

GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS REVIEW GROUP

INTERIM REPORT – 27th August 2003

1 Introduction

This review is addressing the issue of how government should communicate in the widest sense. It aims to bring forward and justify radical recommendations that, if implemented, would help to improve the consistency, honesty, credibility, reliability, accuracy, and professional effectiveness of all government communications. The review is not due to report until later in the year, but we have taken a considerable amount of evidence to date, including commissioning some original research, and have started to develop a number of ideas, including thoughts on the structure of the centre. Whilst this is a strictly interim report, it includes our thinking to date on the role of the centre, which the Prime Minister may wish to consider as he reflects on the sort of communications structure he needs at the centre, in the light of recent events.

2 A Breakdown in Trust

Our own research and other evidence to date point to a three-way breakdown in trust between government and politicians, the media and general public. In our research, respondents were able to recognise and describe trustworthy and untrustworthy styles of communication and associated these styles with a variety of different public sector and commercial organisations. The response of the media to a rigorous and proactive government news management strategy has been to match claim with counter claim in a challenging and adversarial way, making it difficult for any accurate communication of real achievement to pass unchallenged. Our research suggests that this adversarial relationship between Government and the media has resulted in all information being mistrusted when it is believed to have come from “political” sources. The public now expects and believes the worst of politicians and government, even when there is strong objective evidence in favour of the government’s position. We consider it vital for the health of our democratic institutions that trust between the government, the media and the public is rebuilt. This will require culture and behaviour change from all parties: politicians, the civil service and the media. Our remit does not cover the role of the media but they need to recognise that their attitude and behaviour is a vital part of the process. So, the first test for any recommendation we make will therefore be:

- i) **Will it, over time, help to restore public trust in government and the credibility of government communications?**

3 Professional Approach to Communications across Government

The importance of communications to modern government and modern society means that it cannot be approached in an ad-hoc or amateur fashion.

Communications must be strategic, and integrated into the policy and delivery strategies, both within departments and across government. Plans for communications in each department and across government should identify the aims of each piece of communication across the cycle of policy development, policy delivery and policy refinement and choose the channels best suited to that message, deploying the full range of communication techniques and tools.

Communications should be an equal and equally respected third in the trinity of Government policy making, public service delivery and communications. A culture within Whitehall that accepts and values communication both departmentally and across government is imperative.

A sample of departments visited by the review group showed wide differences in the approach to communications and in the understanding of what communications actually means. We have found no common approach to communications within government and little evidence of joined-up communications across government. Each department handles communications in their own way, some having wholeheartedly embraced the Mountfield recommendations to enhance the effectiveness of communications but others having paid them less attention. We see little evidence that being good or bad at communications has a significant bearing on prospects for advancement in the wider civil service. There are wide variations in the degrees of professionalism within the communications operations and an absence of any comprehensive mechanisms to raise standards across the board. The GICS network is a virtual and voluntary one, offering recruitment and training services that departments can take up or ignore as they see fit, and the GICS centre has neither the authority nor the capability to enforce standards in communications. Our second test for any recommendation is therefore:

ii) Will it increase the professionalism of communications within the civil service and foster a more strategic approach to communications?

4 Cross-Government Communications

The current structures and processes make it difficult effectively to co-ordinate communications across government, whether that be in response to policies such as reducing social exclusion that involve several different departments or crises such as Foot and Mouth Disease. The current “silo” approach of the departments and the fact that the GICS central unit has little or no role to play in developing cross-government communication strategies and may or may not be involved in crisis communications co-ordination seems to militate against effective co-ordination. This results in duplication of effort, contradictory messages and a damagingly slow response to crises. Hence our third test is:

iii) Will it enable better cross-government communications and a speedier and more effective response to crises and unforeseen events?

5 Roles of Special Advisers and Civil Servants

This government has relied heavily upon special advisers to deliver a proactive approach to communications. We believe that special advisers and civil servants both have important, but different roles to play. Civil servants can and should do more than issue press releases. They can and should explain Ministers' reasons and justifications for their decisions, actions and policies and their arguments for not taking other possible courses and why they do not accept the criticisms of their opponents. They also have a duty to make government information in the public domain available in an accessible manner and a timely fashion. However, when playing an advocacy role a civil servant may find that the media want, for example, to press on the Minister's underlying political thinking and how the particular point at issue fits in with the Minister's general approach to politics or the Government's overall political philosophy. This is the preserve of the special advisers. Such a role is welcomed by the media, valued by Ministers and should take the pressure off civil servants to take advocacy to a point that would compromise the political neutrality of the service. However, there is potential for confusion over respective roles and responsibilities and for civil servants to depart from their neutral and impartial position if special advisers are able to put pressure upon them. This appeared to be the case in the Jo Moore/Martin Sixsmith situation. Hence our fourth and fifth tests:

iv) Does it clarify the differences between the roles of special advisers and Civil Service communications professionals?

v) Does it protect the impartiality of the Civil Service – is this a system that would be accepted on a change of administration?

6 Role of Press Spokespersons

In the current media climate, with many more outlets for news, an adversarial relationship between the media and the government and the cult of the celebrity fuelling a focus on personalities in all walks of public life, press and media relationships are crucial for all ministers. They need high personal confidence and trust in their media spokespersons, and rely on them to have a complete understanding of policy as well as being able to speak for the Minister. We are considering the process whereby press spokespeople are recruited and trained, their movement into, through and out of the civil service, the skills and competencies of the role and the role of Ministers in their appointment. In this context, our sixth test asks of any recommendation:

vi) Does it recognise the need for a close relationship between the Minister and his or her press spokesperson?

7 Engaging the Public

Government communications must be viewed as part of a dialogue - the system must engage with individuals at all levels and let them voice their views and opinions. This goes far beyond the day-to-day media handling function and means that Government must deploy the full range of communications channels

now available – especially those with a so-called “return path”. While news handling and daily communication is an important part of modern communications, it is only a part of a portfolio of skills which, in best practice private sector companies, will include research, marketing, web site provision, internal communications, PR and paid for advertising. Effective and efficient communications strategies should take an integrated approach to all communication, from speeches through advertising to public relations, so that, taken together, they make a strategic contribution to the policy and delivery aims and objectives of each government department. To re-engage the public we believe that more emphasis also needs to be placed on local and regional communications (including the vital role of the public service employees interfacing directly with the public), as these are both more trusted and of greater relevance to individuals. It is important to recognise the role of the general public as customers and stakeholders in the services delivered by government. Hence our seventh test:

vii) Will it enable more regionalised and personalised information and promote a better dialogue with the general public?

8 Ideas under Consideration

Using the seven tests, we are developing a range of recommendations to address the cultural, structural and behavioural issues we have identified. These will be developed as a complete package - no one of them delivers the role for communications we have outlined above, but collectively they are designed to help reduce distrust and disbelief and increase the effectiveness, the performance and the value of government communications.

The ideas we are developing include:

- A strengthened and more effective central communications function
- Clearer guidelines on the respective responsibilities of civil servants and special advisers, and on propriety issues.
- Clearer processes for resolving and arbitrating on disputes about the application of these guidelines.
- More direct, on-camera and on the record briefings by Ministers on important events
- Increasing the prevalence of on the record briefings for all those speaking to the media
- A less secretive approach to Government information, and a strong application of the Freedom of Information Act
- Clear and independently produced schedules for the publication of routine government information
- A template for the management of communications within each department
- A more systematic approach to the appraisal of communications effectiveness and the appraisal of those working within communications across government departments and agencies

- Processes to recruit communications staff both internally and externally that will attract appropriate candidates into both special adviser and civil servant roles
- Increased resources for the Government News Network and greater alignment with departments and the Government Offices in the regions
- Increased resources for Government websites and for two-way communications
- Greater use of research to inform policy making and assess the success of those policies
- Guidance on styles of communication and language to ensure that meanings and messages are clear and comprehensible

We have not yet completed our work, so we do not propose to elaborate on the ideas listed above. The list is not comprehensive and in some areas our thinking and recommendations are likely to be modified in light of the work that we are currently undertaking and any relevant findings that may emerge from the Hutton Inquiry. We have, however, in response to the Prime Minister's request, included more detailed thinking on the structures and roles at the centre, which is outlined in the following paragraphs.

9 The Role of the Centre

While we recognise that the formulation and execution of departmental communication strategies should be carried out by the departments, either individually or collectively, there are several important roles for the centre of government communications. These include:

- Developing and ensuring the implementation of a communications strategy across government. This covers medium-term communications strategies and co-ordination on issues that cut across departments, such as anti-drugs policies or support for low-income families.
- Acting as a centre of expertise for the development of professional standards. This is important in the context of our second test.
- Providing support for the Prime Minister in Number 10's communications, including the co-ordination of day-to-day media handling across government.
- Providing leadership for the recruitment, training and career development of communications staff in government.
- Acting as the focal point for co-ordination of communications in crisis situations.
- Appraising and measuring the effectiveness of communications expenditure and activity across government.
- Auditing the implementation of propriety guidelines, and acting as a high-level arbitrator in disputes about their application that cannot be resolved within departments.

These roles imply the need for a more powerful, authoritative centre than GICS currently provides. The current structures at the centre fall short of what is needed in several significant ways. The GICS centre is detached from the development of policy in Number 10, is not involved in the day-to-day thinking on communications issues at the centre and has little influence on departmental communications activities. Its lack of authority and involvement means it is unable to carry out many of the roles listed above. The communications function at number 10 is under-resourced, and, notwithstanding the executive powers granted by the Order in Council, has had difficulties in coordinating and mobilising resources when it needs to do so. The fact that the Director of Communications and Strategy is a political appointment, and the power and status attached to this role have led to a perception, in some sections of the media and population at large, that, at the highest level, Government communications are being driven by an overtly political agenda.

We considered whether the centre could work more effectively if the role and powers of the Director of Communications and Strategy were strengthened. Given this is the most influential role in Government Communications, and, by virtue of being a special adviser, the occupant is not required to be impartial in the same way that Civil Servants are, we concluded that while this might pass our third test (**Will it enable better cross-government communications and a speedier and more effective response to crises and unforeseen events?**) it would, in the current climate, do little to satisfy the first test (**Will it, over time, help to restore public trust in government and the credibility of government communications?**).

In order to perform effectively, the centre needs two separate but complementary communications entities. The first of these should be a strong civil service led communications unit, based in the Cabinet Office. This would work with the Government of the day, irrespective of its political persuasion. It would be a centre of excellence for communications across the civil service and would work in close partnership with communications professionals in the departments and agencies but would also independently appraise and audit their performance. The second requirement is for a well-resourced communications function supporting the Prime Minister and based at Number 10, which would include civil servants and political appointees.

A new Permanent Secretary, Government Communications, should lead the central civil service communications unit. The Permanent Secretary, Government Communications would report to the Head of the Civil Service, and would attend the weekly Permanent Secretaries meeting, as well as Cabinet meetings as and when required. He or she would work closely with the Prime Minister and his personally appointed communications adviser to agree a cross-government communications strategy, and would be responsible for overseeing

its delivery across government. There would be five main functions reporting to the Permanent Secretary, Government Communications:

- Strategic Development and Planning, looking longer term at the communications strategies needed to deliver the governments key policy priorities and the means whereby these might be achieved. This would also include responsibility for ensuring effective e-communications, stakeholder and customer relations, access to government and regional communications strategies.
- Media and press, responsible for daily and weekly cross governmental co-ordination, crisis news handling and the Prime Minister's Official Spokespersons
- Cross government co-ordination of research, marketing and campaigns, including the work currently carried out by the COI
- Recruitment, training and career development, covering all Senior Civil Service communication posts and concentrating on raising professionalism and standards
- Appraisal of the performance and effectiveness of communications activity, including departmental reviews of cost effectiveness and professionalism, and public accountability for the application of propriety guidelines via an annual report to the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC)

Working alongside this central civil service led unit would be a strengthened communications unit based at Number 10 and supporting the Prime Minister. This would have two key appointments, one political, one governmental. They would be responsible for implementing Number 10's overall communications strategy, with a particular focus on shorter-term media and news handling, including cross-government coordination and crisis response. We are still in the process of considering appropriate titles for these roles, but for ease of use have given the political role the working title of the Prime Minister's Director of Communications, and the civil service role the working title of Deputy to the Permanent Secretary for Government Communications and Prime Minister's Senior Official Spokesman. This latter position would have special responsibility within Number 10 for the civil service communications operations.

The Number 10 operation would be led politically on a day-to-day basis on the Prime Minister's behalf by the Prime Minister's Director of Communication, who would be a political appointee. He or she would be the Prime Minister's senior political adviser on communications strategy and implementation, including acting as the Prime Minister's spokesperson on personal and political matters. He or she would work closely with the Permanent Secretary, Government Communications and the Deputy, providing the political perspective on behalf of the Prime Minister, and assisting Cabinet Ministers with the political context for departmental communications. He or she would attend Cabinet Meetings as and when required. In addition, the Prime Minister's Director of Communication should play a role in co-ordinating the

communication activities of special advisers throughout government and arbitrating, with the Permanent Secretary, Government Communications, on any disputes between civil servants and special advisers that could not be resolved within departments.

The personal authority and influence of the Prime Minister's Director of Communications within Number 10 and across Whitehall, would be based on his or her close political relationship with, and access to the Prime Minister. The group's view, after taking into account the current climate, is that formal line management powers over individual civil servants would be unnecessary and should not be vested in this role. The Order in Council should not apply in future to the position of Prime Minister's Director of Communication.

Civil service leadership within the Number 10 communications unit should be the responsibility of the other key figure, a civil servant who should act as the Deputy to the Permanent Secretary for Government Communications with special responsibility for Number 10, as well as being the Prime Minister's Senior Official Spokesman. He or she would be responsible for any other PMOSs and would attend Cabinet meetings as appropriate and take day-to-day responsibility for news co-ordination across Whitehall.

The presence of a strengthened centre would provide for direction of civil servants on communications matters by both the Permanent Secretary, Government Communications and his or her Deputy, based in Number 10.

The group believes that these arrangements recognizes the reality that the Number 10 communications effort has to reflect the political context, while more clearly delineating the non-political role of the civil servants.

We recommend that the Strategic Communications Unit should be renamed as the Prime Minister's Communications Support Unit, to avoid confusion with the Strategic Planning and Development function reporting to the Permanent Secretary, Government Communications and that its functions should be reviewed. As now, this unit would be populated by both civil servants and special advisers – the former would report to the Deputy to the Permanent Secretary, Government Communications and the latter to the Prime Minister's Director of Communications.

We are still considering the detail of how the roles of Permanent Secretary, Government Communications, his or her Deputy and the Prime Minister's Director of Communications will relate to each other, and would expect the Civil Service to take responsibility for the design of any resultant organisational structure. However we wish to stress that the overwhelming priority for any organisational design will be the need for these three people to work together effectively as part of a central communications team.

10 Next Steps

During the remainder of our work, we expect to refine and develop these proposals and those listed in paragraph 8. We plan to discuss their feasibility and detail with interested parties and those with experience of the centre, and no doubt the specifics of our thinking will change as a result of such discussions. While we have focused on changes needed within government, we are also taking evidence from the media and considering their role and responsibilities. However, we believe that the main points of our recommendations are now becoming reasonably clear and would like to emphasise the major change in structure, responsibilities, behaviour and culture across government implicit in our recommendations. We hope that this interim note will be of use to the Prime Minister as he considers the arrangements for communications in the centre of Government during the coming weeks.