

## Presentation

I make no apology for stressing the importance of presentation so early in this book. It is an intrinsic part of policy development, because it is never enough, in today's society, merely to introduce new laws and regulations and then expect instant obedience. We have to get the population on our side, or else even the cleverest of policies will fail. Indeed, some parts of Whitehall have come to recognise that they are involved in what amounts to a permanent campaign.

You must also remember that very few people read guidance material, however well written. New regulations therefore need to be easy to understand, and clearly communicated via the media, if they are to be generally accepted and easily enforced. The main purpose of guidance material should be to answer questions about the application of the new rules to non-standard situations.

We must therefore design policies that are easily communicated. Furthermore, presentation needs to be considered right at the beginning of the policy process, not near the end, for policies that are hard to understand, and hard to defend, are generally flawed. The time to think about this is before you choose your policy option, not right at the end of the process. White Papers, consultation documents etc. should make it crystal clear how each proposal will make life better for ordinary members of the public, for business or for other sectors.

Let's now fast forward beyond the policy design stage to the point at which Ministers' decisions need to be announced, and so become the object of critical scrutiny by other politicians and the media. We now have a duty to be less analytical and help Ministers present their policies and decisions in the best possible light. In order to carry out this task, we must put aside any doubts (and sometimes also put aside inconvenient facts) and look at the issue through Ministers' eyes in order to help them express their beliefs and defend their policies as effectively as possible.

Whenever you are thinking about the presentational aspects of a policy, there are two or three things to bear in mind.

- P** *First*, we need to be constantly on the look out for opportunities for Ministers to publicise their policies and their programmes. We need to be pro-active in looking for media and other opportunities, including in connection with developments in related policy areas elsewhere in the department or Whitehall.
- P** *Second*, don't be mesmerised by the media. There are lots of other ways to communicate your policies, including via the web and by getting key opinion formers and senior stakeholders on your side.
- P** *Third*, Ministers will usually want their policies to be set within the Government's

wider agenda. So every important speech, letter or magazine article has to speak to current key themes before focusing down on its particular subject. If you do not have a note of current themes – and they do change from time to time – then consult your Press Office.

**P** *Fourth*, do bear in mind that there are strict limits to how far we can go without compromising our political impartiality. On the one hand, it is perfectly proper for us to prepare drafts for Ministers (including draft Parliamentary Answers) which praise the Government's policies, and it is perfectly proper for our drafts to omit facts and arguments which might cast doubt on the appropriateness of those policies. In doing this, we are not being unprofessional. Rather, like the barrister whose principal duty is to the court and who does not necessarily believe in the client's case, we are simply providing the best possible professional service to our clients, without going so far as to mislead either the Minister or Parliament. On the other hand, we may not explicitly or implicitly criticise members of, nor the policies of, the Opposition, nor may we criticise the actions or performance of the current Opposition whilst they were in Government. Also, anything in a draft that purports to be a fact must be verifiable. Nor may we serve up unverifiable generalisations. If you feel that Ministers would want to make a statement which cannot be verified then you should suggest that they say something like: 'I believe it is clear that . . .' or something of the sort, so attributing the statement to the Minister, rather than implying that it cannot be questioned.

Incidentally, Ministers are particularly sensitive about publications put out by departments. Even the most obscure of documents can contain embarrassing 'expert's' comments or ambiguous facts – often stuck in an obscure annex. Commentators will then use the document to attack a Minister – even though he or she may never have seen it. Of course such documents must still be published, but Ministers are entitled to be warned about possible problems, and given an opportunity to prepare their comments. All documents should therefore be read in detail by someone other than their author to check for problems.

And you should be particularly careful when supporting your Minister in 'the box' in the House of Commons, or sitting in a Committee room anywhere in Parliament. In particular, it is a dead give away if you put your head in your hands when your Minister is asked the one question that you have particularly dreaded!