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Expedient Outcomes: Communication Proves Harder than Expected

A review of the government approach to communication

Morrison’s office on Great George Street was behind Storey’s gate, overlooking St. James’ Park. Behind it was the Treasury behemoth and next door the Foreign Office. Within his limited space Morrison collected a small but very able team including Max Nicholson, John Pimlott, and P.H. ‘Puck’ Boon. These worked closely with Morrison’s committees and particularly with Robert Fraser and, from 1947, Clem Leslie. ‘In calibre it [Morrison’s office] was very high’.1

Following the criticisms of government communication, in November 1946, John Pimlott wrote a fascinating and prescient draft Cabinet memorandum on behalf of Morrison trying to address the problems. It would later be widely circulated. There had, Pimlott pointed out, ‘been a good deal of criticism in Parliament and outside’ of the way in which the government had presented its policy. His assessment was that ‘There is not a sufficiently close link between policy and publicity’. The memo then went on, in considerable detail, to describe the way in which the government should approach both departmental and government wide publicity.2

Success in the presentation of policies relied, it said, ‘upon the publicity aspect being kept in mind from the earliest practicable stage in their formulation’. This included ‘steps which may not seem directly related to publicity’. But the initial announcement itself was critical: ‘the way it is handled by the press and the BBC at the very start may make all the difference to the reaction upon the public and to subsequent publicity’. This meant the information division had to be integral to the process. The Minister should work with them on timing, (‘in relation, for example, to the desirability or otherwise of the first
appearance of the news in the evening papers’), date, (‘What, too, is the most advantageous date of publication?’), explanation (‘Should there be a summary for the press?’), delivery (‘Should there be a press conference? If so, should the Minister take it personally, and who should be invited?’), and support material (‘Should the announcement be printed as a leaflet?’). Equally they should have asked the same questions of themselves about the follow-up. Particularly if they wanted to make a film or use other publicity that required significant lead time.3

The memorandum put particular emphasis on relations with the established mass media. ‘I attach special importance to Press relations’ Pimlott (as Morrison) said, ‘Too much care can hardly be given to the establishment of good contacts with Fleet Street and Broadcasting House’. The Chief Information Officer as well as the Press Officer should be alive to this relationship, and should ask the advice and help of the Number 10 PR advisor if necessary.

The memorandum recognised that one of the continuing frustrations of Morrison and his team was ‘how to get over to the public the general background against which the activities of the various Departments should be seen and a picture of Government policy as an integrated whole’. The individual, they believed, could not understand his or her role without a sense of the national situation. This was however, very difficult given that most publicity policy emerged from the departments. Though the memorandum encouraged departments ‘not to be shy about throwing up ideas for general Government publicity’ it did not propose a solution. That would have to wait for a few months.4

Pimlott sent the memorandum to Nicholson and copied it to Boon. Both agreed with his sentiments and even extended them. Boon re-emphasised the need to draw out the wider picture, saying to Pimlott ‘you are shooting at too small game. What the public needs is more of the wide general picture. If people are given a simple and easily understood explanation of what the Government is aiming at as a whole I think they will quite readily fit into the general picture domestic and departmental events’.5 With minor adjustments it was then sent on to Morrison, Robert Fraser and Francis Williams. Fraser accepted that there was ‘a certain deadness in the relations between the Government and the people’ at the moment, but argued this was the fault of Ministers, not machinery.6 His response implied that Ministers had abdicated their responsibility for communication, expecting the new systems to do their job for them.