Prime Minister.

I think it would help to send me a letter on the lines of the attached draft. If you agree, I will clear the draft with the Lord President and then send it round.

!.

CONFIDENTIAL

MR WHITMORE

AJ
23xii

Excellent.
Agreed
MT

PRESENTATION - WHERE WE ARE FAILING

We discussed this problem on Friday and I promised you a note which you may care to put to the Prime Minister for comment and approval of the action I suggest. This minute reflects comments made to me by politicians and political journalists but is based essentially on my experience of different Governments since 1967.

Overall Assessment

This Government is widely felt to be one of the least "political" we have had for years. Certainly it does not spend much time agonising over presentation. I cannot think of another Government I have served which, for example, would have come as clean over its public expenditure decisions in the middle of miners' pay negotiations.

This Government is more concerned with getting the right decisions - i.e. decisions which it perceives to be right - than with how they are received. That means that presentation has a relatively low priority.

It has found it possible to maintain this stance for a combination of reasons:

- its strong majority in Parliament;
- the phenomenal disarray in the Parliamentary Labour Party;
- the broad acceptance in the Conservative Parliamentary Party of the overall strategy and policies; and
- on the whole, a good relationship with the media.

But now the Government has lost a number of by-elections; the SDP is riding high and far higher than anyone (including the Liberals) expected; the Conservative Parliamentary Party is tetchy, nervous, anxious for signs of hope and success and rebellious; and the Government has latterly run into trouble on a number of issues.

Presentation is therefore of increasing importance and this is reflected in the tendency - par for the course in all Governments in mid-term - to lay the blame for failures at the door of presentation.

There is no doubt that presentation could be improved. But the Government must face the fact that it is its own worst presentational enemy. It is no longer possible for the Government to present its policies on its own terms. Invariably the worst possible light is put upon them before they have been formally announced by malicious leaking. A more cohesive Government would work wonders for presentation.

Thus the problem we now face is not whether the Government can improve its standing with the public by better presentation, but whether it has the will to do so.

Solving the problem

Any proposals for improving presentation must take account of the fact that the Government is a house divided.

They must also face up to the reality that what really counts is substance and not veneer. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear.

We must also accept that all Governments go through bad patches. We had one 12 months ago when we ran into all sorts of embarrassing problems over Written Answers when Mr Foot wanted Oral Statements, not to mention the appalling mess (in the context of the public expenditure decisions) over the effect on employers of increased National Insurance contributions.

We have latterly been through another series:

- Rates Bill/referenda (a policy failure);
- Juggernauts (a clear case of the right policy ineffectively sold);

- Inner cities (a classic example of Government failing to put over its decisions in the best possible light); and
- Public expenditure (a text book example of the Government's failure to decide how to present its policy).

We learned from the 1980 presentational errors. For example, this time we watched the effect on employer National Insurance contributions like a hawk. Can we now learn from the 1981 mistakes? And, more important, can we devise some rules which will generally safeguard the Government's presentation?

Proposals

The Heath Government tried to cope with the problem by insisting that each Cabinet paper contained a passage headed 'Presentation', under which Ministers were supposed briefly to set out the problems and how they proposed to cope with them. I do not believe this worked.

The proposals and procedures suggested below - and especially Point 2 - are likely to have more practical effect. They assume that it is generally recognised that officials will be less than effective in their presentational efforts if Ministers are displaying their divisions to the world.

Having said that, it is possible to ensure better presentation if the following basic rules are observed:

1 - Departments should, wherever possible, give No. 10 Private and Press Offices and the Lord President's Office 48 hours in which to comment on draft statements; the maximum amount of time for comment is the essential point. Central Departments operating at a distance from policy detail have a potentially invaluable presentational commentary to make.

2 - Draft statements should be submitted with background papers which identify the major points of political attack (from all quarters) and how those attacks may be repulsed. This is not making work. In each Department I have worked in I have made it my responsibility to pose the awkward questions on all policy developments and to ensure that satisfactory answers were available before and not after presentation. We did it here in No. 10 to some effect on the dismantling of the CSD. This should be standard Departmental practice.

3 - Departments should identify as a matter of course announcements of policy developments, measures, initiatives and Answers which are politically sensitive; ensure that positive and defensive briefing is prepared; and alert their Press Offices in good time to operate effectively - i.e. bring them into the process of identifying sensitive issues and how they might best be presented.

4 - As one aspect of 3 above, Departments should identify as a matter of course and priority good news and ensure that they and their Press Offices put it over with vigour; I am sorry to say that day in and day out No. 10 Press Office has to drag good news out of Departments and, having dragged it out, has to spur them to sell it hard.

Summary

Nothing can be achieved unless Ministers and officials accept that presentation is essential to the Government's success. If that is accepted, the next requirement is for Ministers to recognise that presentation will be more rather than less effective if they row together. But whether they row together or not there are ways in which the Government's act can be better presented and these are set out in the attached Dear Private Secretary letter for your signature.

B. INGHAM
16 December 1981

Draft Dear Private Secretary letter

The Prime Minister is anxious, ~~as I am sure is the Government~~, to improve the presentation of ~~its~~ the Government's policies. I am therefore writing, in his instructions, to suggest some practical ways in which this might be achieved. ~~[subject - of course - to Ministers being able to present their policies, measures and initiatives in the way they would choose rather than in a manner conditioned by unauthorised disclosure]~~

The Prime Minister and the Lord President both wish to have the opportunity

~~If we are to treat presentation seriously, Departments should give No. 10 Private and Press Offices and the Lord President's Office the maximum amount of time~~ formally to comment on Parliamentary statements, ~~initiatives or sensitive~~ and particularly important Answers. But to do this they need time, ~~I suggest that 48 hours advance notice should be the working rule.~~ and Departments should accordingly aim to get drafts to the No 10 Private and Press Offices and to the Lord President's Office early on the morning of the day before the announcement.

Second, Departments should ensure that ~~details of each~~ these draft statements, ~~initiative~~ and Answers ~~should be~~ are sent to No. 10 and the Lord President, ~~with~~ they are accompanied by background notes which identify the likely points of ~~political~~ attack and suggest how those attacks can best be met. It is ~~absolutely~~ essential that before any Department ~~goes public~~ makes an announcement, the lines of attack should have been anticipated and a means of securing the most positive presentation should have been devised.

— and as a more routine thing —

Third, Departments should as a matter of course identify issues which are likely to arise and problems, ~~and opportunities~~ and should ensure that their press offices (and the No. 10 Press Office) are put in the best position to meet the problems and at the same time to exploit ~~the~~ any opportunities for presenting matters in a positive and favourable light. For maximum effect, guidance should reach No. 10 Press Office by 10.45 am and 3.45 pm each day. If No. 10 learns about a departmental problem for the first time through a press enquiry, we are not half placed to handle it to the Government's advantage.

Finally, it goes without saying that Departments should pay particular attention to items of good news and ~~ensure~~ should see that they are put over with vigour. The Prime Minister ~~is over willing to lend a hand in this both~~ is herself ready to give publicity to items of good news, for example, at Question Time and in speeches. ~~(or on more informal occasions)~~. She also wants Departments to give her Press Office ~~to be given~~ positive material it can draw on on an day-to-day basis. ~~bullets to fire by Departments.~~

I should be grateful if you could ensure that the close ~~points~~ points are

I am ~~sure~~ I can count on ~~you~~ to act on ~~this~~ prescription for improving the presentation of Government policy.

Some constantly in mind in your Department. If there is one aspect of them I would single out for particular mention, it is the importance of giving departmental Press Offices and the No 10 Press Office as much notice of proposed announcements as possible: general PTO

presentation needs time for preparation.

I am sending copies of this letter to the Prime Minister, to the members of the Cabinet, and to the Chief Whip, ~~and to A copies copy~~ and to Sir Robert Armstrong.