to victory by Christmas but also to a brave new world of government communication and advertising. While Alfred Leete's 1914 image of Kitchener was commissioned before the formation of the Department of Information – and although its contemporary reach and impact upon recruitment is now sometimes disputed – it still serves as an ideal starting point for an examination of government advertising. It is arguably the supreme example of the unashamed propaganda, laced with implicit jingoism that characterised material produced for much of the Great War. However, such works should not be



*Lord Kitchener wants you - recruitment for the Great War, 1914*

simply dismissed today on the grounds of infamy or parody and cliché. Their often-arresting simplicity of design and clarity of message should in fact be seen by government communicators as enduring virtues.

By the end of 1916 however, the war still raged across the continent and appeared to have become a stalemate. This was exemplified by the failure of the British offensive at the Somme in the summer of that year. At home Asquith's leadership was increasingly questioned and by December he had been replaced as Prime Minister by Lloyd George. In order to prosecute the war more effectively the latter immediately formed a small War Cabinet, something the former had resisted. At the same time the Cabinet Office itself was also created with the express purpose of co-ordinating the war effort across Whitehall.<sup>7</sup>

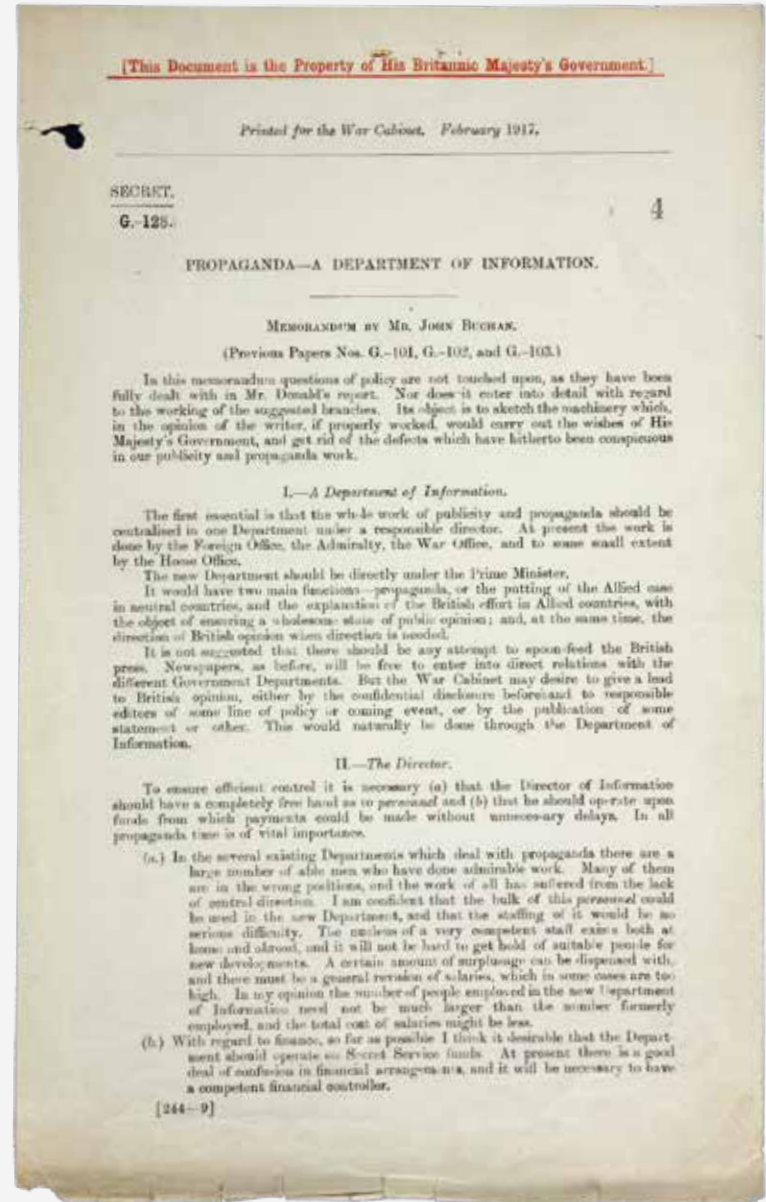
In the fields of information and communication, direct reporting from the Western Front was initially banned under the 1914 Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), but with a public unsurprisingly hungry for news, the press began to directly criticise the War Office and the Secretary of State, Kitchener, over their lack of access. By 1915 reporters had been allowed to join the army in France. A 'pool' was created, meaning that all newspapers and wire services had equal access to copy which originated from official correspondents, a system that has largely endured into the 21st century. Even so, the journalists were subject to control by army escort officers and several layers of censorship in both France and Britain. Several, such as Philip Gibbs of the *Daily Chronicle*, earned a deal of respect from the public, politicians, servicemen and their readers. But they were deliberately supposed to see their jobs as part of the war effort, rather than as independent observers and chroniclers.

While a War Propaganda Bureau at Wellington House achieved some early success, especially in its use of film, it soon began to look unwieldy and ineffective and was the subject

of disputes between different government departments who wanted to set its strategy and use its resources for their own specific interests. The Foreign Office – who had been the first ministry to establish a news department in 1914 – sought to concentrate on propaganda to the United States, while the War Office wanted to target enemy troops. In the very first meeting of the new War Cabinet under Lloyd George on 9 December 1916, the need for an urgent review was listed as a top priority. The review was overseen by Lloyd George’s ally Robert Donald, editor of the *Daily Chronicle*, but without even waiting for the review to be finished, the government created the Department of Information (DoI) on 9 February 1917, under the leadership of John Buchan who had combined his diplomatic and political career with being a popular novelist. Soon after his appointment he declared: “I have had many queer jobs in my life, but this is the queerest.”<sup>8</sup> The peculiarities and potential contradictions of information distribution in a time of war were obvious – indeed even in times of peace they have arguably endured – but Buchan was also firm in his



*The Royal Berkshire Regiment goes into action on the Somme, August 1918*



*John Buchan's submission to the War Cabinet proposing the establishment of a Department of Information*



N.B. - It is important that this Confidential Paper should be guarded carefully and not allowed to pass into the hands of persons for whom it is not intended.

It is requested that copies of the five previous pamphlets issued by the Official Press Bureau may be destroyed at once.

It should be clearly understood that no reference whatever is to be made in the Press to any Confidential Notice issued by the Official Press Bureau, nor should any information contained in any such notice be communicated to anyone outside the offices of those to whom the notices are addressed.

Defence of the Realm Regulation 27A says:-

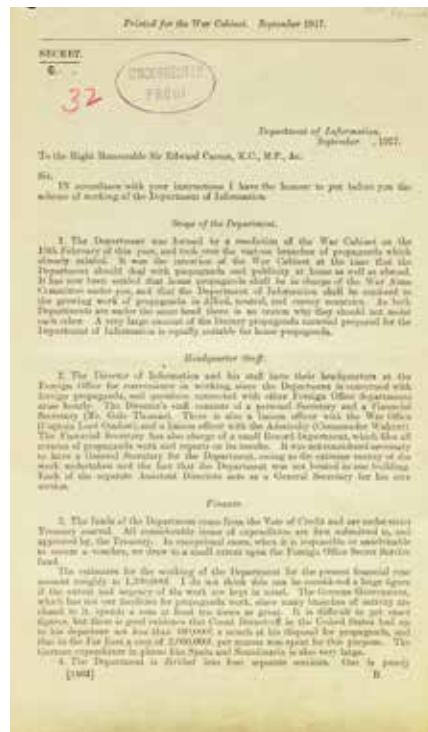
"It shall not be lawful for any person in any newspaper, periodical or in any public speech, to publish any report of, or to purport to describe, or to refer to, the proceedings of the Cabinet, or without lawful authority to publish the contents of any confidential document belonging to, or of any document which has in confidence been communicated by, or any confidential information obtained from, any Government department, or any person in the service of His Majesty."

conviction that propaganda ought to be an accurate record of events, albeit presented in a way that aided the British cause.

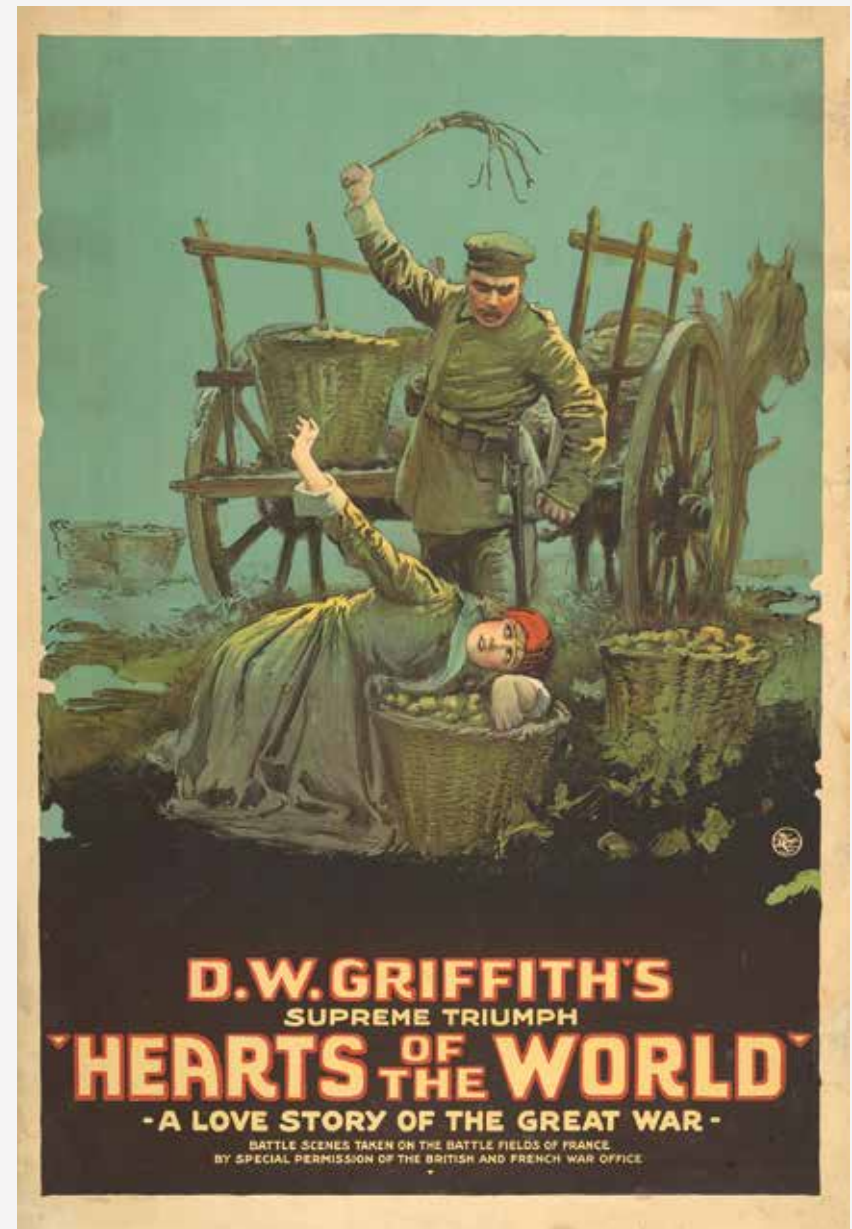
Taking advantage of a vital technological development, one of the new department's first endeavours was the commissioning of *Hearts of the World*, a propaganda film based on German atrocities against French civilians. A central aim of the piece was to turn public opinion in the United States away from neutrality. In order to secure the services of the American film director DW Griffith – most famous for his 1915 Civil War epic *The Birth of a Nation* – an introduction to King George V and Queen Mary was arranged and he was given freedom to film on location in the trenches. British troops were even dispatched to Hollywood to perform as extras in the scenes shot there. Although a box office hit on both sides of the Atlantic, by the time it was released in 1918 America had already been fighting for a year. *Hearts of the World* can on one level be viewed as just another piece of crude atrocity propaganda. To do so would be to ignore the technological sea change it represented: film as a standard tool of government communication. Moreover, far less controversial developments were arguably stimulated by the likes of Leete's poster and Griffith's film. Buchan greatly increased access to the front line for photographers, newsreels began to feature footage from France and the imperatives of rationing were clearly explained to the British population when the system was introduced in late 1917.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike its predecessor the War Propaganda Bureau, the Department of Information was not a secret organisation. While Buchan's biographer notes that "in later life [he] liked to suggest he had undertaken intelligence work"<sup>11</sup> and his memoirs are full of such implications – while never actually mentioning the department – this seems to have been a case of the novelist possessing the man. It is a fact that the DoI openly created propaganda for distribution in Britain, rather than relying on

front organisations as its predecessor had done. Even children were not spared in the new propaganda war. As fears grew of the British public's war weariness in the first half of 1917 the DoI could be found subsidising the second impression of a volume of stories for young boys by the popular writer Henry Newbolt, *Tales of the Great War*.<sup>12</sup> In one story, Newbolt accused the Germans of calculated mutilation of women and children in air raids, claiming the German airmen took deliberate pleasure in such acts and described the Germans as "Huns, the enemies of humane and civilised life".<sup>13</sup> Crude perhaps, but a clear example of how total the war had become.



*John Buchan's report  
on the workings of the  
Department of Information,  
September 1917<sup>14</sup>*

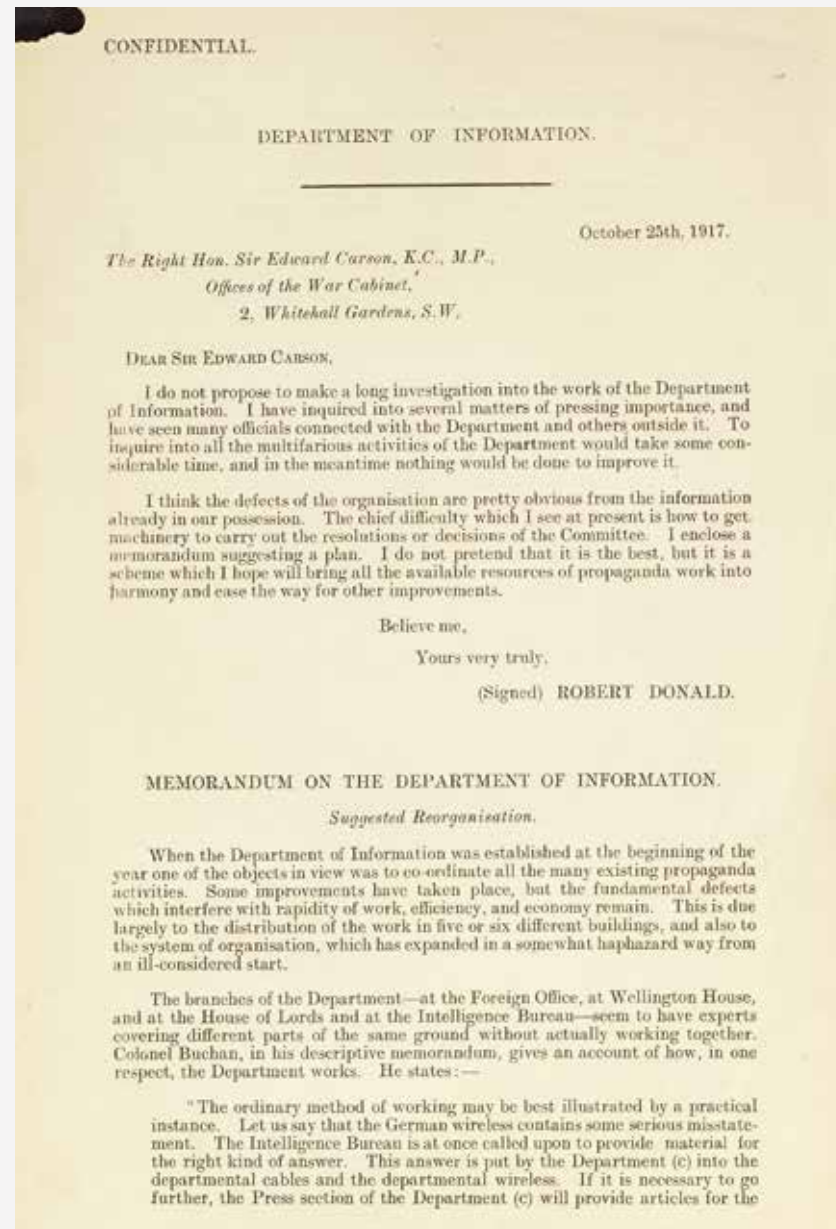


*Preposterous propaganda – DW Griffith's Hearts of the World, 1918*





Practical propaganda – dietary advice from 1917



Robert Donald's Memorandum on the Department of Information, October 1917<sup>15</sup>

Alongside the new department, the National War Aims Committee (NWAC) was created in August 1917. Worried by increasing pacifist sentiment, reports of mutinies in the French army and the revolution in Russia, the government tasked the committee with rebuilding domestic morale. The structure and institutions of the new organisation were a partnership between the central agency and district committees. In opening a direct conversation between the state and the public – rather than one which was conducted formally through MPs or informally through magnates or the press barons – it was something new. Materials were crafted for distribution by religious groups, trade unions and businesses, with messages strategically tailored to reach different audiences, such as members of nonconformist churches thought be especially vulnerable to pacifist arguments. Major national businesses such as WH Smith were recruited as partners to distribute millions of pamphlets and postcards, emphasising German barbarity on the one hand and British virtues – especially the monarchy – on the other. This included a free weekly four-page newspaper, *Reality*, with content from the NWAC, printed and paid for by the DoI and distributed by Smith's. Stories were planted in local newspapers, with contributors being paid to write pro-war articles. But the main output of the NWAC was public meetings, usually featuring one Conservative and one Liberal. Thousands of these were organised by hundreds of local committees around the country in an attempt to combat war-weariness.<sup>16</sup>

Despite all of these developments, the embryonic communication service still had numerous powerful critics, including Lloyd George's influential friends in the press who thought themselves better propagandists. As Buchan put it: "Most men and all journalists consider themselves to be born propagandists...propaganda is not an occult science, but a matter on which every citizen has a right to judge, and on

which his judgement is often valuable."<sup>17</sup> Prominent among the naysayers was Donald of the Daily Chronicle, who was able to persuade the Prime Minister that the DoI should be reviewed by an advisory committee of newspaper editors, including himself. Increasing interference led Buchan to ask Lloyd George to appoint a minister who would stick up for the DoI's independence and enjoy a seat in the War Cabinet. Lloyd George agreed – and in February 1918 the Department of Information became the Ministry of Information, under the leadership of *Daily Express* proprietor Lord Beaverbrook.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly though, responsibility for propaganda in enemy territories did not fall to the new ministry, but was handled instead by the Crewe House Committee under the chairmanship of rival press baron Lord Northcliffe.<sup>19</sup>

Beaverbrook brought a nervous energy to his work at the MoI, which had its downside in numerous fights with other ministers and departments, particularly the Foreign Office. "I will swear that they were not fomented by any truculence of bearing on my part. On the contrary I exhibited a most Christian humility," he later claimed, not entirely believably. There is little doubting though his commitment to the cause. After four months in the job he wrote dramatically that "I am nearly worn out with my effort to put this ministry on its legs."<sup>20</sup>

With the creation of a 'proper' ministry there now began a brief – paradoxically almost 'golden' – age of wartime government communication. Paradoxically, because the stepping up of the MoI's activities was prompted by a worsening domestic scene – exemplified by the introduction of food rationing – and its winding down and eventual disappearance came with the longed for Armistice. In this period the use of photography was expanded including the creation of a Photographic Bureau which sold pictures directly to the public. Although by 1917, the DoI had ensured that

newsreel images from the front were being shown twice a week in British cinemas, under the new ministry, film took off as never before. Indeed the MoI even created its own production studios which made films for other government departments. Moreover, there was a concerted effort to use modern communication channels across different areas of government policy. As noted above, food rationing was introduced from late 1917 as German U-boat attacks started to have a heavier impact on vital imports. Rather than just railing against the dangers of the deep, the Ministry of Information created practical films for the new Ministry of Food Supply explaining the new rationing procedures to the British public. For the first time, wartime government communication became about more than propaganda and recruitment.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, in echoes of what was to become a central question about government communication over the next century, there were intra-Whitehall disputes over what any central communication body could and should control – and what was best left to individual departments. Meanwhile, the suspicion among many MPs was growing that the integration of the press barons into the machinery of government – especially those parts concerned with information – was a threat to freedom.

Beaverbrook resigned on grounds of ill health in October 1918 but the Ministry of Information did not outlast his tenure for long. On 13 November – just two days after the Armistice – it was abolished. In peacetime, it was thought, there could be no justification for any such organisation.

10170/1918

Staff of the Ministry of Information  
(including Crown House).

The total staff was 506. Of these only 92 got more than £250 a year, as follows :

£1,000 or over	2
Over £500 and under £1,000	12
Over £350 and up to £500	26
£250 to £350	53
	-----
	92
	-----

These figures include the civil officers lent by other Government Departments.

The editorial work included in the above was performed by :

1 Director - salary unspecified
1 Officer at £400
1 at £5 per week
5 at £5 per week
2 at £3 per week.

*Report on staff numbers and salaries at the MoI, 1918<sup>22</sup>*





**A**lthough the Ministry of Information had been abolished, some significant parts of the wartime communication infrastructure endured. The Foreign Office News Department formed in 1914 was effectively the first modern press office in government and still exists today. The new Air Ministry had its own press officer from its formation in 1919, with the War Office and Admiralty soon following suit, as did the Ministry of Health. Much depended on the attitude of individual ministers. When Winston Churchill moved from the War Office to the Colonial Office in 1921, he arranged for his press officer at the former to also cover the latter brief. As is so often the case in various fields, war had brought about a critical change – arguably for the better – at the heart of the government bureaucracy.<sup>24</sup>

More generally though the Great War had scarred Britain in a number of ways. Pride in victory was soon tempered by a palpable sense of disillusionment. Lloyd George had promised a land fit for heroes. And while universal suffrage would come within a decade, so would the General Strike of 1926. Particularly worrying from the point of view of government communicators was the growing belief that the public had been lied to during the war. The likes of the book *Falsehood in War-time, Containing an Assortment of Lies Circulated Throughout the Nations During the Great War*<sup>25</sup> written by the Labour MP Arthur Ponsonby became accepted wisdom and the conflict was increasingly viewed as a pointless waste of life, never to be repeated. Recent scholarship has however established that the German Army did carry out a number of atrocities during the First World War, in Belgium and Flanders and also in Eastern Europe.<sup>26</sup> At the time though, the public were no longer inclined to believe such things, perhaps on account of the more extravagant falsehoods that circulated such as the infamous *Kadaververwertungsanstalt* – a German factory where supposedly corpses were turned into soap.<sup>27</sup>

The discrediting of wartime propaganda was to have a powerful effect upon how British government communication developed over the next two decades. There was an institutional reluctance on the part of British officialdom to engage in anything that could be seen as propaganda in the interwar years. Even when war came again once more, some senior mandarins regarded the rumours of Nazi death camps as merely propagandist inventions in the manner of the Kaiser's soap factory.

New approaches were cautiously tested by various individuals. Basil Clarke, a former war correspondent for the *Daily Mail* who was then recruited to the Ministry of Reconstruction in 1917, can be viewed as a prototypical public relations officer. Seconded to Dublin Castle in 1920 during the Anglo-Irish War he pioneered an approach of 'propaganda by news'. In other words, the careful selection and emphasis of stories favourable to the British cause, presented with clarity in order to win the audience's trust. This might now seem like an obvious approach to wartime communication, but at the time it was novel; criticised by British traditionalists and Irishmen alike, for quite different reasons.<sup>28</sup>

The *British Gazette* newspaper, published during the General Strike and edited by Winston Churchill (now Chancellor of the Exchequer) arguably functioned on the same principles. At times though it seemed like a brief but nonetheless full-blooded return to the crudest of wartime methods. The strike was apparently Bolshevik or perhaps Fascist or just simply – in the words of the Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin – “the road to anarchy and ruin”. Nevertheless, the nation remained “calm and confident” – if the front page headline was to be believed.<sup>29</sup>

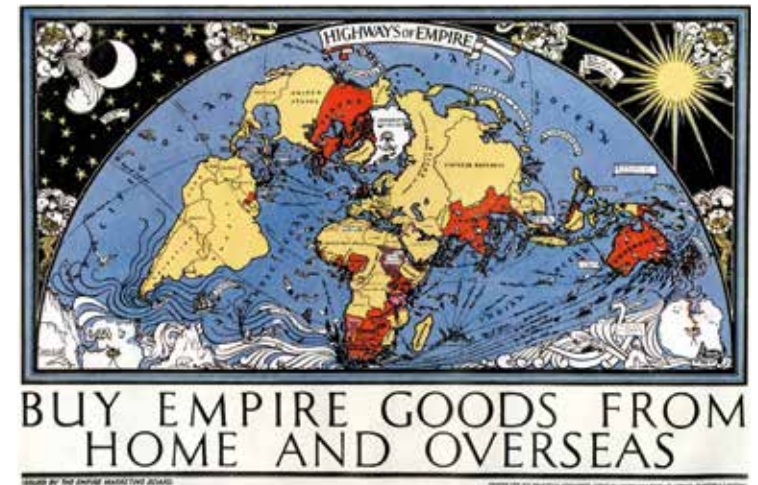
In reality Britain's whole economic model was in severe trouble by the early 1920s. While the Empire had reached its territorial zenith in the aftermath of the 1919 Paris Peace



“The road to anarchy and ruin” – the *British Gazette*, the government's newspaper during the General Strike of 1926

Conference – with the incorporation of former German and Ottoman possessions as League of Nations mandate territories – the likes of the United States and Japan had begun to penetrate markets traditionally dominated by British exports. The gospel of free trade which had dominated British policy since the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 may long have meant cheap food for the domestic market, but it now gave other economic powers the ability to compete with British business. American cars or Japanese typewriters could be sold with low tariffs anywhere inside the largest Empire the world had ever seen. A policy of protective tariffs or ‘Imperial Preference’ had been proposed by Joseph Chamberlain before the First World War and had split the Unionist (or Conservative) Party. After the war the issue came back with equal vigour. Baldwin’s government was divided and the Prime Minister was desperate to avoid another party split. His Colonial Secretary, Leo Amery, was a keen advocate of tariffs while his Chancellor, Winston Churchill, as a former Liberal was inclined towards free trade. The necessary compromise that came out of this situation gave birth to the Empire Marketing Board (EMB).

While it was argued that workers would never vote for more expensive bread, they could still be prompted into buying imperial goods instead of just the cheapest ones. As the cabinet minute recording the creation of the EMB stated: “40 millions of people had to be induced to change their habits.”<sup>30</sup> In order to do this the EMB, under the leadership of Stephen Tallents, would employ the latest advertising techniques to bring about this change in behaviour and so ensure the future prosperity and survival of the empire. At the same time though, Tallents himself was an ordinary civil servant without any experience in advertising. As he would later describe: “I was called upon to assist the distribution of ideas...I’d had no previous experience in that line...But I quickly discovered that scarcely any British government department had ever thought about publicity and



*Highways of Empire – perhaps the most famous of the EMB’s posters designed by MacDonald Gill, 1927<sup>35</sup>*

that most departments despised and were inclined to resent it...I had to improvise methods of our own.”<sup>31</sup>

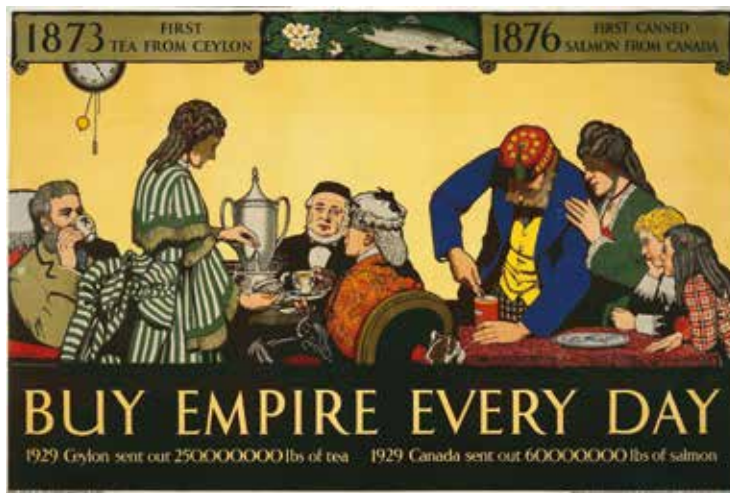
The period saw many developments in the field, unsurprisingly including ever more advanced cinematography and the affordable household wireless, but also neon lighting and new lithograph technology that made large, mass-produced, full-colour posters on hoardings possible for the first time. Indeed the last of these prompted the opening of dozens of art schools across Britain, specifically to train people in the new art form. This was the sudden flowering of true mass communication: an entirely new world of seemingly endless possibilities when it came to reaching an audience.

There were few techniques and channels that the EMB did not dabble in and during its seven-year lifespan it sponsored a bewildering number of attention-grabbing campaigns. From Christmas puddings made exclusively from imperial produce to draping Wembley stadium in a huge banner urging those



attending the 1927 Cup Final to buy empire products, the board seemed to exemplify a quintessentially British combination of the parochial and the unconventional. The central message emphasised by every campaign – whether on a poster, in the cinema, a BBC radio programme or in the classroom – was that each part of the empire had something to contribute and that together Britain's territories constituted a self-sufficient universe.

To a 21st century eye some EMB advertisements might now provoke unease. At the time however, the use of a language of commercialised orientalism – tapping into public fascination with the exotic in order to render the mundane extraordinary – was an aesthetic masterstroke. Simply by making a pot of tea, the ordinary consumer could take his or her place in a grand, Kiplingesque imperial pageant, provided of course that the tea leaves had come from a British colony.

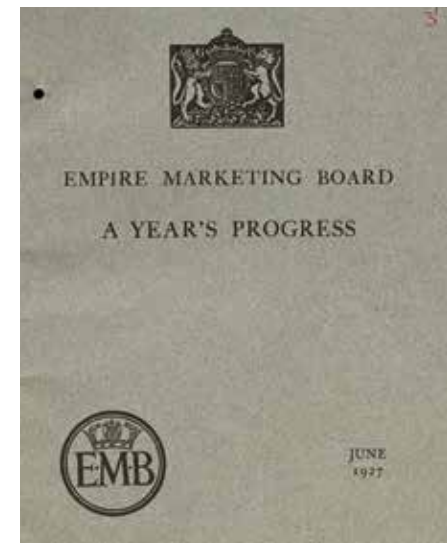


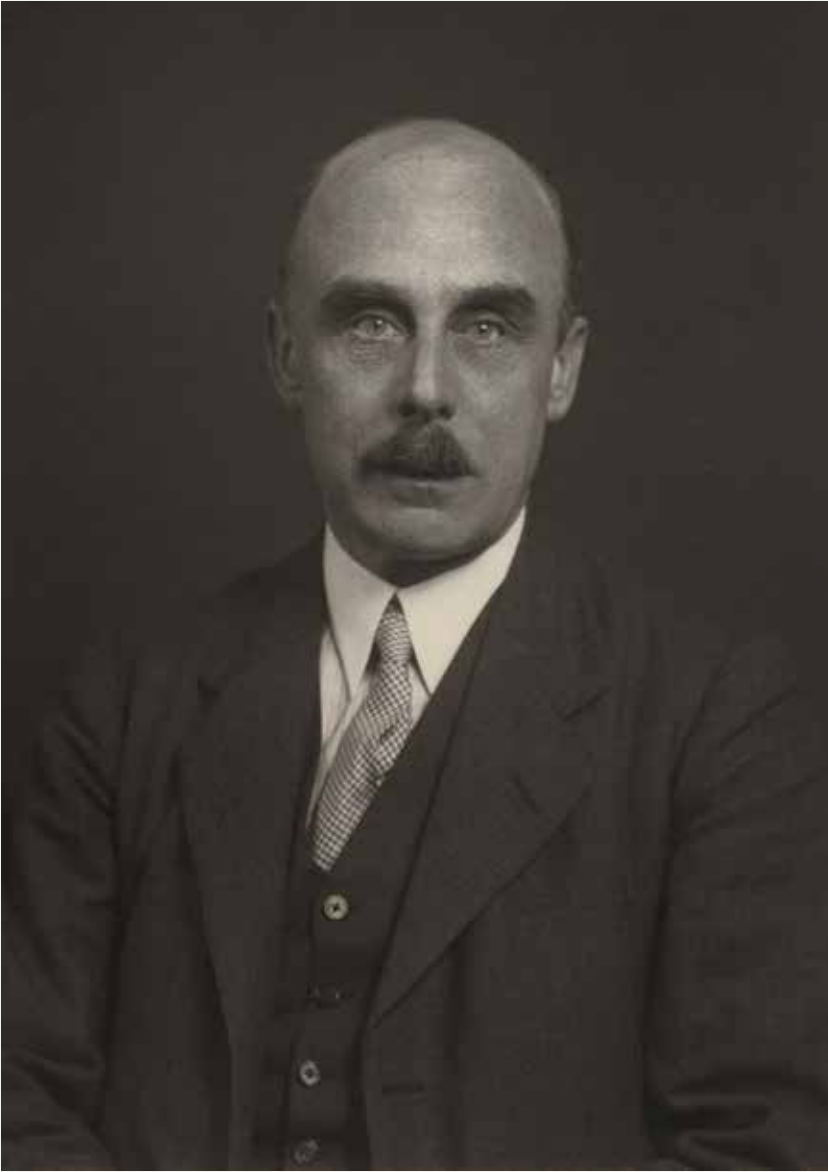
*A Kiplingesque pageant – such adverts elevated the status of purchasing and consuming Empire goods<sup>32</sup>*

It is also important to note that the EMB did not merely produce material, launch it into the ether and hope for the best. Arguably for the first time, government sought to meaningfully evaluate the impact of its advertising campaigns. In attempting to do so it soon became apparent that this was no easy task; it would however become an area that government has sought constantly to improve upon. The EMB's annual reports regularly listed record levels of imports of foreign empire goods into Britain. These included Australian sultanas, New Zealand lamb, Rhodesian tobacco and Palestinian grapefruit. Butter consumption apparently increased by 9% in Britain between 1929 and 1932 but Empire butter imports had increased by 50%. Ultimately though, many of these statistics were in reality untestable, owing in large part to fluctuating global prices.<sup>33</sup>

With the onset of the Great Depression and the introduction of tariffs, the EMB no longer had a reason to exist and was shut down in 1933. Nevertheless it had been a remarkable period for government communication. The EMB had actively sought to engage with consumers as well as informing and educating both them and producers.<sup>34</sup>

*Eye-catching posters aside, the EMB's annual reports were the first real attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of government publicity<sup>35</sup>*





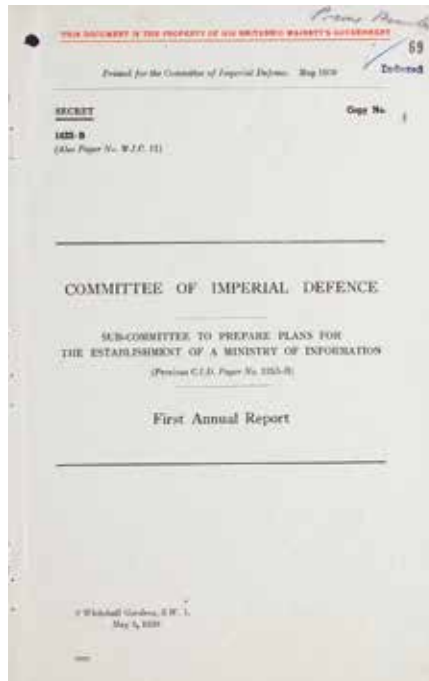
*“I quickly discovered that scarcely any British government department had ever thought about publicity” – Stephen Tallents, the pioneering head of the Empire Marketing Board 1926–1933*

Moreover the sheer quality of many of its campaigns indicated a growing professionalisation of the field.<sup>36</sup> Indeed when Stephen Tallents moved to the Post Office (GPO) following the closure of the EMB, he continued to commission remarkable work. In the depths of depression, the 1936 documentary film *Night Mail* – produced by the GPO Film Unit – looked towards a brighter future. With evocative cinematography, the poetry of WH Auden and the music of Benjamin Britten, the Post Office and Royal Mail’s then cutting-edge distribution system was depicted as an inspiring model of modernity, and as an internal communication was quite the morale booster.<sup>37</sup>

However, the dark realities of the international political situation could not be ignored: the descent once again into global conflict had begun. This time though, clear planning for the information war began at the same time as actual re-armament did. Senior officials and political leaders now believed that munitions of the mind would prove to be as important as tanks, planes and ships. Communications technology had advanced still further, particularly in the cinema with sound as standard and sometimes even colour. The dictatorships of Europe though had a clear head start. Never before had an individual propagandist played as important a role as Josef Goebbels did in the Nazi German state, ironically drawing substantial inspiration from the more lurid material produced by Britain during the Great War. Similarly, by the 1930s the Soviets were already experts in the field. In 1935 Britain prepared to fight back and secret planning for a Ministry of Information began.

By this time individual Whitehall departments had expanded their own communication operations somewhat, as had local government. Westminster City Council – having already appointed a public relations officer and advertised the attractions of that part of London to foreign visitors through the Travel Association earlier in the decade – by May of 1939 was looking to appoint an additional public relations specialist

to specifically co-ordinate communications relating to air raid precautions and the recruitment of volunteer ARP wardens, nearly four months before Germany's invasion of Poland.<sup>38</sup> At the heart of government in Number 10 Downing Street, the first Chief Press Liaison Officer had been installed in 1932, serving both the Prime Minister and the Treasury. Likewise, in 1935 the Board of Education and the Ministry of Health set up a joint public relations branch and the Home Office started its own public relations operation in 1936. The British Council was created in 1934, spawned from the Foreign Office News Department and tasked with promoting the country's culture overseas. By the time war finally broke out again in 1939 there were 'publicity divisions' in virtually all Whitehall departments.<sup>39</sup>



*Planning for war and a Ministry of Information once again, May 1938<sup>40</sup>*

# CHAPTER THREE

## THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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“All that the country really wants is some assurance of how victory is to be achieved.”

*Harold Nicolson,  
April 1941*

The Ministry of Information once again became a substantive institution on 4 September 1939, the day after war was declared on Germany. Headquartered in the monolithic Senate House of the University of London, it was to have five main broad functions: release of official news; censorship of films, press and BBC; maintenance of morale; conduct of publicity campaigns for other departments; and propaganda to other countries. The last of these was jettisoned quickly and it was to be the maintenance of morale and its deeply connected role overseeing the government's news output which was to dominate the MoI's attention over the course of the war.

Despite all of the detailed planning of the late 1930s, things did not begin smoothly. The ministry's initial campaigns were decidedly old-fashioned. The now ubiquitous 'Keep calm and carry on' poster was not actually used and was in fact part of a series that garnered considerable criticism.

*Orwell's Ministry of Truth  
– The University of London's  
Senate House building served  
as the MoI's headquarters  
during the war*

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*"Inspid and patronising" – one of the MoI's early efforts that was met with derision*



*Kept in storage as the war carried on – the modern design icon that remained largely unused in 1939<sup>41</sup>*





*Careless talk costs lives - a 1942 poster by cartoonist Fougasse*

In particular, *The Times* condemned one that read ‘Your Courage, Your Cheerfulness, Your Resolution Will Bring Us Victory’ as a series of “insipid and patronising invocations [that] have a power of exasperation which is all their own”.<sup>42</sup> It seemed to imply effort on the part of the many for the benefit of the few. Its largely unused sister may now be regarded as a design classic thanks to nearly eight decades of nostalgia fuelled hindsight, but the failure of the series stands as a warning: sonorous slogans and striking typography do not by themselves guarantee success. Similarly, in taking a tone redolent of material produced during the Great War, the campaign demonstrated that what was deemed suitable 20 years earlier was not automatically fit for purpose simply because Britain found herself in a similar predicament. Some though within the MoI had argued for a different approach from early on – one that used colloquial language and humour to connect with a public suspicious of lofty sentiment. Eventually this was heeded and put into practice in numerous campaigns, such as ‘Careless talk costs lives’ – which included both the striking but still informal ‘Keep it under your hat!’ posters and the witty cartoons of Fougasse.<sup>43</sup> Of course the sheer volume of material produced over the half decade – for instance 726 government films, many of them made by the Crown Film Unit, successor to the GPO Film Unit<sup>44</sup> – meant that there were still numerous failures amongst the successes. However, by 1945 pompous exhortation of the Kitchener school had been largely banished from the repertoire.

Another difficulty concerned the rather cackhanded attempts at press censorship immediately after the start of the war that did not inspire much confidence. In one infamous case the MoI announced that the Queen had returned from a visit to Scotland with her daughters. However, it was then decided that this news was a security risk and all newspapers carrying it were confiscated, only for it to be re-announced a few

hours later.<sup>45</sup> Similarly the MoI ended up in dispute with the War Office when it cleared for publication news that British forces had landed in France. Officials in the latter ministry demanded that the news be suppressed, taking their case to the Home Office by which time the presses had already started to roll. Eventually, in chaotic scenes, the police were deployed on Fleet Street and ordered to seize all newspapers carrying the information.<sup>46</sup>

The MoI did however have a secret weapon at its disposal: the Home Intelligence Division. Employing empirical methods with the help of the research organisation Mass-Observation, volunteer observers across the country compiled diaries based on conversations with friends, neighbours and workmates. These were then collated nationally in order to produce – often very accurate – summaries of the national mood on particular issues. Monitoring of this sort was extremely controversial. Indeed funds from the security services were made available for the work in order to avoid the disapproval of the Treasury. When the existence of Home Intelligence did become public, the reaction was fierce. It was accused of Gestapo techniques and – thanks to the ministerial leadership of Duff Cooper – earned the nickname “Cooper’s Snoopers”.<sup>47</sup> The organisation was however unique, in that for the first time a government had at its disposal a reliable machine for testing public responses to its actions and communications and for gauging the needs of the people. The sophisticated reciprocity of the field and the idea that “public opinion and propaganda mutually limit and influence each other”<sup>48</sup> were being acknowledged.

Moreover, the quality of the results was shown when findings were compared with quantitative surveys on the same topics. Objections even from the Prime Minister were not allowed to stop such vital work. Nevertheless Duff Cooper soon moved on, bitterly noting in his memoirs that “it would be profitless and wearisome to enlarge upon all that was wrong with the Ministry...I left [it] with a sigh of relief.” His central

complaint was that the MoI contained “too few ordinary civil servants in it, and too many brilliant amateurs”.<sup>49</sup> It was this human potpourri that Evelyn Waugh so mercilessly satirised in his 1942 novel, *Put Out More Flags*:

‘You might do worse, you know. We all abuse the old M. of I., but there are a number of quite human people here already, and we are gradually pushing more in every day...’

‘I don’t want to do anything. I think this whole war’s crazy.’

‘You might write a book for us then. I’m getting out a very nice little series on “What We are Fighting For”. I’ve signed up a retired admiral, a Church of England curate, an unemployed docker...and a nose and throat specialist from Harley Street... All our authors had such very different ideas it might have been a little confusing. We could fit you in very nicely...’<sup>50</sup>

Fear and ridicule aside, the results of Home Intelligence’s findings, arguably prompted in 1941 something of a change in the MoI’s approach. Abandoning the patronising bluster of its early campaigns, the MoI gave the people what they wanted: news. Apparently it did not especially matter if the news was good or bad. What mattered was the sense that the government trusted the people enough to be honest with them about how the war – one which the overwhelming majority of the population felt Britain had no choice but to fight – was progressing.<sup>51</sup> There was little need for propaganda along the lines of Great War atrocity stories; the Blitz had brought the brutality of the German war machine to their back gardens. Interestingly, Cooper’s junior minister Harold Nicolson had already expressed views along these lines earlier in 1941 when he confided to his famous diary that “all that the country really wants is some assurance of how victory is to be achieved. They are bored by talks about the righteousness of our cause and our eventual triumph. What they want are facts indicating how we are to beat the Germans.”<sup>52</sup>

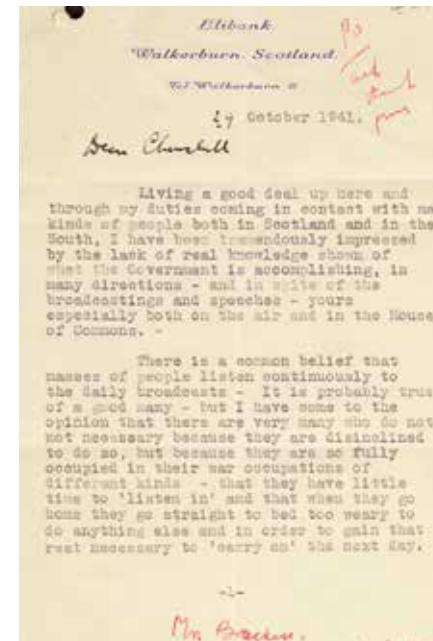




*"It would be profitless and wearisome to enlarge upon all that was wrong with the Ministry" – Duff Cooper, an unhappy Minister of Information, 1940-1941, sits at his desk in Senate House*

The new Minister, Brendan Bracken, was under no illusions about the role. Upon his appointment he described it as "one of the toughest jobs which has ever fallen to the lot of man!" Adding: "I think that in a very short time I shall be joining the happy band of ex-Ministers of Information."<sup>53</sup> He was though described variously as a "man of mystery, a secretive eccentric, a wonderful friend, a freak, perhaps a genius, certainly an expert in the art of make-believe and fantasy."<sup>54</sup> Perhaps this made him the ideal man for the job. In particular his dogged refusal to allow the MoI to be ignored or bypassed – particularly by the armed services – did much to enhance both his and the MoI's reputation.<sup>55</sup>

In the context of news, the British government had at its disposal an instrument of immense power: the BBC. Unlike other state broadcasters of the time and since, the BBC's relationship with the government was semi-detached.

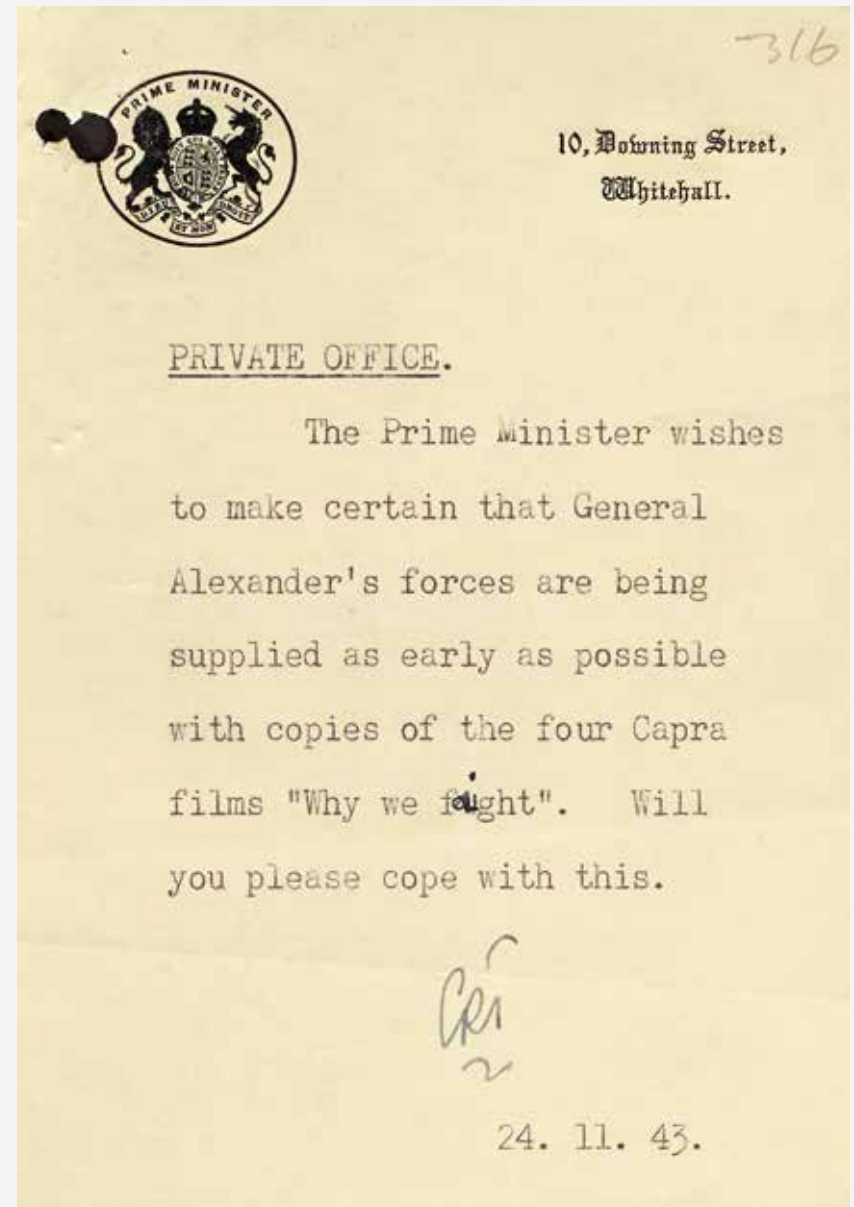


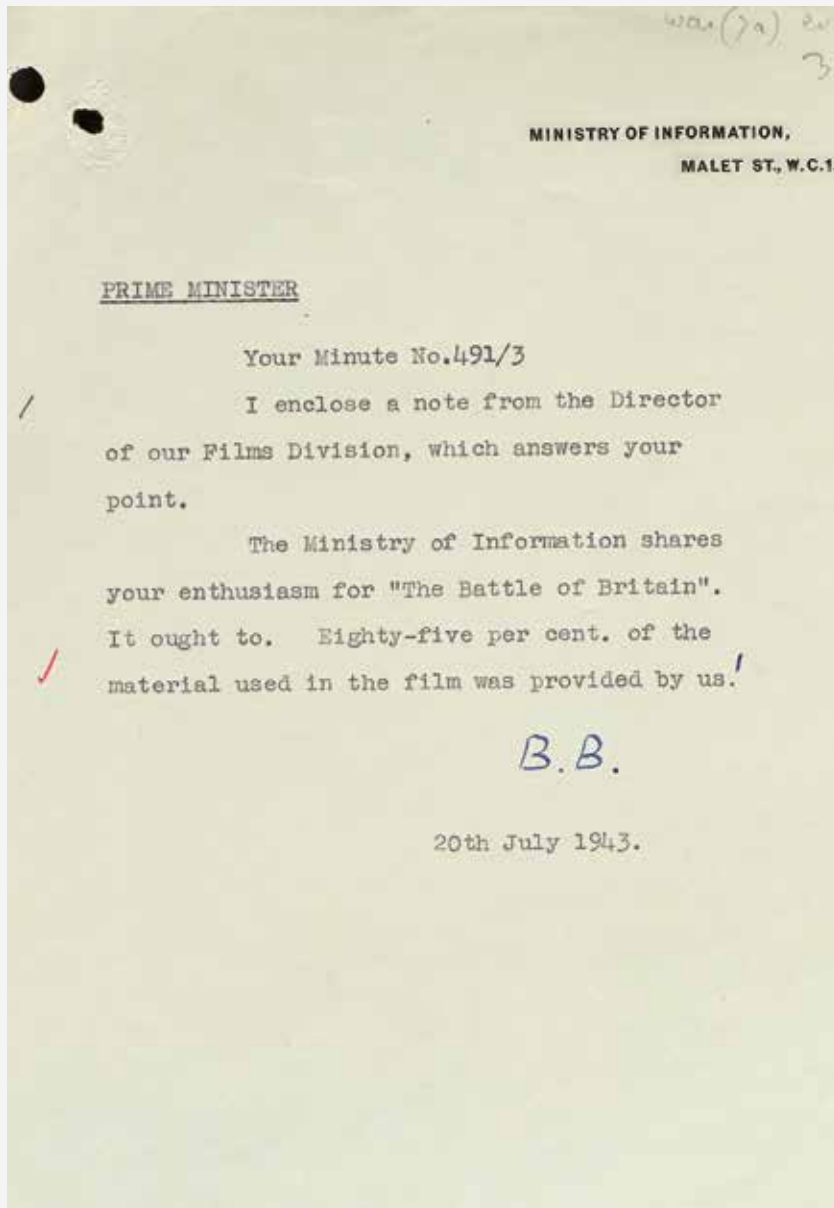
*"Mr Bracken. He is a fool. What do you say." – The Prime Minister demonstrating that in 1941 government communication was yet to become a dialogue with the public<sup>56</sup>*

The government merely appointed governors and a Director-General. During the war the MoI had ultimate oversight of the BBC Home Service, the Foreign Office of overseas broadcasts. In the latter case these were undoubtedly more propagandist in nature but they still avoided lazy sloganeering. In the former case, the BBC theoretically had complete autonomy in the selection and presentation of news on the domestic front. Indeed, that famous dissident George Orwell was in the employ of the BBC between 1941 and 1943 and claimed that he did not feel restricted in his work,<sup>57</sup> even if he did later seem to model the Ministry of Truth in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* on the MoI's Senate House headquarters.<sup>58</sup> If BBC audience research surveys of the time are to be believed though, the light-touch approach was repaid with the public's overwhelming trust.<sup>59</sup>



*“Man of mystery, a secretive eccentric, a wonderful friend, a freak, perhaps a genius, certainly an expert in the art of make-believe and fantasy” – Brendan Bracken, Minister of Information 1941-1945 (front row, second from left) sits with an expectant King George VI in 1941*





*Two examples of correspondence between the Prime Minister and Minister of Information, emphasising the importance placed on the role of film in the war effort<sup>60</sup>*

The sheer scale of the war effort meant a vast increase in the number and range of matters about which the government needed to communicate. By the end of 1941, MoI had the power to approve or block campaigns by individual departments. At this point there were 16 officially-sanctioned MoI campaigns underway – making use of all practical media – ranging from rat destruction to improved health for factory workers. Rising wages and tax increases meant that the number of taxpayers trebled between 1939 to 1945, from 4 million to 12 million. A vast number of people therefore had to be taught how to submit a tax return for the first time. This meant the recruitment of the Inland Revenue's first public relations officer in 1942 – the forerunner of one of the largest parts of government communication ever since. Clothes rationing was another example of how capacity and capability had to be enormously expanded, along with communication planning. To avoid a huge pre-rationing run on clothing supplies, large amounts of advertising space was booked in newspapers over the Whitsun bank holiday weekend in 1941 to give retailers the Sunday and Monday to prepare to ration their offerings.<sup>61</sup>

At this point it is worth sounding a note of caution. Tempting though it is to view the development of the MoI over the course of the war as a two-part story that can be summarised as bungling followed by Brendan Bracken, this is simplistic. Of course there were issues – as noted above – with the country and government adapting to a new kind of total war. Such problems were not uniquely British either. Many similar arguments over the relationship between democracy and propaganda were had in the United States. Arthur Schlesinger – later famous as an adviser and chronicler of the Kennedy Administration – resigned from the Office of War Information in 1943 declaring it to be nothing more than a “glorified advertising agency”.<sup>62</sup> In Britain, the lack of political support that MoI received from both Chamberlain and Churchill did not help.



would be abolished, not whether that would happen. Perhaps surprisingly this was a move fully supported by Brendan Bracken, but with final closure eventually occurring under the new Labour Government in 1946. It was immediately replaced by the Central Office of Information. The MoI had lasted a little over six years. The COI would last for over six decades.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## A POST-WAR CONSENSUS?

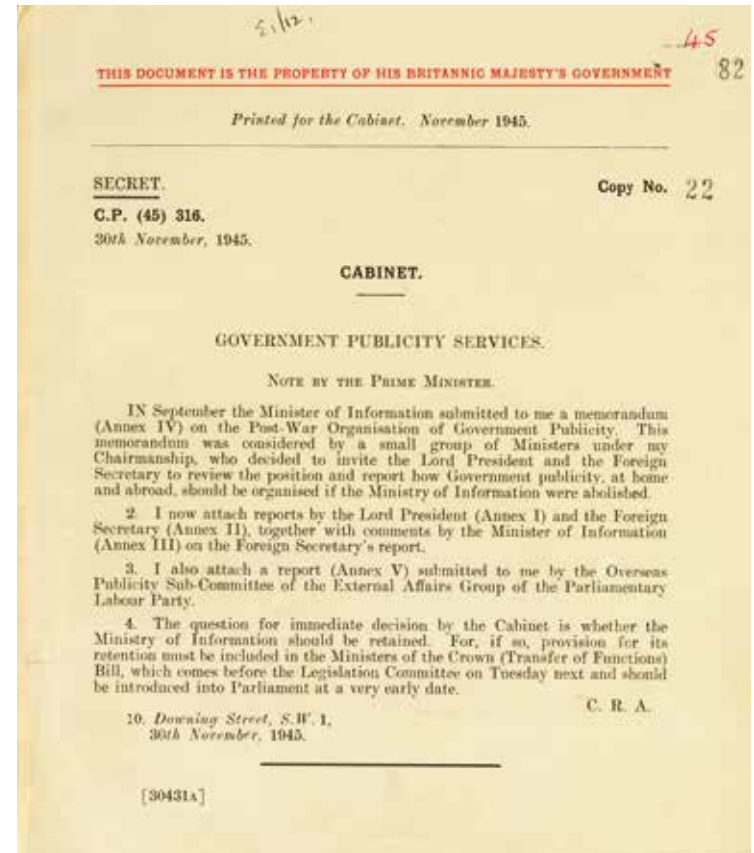
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“A briefing that does not take place in a non-existent room by an invisible man...”

*Michael Cockerell, Peter Hennessy, David Walker: Sources Close to the Prime Minister, 1984*



If the Ministry of Information had been central to winning the War, then the Central Office of Information was a crucial component in winning the peace. This meant educating the population about the challenges and opportunities that a victorious but exhausted Britain faced.



*The new Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, on the post-war reorganisation of the information services, November 1945<sup>67</sup>*

Millions of men and women from the armed services and war industries had to find peacetime occupations, colossal loans had to be repaid and whole cities rebuilt following the Luftwaffe's assault upon them. At the heart of the new Labour government's programme was the creation of the Welfare State, in particular the formation of the National Health Service. The growth of the state then naturally prompted an expansion in its communicative faculties.

To retain the Ministry of Information however would have left the government open to charges of maintaining a propaganda machine in the manner of Germany during the 1930s. Instead a new department, arguably depoliticised by not having a minister at its head, was created to explain the coming great changes to British society: the Central Office of Information. Individual departments retained responsibility for their own publicity but an overarching publicity unit would oversee production. The new centre included poster advertising, exhibitions, photographs, publications and films, plus a central channel for the distribution of government news provided by individual departments. This model would essentially endure into the new millennium.<sup>68</sup>

Communication was by this point a significant financial cost to the government. A key reason for this was of course the increase in the number of personnel. Government communicators numbered in the tens during the 1930s; by 1945 the Ministry of Information employed nearly 7,000 people. With the post-war restructuring numbers fell, but by the late 1940s the COI and information divisions within the various ministries still had around 2,000 staff. Among them was, finally, the first proper Downing Street Press Secretary, Francis Williams.<sup>69</sup> A former editor of the *Daily Herald* and censor at the MoI, Williams thought deeply about the relationship between the press, government and the wider public. In words written in 1946 – but still highly relevant

today – he pondered “the problem of how democracies are to adjust themselves to the great and inevitable increase in the concentration of power in the hands of governments without endangering the personal liberties which democracy exists to sustain”.<sup>70</sup> His appointment is often said to have come about thanks to the new Prime Minister Clement Attlee's distaste for public relations, evident in his laconic manner when confronted by journalists. It is rather amusing then to note that as a young man Attlee had actually been one of the travelling lecturers – mentioned earlier – charged with explaining the 1911 National Insurance Act to the British public.<sup>71</sup>

At this point it is worth pausing the chronological narrative to consider the interlinked roles and institutions of the Downing Street Press Secretary, the Press Office and the Parliamentary Lobby. From the late 1940s onwards these formed a supreme nodal point.<sup>72</sup> The relationship and the Downing Street machine at the heart of it continue to be important to this day, although it is now arguably less prominent within the overall structure of government communication. On one level the Prime Minister's home and office hardly resembles a typical ministry or department. At the same time it is a microcosm of government as a whole. The same could be said of its communicative component. Although the Parliamentary Lobby can be seen to have come of age at the same time as the Downing Street operation was formalised in the early post-war period, it initially came into existence in 1884. This followed the restriction of access to the Members' Lobby of the House of Commons to only those on a special list kept by the Serjeant-at-Arms. Distinct from the straightforward reporting of parliamentary debates, the work of the Lobby correspondents – with their access to the highest levels of government – fostered a culture of exclusivity and secrecy. Even though their quarters within the Palace of Westminster were – and continue to be – a squalid warren of garret-like offices nicknamed the Burma



Road, the members of the Lobby have become an integral part of the institution. Membership gradually broadened out from national newspapers to broadcasters and regional titles. Only however since the 1990s – around the same time that the government officially admitted to the existence of MI5, MI6 and GCHQ – has the system of twice-daily briefings become more open and attributable. Before then it was memorably described in 1984 by the journalists Peter Hennessy, Michael Cockerell and David Walker as “a briefing that does not take place in a non-existent room by an invisible man...When [the journalists] are briefed by Mrs Thatcher’s press secretary, Mr Bernard Ingham, they will never write ‘Bernard Ingham says’. [He] is the deep throat of Westminster.”<sup>73</sup>

Inside the room, the tone of these encounters has always varied day by day and the spokesman’s method is key. Since the 2016 European Referendum the subject of Brexit has lurked beneath the surface of numerous questions, even if the Tuesday morning briefing after Cabinet ostensibly focuses on ministerial discussions of rough sleeping and the impending visit of the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia. Christopher Meyer, in his previously mentioned Harvard paper set out “Ten Commandments for dealing with reporters” that included being accessible, helpful and friendly; avoiding waffle, lies, favouritism and disputes over minor differences of interpretation; taking journalists seriously; making sure that the terms on which a briefing occurs are clear and ensuring ultimately that what is said is newsworthy. But as he now recalls: “With John Major we almost always had our back to the wall, it was a kind of Rorke’s Drift situation with the hacks around you.” This sometimes meant going even further and “deploying every theatrical device to divert their attention and send them off in the wrong direction, keeping them from asking the one thing you didn’t want them to ask. You’d make gurning expressions and behave like John McEnroe, picking

deliberately on one journalist and exclaiming ‘What? You can’t be serious?’ You had to come up with anything. Anything!”

His immediate predecessor, Gus O’Donnell, by contrast favoured a more restrained approach and puts an emphasis on thorough preparation: “When you got the raw material on a policy, quite often civil servants would prepare a Q&A to help with your briefing. These contained really obvious, straightforward questions. They did not test things to death. I didn’t want to see questions asking me about how wonderful the policy was, I wanted to be told what was really wrong with it, what the really killer question was and how to answer it.” Detecting the ‘idiot question’ beforehand and coming up with a response was a crucial skill that had to be honed.<sup>74</sup>

For the current Spokesman, James Slack, preparation and performance continue to play a part in the ritual. In the case of the former, he circulates a list of possible topics to the press office first thing in the morning from which scripts are then prepared. With the latter, there are times “to be quite short with the journalists, on other occasions it helps to be humorous”. Ultimately though, both elements are there to enable you “to be in control. When you’re not, problems arise.” He adds that having been on the other side of the briefings as the political editor of the *Daily Mail*, he knows when the Lobby “is trying to trap me...they hunt as a pack. Where press secretaries come unstuck is under sustained questioning from different journalists, all of whom will be able to spot slightly different nuances and cracks in what the spokesman is saying.”<sup>75</sup>

Slack, O’Donnell and Meyer agree unequivocally on one point though – already highlighted in the latter’s Ten Commandments – a press secretary must never, under any circumstances, lie. Slack comments: “The relationship with the Lobby is built on the fact that they know that I might not always answer the question, but I will never lie to them.” To do so would be to betray their trust and to lose their confidence.

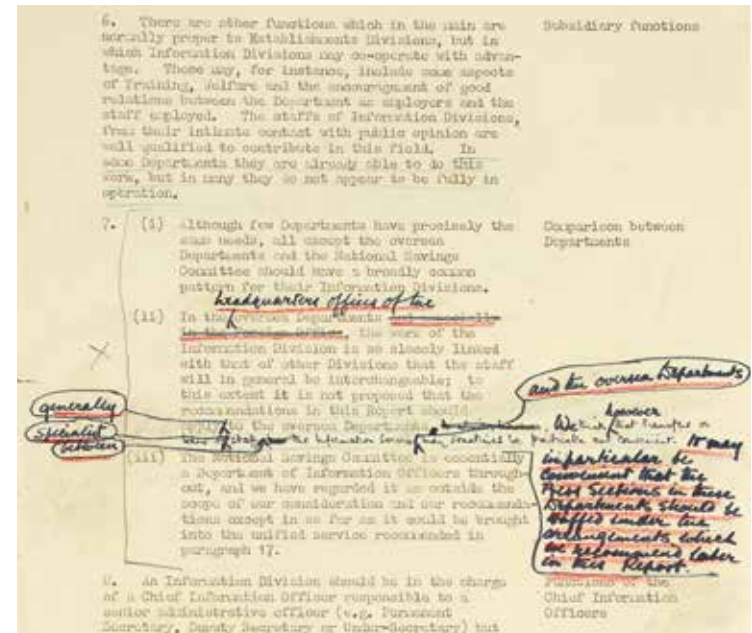
As Christopher Meyer puts it, once that happens, “you’re f\*\*\*\*\*”. Moreover, as O’Donnell points out, “there were lots of times when you couldn’t actually answer certain questions. I was quite fond of saying ‘I don’t know.’”

Not giving the answer the Lobby correspondents want of course comes with its own perils. Michael Crick of Channel 4 News comments that “When a press officer says ‘we’re not giving a running commentary’ or accuses one of asking ‘a hypothetical question’ I always know I’m onto something and think they’re in trouble. They are two of the most idiotic phrases to use.”<sup>76</sup> This vignette gives a sense of what Meyer describes as the “hot breath of the Lobby”, in contrast to the altogether more languid approach of the broadsheet diplomatic editors he had dealt with in the Foreign Office: “Their sense of the jugular was stupendous.” Moreover he – along with O’Donnell and Slack – agrees with Crick’s first point of irritation, as “the role of the spokesman is to give a running commentary”, but he remains firm on refusing to answer hypotheticals. Crick’s producer colleague Robert Hamilton is keen to emphasise that, on the whole, the Lobby do still straightforwardly trust civil servants over political appointees: “We expect that civil servants will tell the truth, that they won’t monkey about with numbers...there is a difference. If they tell you something, they really have told you something. Their way of avoiding embarrassment is just not to tell you at all.”<sup>77</sup>

This expectation of sturdy professionalism certainly still owes something to the 1947 Crombie review, which came about as a result of the immediate peacetime growth in communication staff numbers. There was a realisation that as integral parts of the government machine, communicators needed clearer definitions of their roles. Under the chairmanship of Treasury mandarin Sir James Crombie the duties of Information Officers, their pay and conditions and also how they might be recruited were set out. Their responsibilities at this stage were

seen as going beyond ordinary press work. Indeed they were expected to “create and maintain an informed public opinion: to use methods of publicity to help a department to achieve its purpose, e.g. the Ministry of Food to lead people to eat foods readily available and dietetically beneficial; to advise departments on the reaction of the public to a policy present or contemplated and to assist and advise in all matters bearing on the relationship between department and the public.”<sup>78</sup>

The early years of the COI however were far from a success. On the one hand concerns began to be raised over the impartiality of the government information services.<sup>79</sup> On the other, in spite of experience gleaned in the war, the COI actually seemed to be lacking in competence, or at the very least common sense.



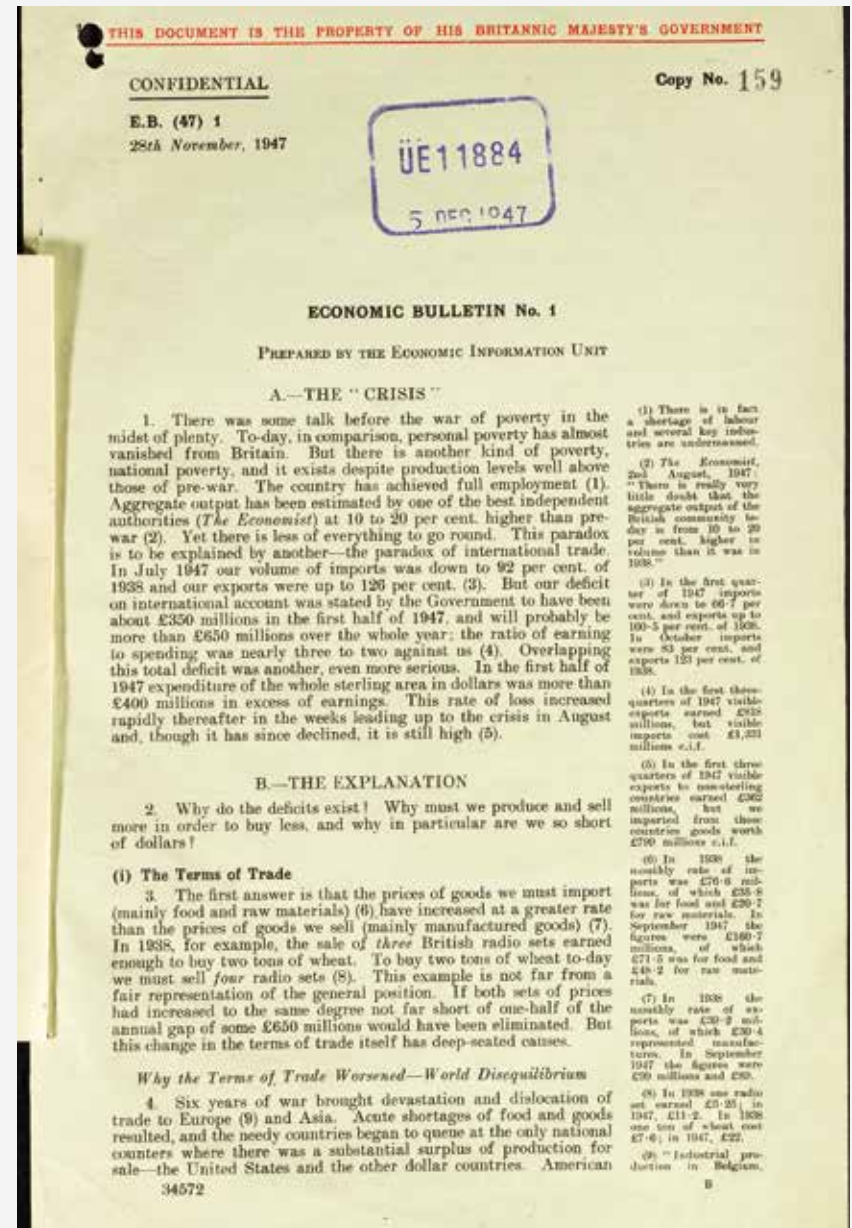
Notes from the Crombie Committee, 1947<sup>80</sup>

Most notoriously, the ‘Prosperity Campaign’ of 1946-7 was an indigestible attempt to educate the population in Keynesian economic policy.<sup>81</sup> Pressure grew to switch from simply informing the public to explicitly trying to strategically influence public opinion. The result in 1947 was the Treasury’s Economic Information Unit, staffed by journalists, advertising professionals and seasoned government press advisers. Information gathering along the lines of Home Intelligence began once more, messages were targeted at specific audiences and a series of ministerial briefing papers were produced for use during broadcasts and press conferences. The unit’s success showed once more that thorough research and the input of professional communicators made a vital difference to the government’s campaigns.<sup>82</sup>

Visually, though, much of what the new Central Office of Information produced for the rest of the 1940s continued to have a distinctly wartime flavour. As noted above, winning the peace in advertising terms meant conveying to the public how they would benefit from the government’s welfare reforms, but also warning of what they would still have to endure, owing to the country’s precarious economic situation.

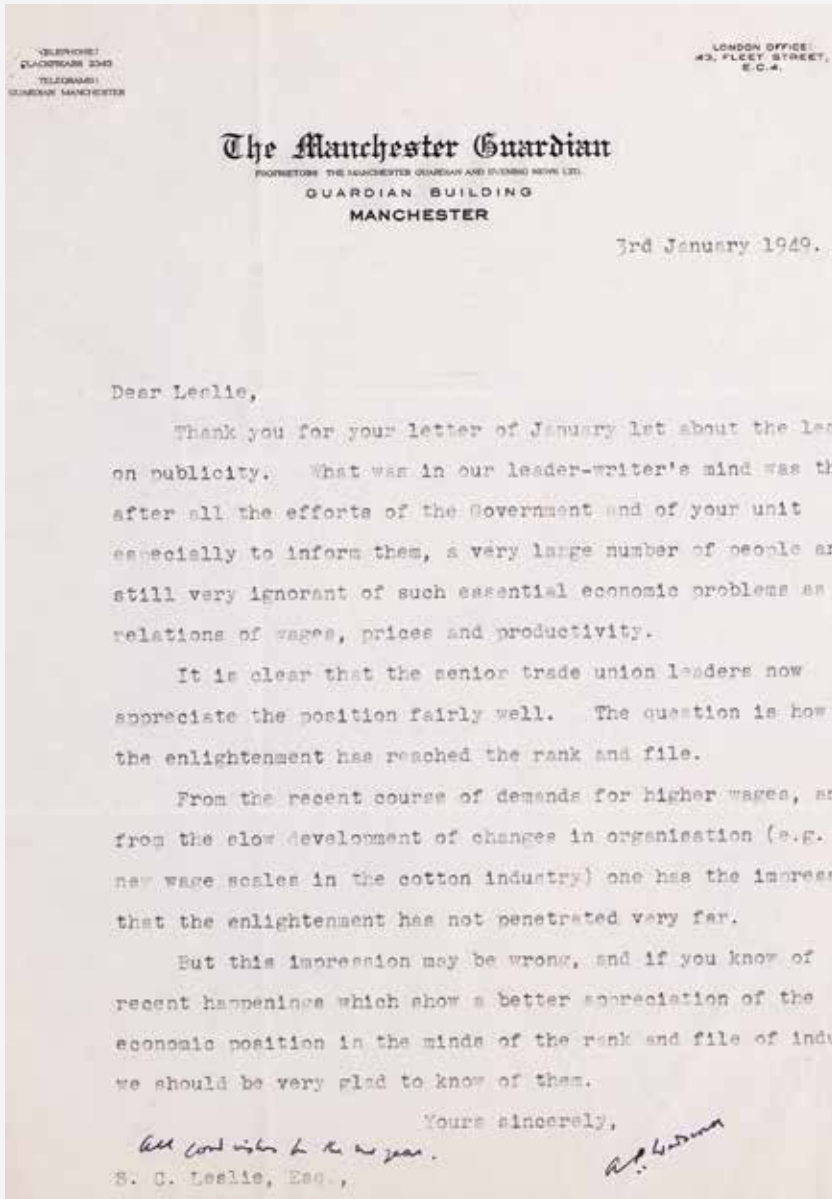


*Report on the formation and functions of the Economic Information Unit, November 1947<sup>83</sup>*



*The first bulletin of the Economic Information Unit, 28 November 1947<sup>84</sup>*





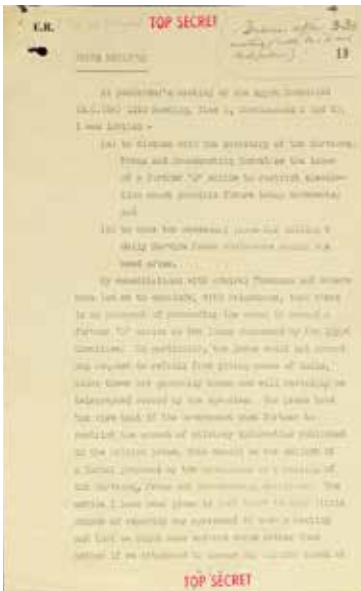
*The editor of the Guardian, AP Wadsworth offers a critical view of the Economic Information Unit, January 1949<sup>85</sup>*

Film was central to this and in the likes of *Export or Die* (1946) and *Choose Your Doctor* (1948) vital information was expressed with clarity, stark messages about an imbalance of trade delivered via a humorous cartoon and the complexities of registering with a new NHS GP communicated in a simple, friendly manner. Technological developments – and a decrease in Received Pronunciation accented narrations – aside, many of the central principles of these public information campaigns have endured. Indeed, memorable slogans from the 1940s like ‘Coughs and sneezes spread diseases’ continue to resonate and many of the public health and safety campaigns of 1960s, 1970s and 1980s followed suit in this respect.

When the Conservatives returned to government in 1951 it was with the intention of narrowing the reach of the state. Most demonstrably rationing was abolished, but the future of the COI and the information services also came into question. The often-cited consensus between the two main parties did not seem to extend into the sphere of communication. There were cuts in publicity expenditure and individual job losses but in the end the communication structure remained largely unchanged. The famous Crown Film Unit was also disbanded, but this was in fact on the recommendation of the French Committee Report of 1949, set up by the Labour government.<sup>86</sup>

By 1954, the government was spending less than a third of the sum on communications that the Labour government had done. Lord Drogheda’s report of that year into British projection overseas concluded that not enough was being spent.<sup>87</sup> It was a warning note that largely went unheeded and it would take another war – in this case the Suez Crisis of 1956 – for the government to once again realise the value of a properly resourced communication machine. Indeed in military terms, Britain’s bid to seize back control of the canal from the Egyptians was a success. How then did it acquire a reputation as the war that finally killed the British Empire? Colonel

Nasser’s nationalisation earlier in the year was regarded across the globe as a scandalous act. But the considerable sympathy initially directed towards Britain was later seemingly wasted – Anthony Eden’s transparently covert machinations with Israel and France apart – thanks to a disastrous communication strategy. Ministers kept civil servants in the dark much of the time, in turn there was a four day media blackout from the government and thereafter politicians and officials failed to co-ordinate the information emerging from the various departments involved.<sup>88</sup>



Two memos on press restrictions and publicity arrangements during the Suez Crisis, November 1956<sup>89</sup>

# CHAPTER FIVE

## THE WINDS OF CHANGE

“I still believe strongly that our job is to be behind the camera, not in front of it.”

*Neville Taylor, Director General of the COI and Head of the Government Information Service, 1985-1988*



**W**ith Eden's resignation and Harold Macmillan's ascent to the premiership, communication edged towards its current position in the government machine. At the apex, the new Prime Minister was arguably the first holder of that office to realise the power that came with engaging television directly in a meaningful way. More prosaically, the proposals set out in the 1957 White Paper on Information Services resulted in both higher expenditure across the divisions and greater co-ordination at home and abroad, including weekly meetings of departmental Chief Information Officers chaired by a co-ordinating minister.<sup>90</sup>



*The first real TV PM – Harold Macmillan relaxes in the spotlight with his wife, 1959*

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Neville Taylor, who would rise to become both Director General of the COI and head of the Government Information Service (GIS) in the 1980s, recalls joining the Admiralty around this time as an Assistant Information Officer: “It was a very lowly grade, but it was my introduction to the Civil Service.” He agrees that there was a very clear divide between press and policy people in the department, but characterising information officers as merely rough and ready former hacks who had changed sides would be incorrect. His first mentor, Henry James – “an urbane man who got on with everybody” – and subsequently the likes of Philip Moore and John Groves – both heads of public relations at the Ministry of Defence, the former going on to become Private Secretary to the Queen – were civil servants of both great style and substance. Among many other things they taught Taylor how to translate officialese into a language that could be understood by the general public, an eternal duty of the government communicator. The 1960s and 1970s were also a period when cabinet ministers were far more likely to be household names than they are today. Working under the likes of Denis Healey at the Ministry of Defence and Anthony Crosland at Environment, Taylor found himself in the presence of “inspirational” intellectual heavyweights who were themselves natural communicators. In private with the former, this often ran to jocular abuse as Taylor prepared him for press conferences, testing him with tricky questions. “You’re a bloody bastard!” was a particularly favoured exclamation of the Defence Secretary. With such colourful political bosses prowling the corridors of power in those decades, it was perhaps easier for press officers to avoid the limelight, aided by the fact that as Taylor remembers: “We used to have fines. If somebody ended up being photographed with a minister, they owed us a pint or a brandy. I still believe strongly that our job is to be behind the camera, not in front of it.”<sup>91</sup>

For all of the progressive legislation and shifts in social attitudes that characterised the 1960s, much remained unchanged in Whitehall. Certainly Harold Wilson’s assumption of the premiership meant that the political head of the Civil Service was now a true meritocrat, but women in particular continued to work on the margins. Indeed until 1973, female members of the Diplomatic Service were obliged to resign upon marriage. Into this world stepped the likes of Barbara Hosking and Romola Christopherson, pioneers of a sort who would both work in the Downing Street Press Office. The former would eventually leave the Civil Service in 1977 to become Director of Information at the Independent Broadcasting Authority; the latter served seven Secretaries of State as the Department of Health’s Director of Information. Here she dealt with government communication on AIDS, Salmonella and BSE – as well as the minor scandal of her being photographed by a newspaper puffing on a cigarette outside the office – until her retirement in 1999.<sup>92</sup>

Hosking was acutely aware that when she joined the service, both her gender and role in information meant that she was “below the salt” in the eyes of some traditionalists. Having risen though to the rank of ministerial private secretary via the Downing Street Press Office, she is without rancour and full of praise for the institution: “It is a Rolls Royce machine. The politicians are learner drivers.” Moreover she argues that contrary to many popular depictions, “They don’t look to see whether you have a double First from Balliol. They think: ‘Can she do the job? Has she got good sense? Can she do the next job?’ At its best the Civil Service is most pragmatic.” It did take time though to build a relationship with Edward Heath. In contrast to the personable Harold Wilson, small talk was not his strong suit. As Hosking puts it, “At first he used to call me ‘Press’. It was a year until he called me Barbara.” Eventually though they developed a rapport over the European



*“Public policy and public relations cannot be separated” – Fife Clark, the longtime Director General of the COI from 1954-1971*

issue, thanks in part to Hosking’s willingness to be blunt in meetings while helping herself to his sherry. Her presentational common sense no doubt also added to her stature in the Prime Minister’s eyes. The 1972 Munich Olympics had been blighted by the murder of 11 Israeli athletes by the Black September terrorist group. Heath – visiting for the sailing – avoided huge media embarrassment thanks to Hosking personally informing him of a quayside memorial service that was due to take place the next day.

When she had mentioned the event earlier to one of his senior policy officials, he had refused to pass on the message and told her that the Prime Minister was too tired to attend.

Hosking’s recollections illustrate the ways in which certain elements of work culture have changed significantly since the days when she was a press officer; and yet they also show how the seeds of practices we think of as 1990s innovations has already been sown. On the one hand she notes that “The heavy drinking days are over. Back then nothing in politics worked without a drink.” On the other hand, when she worked in the Cabinet Office as Private Secretary to

Geoffrey Johnson-Smith – the Conservative junior minister responsible for the co-ordination of government information between 1972 and 1974 – they would compile each week “an agenda of forthcoming attractions and ensure there weren’t clashes”. Arguably this anticipated ‘the grid’ introduced by Labour after 1997: a spreadsheet which laid out day by day the timing of policy announcements across government.<sup>93</sup>

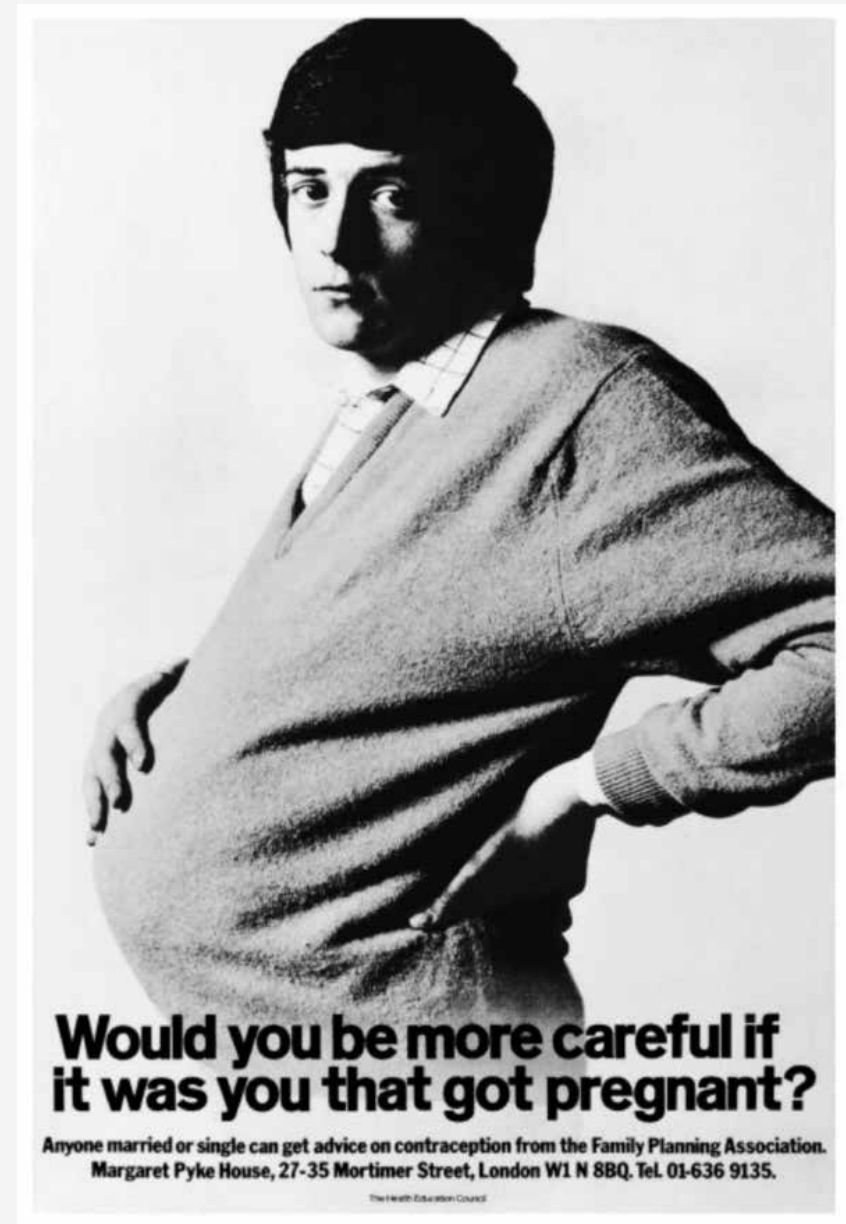
Also in this period the COI was growing in influence, not only as the central distributor of press releases and other vital information to the likes of Parliament, Fleet Street and the BBC, but also as an intermediary between the individual departmental communication teams in the GIS and the private sector. It provided advice on procurement – such as purchasing advertising space – and on various technical matters. Fife Clark – Director General from 1954 until 1971 – sought to define the department’s purpose in strikingly modern terms when he argued that “public policy and public relations cannot be separated”.<sup>94</sup> In many ways this remained a mere aspiration, but over the decades the COI undoubtedly masterminded numerous iconic – and often controversial – campaigns and earned a fearsome reputation as a client, with advertising agencies conscious of the prestige that a commission carried.

With Britain firmly in the grip of the television age, key developments included well-known personalities fronting campaigns and in some cases the use of quite shocking imagery to hammer messages home. Campaigns sought to address the likes of drink driving, drug taking, the dangers of smoking, road safety, general crime prevention, rabies awareness, safety at sea and near water, the danger of strangers to children, accidental fire prevention and the promotion of blood donation. These brought public information films such as the Tufty Club, Charley Says and the Green Cross Code into living rooms across the country, often appealing to children. However, perhaps one of the most iconic

campaigns since the war was the ‘Pregnant Man’ of 1970, commissioned from Cramer Saatchi, later Saatchi & Saatchi. It was regarded at the time to have pushed accepted boundaries, its shock value derived from the mundanity of the rather glum man pictured – who just happened to also be heavily pregnant. This style owed much to the design of earlier anti-smoking adverts produced by the consultancy, one of which featured a tar yellowed hand being scrubbed with a nailbrush and carrying the caption ‘You can’t scrub your lungs clean.’<sup>95</sup>

Throughout this period, increasingly in-depth evaluation of government advertising expanded, on more than one occasion turning up unwanted findings. A particular example was the response to the road safety campaigns of the late 1960s. The figures for incorrect overtaking, drink driving and the non-wearing of seatbelts showed little in the way of downward movement and in some instances they actually increased.<sup>96</sup> Critics pointed to this as evidence of the futility of such campaigns and with the advent of Margaret Thatcher, expenditure on advertising looked set to be slashed.

*Darth Vader to the rescue? Before finding fame as one of cinema’s great villains in Star Wars, David Prowse was the friendly superhero Green Cross Man, warning the children of 1970s Britain about the dangers of the road*



*1970s shock tactics – Saatchi & Saatchi tackle unwanted pregnancy*



**You can't scrub  
your lungs clean.**



**Lung cancer kills ten times more smokers  
than non-smokers.**



The Health Education Council is a registered charity.

*1970s shock tactics – Saatchi & Saatchi tackle the risks of smoking*

## CHAPTER SIX

### COMMUNI- CATION UNDER THATCHER AND MAJOR

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“The Downing Street Press Secretary’s authority over the other press secretaries in Whitehall is precisely linked to the authority the Prime Minister has over his or her cabinet.”

*Christopher Meyer,  
Downing Street Press  
Secretary, 1993–1996*



When the Conservatives returned to power in 1979, cutting costs was high on their list of priorities. The information services were not to be spared as far as the new government was concerned. 1982 would however bring both a warning and demonstration of the importance of the government's communication machinery in the form of the Falklands War. With Britain's international credibility suddenly on the line, the government resorted to heavy censorship. This was very much the doing of the Ministry of Defence and was a source of disagreement with Downing Street as the war progressed. Indeed the Prime Minister's Press Secretary at the time, Bernard Ingham, was "convinced that the MOD had gone barmy". The department's Permanent Secretary Frank Cooper was apparently hostile to Ingham, and the Defence Secretary John Nott was very attached to his own acting Director of Public Relations Ian McDonald – a career civil servant with no media experience – who was expected to brief the press on camera. His "Dalek-type delivery" might have satisfied the military top-brass but it did nothing to reassure professional communicators within the government, the press or indeed the public.<sup>97</sup> A lack of co-ordination, symptomatic of Number 10's less than absolute control of the communication apparatus – rivalled as it was by a massive, powerful department and its concomitant institutions in the form of the Army, Navy and Air Force – was particularly concerning. By the time of the Argentine surrender, things had improved, but the media operation as a whole left a lot to be desired.<sup>98</sup>

This may come as a surprise to many, considering the fearsome reputation Bernard Ingham had acquired by the time of his retirement in 1990. For Christopher Meyer, he was "the greatest press secretary in the universe and my mentor". Meyer describes how when he was the Foreign Office spokesman and Ingham was at Number 10 they would travel to international

summits. Briefing the press together during these was an excellent apprenticeship for the younger man. In particular he recalls the skill with which the Downing Street Press Secretary would deal with the questions of tabloid journalists. At one economic meeting, a member of the press asked: “Who we gonna shaft today?” To which Ingham replied: “Better bloody not be the Prime Minister!” Nervously giggling, Meyer added: “Oh please, not [the Foreign Secretary] Geoffrey Howe.” As a result, “they shafted the Chancellor, Nigel Lawson”.

These performances seem to have owed something to northern music halls and working men’s clubs, no doubt enhanced by the main act’s pairing of a distinctive Yorkshire accent with eyebrows to rival those of Denis Healey and Leonid Brezhnev. But as former Cabinet Secretary Robin Butler remembers, the blunt theatricality was matched by



*His master’s voice – Downing Street Press Secretary Bernard Ingham guards the Prime Minister’s flank, mid-1980s*

the Press Secretary’s conscientiousness, again in evidence on overseas trips: “When we [the policy officials] had all gone to bed, Bernard would stay up in order to keep the press informed so that they could send their stories back to London. And I think that was hugely appreciated by them.”<sup>99</sup> Ingham seemed to bridge the gap between professions and disciplines. He has himself written of how he sought to “brief the Lobby as often as I could myself [and] maintain a dialogue...on a basis of mutual respect. I recognised that they had a job to do.” For Butler he “looked at his job from the point of view of a professional media person – what did the media want? He regarded himself – within the bounds of being a civil servant – as also being the servant of the media.” Again Ingham, in his own words, tried to “be as open as [he] could with the media”<sup>100</sup> while also representing their views to the Prime Minister, ministers and senior policy officials. As he saw it though – and to return to a common theme – many of these officials displayed “massive ignorance, prejudice and defensiveness” towards the press, regarding members of the GIS as “mere mechanics”.<sup>101</sup>

Sections of the press though did not see Ingham as sympathetic to their craft – quite the opposite. Christopher Hitchens – aside from describing him as a “bulldog-visaged, anti-intellectual, aggressive, insecure, class-conscious reactionary tyke” – levels a number of charges at the Press Secretary. For one, the journalist argues that “during his time in office, Fleet Street took several steps towards an American system of Presidentially-managed coverage and sound-bite deference”. Likewise, a “simple blackmail” of correspondents, where privileged access was traded in return for docility – after all “who wants yesterday’s papers?” – was connected to a system of leaking that Hitchens alleges Ingham fashioned into “a prime ministerial, taxpayer-supported state monopoly”. Hyperbole aside, it is difficult to regard the likes of ‘sources close to the Prime Minister’ declaring the Leader of the House

CONFIDENTIAL

FALKLAND ISLANDS: FINAL POSITION

NOTE TO PRESS OFFICERS

1. The Government is publishing today the Final British Position Paper handed to the Secretary-General by Sir A Parsons on 18 May. The following notes are designed to explain and commend the paper.

SCR 502

2. The starting point is SCR 502. On 1 April the President of the Security Council formally appealed to Argentina not to invade the Falkland Islands. President Reagan appealed direct to General Galtieri. On 2 April they invaded. On 3 April SCR 502 demanded an immediate withdrawal of all Argentine forces from the Islands. The same day they took South Georgia.

3. SCR 502 was mandatory. It determined that Argentina had breached international peace and security, and laid upon them the international legal obligation to withdraw. Instead, they have massively built up their occupying forces.

4. In these circumstances Article 51 of the Charter gives Britain the unquestionable right to expel the invaders by force. We have made clear throughout that we would exercise that right if we had to, but that our highest priority was to achieve a negotiated settlement if that was humanly possible.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

5. Our approach has been governed by certain general principles:  
(a) Law. International law must be upheld. SCR 502 must be implemented. Aggression must not be rewarded or small countries all over the

Private Secretary  
c.c. PS/Mr Hurd  
PS/PUS  
Mr Giffard  
Mr Ure  
S&M Emergency Unit

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SECRETARY OF STATE'S PUBLIC STATEMENTS: THE FALKLAND ISLANDS

1. We have received innumerable requests to interview Mr Pym on television, radio and in the press. The current list is attached (but will no doubt be out of date before it reaches you).

2. As a first step we have arranged a photocall at 3.00 p.m. today to show the Secretary of State visibly in charge.

3. I suggest that our strategy over the next few days should be built upon Mr Pym's opening speech in the House of Commons debate tomorrow, 7 April. In this speech - and accompanying briefing - we shall try to demonstrate the continuity of ~~the~~ policy while drawing a line under the recriminations of the immediate past and stressing, under new management, our quiet determination and at the same time our constructive diplomatic approach to the problems of the next few weeks. With this in mind, I recommend that the speech should be followed by interviews in the late afternoon with BBC TV, ITN, BBC Radio 4, IRN, and BBC Overseas Service <sup>and 501 Radio</sup>. These will serve to give maximum impact to the message in the speech itself. They could be conducted either in the FCO or, if Mr Pym prefers, in the Norman Shaw studios.

4. Precise recommendations for the follow up will depend a little on how it goes tomorrow. The Secretary of State will not wish to place himself at the beck and call of the media; rather he should hold himself in reserve for major occasions.

of Commons, John Biffen, to be a “semi-detached member of the cabinet”, or the leaking of a letter calculated to damage the Defence Secretary Michael Heseltine during the Westland affair, as particularly edifying behaviour.<sup>103</sup> That this occurred at a time when the Lobby system’s existence was still not acknowledged can only be seen as an aggravating factor. It is reasonable to assume though – putting the conventions of cabinet government and collective responsibility aside – that such singular, pugnacious devotion to the Prime Minister alone was central to the bond that Ingham and Thatcher developed.

As her trust in him grew, so did his influence and his uncanny ability to divine her views. “He could give them Margaret Thatcher’s line without having to ask Margaret Thatcher” says Robin Butler. This was perhaps less difficult in her particular case, given that she was a leader with strident principles. The Press Secretary’s power was also arguably augmented by the fact that he served a Prime Minister with a single-minded determination to drive through policy, who was not especially interested in the intricacies of communication and often had to be forced to read news stories relating to her own government.

At the same time Robert Armstrong – who was Secretary to the Cabinet for much of the time Ingham was at Number 10 – emphasises how the Press Secretary did not second-guess the Prime Minister’s views for the sport of it. With twice daily Lobby briefings, such instinct was a necessity. As Armstrong recalls, “He would either have to fudge it, or he would know enough to give an answer, but not necessarily one he had been able to clear beforehand with the Private Office or the Prime Minister herself. There is no doubt Bernard walked the tightrope with panache and she trusted him.” His willingness to perform on the high wire can be seen as evidence – as Butler points out – of his commitment to give the correspondents something to write about; but for Armstrong it is also evidence

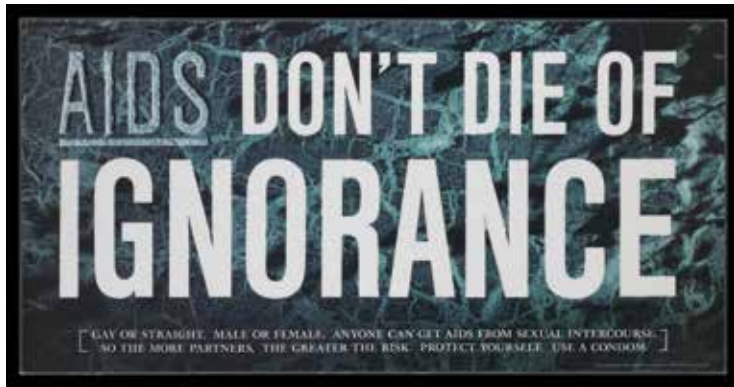
of Ingham being “acutely conscious of the political side of his work”. This notion of selling the government’s line was for the earlier Cabinet Secretary “a rather different approach to that of Mr Heath’s Press Secretary Donald Maitland”.<sup>104</sup>

Indeed Ingham’s predecessor as head of the GIS, Neville Taylor, believes he “got very close to becoming a spin doctor” and Barbara Hosking argues that “by the end Bernard had become a passionate and committed defender of Margaret Thatcher”. This is certainly a popular perception, but Armstrong is convinced that such a view owes more to shared chronology rather than ideology: “Bernard admired her very much, but I don’t think he ever became a Thatcherite.” Rather, because both Prime Minister and Press Secretary served in their respective roles for a very long time by modern standards, there was a conflation in the minds of the press and public. As a comparison, many senior policy officials of the period discharged their duties with similar vigour. Had they not been personally inclined and professionally obliged to be camera shy, they might also have come in for similar criticism. It is also worth noting that before he joined the Civil Service, ‘Thatcher’s Rottweiler’ had in fact been a member of the Labour Party and there is general agreement among senior mandarins that had Tony Benn – Ingham’s former boss at the Department of Energy and Mrs Thatcher’s polar opposite – ended up as Prime Minister, he would have served him just as fiercely.

Nevertheless, when he succeeded him as Press Secretary in 1990, Gus O’Donnell made the conscious decision to adopt a more low-key style than Ingham: “Bernard had been a big story and to this day is a big story.” That it apparently took the Lobby some time to adapt to the new regime is testament to the distinctive way in which he ruled the roost for over a decade.

In the realm of advertising, the 1980s would also see shock tactics – of the type pioneered in the anti-smoking and





*A 1986 poster from the, AIDS: Don't die of ignorance, campaign. The apocalyptic nature of the accompanying television advert is difficult to convey on paper*

unwanted pregnancy campaigns of the preceding decades – reaching their apotheosis in agency TBWA's 'AIDS: Don't die of ignorance' campaign of 1986. In particular the television advert that was central to it – was unashamedly apocalyptic. At a time when contracting the illness was effectively a death sentence, the government and in particular the Health Secretary Norman Fowler regarded such tactics – and the substantial expenditure that went with it – as justified, especially when subsequently the number of new cases decreased.<sup>105</sup> Indeed by 2009 the UN Programme on HIV/AIDS estimated that there were 85,000 people living with the condition in the UK. In France, where there had been no comparable public health campaign in the 1980s, the number was thought to be around 150,000.<sup>106</sup>

Ironically the Thatcher government's commitment to privatisation meant that ambitions to curb government expenditure on advertising were put to one side as the COI set about commissioning campaigns to advertise the sale of shares to the general public. With the 1986 sell-off of British Gas,

adverts with the tag line 'If you see Sid, tell him' hit television screens. They perfectly encapsulated the Prime Minister's own vision of popular capitalism, where the average citizen was also a shareholder and discussion of the markets was a suitable topic of conversation down the pub. The campaign masterminded by Young & Rubicam cost the taxpayer £159 million. Expensive though this might seem, in advertising terms it was a roaring success when 4.5 million people applied for shares.<sup>107</sup> Other privatisations also proved popular but sometimes the tone of the advertising drew criticism. Electricity privatisation in 1990 for instance saw a lavish campaign fronted by Frankenstein's monster and other assorted ghouls that was condemned as "disgusting" in the House of Commons for appearing to trivialise the sale of national assets.<sup>108</sup> Such are the ever-present perils of using humour in advertising.

When John Major moved from Number 11 to Number 10 Downing Street at the end of 1990 he brought his Treasury Press Secretary with him. Gus O'Donnell's time as the Prime Minister's Spokesman was notable in that the operation of the Lobby became somewhat more straightforward: "When I joined Number 10, I inherited a situation where the *Guardian* and *Independent* weren't part of the Lobby. It was rather more opaque than I would have liked it to be. It was possible to make incremental changes and my number one priority was to get everyone back in." In this O'Donnell was successful. It meant an end to "briefing favourites at night and slipping them exclusives" and greater transparency in terms of journalists directly attributing information to Downing Street. His background as an economist meant he had an abiding belief in the principle of fair markets – "at the Treasury we were particularly scrupulous about statistics being available to everyone at the same time, no insider trading" – and so he sought to do the same with information more generally.<sup>109</sup>

However, the wider health of a government also plays



a huge part in determining how difficult a communicator's job will be. As the Major government limped on in the mid-1990s – its economic credibility tarnished by Black Wednesday and the Conservative Party at war with itself over Europe – leaks abounded. For O'Donnell's successor Christopher Meyer they were "a sign of demoralisation and lack of discipline". Moreover he argues that: "The Downing Street Press Secretary's authority over the other press secretaries in Whitehall is precisely linked to the authority the Prime Minister has over his or her cabinet." A weak Prime Minister makes for leaky colleagues. Worst of all, "There is nothing you can do about it. I could point the finger at people who I thought were leaking, but I couldn't ring up Ken Clarke or Michael Portillo and say 'oi that's from you, isn't it?'" All the Press Secretary really can do is push on with the official agenda, even if this on occasion feels like sailing into the wind. The incumbent, James Slack takes the attitude that leaks are best ignored, and O'Donnell stresses that they are often light on consequential or new information. The splits in John Major's cabinet over Europe for instance were common knowledge, but the leaks and counter-leaks continued regardless. Whether the Prime Minister famously calling members of the cabinet "bastards" – in conversation with Michael Brunson of ITN, unaware that his microphone was still on – counts as one of these is open to debate.

Demoralisation at the top though is often as much a consequence of such activity as it is a cause. Dangerously it can lead to a lack of clear direction from the Prime Minister which in turn leads to further leaking and so the cycle continues ever downwards. The Downing Street Press Secretary can suffer as a result of this, reduced to bluffing his way through briefings and subject to his boss's ire when things fail to improve. Meyer remembers one occasion where he had to brief the press on a European issue which was being interpreted differently by various members of the cabinet. In attempting to reconcile

the assorted positions, he ended up satisfying no one: "The next day Portillo was enraged and I remember Major saying 'What the f\*\*\* did you think you were saying?'" The cause and effect of this explosive frustration were bouts of timidity, often manifested after Prime Minister's Questions. "The Prime Minister could often be found in his room, head in his hands. You'd say, 'What do you want me to say about your answer to x?' and he'd reply 'Did I say that? Oh dear, you'll think of something.' You were then forced to think on your feet." In another particularly extreme example, he found himself having to announce John Major's intention to veto the appointment of Belgian Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene as President of the European Commission, before Major had definitely made up his mind. Dangerously, diffidence and indecision has the potential to infect the spokesman. "I would sometimes wake up in the night and something would rise to the surface and I'd think 'S\*\*\*, I shouldn't have said that,'" recalls Meyer. Ultimately then, without clear direction from the Prime Minister, his or her spokesman is sunk.



*Prime Minister John Major visits the Press Association with Christopher Meyer (standing, far left), his Press Secretary 1993–1996*

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## NEW LABOUR, NEW METHODS

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“I don’t think a civil servant could have done my job. It was as much about shaping the narrative as communicating it.”

*Alastair Campbell, Downing Street Press Secretary and Director of Communications and Strategy, 1997-2003*

When New Labour entered government in 1997, they were determined to ensure that Downing Street's grip upon the communication machine would be total. Greater emphasis was given to actively setting the agenda in the press, rather than merely reacting to events and inquiries. Perhaps the most famous example of this was the introduction of 'the grid'. The advent of the internet, social media and rolling news coverage would arguably make such an approach unavoidable. With this in mind, another important issue that needed to be addressed was the persistent epistemic distance between government communication and policy. Although communicators were no longer treated by policy mandarins with contempt, or as an afterthought – as they had been in previous decades – anything resembling a fusion was still some way off.<sup>110</sup> Simon Wren – now Director of Communications at the Foreign Office – began his Civil Service career in policy at the Ministry of Defence. When he crossed the divide to become the MOD's chief press officer in the year 2000, he was "a bit shocked by how little the press office knew about defence and about what the department was doing. They only knew the bits which had been in the papers." Likewise, other civil servants mistrustful of their communicator colleagues sometimes had to be reminded that there was "a difference between talking to the press and talking to the press office". In attempting to reconcile the two worlds, Wren sought to ensure that people hired from outside government were initially "deeply immersed in the department". Even experienced communicators "needed to not only be an expert in dealing with the media, but also in the policies the department was trying to implement". In practice this involved spending time outside of the press office, speaking directly with policy people and building an understanding with them. As Wren puts it: "Looking back on my own career, I

would have been a much better policy official if I'd had a spell in the press office."<sup>111</sup>

Reaching a synthesis across government continues to be a challenge. Former head of the Civil Service Gus O'Donnell is also keen to emphasise communicators "really getting policy, understanding the plusses and minuses, not being superficial about it". However, being able to "translate a policy into something memorable, turning it into a story" is also key. This is hardly a surprising opinion given that O'Donnell served in both policy and presentational roles during his Civil Service career. Although like Christopher Meyer he was a policy official before he was a press secretary – and so had no formal training – a background as an academic economist meant he had come to appreciate the importance of "distilling complicated things". He recalls a test for Downing Street press office staff along the lines of giving them a story and asking them "What's the headline on that? What's the one message you'd want to get across?" More generally "Government Information Service people were very good at distilling things. Some policy people had the skill, some were completely hopeless – they couldn't summarise in ten pages, let alone one." O'Donnell also stresses "understanding the medium you are operating through. What works for newspapers? What works on television? And now, how to approach the internet and social media." Moreover, in agreeing that a greater interchange of those working in policy and those in presentation would be desirable, he argues that this would be of as much benefit to those ultimately formulating policy as to those seeking to add depth to their presentation of it. As he puts it – giving the example of the poll tax – "People ought to have said 'Let's look at the press release, how are we going to sell this?' The idea that you can separate a policy from its presentation is a mistake...I certainly found it really useful throughout my later career to have done that time."

Soon after the 1997 General Election the senior Whitehall mandarin Sir Robin Mountfield was tasked with reviewing the effectiveness of the GIS. His eventual report contained a number of recommendations aimed at updating a body that had arguably changed little since its creation in the 1940s. Although the proposed name alteration to the Government Information *and Communications* Service could be viewed in superficial terms, it in fact encapsulated Mountfield's substantive suggestions aimed at moving the GIS away from its old, largely reactive role. Critically, there were recommendations that sought to ensure the co-ordination of media monitoring across Whitehall, alongside the creation of a strategic communications unit inside 10 Downing Street.<sup>112</sup> The report also dealt with questions of Civil Service neutrality and the politicisation of government communication. While the latter was certainly true and party political communicators had been accorded a new place of prominence in Tony Blair's government, Mountfield strenuously denied that the former was at risk because of this. It was not however an issue that would disappear easily.<sup>113</sup>

In part this was down to the aura that seemed to surround the most prominent of all party political communicators: Alastair Campbell. Having adapted to life without Bernard Ingham, many members of the Lobby presumably thought the days of their hanging on every word uttered by a combative Yorkshireman were history. And then Campbell entered Downing Street. During his tenure as Tony Blair's Press Secretary and later Director of Communications between 1997 and 2003 he acquired a reputation for being as talented as he was controversial. Like Ingham he had a distinctive appearance with a slightly menacing physiognomy that somehow conveyed his authority. He himself notes with a certain amount of pride that the journalist Andrew Rawnsley once said to him that

“most of us find you a lot more interesting than we find the politicians”. Such a statement would have been unthinkable over half a century earlier when the post was created. Campbell’s perspective then, on government communication and the relationship between politicians and officials, is unique.

Comparisons with Ingham only go so far, not least because of Campbell’s status as a political appointee. In this respect his role can be seen to have more closely resembled that of Joe Haines’ – Harold Wilson’s Press Secretary and “hatchet man” between 1969 and 1976 – who also came to Downing Street via the *Daily Mirror*.<sup>114</sup> Campbell though was far more powerful and unlike both of his predecessors was fully immersed in the substance of policy. He still believes that Labour’s restructuring of Number 10’s communications operation – heavily influenced by the Clinton White House – was necessary for a new media age that was “more aggressive, more judgemental, more around the clock. The technology was changing, and we had to be ahead of the game.” As noted above, this entailed greater centralisation and the new Press Secretary taking on a role that combined party political and governmental elements. Although the latter had of course happened before, Campbell argues specifically that continuity from the party’s time in opposition was required: “A leader needs a team around them that they can totally trust. I don’t think a civil servant could have done my job. It was as much about shaping the narrative as communicating it; being part of Tony Blair’s mind as well as Hoovering from it.” At the same time – echoing Mountfield’s findings – Campbell suggests that his “presence allowed the civil servants who worked under [him] to in fact be totally free of any political pressure”. Less convincing perhaps are protestations of his lack of power in comparison to ministers, especially when one considers the Order in Council passed shortly after Labour came to office granting him executive authority.<sup>115</sup> He does concede though

that there is some truth in depictions of those same ministers regularly seeking his approval on matters internal to their departments. Indeed he freely admits that he was and is “a control freak”.

Such a tight grip at the centre is seemingly key to Campbell’s vision of co-ordinated, effective communication: “You have to have a sense of strategy – how you communicate over time. It can’t just be one person, it has to be a team across government. Under John Major I don’t think the Civil Service machine was fit for purpose. Their thinking was trapped in a prior age.” As he sees it, many things – “the grid, media monitoring, rebuttal – didn’t exist when we came in in 1997”. As Campbell says, they are now considered part of standard communication practice, but others might suggest that they are the tools that facilitate spin. For him, government communication must retain its place at the top table and its future success depends in large part upon “staying ahead of the pace of change...it has to be fast and has to be innovative”.

Much of the criticism levelled at Campbell by both political insiders and journalists contends that he became too prominent a figure within government. It is hard not to see such prominence as a side effect of centralisation mixing with politicisation. In response though to the idea that his tenure ended in tears, he is bullish: “So what? Our goal was to win, to govern effectively, to communicate that and so win again. And we did that three times. Tony left office to a standing ovation from the House of Commons. Yes, it ended badly in the sense that I left in the middle of a great cacophony, but so what?” The implied self-sacrifice in this comment is interesting but it does not take in the whole picture. Many within the Lobby would say that on his departure in 2003 he left a compromised government communication machine. Campbell dismisses the idea that trust had broken down between him and the Lobby: “If you asked Michael White, Philip Webster, Robert Peston;



I don't think they'd say that." But he also adds that "there were others who I did not trust", arguably proving the very point he seeks to dispute. Like modern divorce proceedings, when it comes to the marriage of convenience between Press Secretary and Lobby, all parties are not required to agree that they disagree in order for the relationship to be terminated.

In light of this, the appointment of a civil servant as Press Secretary – with the strict conjugal boundaries this entails – once again seems appealing. It is hard to imagine Donald Maitland for instance appearing on the evening news, jabbing the air with a biro, telling the interviewer to "get [his] facts right" and denouncing the BBC for "broadcasting lies" – as Campbell did in 2003 following the invasion of Iraq.<sup>116</sup> In attempting to assert control so publicly, he arguably showed that he had lost it. Although he now rationalises his appearance and talks with justifiable irritation of the myths that surround it – "the idea that I stormed into the studio is a total lie" – it is difficult to see such a decision as anything other than a strategic mistake.



*"Get your facts right" – Alastair Campbell to Jon Snow, Channel 4 News 27 June 2003*

Moreover, with regard to the Iraq War generally, he accepts that "communications-wise it is now seen as a failure". He still maintains though that "At the time we were trying to communicate what the government saw as a real threat, requiring a difficult decision to be taken over military action. That happened and Saddam fell." As Campbell sees it the problems came afterwards, particularly with the fruitless search for weapons of mass destruction. He resigned at the end of August 2003, five months after the invasion and two months after his appearance on Channel 4 News. It would therefore be wrong on one level to hold him responsible for the long-term strategic communication failure over Iraq. That said, his departure was itself a major blow to a machine that had in some ways become indistinguishable from the man. And yet, soldiering on would have had its own perils as noted above.<sup>117</sup>

In such circumstances it is tempting to ask whether a more conventional communications machine within Downing Street – with a division of labour and separation of the political and governmental elements – would have weathered the storm more effectively. It is impossible to say. Arguably though, the strategic vision of civil servants has always been – by definition – far greater in scope than those of political appointees. What Alastair Campbell did was to introduce the mechanisms by which the government could codify that vision beyond vague, hackneyed expressions of the national interest. Where he came unstuck was in his understandable conflation of this with the vision of one man, who he served with uncommon zeal. As Robin Butler recalls: "Tony Blair said to me when he took office: 'You can take some of my staff away but you can't take Alastair, he is crucial to me.'"

It is striking what a difference 50 years makes. When Butler's immediate predecessor as Cabinet Secretary, Robert Armstrong, joined the Civil Service in 1950, he was barely aware of the Treasury press office's existence. Butler joined the

Treasury a decade later, but still the head of the press office was “really rather a junior figure...I doubt whether he saw the Chancellor of the Exchequer very often.”

It is therefore important at this point to pause and consider the work of the government’s senior communicators within the context of the wider Civil Service. By the time both Armstrong and Butler were working in Downing Street under Prime Minister Edward Heath in the early 1970s, the career diplomat Donald Maitland was Press Secretary, and a figure of considerable importance to the Prime Minister. Armstrong remembers him as “a very likeable man with a good sense of humour; highly intelligent, a lovely person to be with. He prided himself in playing it straight with the Lobby and they in turn trusted him totally.” Nevertheless communication was still a “distinct job” at this time and there was – Armstrong argues – a natural tension between policy and information people, in part because the latter were always keen to reveal more to the press than the former might have liked. By the mid-1980s something like the AIDS crisis showed an increased knitting together of policy and communication at the highest level, with the Cabinet Secretary intimately involved in the committee discussions that led to the ‘Don’t die of ignorance’ campaign. On the other hand the way Armstrong was exposed to criticism during the Spycatcher saga showed continuing limitations. When Christopher Meyer swapped the Moscow Embassy for the Foreign Office News Department in 1984, he experienced a “moment of hubris and delight when I realised I could exercise enormous power from the centre in advising not just how to sell a policy, but also whether it was saleable in the first place.” Still, this was balanced by former policy colleagues regarding him as something of “a traitor, or as if [I] had some kind of hideous disease!” By the time Robin Butler retired in 1998, policy and communication were enmeshed like never before. He is keen though to stress that the increased

status of communicators in the government machine should not be seen as fuelled by politicisation. Indeed he points out that the job of Downing Street Press Secretary has swung between political appointees and members of the Civil Service ever since its creation in 1945. Instead, Butler sees the growing prominence of journalists around Westminster and Whitehall as the reason for the gradual uprating of communicators. As he puts it, in the 1960s “Lobby correspondents were not nearly on such familiar terms with politicians as they are today. It would be an exaggeration to say that they were rather grubby people in raincoats, waiting for whatever snippets they could pick up, but that gives a flavour of what it was like! Over the course of my career their status and access increased hugely. The stature of the GIS grew correspondingly.”

Likewise Butler believes that changes in the mechanisms of government communication brought about by New Labour – during his last year as Cabinet Secretary – were not driven by a desire to deliberately politicise the apparatus. This was genuine modernisation, but one informed by the cutting edge techniques the party had harnessed in opposition. Nevertheless he argues that a party political prioritisation of speed in communication – emphasised by Alastair Campbell above and numerous other Labour figures of the period<sup>118</sup> – must always be tempered by an unwavering commitment to accuracy on the part of government communicators. At the same time, from his perspective as a policy official he is at one with the likes of Christopher Meyer and Gus O’Donnell in emphasising the importance of press officers having an “intellectual grip” of policies. Alongside this, “sympathy for the media’s job and good judgement regarding the boundaries of one’s own” should play a crucial role. Ultimately though for Butler, there can be no substitute for “understanding the Prime Minister well enough so as to communicate to the press what he or she would say if they were there themselves”. Arguably no amount

of technological wizardry or bureaucratic restructuring can compensate for the lack of this vital instinct.

It is this relationship at the top with political figures that largely determines how successful the Downing Street Press Secretary will be. As Robert Armstrong emphasises, there must be a chain of trust that runs from the Prime Minister through his or her spokesman to the media. The links in both directions extending from the press office must be of equal strength. “In this job you take your lead from the Prime Minister” says James Slack. “A good day for her is a good day for me.” Almost as importantly though, the civil servant must cultivate reciprocal confidence with politically appointed special advisers. As Christopher Meyer notes: “as Press Secretary I had to work closely with the Prime Minister’s Political Secretary. The dividing line between what was party political and what was government was very difficult to draw sometimes.” Moreover, O’Donnell is quick to point out that “Whatever rules you’re playing by, ministers and their special advisers are playing by their own rules. There are multiple sources of information out there.”

And yet, simultaneously, what might be termed the ‘geography of power’ in Number 10 has – for many decades now – shown a striking fusion of the party political and the governmental. The current arrangement sees a press office of around 30 people actually based in Number 12 Downing Street – most of them in a large open plan space. Workstations for the news desk, media monitoring and various policy areas are set somewhat incongruously against a backdrop of 18th century–style wood panelling and brass light fittings. In a side room, the Official Spokesperson and head of the Government Communication Service sit beside a number of political appointees. Their work is underpinned by the grid, which makes no distinction between the political and governmental agendas. A short walk parallel to the street,

through connecting doors between Numbers 12, 11 and 10 and you soon find yourself at the Cabinet Room and the suite of rooms comprising the Prime Minister’s Private Office. This is a somewhat calmer environment, slightly detached from the communications operation but clearly within touching

 Cabinet Office **WEEKLY COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING GRID [OFFICIAL]**

02/08/15 - 08/08/15	Sun 02	Mon 03	Tues 04	Wed 05	Thurs 06	Fri 07	Sat 08
<b>EXTERNAL</b>				24h tube strike (1830)			
Main Govt news	Fallon: Defence efficiency (Times)	Clark: Rogue landlords	Fallon: Overseas	Boles: Checkoff	Lewis / Boles: Sunday Trading	PM four day - NCS	
Internal / Civil Service Comms		Blog: CS Live promo				Civil Service award nominations close	
Update on Cabinet Office review (BBC)							
Propriety and CO Corporate							
Making Government Work Better	English language requirements		Technology in Government 2015 (BBC)	Removing check off	Blog: sale of Govt IP addresses		
Constitution							
Office for Civil Society						Unformed youth LIBOR access story	FYI: Interview with William Shawcross, Charity Commission expected in Times
Social Mobility							

09/08/15 - 15/08/15	Sun 09	Mon 10	Tues 11	Wed 12	Thurs 13	Fri 14	Sat 15
<b>EXTERNAL</b>					A Level Results		
Main Govt news		Clark: Housing	McLoughlin: Northern Powerhouse	Unemployment (Jul) re Bulgarians & Romanians Q&A Fallon: Defence	Johnson / Gibbs: A Level results & UCAS visit		PM: 100 days of Govt
Internal / Civil Service Comms				Leadership statements - 6 months on			
Propriety and CO Corporate							
Making Government Work Better	MCO James Lyons interview diversity measures, region of birth				Mike Bracken background chat, Spectator Sherin Aminosshe, New London Quarterly, Govt Property Sherin Aminosshe, States Gazette, Govt Property	GIST tool data	
Constitution	Pickles: Electoral fraud review sp-ed		John Penrose voter registration visits				
Office for Civil Society		FYI: Oxfam 2014/15 annual report		Make your Mark: Thunderclap			
Social Mobility							

*An August 2015 example of the grid – revolutionary when first introduced, now standard–issue*

distance. The compactness of Downing Street arguably necessitates a paradoxically collaborative approach to ensuring political and Civil Service boundaries remain intact, once again confirming the importance of personal relationships to effective administration.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## INTO THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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“If we’ve encouraged one person to put their seatbelt on and it helps them survive a crash, that’s not a bad day’s work.”

*Brian Jenkins,  
Head of Radio at  
COI, 1998–2012*

The issue of politicised government communication also dominated discussion in the early 2000s following repeated accusations of spin and the distasteful practice of burying bad news in the wake of tragedies such as the attacks of September 11, 2001. A further review of government communication was therefore deemed necessary. Ironically, the review – headed by Sir Bob Phillis, a media executive rather than a civil servant – conducted its work against the backdrop of the 2003 Iraq war. Moreover, in examining the effectiveness of the Government Information and Communication Service (GICS) and the roles of civil servants and special advisers, Phillis was highly critical. He spoke of a “three-way breakdown in trust between government and politicians, the media and the general public”, arguing that the “traditional culture of secrecy in British government has not helped” and that the GICS had “neither the authority nor the capability to enforce standards in communications”. In attempting then to restore institutional trust and credibility, the final report laid out seven principles that should underpin government communication in the future: openness, not secrecy; more direct, unmediated communication with the public; genuine engagement with them as part of policy formation and delivery; positive presentation, not spin; the use of all relevant channels of communication, not merely Fleet Street and broadcasters; co-ordination across departments avoiding conflicting or duplicated messages; and finally the reinforcement of the Civil Service's political neutrality, guarding against a blurring of government and party communications.<sup>119</sup>

The substantive changes that followed included the appointment of Howell James as the new Permanent Secretary for Government Communication and the creation of the Government Communication Network (GCN) based in the Cabinet Office. James had himself sat on the Phillis review and argues that this meant he had an acute understanding of



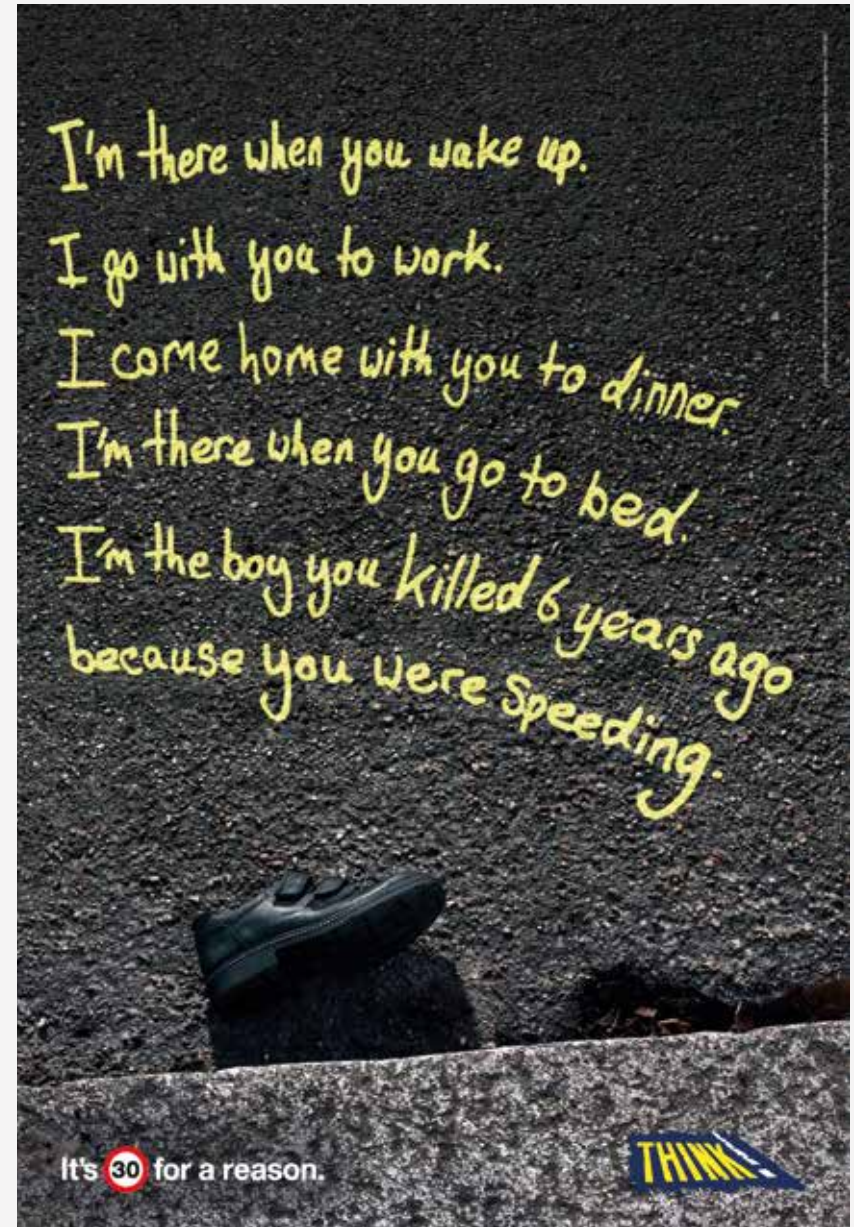
the issues facing him on appointment. Moreover, in joining the Civil Service from the private sector he arguably both brought wider experience to the role and was emblematic of government's belated acknowledgement of communication as a distinct profession that straddled the boundary between Whitehall and beyond. One political insider has characterised James being given the rank of Permanent Secretary as “a classic Whitehall fudge: a job that looks high status – but without any power”.<sup>120</sup> And it is true that the communication apparatus would be overhauled once again within a decade. That said, as a self-described “backroom boy” James sees his central task as having been to “knit the machine together to make it work effectively” and specifically – in the wake of Phillis – to “take the heat out of a situation” where spin was perceived by the public to have run out of control. In this – and in laying the foundations of what eventually became the Government Communication Service – he was arguably rather successful.<sup>121</sup>

Another problem though with the system in the 2000s was what many saw as the alarming lack of attention being paid to professional development. Jacqueline Williamson – who is now in charge of it in the Cabinet Office – recalls joining the COI at this time and noticing the gap. Ultimately calls for a skills building programme led to the creation of a professional development team that went on to work with a range of government clients.<sup>122</sup> Post Phillis, core competencies for all government communication staff were developed and for the first time – albeit loosely – the GCN brought press officers into the same organisation as other communication professionals. The Permanent Secretary was charged with maintaining professional standards and the first structured development programmes, ‘Engage’ and ‘Evolve’ were implemented. The Civil Service Code – first introduced in 1996 – was revised in 2006 and supplemented by ‘Propriety Guidance’ which set out the standards of behaviour for those working in government communication.

Furthermore, throughout the 1990s and 2000s Whitehall began to grapple with the arrival of the internet as an everyday tool of communication. David Rose – now a Deputy Director within the Government Communication Service – joined the Department of Trade and Industry from the private sector in this period. He remembers how some civil servants were actively annoyed by the very notion of receiving emails. This may now seem laughable; but such resistance to innovation was arguably tied to the last remnants of anti-communications snobbery that had plagued previous generations. There were after all, still people within government who “complained about the use of the word ‘marketing’”.<sup>123</sup> That said, the myriad of different websites for individual departments and agencies that emerged in this period was testament to a lack of joined-up thinking on the part of those who sought to innovate. Phillis recommended the creation of a single government website, but this only came into being nearly a decade later when GOV.UK went live in 2012.

The early 21st century also saw a multitude of campaigns that embraced new technology like the internet. At the same time, extensive use of more traditional media such as radio continued and built on the verities of the past century. One example of this would be the jovial MoI-esque matter-of-factness married to a catchy slogan of Adam Hart-Davis’s ‘Tax doesn’t have to be taxing’ adverts for HMRC. Another would be the often harrowing CGI-aided imagery of the Think! road safety campaign which continued to demonstrate the value of shock as a tool in promoting behavioural change. In both cases the stylistic debt owed to antecedent campaigns is clear. There is also a palpable sense of pride amongst COI people when speaking of their work and its role in promoting the public good. As Brian Jenkins, former head of radio at COI puts it: “I wanted to make the world a better place... I could say to my team, today we could have helped save someone’s life. If we’ve encouraged one person to put their

seatbelt on and it helps them survive a crash, that's not a bad day's work."<sup>124</sup> The current Head of Marketing and Internal Communications at the Ministry of Defence, Wendy Proctor, also emphasises that there is a hard-headed rationale behind investment in campaigns promoting behavioural change. Namely, their potential to save the government money in the long run. Of course in order to show a return on investment strict spending controls have to be adhered to, but as Proctor argues, this is something "we have become much more adept at over the years...we cannot use taxpayers' money to indulge in vanity campaigns which deliver no benefit or outcome". She points to the praise government campaigns have repeatedly garnered from the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) in its annual effectiveness awards – judged on measurable impact rather than aesthetic grounds – as evidence of government's success in striving to ensure value for money for the taxpayer.<sup>125</sup> In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and recession though, this quest took on new meaning and would result in huge changes to the machinery of government communication.



*"It's 30 for a reason" – a 2009 poster issued by the Department of Transport*

# CHAPTER NINE

## TODAY AND TOMORROW

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“There is now a very pressing need to deal with the cacophony of digital conversation. To know how to listen, how to guide.”

*Alex Aiken, Executive Director  
of Government Communication,  
2013-present*

The new millennium had seen an explosion in the number of communication personnel across government. In written evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications in 2008 the Cabinet Office suggested that in 1998, 795 communication staff had been employed across Whitehall. A decade later this had risen by 73% to 1,376.<sup>126</sup> As numbers increased, so did costs. In 2009-10 the total cost of communication to government was £1.01 billion, of which £540 million was made up of direct communication through the COI, with £329 million spent on staffing. The total headcount within the GCN was estimated at 6,848. With the coming of the coalition government in 2010 – and the appointment of Francis Maude as minister for the Cabinet Office – a freeze on marketing and advertising activity was put in place. Yet another review – this time focused on the future of the COI – was also commissioned. Carried out by the then Permanent Secretary for Government Communication Matt Tee, the findings were published in March 2011. The report argued for dramatic cuts in expenditure, with future communication focused upon greater value for money and return on marketing investment. Effectiveness would be achieved through better evaluation and insight, with priority issues and audiences stressed across government rather than taken forward by individual departments.<sup>127</sup>

Much of this chimed with the Maude's own wider plans at the time for reforming the Civil Service. Indeed he continues to emphasise the importance of strong functional leadership with direction, co-ordination – to avoid duplication or contradiction – and ultimately a figurative emergency brake held at the centre. In terms of a specific communication strategy this means saying a few things well, looking for as many opportunities as possible to say them, and then continuing to say them over and over again. As Maude himself puts it, in the

context of a politician trying to get a point across: “When you feel physically sick hearing yourself say the words, that’s the time when your best friend says to you ‘I heard you saying x on the radio the other day, why haven’t you said it before?’ That’s the point when you’re just beginning to get cut through.”<sup>128</sup>

In the wake of Matt Tee’s report, COI was abolished in 2011. Over the course of the 2010–2015 Parliament, total planned communication spending was reduced by over £1 billion. George Eykyn, Director of Communications at the Department for Communities and Local Government between 2008 and 2014, describes how in this period his team shrunk by over 40%: “It necessitated hard stuff like key vacancies not being filled. You just had to make do and work with the capabilities you had in house.” Maintaining the highest of standards in this environment was clearly quite a challenge, especially considering the breadth of the department’s responsibilities. But he was perhaps helped in this task by his own prior overhaul of DCLG’s internal communications. This was begun immediately upon his appointment at the request of the then Permanent Secretary Peter Housden. As a result “they became a lot nimbler, more strategic, in line with the department’s overall objectives and it placed a proper premium on face-to-face communication: the spine of good internal comms”. Ironically, Eykyn sees DCLG’s coping with the cuts as ultimately a success story and the sunnier side of the then government’s programme – namely the ‘Big Society’ – as something more problematic that “didn’t progress far beyond the slogan stage”.<sup>129</sup> Indeed the actual impact of the initiative has been subject to criticism, most notably in a 2015 report by the think tank Civil Exchange.<sup>130</sup> In purely communicative terms though, Eykyn’s experience illustrates that tangible situations – however difficult – are still often easier to deal with than abstract ideas.

Crucially then in the realm of concrete changes, at the end of 2013 the Government Communication Network was

superseded by the Government Communication Service (GCS). And so the past becomes the present and stock can be taken of a century of developments as the service looks to the future on a number of fronts.

GCS was established not only to oversee the future efficiency of government communication from a strengthened centre, but also to ensure high professional standards and co-operation across government departments. As it now stands, GCS supports the work of 25 ministerial departments, 21 non-ministerial departments and over 300 agencies and other public bodies. In human terms this amounts to around 4,500 communicators who are members of GCS. This is a massive overarching remit across all communication disciplines. At its head is the Executive Director of Government Communication Alex Aiken, based in the Cabinet Office, who in turn is responsible to the GCS Board chaired by the minister responsible for government communication.<sup>131</sup>

This new structure is arguably a monument to Francis Maude’s reform agenda, something Aiken is keen to stress. At the same time, he regards the GCS as very much part of a continuum of 100 years, with the enduring goal of delivering “truth, well told” to the public. And in some senses, he is himself the latest in a line of apostolic succession stretching – back via the likes of Fife Clark and Stephen Tallents – to the first director of government information John Buchan. Indeed he is quick to acknowledge that “the COI did terrific work over 60 years” but that by the early 2000s it – and government communication more generally – had “stumbled...there was an excess of process over progress”. In addition to the fundamental functions and objectives of the GCS mentioned above, the Director also emphasises the underlying importance of intellectual rigour to its activities. This is an approach embodied in the new Evaluation Council’s work measuring effectiveness. Similarly, Aiken believes that government communicators must effectively master the techniques of behavioural science.





Audiences can then be considered by personality as well as by demographic and the mass of audience data available to the service transformed into actionable insight. Linked to this is the enhancement of two-way communication in order to build public trust, through this demonstrating communication's value as a strategic policy tool. Perhaps most importantly, Aiken argues that "There is now a very pressing need to deal with the cacophony of digital conversation. To know how to listen, how to guide. To know when to intervene, when to stay out of the debate. To know what is going on. That is the central challenge: mastering the digital landscape." In practical terms, he stresses creating engaging content, ending opaque digital marketing and – most interestingly in the current climate – the construction of a rapid response social media capability led from the Cabinet Office to deal quickly with disinformation and "reclaim a fact-based public debate".<sup>132</sup>

With the last issue, as Chris Hamilton – the current Head of Digital Communications at Number 10 – points out, this has meant a shift from the traditional practice of waiting for the mainstream media to pick up stories and then rebutting them to a system of tracking online content based on the extent to which it is liked, shared or commented on and then taking immediate action if it is deemed necessary. Since the unit was set up in April 2018 the initial team of four people have been dealing with a wide variety of what is commonly referred to as 'fake news' and which often takes the form of conspiracy theories. Some of this material relates to matters still in the news that it would be premature to discuss here. Specifics aside, the central challenge is actually the mass of data that now both confronts and is available to government, an amount that would have been unimaginable to John Buchan, Brendan Bracken or even those at the heart of New Labour in the mid 1990s. Beyond social media rapid response, Hamilton outlines the positives that can come from this, including the data lake

at the centre of the new 'Engage' programme, which will store the millions of data points generated from government digital advertising and allow them to be analysed to "improve effectiveness and spend efficiency". A new mapping tool displays multiple data sets at local authority level, allowing government to target its communication where it is needed. But Hamilton also highlights the problems surrounding programmatic advertising, where on hugely popular websites and social media platforms, automated auction buying of space can make it impossible to know what the government's content is being seen alongside and where its money is going. Indeed in 2017 it withdrew from YouTube after government adverts were shown alongside extremist content. Additionally he argues that "upskilling" across the field in government – therefore ensuring consistency – will be a continuing challenge as the skills themselves evolve.<sup>133</sup>

Contextualising this as part of government's wider digital journey in recent years, Anthony Simon – Head of Digital up until 2015 – emphasises how far things developed during the coalition years but how many issues still needed to be addressed in a systematic way across government: "Digital communication was growing rapidly but it was sporadic and without structure. It was still seen as a bolt-on to mainstream methods." In 2010 "press releases were still the central means of communicating with audiences and there was a disconnect with a public moving rapidly into social media and digital channels". By the time he left government five years later, Simon argues that the likes of "regular blogging and the use of Twitter in an effective and timely manner were still seen as 'nice things to have' rather than essentials. Digital communication is seen as a specialisation. It needs to be embedded up to and including at the leadership level." Despite this, he points to particular individual examples that show how far things have come in a relatively short period of time. The use of the Number 10 Twitter account to announce

the 2012 reshuffle was “groundbreaking...it enabled everyone to see the announcements as they were made in real time. It stamped the authority of government on the announcements and demonstrated how it was forward thinking and modern in its communication.” Likewise, the launch of GOV.UK in the same year “represented a major improvement in providing web information in a single government website”. As Simon sees it, for the public this meant “less confusion for users about where to find information” and for the government itself it made sense as “major activities which involved more than one department – such as the Budget or Queen’s Speech – from then on existed in a single place, rather than as separate announcements across different websites”. Alongside this, the creation of social media guidance for civil servants that Simon led on has meant that “the digital landscape within government departments now more closely resembles the one outside” with officials aware of their obligations but free to have a personal online presence. This is of course a dramatic change from the anonymity of the 20th century Civil Service, but one that means government “better reflects the country as a whole”.<sup>134</sup>

Rather than a distinction between the conventional and the digital, James Slack – as the Prime Minister’s current Official Spokesperson – sees the division of labour as one between those communicators who “think strategically, analyse data,

look at trends and plot campaigns” and those who more traditionally are “the first line of defence and attack”, the group he includes himself in and who he still regards as crucial within the overall machine. Of course, as noted above, the latter category could now also be seen to include – among others – those in the social media rapid response unit. Slack emphasises though “the importance of having people who complement one another” across the field. In his role specifically he cites “the capacity to form and hold good relationships across Downing Street, while remaining nimble on your feet and retaining an enormous amount of information” to be key traits. He still therefore regards prior experience as a newspaper journalist as invaluable, especially when it comes to briefing the parliamentary Lobby correspondents as detailed earlier. In the quest for continuing relevance in an age of information overload, he has sought to make briefings “newsworthy events”, using them to “make announcements that in the past might not have been made via Lobby”. As a former correspondent he is acutely aware of what the journalists want and argues that “if they leave the room with something they can ring their news desk with or that they can tweet; I’ve provided a service.” Of course this also means that “having given them something, they’re perhaps slightly less likely to go hunting for something else”. Anything given to the journalists is of course carefully calibrated. Slack stresses that “the idea that you can speak to one audience and other audiences will not be listening is naïve”. On the most critical ongoing issue facing the government and the country – Brexit – Slack points out that “there are audiences in Brussels, in the other member states, a domestic audience that voted for different things and different audiences within the government”. In practical terms this means that “if you don’t get your messaging right, you’re liable to offend one or other group. Constantly thinking about it is a great challenge, you don’t always get it right. Sometimes



*One stop shop - GOV.UK,  
the unified government website  
finally went live in 2012*



*The Prime Minister and her official spokesman James Slack (centre, hands on table) brief the press en route to the G7 Summit in Canada, June 2018*

you'll please one audience enormously and simultaneously infuriate another."

The inevitability of criticism from one audience or other is something that government communication in its various forms has faced from the advent of the DoI. This is hardly surprising in a functioning democracy and indeed should be taken as a measure of its health. As this study has shown, from attacks on wartime propaganda via criticism of censorship, press and public have let their feelings be known.

From within the political establishment too, there are potent recent examples of dissatisfaction with government information, again related to Brexit. When the official leaflet recommending continued membership of the European Union was published ahead of the 2016 referendum at a cost to the Cabinet Office of £9.3 million, prominent Leave supporting MPs declared it to be variously "an outrageous abuse of taxpayers' money"

(Bernard Jenkin), a "one-sided piece of propaganda" (Michael Gove) and a "crazy waste of money" (Boris Johnson). The government was of course under no obligation to be neutral and publication was in line with a precedent set by the distribution of a similar leaflet during the 1975 referendum.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, although the eventual vote was in favour of exit, the document can be viewed as having been a clear exposition of the government's stance and a prompt to informed debate.

Current civil servants can also take comfort in their political masters' greater appreciation of the importance of effective government communication and publicity. The idea that a senior politician today would dismiss their own overseas tour promoting British business as "a complete f\*\*\*\*\*", as Mrs Thatcher's Minister for Trade Alan Clark did in 1986 is barely conceivable. Even less likely would be a member of the government publicly disowning official policy live on *Question Time* as Clark did over arms procurement in 1984.<sup>136</sup> (There is of course some small irony in the fact that Clark's own father, Kenneth was – as noted above – a veteran of the MoI as



## **Why the Government believes that voting to remain in the European Union is the best decision for the UK.**

[The EU referendum, Thursday, 23rd June 2016.](#)

*The government's advisory leaflet on the EU Referendum, 2016*



Controller of Home Publicity.) Modern ministerial maulings by the likes of Jeremy Paxman and John Humphrys look in comparison like mere papercuts.

A satirical element to criticism of government communication across media has though remained a constant. Where the likes of Evelyn Waugh had led, so his journalist son Auberon followed and others have now donned the mantle. The former had savaged the supposedly incompetent Ministry of Information during the Second World War and the latter, from the 1970s onwards – in the pages of *Private Eye* and *The Spectator* – had railed against the evils of that very British concept: the so-called ‘Nanny State’. From accusing the government of ruining Christmas through its anti-drink driving campaigns<sup>137</sup> to promoting the idea of “National Smack a Child Week”<sup>138</sup> the younger Waugh regularly sought to rubbish the idea that public information was of any value whatsoever. Those who might dismiss all of this as the stuff of a bygone, less politically correct age ought to be careful however. In the second decade of the 21st century the ‘Nanny State’ notion is still a source of much journalistic comment, not to mention public conversational complaint. In grumbling about things such as the currently ubiquitous ‘See it. Say it. Sorted.’<sup>139</sup> announcements warning of suspicious packages and behaviour on public transport, Quentin Letts of the *Daily Mail* can be seen as one of the heirs of the Waugh’s particular brand of irony, geniality and malice. The assaults are often amusing and strike a chord with many members of the public, but to take issue with a slogan’s irritating memorability is to simultaneously miss the point entirely and confirm the slogan’s success, at least by Francis Maude’s standards outlined earlier. Dangerous territory is entered though when commentators simplify matters. Understandably, this curious mirror image of official spin comes from a desire to produce lively copy and eye-catching

headlines, but often it leads to adulteration through word of mouth or repetition on social media. Sometimes this is entirely organic; on other occasions malicious actors might seek to exploit such developments, actively creating ‘fake news’ with global reach, as noted earlier. Ultimately it is public trust in government that is damaged. Even before disinformation on social media became a major issue, trust of those in the political sphere had sunk to shockingly low levels. In *Trust: A History* Geoffrey Hosking points to a 2013 MORI poll in which only 18% of the British citizens surveyed said they trusted politicians to tell the truth, “fewer even than trust estate agents (24%)...”<sup>140</sup> And lest civil servants dismiss such information as irrelevant to government more generally – on the basis that personal and party political reasons are mainly to blame for such a dismal figure – there is further sobering evidence. In 2015, while civil servants had net positive trust ratings of 16%, they were considerably less trusted than a stranger in the street on 37%.<sup>141</sup> Hard to gain and so easily lost, the battle to retain and build public trust is something that the GCS will perpetually have to address in the third decade of this century and beyond. There will always be critics of how the government communicates, those who point to excessive instruction and those who believe that it tells the country’s citizens too little on certain matters. The path between nanny and absentee landlord is a difficult one to tread, but in always striving to be a source of useful information, civil servant communicators over the last 100 years have on the whole acted – and will doubtless continue – to act in the best interests of the British people. Utility should also come though from being able to effectively listen. Echoing Alex Aiken’s views above, Gus O’Donnell says the challenge is not so much about finding new ways of speaking to the public, but about “finding new ways of listening to them and learning from them...communicators have often been slow on this. As an example, John Major’s ‘Cones Hotline’ was totally derided



at the time, but he *got it*. Tony Blair took up the feedback idea in a more sophisticated way. Today, everyone's into it."

Sheila Mitchell – Director of Marketing for Public Health England since 2013 – unapologetically declares that "Health has always produced iconic campaigns." And considering the likes of the 'Pregnant Man' and 'Don't die of ignorance' this is self-evidently true. What is more, few would argue that these initiatives have been a mistake, even if they did seek to alter – sometimes dramatically – the behaviour of the public. But Mitchell also echoes others when she says that what was missing until relatively recently from this most enduring field of government advertising was "a rigorous focus on insight strategy, research and the use of customer data". Major advances in campaign and marketing disciplines have though been made, particularly with regard to brand architecture and a concentration on "customer life stages" as exemplified by the 'One you' campaign that focuses on people in their 40s and 50s. Likewise co-operation with the commercial sector including large retailers – something that would once have been sniffed at – as well as institutions like the BBC has become an essential method of cost-effectively ensuring greater reach. For Mitchell, marketing of this sort has now "moved things to become broader than just government communication". And while "the whole industry is struggling to come to terms with marketing technology", particularly when it comes to targeting in a world of social media, she is optimistic, singling out the anti-obesity 'Change4Life' initiative as an especially successful example. That it has "95% awareness amongst mums" is down to a "flexibility which cuts across boundaries and makes it more than an advertising campaign".<sup>142</sup>

The government's continued commitment to effective and innovative advertising in other fields is likewise embodied in the GREAT Britain campaign. Since its launch in 2012 it has fashioned a new brand of progressive patriotism, reminiscent



*An example from the "slightly counter-cultural" GREAT Britain Campaign, 2012 – present*

of the work of the Empire Marketing Board, but fit for the 21st century. Looked at in the context of Britain's imminent withdrawal from the European Union, its significance is even clearer. Its director Conrad Bird sees it as "slightly counter cultural" in that "the British psyche can be modest and self-deprecating and our favourite word is often 'sorry'". In a competitive world, he argues, "you cannot apologise yourself to international success...if you don't dial it up, you'll be ignored".<sup>143</sup> And, indeed, this bold approach appears to have paid dividends. By 2016, government investment in it of £160 million had resulted in economic returns of £2.2 billion in the form of increased trade, tourism and educational investment. Looking to the future then, the government can arguably still consider itself to be a purveyor of the first water when it comes to practical, profitable and iconic advertising campaigns.

With only 30 or so communicators at the very centre in Downing Street – out of a total of more than 4,000 – the new GCS structure of government communication has in some senses come full circle. So much work is now clearly done within

departments. Sam Lister – Director of Communications at the Department of Health from 2011 and then at the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy between 2016 and 2018 – offers a viewpoint that confirms much of the overarching narrative of those years, but at a departmental level. In particular he contrasts the handling of the Health and Social Care Bill in 2011 with the Industrial Strategy Green Paper of 2017. At the heart of this was the listening issue highlighted by both Alex Aiken and Gus O'Donnell earlier. In 2011, government communication was in Lister's opinion "often off the pulse in terms of public sentiment", not helped by the fact that policy makers could be found "stuck in a mindset of coming up with ideas in isolation in Whitehall and then sending these out as directives". This manifested itself in some striking examples of "retrofitted consultations" that contributed very little, as decisions had already been made. Lister points out that of course there is an "element of risk" in truly open consultation and policy development (unwelcome issues might be raised) but ultimately a policy will be the better for it. In the 2017 example he emphasises the "two-way stakeholder engagement with 2,000 organisations over four months, much of it face to face" that took place. This engagement with the 'real world' is something Lister is particularly proud to have pioneered in other ways in his departments. For instance, a programme of shadowing work in the NHS – be that in accident and emergency departments or care homes – for senior civil servants at the Department of Health is now being adapted for those at BEIS. Perhaps it is this desire to innovate on the part of communicators that has given them a contemporary reputation in government – according to Lister – as "people who get stuff done" and who have the potential to work beyond the field itself. At the same time he stresses that an effective communicator is not merely "a natural...you have to work hard at it" – a sentiment that would have been considered

laughable by many of the gentlemen amateurs of a century ago. Likewise certain policy officials only a few decades ago would have bristled at his assertion that today "communication is no longer a niche specialisation, it is an absolutely core leadership skill". Perhaps this is down in part to what he sees as communication's increased importance in a climate where government's other levers of legislation, taxation, spending and regulation are either compromised or less available to many departments across Whitehall than they were only a few years ago. Causes aside, few would deny that the effects have been dramatic.<sup>144</sup>

A clear development curve can now be divined when one looks at the profession within government as a whole after a century. From a necessary evil during wartime and acceptance as a useful afterthought for much of the 20th century via occasional mythical status, communicators have grown in stature. They now defy the easy categorisations that stereotyped them as either street fighters or rarefied mandarins and sometimes even as devious spin doctors. The curve has perhaps been at its steepest in the last two decades. As an assistant information officer in the 1990s Sean Larkins – eventually Group Director of Communications at Defra – recalls it as a binary world: "You either worked in the press office or you managed advertising campaigns. It reflected the media of the day." This had an exciting aspect, in that "junior members of staff were given responsibility far more quickly – with no real experience, I was sent to accompany junior ministers within my first month of work". But at the same time "there was far less cross-government collaboration that there is now". Indeed he argues that government has been historically bad at both sharing best practice across its constituent parts and learning from abroad and that this must continue to improve. Similarly, within the GCS of today "the skills and structure of communication have changed beyond recognition. While the

press office is still important, there is a growing understanding that social media and channel growth has fractured audiences. That citizens are more powerful, more cynical and less deferential than probably ever before.” Reinforcing what has been said above about the new frontiers of communication, Larkins describes how “the tools of engagement have changed” and that in order for the profession to remain relevant, government communicators will need to learn new skills, such as “learning how to code, how to use algorithms” in order to connect effectively with the general public.<sup>145</sup> At the same time of course, one would hope that there is still some room within the profession for instinct and individualism of the kind that underpinned so many successes earlier in the century.

The days of Churchill’s “bodyguard of lies” are now a distant memory and much else can be seen to have changed with the various restructurings of the government communication machine in the intervening decades. There is almost no desire among current or retired senior members of the Civil Service for a return to an overwhelmingly centralised MoI type structure. And yet, in impartially serving the government of the day and constantly striving to communicate effectively with the British public and beyond – whether that be via social media, a humble press release or an iconic advertising campaign – the GCS is clearly the heir to a long tradition at the heart of Whitehall. Yes, over 100 years there have been mistakes – and even the occasional disaster – but through the turbulence of the 20th and early 21st century the state’s parliamentary democracy has remained intact and the United Kingdom remains a significant and respected player on the world stage. Government communicators can therefore be justly proud of the role they have played in guarding the security and prosperity of the nation.

# NOTES

## NOTES

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*Current and future leaders –  
Directors of Communication (above) and GCS interns (below), 2018*

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# 100 YEARS OF GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION

This new study traces the development of Britain's communication apparatus from the creation of the Department of Information during the First World War to the present day. It is a story that takes in a further world war, imperial decline and the rise of the welfare state, the end of the post-war consensus and a country on the cusp of Brexit. Equally it is about taboos surrounding propaganda, the birth and development of television, the internet and social media, not to mention the enduring appeal of the poster. At its heart are the people – some famous, some unknown – who have worked to hone and deliver the government's message across a turbulent century.

Includes material from new interviews with Alastair Campbell, Gus O'Donnell, Robin Butler, Michael Crick and many others.

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