

PUBLIC AFFAIRS

NEWS, VIEWS AND HULLABALOO

STUART THOMSON

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'Cover Illustration by **Sarah Goddard** silhouette artist at Visage Silhouettes'

www.visagesilhouettes.co.uk

Silhouette artist, Sarah Goddard has been creating silhouettes freehand using scissors since 2000. This art form is extremely rare and is reminiscent of the 18th Century artform founded by Etienne de Silhouette in Paris. Sarah mainly works at events cutting silhouette profiles of guests as a unique memento. The silhouette on the front cover of, 'Public Affairs' was also a result of a party silhouette which was made in only a minute and presented in a mount card to take away. Who would have thought it would have ended up on the front page!

This book is dedicated to Alex, Will, Callum and Elenya and not forgetting Mum, Dad and Iain.

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INTRODUCTION

Writing a blog is not for everyone. The regular commitment to writing 500-800 words, week in week out, means that you have to have interesting ideas about what to write about combined with the ability to have a tone of voice that people are prepared to listen to regularly.

For me, blogging was a way of continuing the work of my earlier books, particularly Public Affairs in Practice. That book secured good reviews and people seemed to like it. It is not the only book on public affairs but alongside a couple of notable others, it is recommended reading for a number of public affairs courses.

Public affairs is fundamentally about communications. What makes it different from other communications disciplines is the role that politics plays. Very often those involved in public affairs have political decisions as their aim. This involves communicating with a range of stakeholders but particularly politicians. They have their own special needs and work in an environment that can be alien to many.

Obviously there is a UK focus in the chapters of this book but the lessons are valuable across jurisdictions and countries. While some of the policy-making processes and nature of Parliaments may vary, the fundamentals of engaging with politicians remain pretty constant.

I was attracted to writing a blog by idea that I could offer tips, hints and thoughts on public affairs and political communications. In my case, I also have an employer, Bircham Dyson Bell, that values the thought leadership and profile that regular blogging can bring. Sometimes people comment on the blogs and this offers some great discussions, an opportunity I always try to take.

The breadth of public affairs lends itself to blogging, as there are lots of issues to explore. Crisis communications, media relations, project development, local engagement, lobbying all sit under the umbrella of public affairs and so are fair game to be explored in my blog.

The down side of blogs are that they tend to exist in a particular moment. They are read the week that they are published but then the intellectual capital that has been invested just sits on the website's server occasionally revealing itself after a random web search.

That was until Matthew Smith of Urbane Publications stepped forward. This book was Matthew's idea. He was the one that saw the potential in bringing the posts together in an e-book and giving the ideas a chance to see a wider audience and live on a little more. I am hugely grateful to Matthew both for having the idea and having the faith in me to publish this book. I have been fortunate enough to work with some big publishing companies but none have Matthew's insight, drive and enthusiasm. But particularly, Matthew has ideas. In an era of constant change in publishing as in politics, ideas are critical and that makes, I think, Urbane Publications and my blog a natural fit.

Some of my blog posts are better than others. The aim of this book is to use the best ones, sharpen and improve where needed, and offer them another lease of life. They have also been themed so

that similar posts sit together rather than reflecting the haphazard way in which I have otherwise written them. This is a better approach for the book and means that the reader can learn a series of lessons on topics. It makes the book coherent in a way that the blogs normally have no need to be. Each chapter offers practical advice alongside views. Some are based on regular and ongoing problems faced by those working in public affairs, others are meant for the more occasional political engager. There are a few more that focus on the hullabaloo that constantly swirl around politics.

I would like to give Bircham Dyson Bell formal thanks for their support. For some of the posts I needed a bit of guidance from others and particularly Sana Ali is always pleased give me comments and put right my writing errors!

I also have a wonderful and supportive family that put up with my political focus. The day wouldn't be the same for me, my wife, Alex, and our children (Will, Callum and Elenya) without a dose of the Today programme over the breakfast table and questions flowing from the children about government decisions, politics and maybe football as well. Actually, I blame my mum (Maureen), dad (William) and brother (Iain) for talking about politics when I was growing up. Them and John Craven's Newsround.

Stuart Thomson

November 2014

SECTION 1 – PUBLIC AFFAIRS AND LOBBYING

The rise of Select Committees

20 November 2012

Parliament's efforts to boost the standing of Select Committees are working. Unfortunately, it seems that many outside of the Committee corridor have yet to catch up with this. There still appear to be organisations external to Parliament who don't take Select Committees as seriously as they should.

In the past, the power and influence of a Select Committee was often solely down to the standing of its chair, and as they were appointed this standing varied. Making the position elected has changed the dynamic and a MP can really carve a role, voice and career for themselves by being an effective chair.

This has also meant that membership of the Committees has become more attractive and is pursued by MPs with Ministerial ambitions or an alternative career path to the Cabinet in the Commons. An effective MP can play a critical role from the backbenches by being an active Committee member. The prime example of this is Tom Watson MP who, on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, really did pursue the Murdochs (as did Louise Mensch before her resignation).

So with the position of the Chair boosted and membership more attractive, on the face of it Committees have sharper teeth to better meet the challenge of scrutinising.

In the main, Committees reflect the responsibilities of the Departments they hold to account when choosing their inquiries. They appear though to be getting bolder in choosing what to have inquiries on and also who they call to give evidence. These breeds further confidence.

But it is still the case that when it comes to giving evidence, many organisations and individuals are ill-prepared or seem not to not take it as seriously as they should.

There is no doubt that George Entwistle's problems were brought into even sharper focus because he wasn't fully prepared for the questioning that came his way at the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee. It undoubtedly contributed to him stepping down his job as the BBC's Director-General. Nick Buckles of G4S made such a mess of his first appearance at the Home Affairs Select Committee that he came back for more but this time without the pinstripe suit and with a smarter haircut.

Starbucks don't appear to have used the opportunity of an appearance before the Public Accounts Committee to put the record straight on their UK tax affairs. Even the most basic trawl of previous company statements on UK profits will be enough to put question marks besides their responses in the eyes of the Committee members.

Amazon has come under pressure for sending someone to give evidence to the same Committee who couldn't answer some basic questions. This led its Chair, Margaret Hodge, to ask the firm to send 'someone more important' along.

The media too seem enthralled by these Select Committee hearings and they are securing large amounts of coverage.

All this isn't to say that Select Committees have got it all right. Whilst they are putting external audiences under pressure, they are not always as aggressive with Ministers. The quality of the Committees varies as well - whilst some excel, others are less impressive.

We also should not get too carried with the current interest in the Committees. At a time of less interesting inquiries their star may fade. They need to maintain the momentum.

As things stand, they seem to be taking their line from the more powerful and influential Congressional Committees in the US. Whilst there is a long way to go, they should have an aim in mind.

But this will mean a serious look by Parliament at the powers allocated to Committees, the resources at their disposal and the size of their teams. Until these are beefed up, there is only so much the Select Committee can achieve.

Royal power over legislation

24 January 2013

It came as a surprise to many that the Queen and Prince Charles are not only asked to consider legislation before it goes onto the statute book but effectively have the power of veto as well.

The Guardian story provided information and details gathered as a result of a Freedom of Information (FoI) request. However, it was largely because of how the Cabinet Office dealt with the FoI request that the paper was able to talk about the 'secretive powers of veto' (emphasis added).

It helped the Guardian to build its story and gave it more impact than it may otherwise have had. Looking at the list of legislation over which the Royals were consulted reveals few surprises – most are directly relevant to the position and authority of the Monarch, the use of the symbols of the Monarchy, etc, though there are some surprises – who knew that Prince Charles is consulted about shipping laws because the Duchy of Cornwall runs the harbours on the Scilly Isles?

Instead of looking at the balance of the potential story it appears that the Cabinet Office, as is common amongst many public authorities, took the view that they needed to fight the FoI request almost as it were on principle.

This opens up a wider discussion about how public authorities deal with FoI requests. Many simply consider that the information should remain secret and fight it. They do not always think through the communications implications or how stakeholders will react to information being kept secret with taxpayers money being spent trying to keep information away from the public.

This may be because those making the decisions are not responsible for communications and / or do not talk to their communications people. This approach also means that if the FoI request is lost then the public authority is on the back foot in communications terms, because, even if the requested information turns out not to be that interesting, the requester can spin a story out of the attempts to keep it secret. In this case the Cabinet Office lost, appealed and then gave in, which compounded the situation.

Whilst, of course, each case has to be looked at on its own merits, it is a perfectly acceptable solution to make the information available from the outset and say 'yes' to the FOI request. The authority would then be in a better position to manage the release of the information on their terms.

They could, for instance, spoil the story by issuing the information before the media are ready to publish. It also gives a better chance to get their explanation out. Controlling the information provides the opportunity of being on the front foot and having to be less reactive.

Too many public authorities currently take a reactive stance on FOI requests which does not consider the importance of reputation.

For those involved in public affairs, the story also reveals an additional need to consider any implications of the issue / legislation on the powers of the Monarch. It means that we have to be particularly aware of how the final version of any legislation may be viewed and it may also require some additional stakeholders to be briefed.

Public authorities need a better appreciation of the options open to them when it comes to FOI and to consider all of them from the outset – fighting the request may not be in their best interest and can inflict substantial reputational damage. In the case of the Cabinet Office, they may well have inflicted damage on the reputation of themselves, Parliament and the Royals.

Recent Select Committee reports show tensions between MPs

15 February 2013

The Public Accounts Committee's (PAC) report on local transport funding published last week packs a double punch. As well as stating that the Department for Transport (DfT) does not have adequate systems in place to monitor transport funding given to local authorities, the report also suggests that devolving transport funding powers could be a 'risky move'.

The PAC report is the latest in a series of select committee publications considering the pros and cons of localism over centralism but its conclusions are at odds with the findings of other committee reports.

The primary conclusion of the PAC report relates to DfT and argues that it does not have a firm handle on the £2.2bn given to local councils to spend on transport projects. MPs on the committee argue that the DfT has failed to put systems in place to assess value for money and identify failures.

A secondary conclusion of the report is that going ahead with Government's plans to devolve transport funding powers for major projects to newly created Local Transport Bodies (LTBs) by 2015 may be a 'risky move'. The PAC report argues that this may further erode the already 'limited' accountability structures that are in place.

What seems to have really struck a chord with council chiefs is the suggestion that Whitehall's apparent confidence in the ability of LTBs to make sufficiently strategic and joined up decisions in the face of tough financial pressures is 'misplaced'. The Local Government Association (LGA) issued an angry response to the suggestion branding it as a 'slap in the face' and 'baseless speculation'. A strong but arguably reasonable reaction?

Well, other recent committee reports considering issues such as local-centre relations and the management capabilities of DfT do seem to have taken a different view on the capabilities of local government.

The Transport Select Committee's 'Rail 2020' report published in January recommended that some rail franchises, such as the Northern franchise, should be devolved to local or regional bodies. The report also stated that the DfT lacks the commercial skills and expertise to let and manage franchise contracts effectively and suggested that these should be outsourced to an arms length body with more commercial nous.

The Political and Constitutional Reform Committee published a report last month examining the prospects of codifying relations between central and local government. It found that the balance between the two was skewed in favour of central government and needs to be addressed. The committee outlined a code which gives councils more autonomy and fiscal powers, which the committee argued in its report, is required for local government to better shape public services for the communities that they serve.

These differing conclusions perhaps justify the angry response from local government and are also quite revealing about tension between the centralism and localism amongst select committees.

The PAC's conclusions are also confusing because the comments about LTBs seem to suggest that Whitehall departments 'do it better' than local government but the report also criticises DfT's monitoring of transport spending by local councils.

To be fair to the PAC, the 'minimum requirements' that DfT published last November as guidance to LTBs developing their assurance frameworks are quite light on detail. In terms of reporting requirements there is not much more information provided beyond the need for LTBs to submit annual reports to the DfT and that DfT will conduct 'periodic assessments' of spending decisions.

But the committee's concern seems to stem from the belief that LTBs spending decisions need to be monitored stringently because they will not be able to make sufficiently strategic decisions in the face of financial pressures. This is perhaps unfair as it ignores examples of good work being done up and down the country by many local authorities to be more radical, innovative and collaborative in the approach to public services. This assertion also assumes that this knowledge will not filter through to LTBs of which local authorities are an integral part.

As LTBs get ready to submit draft frameworks this month to the DfT for consideration, it will be interesting to see how far beyond the minimum requirements they will go.

In addition, given that this is the second report in just over a fortnight criticising the Department's capacity to manage, the PAC report suggests that there is more food for thought here for the DfT than for council leaders.

Bad lobbying: Top five reasons why Public Affairs campaigns fail

19 February 2013

All too often ineffective public affairs campaigns suffer from similar faults. If campaigns do not have the right architecture, designed from the very outset, then a lot of time, effort and resources can be wasted.

Considering some key structural issues right at the start means that some of the problems can be avoided. A short 'audit' before campaigning gets underway would be welcome because it would help stop some of the obvious mistakes from being made. It will not guarantee success but at least, if challenged, it can be shown that you were doing the right things.

Some of the most common faults are

- 1 **Failure to provide a workable solution** – this is cardinal sin number one. It remains the case that many organisations do not consider it their responsibility to come up with a solution to the problem they have. Under those circumstances, it is not clear whose responsibility it actually is. If the organisation cannot find a solution then how will anyone else? Also, if you are working with officials on the issue then understand that they will be looking for help and support, not a series of meetings with organisations who want to have the opportunity to get some issues off their chests.

A workable solution can take many forms from legislation through to changes in guidance. However, the key phrase is 'workable' - be careful not to ask for the moon on a stick. If it is not within the power or gift of the stakeholders you hope can implement it then it is not workable.

- 2 **Wrong people** – government is much more open than it has ever been before, locally and nationally. A lack of information is no longer the problem, rather working through what is available and prioritising can be. Part of the openness relates to the names of people and organisations you may need to work with, influence, or face opposition from. But are they all relevant and do they wield power or influence? It is too easy to think that you are dealing with the right people but you are instead heading off down a dead end, wasting time speaking to people that whilst relevant, are not in a position to really assist the campaign.

- 3 **Wrong time** – working with Parliament and government can be daunting. For Westminster the policy timetable can often be quite unclear, especially when a policy is in its early stages of development. It is not like Brussels where often an explicit timetable for policy exists so you know when and where decisions will be taken and at what stages and when stakeholders will be consulted.

In Westminster, time should be spent working out the timetable for a policy so that the campaign has, sometimes a best guess, built into it. This is essential as it relates directly back to the first point, delivering a workable solution. Solutions can vary over time depending on where the issue is in the policy-making process. It also highlights the need to get involved in policy development and design from the earliest opportunity. The more you can shape and offer constructive engagement the less likely adverse outcomes are. You can only know when this time is, however, if you are following the relevant issues and know the timetable.

- 4 **Wrong level** – especially for CEOs and other senior executives, there is a temptation to aim contact at the very top, a fixation on No 10 and the mis-guided belief that the Prime Minister or Secretary of State controls all the levers of power. In fact, Steve Hilton’s recent comments about the power of the civil service show that even No 10 does not think it has complete control over the operation of government.

In fact, going straight to the top from the outset will just show that you do not understand the policy-making process. You may get a nice picture of your CEO outside the door of No 10 for the intranet site and company magazine but it won’t increase the chances of a campaign’s success.

- 5 **Too much emphasis on the media** – the media card can be played too early in a public affairs campaign. The knee-jerk assumption that the media can be a way of applying pressure on politicians to take action can have exactly the opposite effect. If politicians and government feel pressurised too early, without having had the option of dealing with the issue and considering it, then the media spotlight can cause them to dig their heels in. This will only lessen the chances of success for the campaign, add to costs and lengthen the timescale.

Of course, a good public affairs campaign needs to be fleet of foot and change of time, have robust messages and have clear aims but if an initial audit focuses on these five issues then it will have a much better chance of success.

The Secret State: Top five Ways to learn what Government is planning

14 March 2013

All too often organisations only bother to engage with government when there is a problem that they need to address. But government often cannot react that quickly. It can be a supertanker that takes time to manoeuvre and you certainly have little chance of stopping it.

There are two lessons from this. Firstly, know what government is planning so that you can make informed decisions about engagement at the right time. Secondly, be prepared to commit resources to getting involved over a period of time in engaging with policy and building networks. No self respecting organisation would fail to network in their sector and amongst their peers, so why is politics and government often treated differently when they can have such an impact on how an organisation operates.

Here's how to find out what is being planned

- 1 **Parliament** - the monitoring of Parliamentary proceedings remains the building block of any political communication. Knowing what is going on, who is saying what, what campaigns are getting traction etc means that action can be taken. Parliamentary questions, debates, select committees, all party groups, early day motions, they all have to be considered.

A recent example helps to prove the point. Eric Pickles, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, has been 'combative' in his relations with local government since

entering government. A recent ministerial statement by Pickles on local government finance claimed that there is a 'secret state' of unelected council tax levying bodies. He went on to list these bodies and promised legislative proposals to increase their accountability and transparency. Only by being aware of these comments can those organisations potentially involved hope to take action. If they don't then they could face some dire government interventions riddled with unintended consequences.

- 2 **Speeches** - it is all too easy just to pay attention to the headlines carried in the media about the big set piece speeches. It is often the detail that is more important and you can only understand this by reading the full speeches, not just the edited highlights. Also, junior ministers and the opposition all give speeches as well and often these are not the subject of any media coverage. It does not make them any less important or relevant to you.

You only have to consider the case of author Hilary Mantel's recent speech and the media furore which followed to see how context and setting can be totally missed by the media and comments taken out of context.

- 3 **The media** - when Labour were in power they had a tactic of letting new policy ideas emerge through the media. If there was an adverse reaction then they could claim that it was never government policy and then shelve it. The 'popular' ones could then move forward. This also meant that organisations, if they were paying attention, had the opportunity to make representations to government. Government still uses this tactic so organisations still need to be alert.

- 4 **Engagement** - pro-active engagement across the political spectrum means that you will pick up information and insight. It is not just about government but also how the opposition is reacting, what tactics it may be adopting on an issue. All this information will enable you to make informed decisions about your engagement and tactics. Good networking should not just be applied to business circles but wider stakeholder audiences as well. Often the challenge is then how this information is brought together and managed effectively - how do you ensure that the information is shared and acted upon?

- 5 **Look back in time** - few political ideas are new and many have a habit of coming back time and time again. Taking a historical view may not be the most exciting of approaches but that does not make it any less correct. Take public health, transport, finance all have ideas that come back every few years. Learn from these. You do not come to them with a blank sheet of paper, instead there may be knowledge and responses already in existence just waiting for their time to re-emerge.

By considering all these sources, a picture of what government is planning and what the potential risks or positives are can be drawn. Once this is in place informed decisions about appropriate actions can be made. The issue of what to do when you see a threat emerging is one that I will come back to in a future blog.

The Queen's Speech: Top five ways To mobilise your lobbying

03 April 2013

On the 8th of May the Queen will read out the list of Government bills to be introduced in the next Parliament. The Queen's Speech is one of the big set piece Parliamentary occasions. With fixed-term parliaments there is now much more clarity about when elections and the Speech will take place. They aren't fixed points in a calendar but you can plan around them.

Too many people underestimate the importance of the Queen's Speech – they see it as just a list of Bills. But considered properly it can be a valuable launch pad for constructive and effective engagement.

Of course, nothing in the Speech should come as a surprise. If engagement has already taken place then it will just reaffirm what you already know. A large part is also trailed widely in advance in the media. Indeed, at the latter end of the last Labour government the contents were even consulted on (the programme being released around six months before).

There are though important lobbying considerations around the Queen's Speech.

- 1 **The detail** – unfortunately, very little detail is provided alongside the Speech. There will be some accompanying documents and these should be considered. It is always worth having a thorough double check of these documents and looking for Bills that may not, at first glance, appear directly relevant. Very often the devil is in the detail and Bills can potentially contain measures which may need attention or support.
- 2 **The opportunities** – you should be looking to make the most of the opportunities presented by the Speech. Some of the Bills mentioned will be introduced almost immediately; others won't come until much later in the session. That means that the proposed legislation will be in various states of readiness, some being more embryonic than others. This makes engagement with the relevant government department an absolute priority.
- 3 **Read the Speech** – not all the Bills make the headlines so it is important to actually go through the Speech and consider the contents. Reading the Speech in detail also enables you to more fully understand both government priorities and those of the individual departments. The latter, in particular, can be lost in the media coverage.
- 4 **Be ready** – it is critical that you are capable of moving quickly. Be ready with reaction - support, an expression of opposition to plans or a call for more engagement in the detail of the proposals. It can set the tone for the lobbying work going forward.
- 5 **Follow-up** – there is a debate in Parliament on the Queen's Speech once it has been delivered. The debate is broken down into subject areas and you should not miss the

opportunity to brief Parliamentarians so that they can take part in the relevant debates. Again, this helps to highlight issues at the outset and can be used as a basis for further work.

The Bills announced should not come as any surprise if you are already plugged into policy making. But even then the Queen's Speech should not be ignored. There may be action to take but without proper analysis any opportunities will be lost.

The real lesson of the Queen's Speech is that early and frequent engagement with government is the only real solution.

Super-PAC is go: why lobbying is more than just money

16 April 2013

The news that some of Silicon Valley's biggest names have come together to form a political action group highlights the potential dangers of simply throwing money at a problem.

One big caveat to start. The super-PAC will be operating in the US and their political system is very different from ours. There are requirements to put structures in place if organisations wish to make financial and other contributions. That should not though shift the focus away from the scale of the challenge the body faces. Money does matter in US politics in a way that it does not here but successful lobbying is not just about the size of the chequebook. In fact that can have the opposite effect with politicians needing to show that money doesn't talk or buy influence.

Large sums of money can be a hindrance rather than a help. In terms that the tech industry may recognise, the super-PAC needs to think of itself as a lean start-up. That attitude would help to drive creativity and enthusiasm for its lobbying.

If we think of the body as, in effect a trade body, then it needs to bring in a wide membership base so that it is not seen as a narrow clique with important, but possibly more ignorable, issues. Being the play thing of a few monied individuals does not motivate politicians to take action.

It comes down to the strength of argument, how it is supported and ensuring that the lobbying is done at the right time to the right people. They are lessons which apply equally to the US and UK.

Given the budgets involved, the contributors will expect action and achievements. Not to start with but certainly after a few years. The body will need to demonstrate that progress has been made and that means being able to measure and communicate that progress to members.

From our perspective, the demands of the US government may soon become the demands made on other governments. If, as reports suggest, the first big issue that the super-PAC will tackle is visas for skilled migrants then that is an issue that rings true for the UK as well.

These are global businesses with global demands who do not like having to operate to different laws in different jurisdictions, although they will be sufficiently pushed. Governments do not, however, like spending lots of time and money in the courts defending their policies against big corporates. So the tech industry, and others, needs to be aware of the interplay between their legal approaches and their lobbying.

One of the first issues the super-PAC will focus on is immigration reform to enable more skilled workers such as engineers to come to the US but immigration is a highly political and often toxic issue. Lobbying on the issue needs organisations to act together to demonstrate that it needs to be addressed and that the 'benefits' for politicians to take action are sufficiently large. That makes it a cross party issue. If the same issue was raised here then media relations would be essential as well. There will be a lot of the media that would take an instant dislike to the position and will be vocal about it. Corporate reputations will be on the line.

Rich clubs of business people, from whatever sector, are indicative of a very old, closed type of politics and not the open, democratic, transparent approach which technology has made available to all. The super-PAC needs to embody that approach in the US and in other countries should it look to lobby elsewhere. Simply throwing money at problems rarely works.

The Coalition: Five lessons for lobbyists

30 April 2013

When the Coalition Government came to office there was a good deal of head scratching by politicians, commentators and lobbyists alike about what this new, for Westminster, style of government would mean. However, after nearly three years we can draw a number of lessons about how this Coalition has behaved and what it means for engagement with government.

- 1 **The power of the public** - the Coalition has shown that it is particularly susceptible to reversing policy decisions if it believes that large numbers of people are actively against a policy. It would be naive to suggest that other governments haven't listened to public opinion but the Coalition will perform abrupt u-turns if pressed. Just look at the forest sell off - proposed, being consulted on and then unceremoniously dumped part way through the consultation!
- 2 **The role of the media** - for a lobbyist the media should only be used at the right time in a campaign but it is an excellent way to demonstrate point one. Ministers in this government appear less concerned with media strategy than under Labour. It can be argued that this is a good or bad approach but the consequence is that Ministers tend to react in a much more ad hoc and uncoordinated way than under the previous government.
- 3 **Show me the money** - the one absolute constant is the quest to cut the deficit. The government need, and will become increasingly obsessed by, policies and schemes that can be delivered quickly and with minimal outlay whilst securing jobs and growth. 2015 is coming around very quickly and unless the Coalition can deliver a boost to the economy whilst bringing down the deficit, they will struggle to be re-elected (either partner). As we approach the time of the Queen's Speech, it is these issues that will also dominate the legislative programme but as the Coalition has already discovered, passing laws does not guarantee growth.

- 4 **Conservative vs Lib Dem** - differences between Ministers are clear and can, sometimes, help a cause. Splits can block as much as unity can help to drive a policy through. Unforced government reshuffles have certainly declined in number and the Prime Minister has so far proved less willing to use a reshuffle as a way of attempting to boost the Coalition's popularity. Largely the Ministerial team you are dealing with will be the same going forward.

- 5 **No political decisions** - related to all of the above has to be the realisation that, especially as the General Election draws close, the Coalition will not make any big political decisions. This is partly down to the difficulties involved in binding two parties together on such matters and partly down to a wish to avoid having too many winners and losers from decisions. Just look at the promises made to deal with capacity and investment in roads. No 10 and the Treasury have blocked plans put forward by the Department for Transport and the timescales for a roads policy keeps being put back. Most recently it was meant to be coming forward at the time of the Budget (which was delayed in itself) then June and now 'this year'. This understanding of how the Coalition is likely to behave is critical and needs to be factored into any campaigns and their timescales. Moving a decision on airports and aviation to an independent Commission helps to cover the Coalition's divisions over the issue. The Lib Dems are against any expansion in the South East and the Conservatives built their election approach on being against a third runway at Heathrow. But none of the main players have agreed to abide by the outcome of the Commission's report or even to make any decisions based on its interim report which is all about possible short term measures.

What we need to remember though is that any future Coalition, post 2015, will be very different. Each has to be assessed on its own merits which are all about the policies, the agreement put in place to cement the Coalition and the personalities involved.

So we can start all over again.

The Golden Rule of Public Affairs: Seek out your opportunities

12 June 2013

Those organisations that get the most out their public affairs work are those who seek out the opportunities to get involved. It remains the case that too many expect government to come to them or believe that they have a right to be involved / consulted because of who they are. That is rarely the case and also runs the risk of exclusion because of simple error or oversight.

Coherent lists of who to involve, on what issues, do not exist in government. Aside from lists of statutory consultees for some issues, there may be some informal arrangements in place but when people leave or are replaced, either internally or amongst officials, knowledge of these arrangements can be lost. So efforts to engage need to be ongoing and continuous.

Just because a good set of relationships have been established with one group of officials does not mean that those relationships will last forever, they need to be worked at.

Organisations should also avoid a mentality of not straying far from home. For example, the departments they report to or that have responsibility for them, those that have the best relationships with government, and work across departments.

This offers the best opportunity for maintaining relationships and also reflects the nature of modern policy-making. Decisions very often cut across departments. The days of single department decisions, whilst not dead, are at least fading fast.

Developing the widest possible network of contacts and friends is especially helpful in times of financial constraint. For those with an income stream from Government, it can provide some protection against ongoing cuts.

Importantly, the wide network means that you have friends and allies if they are required. An organisation has people it can discuss issues with or who may be willing to argue their case. Again, the more these voices come from across Government, the better.

Turning that situation around, if an organisation needs to talk Government out of a policy, the more departments and officials disagree and the more difficult a policy becomes then the less likely it is to be pursued.

With the emphasis on developing links then that means looking for issues with which to engage with Government in a meaningful way. This requires a full and deep understanding not just of Government policies and what it wants to do but also of the organisation you represent.

That understanding has to include the ability to manage and minimise risk, manage reputations and deliver strategic advice to the organisation about where it needs to go. That is the real value for organisations in public affairs, it should not just be about relationships with stakeholders.

The golden rule is that those in public affairs need to seek out opportunities for engagement but that can only be done if you really understand your own organisation, or client, and have the opportunity to input strategically.

Five ways to build a career in public affairs

13 June 2013

Starting out in public affairs can be daunting. Many of those in senior positions seem to be ultra confident and have a string of business and political contacts. For those entering the industry it is not always clear what they need to do get going and to build themselves a career. The good news is that there is no defined A to B career path and as a result there is plenty of scope for mapping out your own direction. This can change over time and pivoting is not unheard of as new opportunities arise.

Here are five lessons which, if followed, will help to establish a career in public affairs.

- 1 **Networking** - there is no alternative but to get out there and start to meet people. There are whole books dedicated to the benefits of networking but for those starting out some of the best contacts you will make come in the early years. People move around consultancies and

go in-house and can often be a source of work, advice and insight. Make sure you have a good online presence, especially on LinkedIn, as this will help you to keep track of contacts.

You also need to know what is going on in the sector so read your way around the industry - familiarise yourself with PR Week, Public Affairs News and PubAffairs (amongst others).

- 2 **Understand Parliament** - there are a number of core skills that are needed but fundamentally good public affairs advice is based on knowing and understanding how Parliament works. Understanding the system and the processes shows you know when to get involved and what is expected. Any audience, internal or external, will expect you to have a firm grip on this.
- 3 **The commercial side** - just speaking from personal experience, on starting in the sector I had little real knowledge and understanding of how business works and the commercial realities of working for an organisation (public, private, NGO or charity). On the job experience is essential, but make efforts to stretch your experience out across the organisation and try to get a handle on the financial side as well. For those in a consultancy, the earlier you can get involved in pitches and tenders the better but don't feel constrained to stick to the research or generation of ideas, explore pricing, charge out rates, and costs more generally.
- 4 **Be different** - try and set yourself apart from others in the industry. That may be easier said than done but consider your background, skills and experience and also the issues or areas that you are particularly interested in. Think about it in terms of a personal PR plan rather than a Heseltine-style back of an envelop career plan. Business and marketing plans are standard for organisations, just apply the same type of thinking to yourself.
- 5 **Think ahead and recognise your weaknesses** - training and development comes in many different forms. Do not be afraid to ask your employer for help and support from the outset. Placements and secondments are a fantastic way to gain experience and widen your network. If your boss really does know all the people they claim then they should be able to help set something up.

There are lots of free sessions, lunchtime seminars etc out there to help. It is also important to sign-up to membership organisations such as the CIPR or PRCA. They not only provide help, guidance and support but they also have some great training and events.

All this can seem like a lot to take on but as public affairs becomes a more crowded market place and the competition for good roles intensifies it is those that make the conscious decisions and efforts early on in their career that will do best.

Too often new entrants are not helped and supported as they could be. But it is not all up to the employer, the individual needs to take responsibility as well and drive themselves on. It will mean they can be in public affairs for the long term.

Making your voice heard by Government - five lessons

19 June 2013

Trying to secure the attention of government can be difficult - it is a crowded marketplace. There are a lot of people and organisations jostling for position and trying to get government to take note of their concerns. They all believe that they have a right to be heard and only if they could get someone to listen they would then instantly understand the issue and do something to help sort it out.

Too often, however, no-one takes the time to ask 'why should government listen to me?' Amongst the myriad of other organisations, why is your problem or issue any more pressing than anyone else's? There are many, varied and complex reasons why government listens to some but not others but here are five ways in which you can improve your chances.

- 1 **Do not just moan** - too much bad public affairs and bad lobbying is down to organisations simply using engagement as a tool for criticising government and policy. Just like hearing someone incessantly talking about their children or their favourite hobby, this becomes boring and people switch off. Government is no different. The engagement has to be sophisticated and take into account existing policy, problems and offer solutions. The solution is critical. It is what can be done to solve the problem.
- 2 **Quality argument** - the content and presentation of the argument is critical to its success. From the way in which the initial approach is made through to the conduct of any meetings, the right messages have to be constructed and conveyed. Whatever points are made also need to be fully justified, defended and backed up by fact. Opinions or one's own certainty are completely insufficient.
- 3 **Fit the process** - there is nothing worse than making an approach at the wrong time. The arguments may be completely compelling but if the boat has already sailed there is very little anyone can do about it. That would make it a different type of campaign entirely. This is really a call for early and consistent engagement alongside full research into where the issue is at.
- 4 **Talk to the right people** - similarly if engagement is not happening with the right people then you may have some interesting meetings but there will be little or no constructive output. Knowing who to speak to and when are all part of designing the campaign from the very start.
- 5 **Unity of purpose** - an issue that comes up consistently is that there are simply too many bodies out there. Many are competing for the policy space and/or say very little of difference. Lord Heseltine, for instance, has been highly critical of the sheer number of business organisations and how few real businesses they have as members. From a lobbying

perspective, engagement is more effective when the voice is united and strong. That can take effort, may add to the timetable of a campaign but can be a wise investment.

No organisation has an inherent right to be listened to - it has to be earned. Consider your strengths and ask 'why should I be listened to'? That would be a good starting point for trying to talk to government.

Learn to stand up to Government

18 July 2013

If you have any issue with government or policy, all too often the path of least resistance is to try to act in a conciliatory way and devise a solution in partnership. This approach obviously has many attractions and can work. Very often it is the right tact to adopt at the start of a campaign. Government should at least be provided with the opportunity of solving the problem once it has been availed of all the facts.

This approach also often suits senior management who do not want to be seen as 'taking on' government for fear of the potential fallout if they annoy anyone that matters. The fear of regulation and potentially direct action from government are powerful incentives to work with them. But this 'fear factor' should not pre-dominate.

However, this type of thinking can prevent real action from being taken when it is needed. That means tackling government head-on and being prepared to face them down.

The tactics around this are very different from normal lobbying and an organisation needs to be very sure of its ground. There is no use acting in a more aggressive way only to then find that the basis of your argument is flawed, the evidence isn't there or that the wider support that may be needed is completely ephemeral.

Taking the examples of the campaigns against the sell off of the forests, pasty tax, health reforms, Bookstart funding, child benefit and you see well organised campaigns that used the media to great effect. These campaigns took the fight to government and utilised widespread public support. The reversal of the West Coast Mainline rail franchise decision showed what could be achieved in a straight fight based not on commercial sour grapes but on a flaw in the appraisal system, ie it was not a fair fight. Many of these campaigns also faced a very constrained timescale so this, no doubt, was factored into the campaign as well.

Parliament too is often treated with a level of reverence that is not always right for the issue. Take Select Committees, under most circumstances, it is right to work as constructively as possible with them, especially in oral hearings. However, there is no doubt that many Select Committees are now taking the fight to organisations and believe that whatever demands they make have to be met. This is not the case. It may be that Select Committees genuinely believe that they can make demands but for those involved saying 'no' is most definitely an option and may be the best option open to them. Politicians are not always right and do not always have the full facts available to them when they make statements. They have also been known to use Parliamentary Privilege to stand up in the House and make statements about named people and organisations. Under these circumstances, a public fight back is often the only remedy.

If the more confrontational approach is adopted then it is critical that the reasons are explained and made clear to all involved, especially amongst officials who are likely to get caught in any crossfire. There also has to be an awareness and realisation that if politicians are backed into a corner are likely to come out fighting so a robust defence has to be mounted, often through the media.

If government is to be tackled head-on that approach demands a level of consistency and total commitment. Any slight deviation or back tracking will be used against the organisation. There has to be a total and unified commitment to the programme and all it entails. Any deviation will be taken as a sign of weakness and will strengthen the hand of government.

Sometimes a robust and aggressive approach will work. Organisations should not roll over and have their tummies tickled.

Keep lobbying Westminster, centralism is here to stay

24 July 2013

The UK political system is one of the most highly centralised in the world. Despite all the talk of localism and greater local control, Westminster and Whitehall still have most power and sign-off most major decisions. There is also, of course, the issue of money...

Compare this to other countries where states and cities have a much larger degree of control over policy and finance. Their politics are closer to their citizens whereas in this country people have little idea about what local authorities actually do aside from collecting the refuse.

Of course, in some areas, particularly planning and development, local authorities are the key decision making body but for most other issues Westminster and Whitehall remain in control. Even those powers that are being devolved still retain some form of central government process through agreement, sign-off, or need for 'their' money to be spent. Civil servants sometimes have 'observer' status on local bodies as well which does not seem like the model definition of devolution.

There are a lot of bodies doing good work to change this and are championing a more local approach - the Local Government Association, the Core Cities group, and the new Key Cities group to name but a few. There is a danger though that their campaigns are deflected by the cuts and austerity agenda. Their positions become dominated by arguing against budgetary cuts as opposed to highlighting how they can achieve better results. This in turn impacts on their standing with Ministers and trickles down to officials as well.

They undoubtedly need the firepower of think tanks such as the Centre for Cities and Centre for London to provide workable ideas but they then need to sell these to central government.

But there is an iron law of centralism at work - when local politicians become MPs they somehow forget to devolve power. Under the last Labour government local authorities, and other parts of the public sector, became lost in a sea of centrally imposed targets and initiatives. For the Coalition, the need to make cuts meant that spending decisions had to remain with HM Treasury.

The preference for centralism is also partly a product of the media as well. They constantly call on central government to take action and ensure something happens and want to blame Ministers if anything goes wrong. This makes Ministers even less willing to 'let go'.

A full analysis of all those involved would reveal that the broad thrust of policy, guidance and/or direction are set centrally whilst implementation may be local.

Constituency MPs themselves often have split allegiances between the strict party discipline applied at a Westminster level and the need to be re-elected by local constituents. How often have we seen a MP support their Government's position on reform of the NHS or Post Offices and then campaign against the closure of a local hospital or post office?

Policies do not fit neatly into a 'local' or 'national' box; it is far more complicated than that. For those wanting more decentralisation then the only time to achieve this is when a new Government first enters office and are full of joys of victory. Looking at the Coalition's most recent announcements shows that even when there is talk of localism, the reality is different – failure to devolve funding in line with the endorsed Heseltine Review, cuts to first budgets of Local Transport Boards and a failure to deal with the recommendations of the Mayor of London's Finance Commission. Far from joining '[the Metropolitan Revolution](#)' as recommended by Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley, so far we have seen few signs of moving away from the centre.

For lobbyists the lesson is clear, even if the issue you are looking at has been devolved to a more local level, there is rarely total local control – the hand of Westminster remains firmly on the tiller. The difficulty can be in getting anyone to admit this.

Why think tanks will become ever more important

13 August 2013

Lobbying and public affairs campaigns are in constant need of solid evidence. One of the ways of demonstrating that there is a real issue and that evidence of a problem exists is to commission a think tank to write a report.

This has helped turn think tanks into a free-standing industry and has led to a much more crowded marketplace. The political positioning of many is clear for all to see and the think tanks often make a virtue of this. Others prefer to set out a clearly independent line.

What all would agree on is the need to produce rigorous and well-argued research. Without this they lose their credibility both with political audiences and, as a knock-on consequence, those organisations who commission the work.

Politicians often value the role of think tanks as it can help them to explore new ideas and float them with the public. This type of 'arms length' arrangement enables them to adopt the good/popular ideas and distance themselves from the others.

The increasing emphasis on a sound evidence base in policy-making means that any good lobbying campaign has to be backed up – and this is why think tanks are of importance and often where they positioning themselves. A well-designed report can provide the basis for effective lobbying. It can help with building the case, helping to persuade and also delivering the detail and information required at various stage of policy development, ie when it is examined from a regulatory / red-tape perspective.

So it is not just about how to use the finished product but public affairs professionals also have to be able to use their understanding of the policy-making process and the politics to help inform the design and brief for the research in the first place. They also need to ensure that the evidence base is sufficient and rigorous enough.

Think tanks need though to distinguish themselves from lobbying and public affairs firms. They cannot 'just' be about influencing and supporting campaigns but instead need to look at setting the agenda. The best think tanks do this already but the need to generate income can have an obvious influence on their output. It is rare that a think tank can be more or less self-sufficient through donations, grants etc which would help to maintain an absolute independence and freedom of thought.

There will be an obvious pressure to deliver outcomes balanced against maintaining more serious academic thought. Most though need to raise funds and there in lies an obvious and well-recognised danger. The think tanks need to produce a steady stream of quality reports.

For those looking to work with think tanks this stream of reports can be a problem. They want their report to be considered and listened to but if the think tank is producing several others around that time then does that lessen the impact?

The 'open policy making' discussed in the Civil Service Reform Plan means that there is a further market for think tanks. This could, however, make the problem of not veering into the lobbying sector even more apparent.

There would also be distinct challenges about whether such 'outsourced' policy or research would need to be impartial or follow the line established by the Government, of whatever persuasion it is?

For those working in think tanks there can be more of a revolving door to working in Government, normally in political/policy advisory roles. This looks set to continue as Government seeks to prove that it can maintain the generation of ideas based on solid evidence. The movement of people also helps think tanks to demonstrate that they are influential in policy-making – increasingly important as the civil service reforms go forward.

There is no doubt though that the need to generate an evidence base and ideas means that public affairs firms need to continue to work with think tanks.

Top five reasons why the Party Conferences are still important

01 October 2013

Every time the party conference season comes around there are always people that say that have come to their end of the natural life, that attendance does not really matter and that all business goes on in Westminster anyway.

They are wrong. The party conferences remain a mainstay of the British political system and of public affairs activity. That does not mean that organisations should always spend huge sums of money organising events, holding exhibitions or sponsoring party events but instead a carefully built and targeting conference campaign can prove useful. It's all about the right actions for the campaign or issue.

Each conference has its own way of behaving and each party its own way of policy making some involving the conferences more than others. The Labour conference used to be considered the 'parliament of the party' but it is a long time since it played that role. The main role of the Conservative conference is for party members to show their support for the leadership. The Conservative Party understood the meaning of discipline and unity long before Labour had it imposed on them by an unforgiving electorate and media. The Lib Dem conference is probably the closest there now is to democracy at a conference but being in government appears to be providing more certainty to the leadership about the behaviour, and votes, of the membership.

For those involved in campaigns the party conferences can still play an important role.

- 1 **Communicating with a wider audience** – activity at conferences offers the prospect of getting to more people and, if properly organised, building a wider basis of support for the campaign. The party conferences are not just about politicians and their advisers but party members, local councillors, trade unions, the media and other campaigning groups. These could all be stakeholders that are important to your campaign.

- 2 **Meeting and greeting** – not everyone finds themselves in London all the time and conferences offer the prospect of bumping into those that you are trying to work with. It is generally a more informal space and so even the most fleeting discussion can at least mean that a follow-up is possible. The connection may never otherwise have been made. Those that claim that more can be done in London are missing the point and are taking a very London and Westminster centric view of the world.

- 3 **Getting involved** – the political parties like to see that efforts have been made to get involved in their party processes. This has, of course, nothing to do with the conferences also being part of the fund raising efforts of the parties. Involvement in the conferences can also lead to further opportunities for participation for instance through participation in events.

- 4 **Understanding the parties** – it is very difficult to understand the parties properly if you do not attend the conferences. The delivery of effective advice makes this level of knowledge critical. Too often the emphasis is solely on Government. That may be right for some but may not be a wide enough view for other campaigns.

- 5 **Information** – attending the fringe meetings organised around the conferences offer the prospect of not only hearing about policy and ideas from the politicians but also other stakeholders. The discussions often provide an insight into future policy development and provide a welcome insight into some of the personalities involved as well.

The death of the party conference has been widely foretold but remains a long way off. There is a wide spectrum of types of involvement from attendance right through to sponsorship of party events. It is important that your public affairs campaign adopts the right actions and level of party conference activity. The party conference dates should continue to feature in your calendar

The biggest challenge in Public Affairs

07 October 2013

Public affairs campaigns often face a number of significant challenges. From identifying the right people to engage with, through to ensuring that a workable and feasible solution can be developed. The biggest challenge in public affairs though remains dealing with a lack of joined-up government.

It is infrequent that a problem can be solved with reference to only one government department. Instead a range of stakeholders, ministers, advisers and officials need to be engaged. It is also rarely solely within the gift of one government department to give the go-ahead to the proposed solution.

Take for example, corporate responsibility. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills are currently working on the government's approach with the aim of publishing a framework later this year. It has, however, become clear that the range of ways of reporting demanded by different government departments on similar issues is wide. This makes the position for businesses confusing and imposes additional costs. For those officials charged with making sense of corporate responsibility it massively adds to the complication.

The Cabinet Office was at one point making significant headway in encouraging a joined-up approach. It remains the case that its achievement needs leadership from the very top of government.

However, a more siloed, compartmentalised and narrow departmental view of the world has re-emerged. It may be that financial austerity is at the heart of this change in direction. Once again, Ministers are deemed to have done a 'good job' if they have protected their departments from cuts. Although in the case of Eric Pickles at Communities and Local Government, success seems to be measured in an ability to inflict the biggest cuts.

Also with officials coming under increasing pressure to deliver what Ministers want in terms of policy, they too have little incentive to think more laterally across departments. This is particularly true at the start, ideas and policies need to spring almost fully formed from departments so that credit can be gained. Ideas inevitably have to be at a more developed stage before any views are taken from others. The sponsoring department cannot be seen as being weak.

Very few of the challenging and complicated issues that those in public affairs have to deal do not fall into such neat categories. They often move across departmental boundaries. So it is up to us to work out methods of joining government up.

Sometimes this can complicate a matter and if you are not careful it simply removes any incentive from government to deal with the problem. However, if you remove the conflict from between departments and provide them with the will to work together, by clearly demonstrating the benefits, then the chances of securing a successful outcome are multiplied.

You need to show that you have considered the wider implications, explaining whether it is a matter of concern and/or how to overcome it. In essence, you are showing a wider and deeper understanding of the issue and empathising with the position officials find themselves in. At the end of the day, they will need to have similar conversations across government and if you are not prepared to help with their thinking then there is no reason they should do your job for them.

If the complete package can be presented to Ministers then, again, it becomes more feasible and increases the chances of a successful outcome.

So whilst the lack of joined-up government is a problem it is one that a good public affairs campaign can help to solve.

You shouldn't ignore Brussels

13 November 2013

Many organisations spend much of their time considering what Westminster thinks about them. Parliament dominates their thoughts and they rightly build public affairs and stakeholder engagement programmes around Members of Parliament, Select Committees, advisers and the impact they can have. But they wrongly forget about Brussels and the European Union.

Some sectors, such as financial services, are extremely aware of the power of Brussels and spend a lot of time and effort engaging with the European institutions. Others, however, do not give Brussels the care and attention it deserves. That leaves them vulnerable to not only being unaware of policy and regulatory changes that could impact their business and therefore not managing risks effectively, but also means they are failing to make the most of opportunities to input positively into legislation.

With the European elections coming up next year, institutions are considering the work programme for the next Commission. This means that there is a period of 12 to 18 months where this programme is being worked on and priorities arrived upon. So hundreds of pieces of potential legislation are being sifted through and the priorities for the next Commission will be set. Ideally this stream of work should not be set without your involvement. There is competition between the institutions and the DGs (departments) so do not get squeezed by this.

It is not that people have to become instant experts in how Brussels works. UKREP, the UK Permanent Representation in Brussels, provides an excellent starting point for anyone wanting to engage and wanting to know what is going on in their area. UKREP wants to hear from UK businesses so that they can more effectively ensure that the voice of the UK is heard at all stages of policy development. UKREP wants to deal with the Parliament and the Commission from a position of strength. It will also allow them to ensure influence upstream and build alliances, where necessary.

Whilst the UK, putting a possible referendum to one side, is trying to get better at engagement, the European institutions themselves are making efforts to develop better drafted legislation. EU legislative proposals are now also subject to an impact assessment process of the kind we are used to in the UK. These are though only as good as the data and information that are inputted. Again, this points to a need to effective engagement. In the UK we are used to impact assessments and how they work, many others are not. Cost is being given a lot more consideration and is now seriously considered in policy-making. That is not to say that there is a consistent approach but the moves are welcome nonetheless.

For those wanting to lobby in Brussels, the normal rules of public affairs apply. You need to bring the issues to life and provide evidence and case studies. The development of a workable, deliverable solution is paramount and, of course, needs to reflect the institutional structures and timescales.

The institutional arrangements mean that timescales for policy-making can be much longer but the institutions can move quickly if they need to so do not take this time for granted.

It is also imperative that you get your home country on board, so again back to UKREP. It is also widely agreed that the UK is overly legalistic in its interpretation and implementation of European Directives. This so-called 'gold-plating' is considered to be a serious problem so that too requires attention. However, the more you show that there has been involvement in the issues in Europe and the more UKREP already knows and understands the issues then 'gold-plating' can be tackled head-on and avoided.

So far from ignoring Brussels and Europe now is the time to ensure that your engagement is serious. Do not get caught out just because you only focused on Westminster.

Political alliances can be critical in public affairs

19 November 2013

Politics is not always adversarial. The mere existence of coalition government in Westminster shows that politicians can work together. There is previous experience of coalitions in the UK in Scotland and Wales and, importantly, in local authorities as well. But despite all this, public affairs campaigns often think one dimensionally and concentrate on the majority party in Parliament. This is wrong as public acceptance, not just raw politics, comes into decision-making.

It may suit the politicians to show that there is clear distance between the political parties but working on this type of level is fraught with difficulties. The parties are happy to use organisations as case studies 'for' their policies and / or 'against' their opponents. That can leave you in the position of being used as a political football. That could bring some short term benefits but risks long term damage.

A very political approach also fails to take into account how Parliament works and the role of Select Committees where for instance, the chairs vary in party. By its very nature it can rule out or rule in future activities that may involve parliamentarians from across the spectrum. If a very political approach is adopted and that then fails, it can be difficult to change position. That can make the campaign seem flawed and the organisation involved mercenary. Again, hardly likely to ensure a successful conclusion.

Too political an approach will also not appeal to civil servants who are always a starting point for campaigns. It instantly makes any decision a political one and can rule out any more administrative type change. The civil servants will simply not want to get involved and it may also make them less likely to provide constructive input and assistance. A campaign should, on the whole, seek to make friends, not alienate.

A political approach only considers central government, whereas decisions and implementation could well take place at a local level where the politics may be different or not as straightforward. As the coalition continues to place an emphasis on the devolution of powers and also gives bodies such as Local Enterprise Partnerships more say and finance the campaigns have to consider not just the short term achievement of a goal but its long term implications as well. A good campaign has to think in both short and longer term horizons.

For many organisations, such as charities, it is simply not allowed to push a political agenda. Others may also need to think about the implications, for instance, involved in delivery of services to government. There are risks involved so the campaign should not always be the sole focus.

Instead, very often a more balanced approach which reflects the mixed political make-up of the political institutions can be much more effective. It also means a campaign is able to flex over time and if a more high profile approach is necessary then the public are less likely to be put off. If large numbers of people are needed then too political an approach early on will make this less likely to happen.

So public affairs should be focused on bringing together a coalition of (potentially diverse) interests. It should also assist in working with a range of political audiences and avoid all the potential pitfalls of being seen as party political. The advice delivered should focus on helping to build bridges and identifying the common ground to allow alliances to be built.

Politicians can work together and an effective campaign often requires this to secure its aims. That is where public affairs can help.

Less politics does not mean less lobbying

07 January 2014

It is often suggested that politicians avoid having to make difficult choices for fear of the electoral implications. Shifts in the way that policies are made and implemented give credence to this but a shift away from politics does not mean that lobbying is any less important.

Changes to the way in which policies are developed have been taking place for some time, they have not come about just as a consequence of coalition government. It should also be stressed that not all the changes are intended as a cunning wheeze but can and often do actually lead to better policy outcomes and are more reflective of the need for increased transparency.

One of the main changes has been the rise in public consultations. Although the Coalition has recently introduced a new set of consultation principles which are 'more proportionate and targeted', the fact remains that any major policy initiative needs a period of public consultation. This, at the very least, can provide politicians with some evidence when making a final decision and / or allows them to follow the publically popular route. The trouble is that consultations are not referendums and using some in this way just undermines the validity of others.

Politicians also often rely on independent commissions to look at 'difficult' issues, the recent airport expansion commission is an excellent example. This at least secures some additional time and can be used to demonstrate that decisive action has been taken. The results of the work of such commissions can be ignored by government so their establishment does not mean that a policy decision will be reached. Often such commissions actually come to the same conclusions as departmental officials who have also looked at the issue.

'Tsars' have been popular with government as well with around 100 having been appointed under the Coalition. They are independent policy advisers who 'report' to Ministers and are put 'in charge' of an issue area. Initial agreements with Ministers are often informal and according to critics the

process lacks transparency. The benefit for Ministers is that they can be 'blamed' or dumped if the going gets tough.

However, these changes do not always remove the need for a political decision to be taken. They may simply delay the need to take a decision past a critical point, ie the next General Election.

Independent authorities are looking as though they may be popular going forward as well, especially in the realm of infrastructure development. The first half way house has been Infrastructure UK but, for instance, Sir John Armit's report wants to go much further and, in effect, give a new body responsibility for designing the country's infrastructure needs over the long term.

None of this means though that lobbying and public affairs activity is lessened in value. In fact, it can be more valuable.

All these bodies and organisations still need ideas and input into policy development. Many seek to contribute and those that do not should not be allowed to drift off to make pronouncements that have an adverse impact. Government retains a fundamental role but may, on occasions, need to be reminded of this.

Often political decisions still need to be made. At the end of the work of a Commission, its report still needs to be implemented or ignored by government and they need to understand the basis on which that decision is to be made.

In addition, reputation remains absolutely key to constructive relations with those involved in policy making. This means building relations over a period of time, input and solutions-based submissions. None of them operate in splendid isolation despite their independence.

It remains critical to understand the policy making process, how the bodies interact with others and what the timescales are – the basic building blocks of a public affairs campaign. Despite what structures and processes are put in place it remains the case that lobbying plays an important role.

Are you part of a Blob?

05 February 2014

According to the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, there is a group that represents the 'educational establishment' which he calls 'The Blob'. Gove is fighting this establishment which, according to [Nick Robinson](#), represents "the 'progressive' grip over teacher training, classroom standards and qualifications".

Politicians often feel that they are fighting vested interests, whatever name they give them, but the interesting question is whether you and your organisation are part of a Blob?

There are obvious dangers in being part of a Blob. Your issues may only chime with one of the political parties so you spend time either in or out of favour. If parties remain in power for long periods of time, as they have done since the 1980s, then you spend long periods in the wilderness and have little ability to affect change.

When ideas do come forward from a Blob or one of its 'members' then they risk being rejected out-of-hand by the other side. If the ideas are implemented then they risk being reversed when the other side comes into office.

Some sectors, such as education and health, are seen as political battlegrounds. All the political parties feel the need to reform the sectors on entering government and undoing the reforms of the previous administration to whatever extent they are able to. Whether this helps deliver improvements is far from clear but both sectors often complain of living through 'constant change' or 'permanent revolution'. As soon as one set of reforms are complete, or maybe not even complete, then another set come in.

The Coalition has seen Blobs in several sectors as well as in the civil service. The existence of these Blobs has, in the eyes of some, been one of the reasons why potential reforms have been blocked and more has not been achieved.

But Labour is talking about taking on its own Blobs. Miliband continues to challenge the trade unions and has spoken of reform in banking, finance and transport.

To many a Blob is really just a vested interest but being part of a Blob also means that organisations are missing out on potential opportunities to engage with government and the political parties. Comments from a Blob become self fulfilling – their opposition to plans instinctive rather than incisive or well-argued. Even if they are then being part of the Blob means, in the eyes of some, that their concerns can be ignored.

Making sure that you are not seen as part of a Blob should not be about being more political or ingratiating. It should instead be based on:

- **Generating ideas** – developing and delivering new ideas, challenging previous ways of working or learning from mistakes (and accepting that mistakes have been made), need to be the norm when working with government. Sometimes the engagement will be more technical in nature, other times it may be the bigger picture. The lesson, however, is the same – don't be seen as simply defending the status quo for the sake of it.
- **Engaging with a range of stakeholders** – whether these might be natural allies or those with who you do not have a natural affinity. The ability to learn from others should feed in directly to the generation of new ideas. A Blob can end with a groupthink mentality and action should be taken to make sure that this does not happen.
- **Development of a constructive relationship** – not standing in splendid isolation but instead being prepared to work with a range of stakeholders and audiences. This also means being alert to new stakeholders.
- **Getting the timing right** – being able to work with government at the right stage in the policy-making process. This will also make the development of a constructive relationship easier. If government can see that you are working with them rather than deliberately against them then they are less likely to consider you to be a Blob.

Take action now or risk being a Blob!

The ministerial merry-go-round

28 April 2014

The recent resignation of Maria Miller as Culture Secretary and her replacement by Sajid Javid was not greeted with unanimous enthusiasm.

A series of articles in the Times especially those by [Libby Purves](#) and [Philip Collins](#) discussed whether ministers dealing with culture were expected to appreciate their brief as well as champion it in a way that others are not expected to. The open letter from Michael Rosen suggesting that Javid's background in banking made him unsuitable for the job.

Collins suggested that:

"The perfect minister would have a clear idea of what they want to achieve and the courage born of passion to stick to that plan. That minister would need to leaven their necessary passion with the ability to stay calm under pressure, to be capable of inspiring a team, clever at husbanding their time and able to take advice. Above all else... the vital quality is decisiveness. To procrastinate and not to come to a judgment is the most damaging failing a minister can display."

A close alliance to HM Treasury is also a must as far as Collins is concerned. Although this can be a double-edged sword. The Minister may be able to argue persuasively for the purse strings to be loosened a little or could be at the vanguard of the Treasury's efforts to impose cuts.

For those looking to engage with Government, a change in Minister is a time for instant action. That new Minister needs to hear from you and receive an initial introduction or briefing. However, it has to be appreciated that they do not always have much room for manoeuvre. Not all Secretaries of States or Ministers enjoy influence.

Consider the politics and the timings. In Javid's case he may be able to outline some new approaches but the big issues he faces - arts funding, press regulation etc - remain the same. There will be an election in a year's time, is this the time for any grand new strategies?

The civil servants supporting the Minister do not change and the Government's overall policy approach has not changed either. In other words, the idea that a new Minister will bring with them a whole new or different approach is not realistic. Special advisers may remain in place as well, so the eyes and ears of the new Minister could be the same as the old one. That would suggest that things will continue as before.

The Westminster way of doing politics also means that Ministers rarely have a deep understanding of the policy area they are taking charge of. There is then a period of them needing to get 'up-to-speed' with the brief. This can take longer in some cases than others, especially taking the example of culture, media and sport. The brief is so wide and there are so many interests involved that this further complicates that process.

All this does not mean that a new appointment is not a good time to undertake a reassessment of approach or priorities, or to brush off some old ideas but that is done with a degree of realism.

A new Minister may well be looking to make a mark but be sure to put that in the confines of the Government's overall approach. A new Minister, especially this close to an election, will not want to 'rock the boat'.

The parties also have their own policy making and manifesto development processes in place. A new Minister cannot simply walk in and decide the approach. They at least have to work with what is already in place and with the processes themselves as well. Incremental change may be the order of the day in some cases but wholesale reform will not be.

Effective engagement is about context and politics. A new Minister may offer opportunities for engagement but they rarely offer the prospect of a clean policy slate.

General Election countdown: The Public Affairs checklist

06 May 2014

With a year to go until the General Election, now is the time for those in public affairs to make sure that they are planning for the future, regardless of the outcome.

For the most part trying to pre-empt an election outcome is best left to pollsters and psephologists. Whilst we know that the election will be held on 7th May 2015 there are a whole range of issues to be resolved which could impact on the eventual outcome. According to the Guardian's the Guardian's Patrick Wintour, the election has the "least predictable outcome for 70 years".

Chief amongst the issues and variables are the economic figures, whether growth will continue and if Labour's 'cost of living' campaign continues to have resonance. There is also the matter of when and how the Coalition will come to an end. Will there be a messy divorce or a 'conscious uncoupling'? Whilst the MPs of both parties may prefer the former so that they can establish some clear distance, Clegg and Cameron may personally prefer the latter. Consideration also needs to be given to what will take place in Parliament. If there is not much legislation to be discussed then that could leave room for more active backbench MPs to start making trouble.

For those leading public affairs, there should be less time spent worrying about the outcome, although that is important, and more time and resources dedicated to ensuring that a new Government knows and understands your issues.

You should do this by considering:

- 1 **New MPs** – you need to know who are they and gain some insight into their views. News, for instance, of the open letter by a group of prospective Labour MPs about the re-nationalisation of the rail system helps identify individuals but also indicates what their thinking is. This is all about stakeholder mapping and thinking ahead. If you wait until after the General Election you could lose ground to others.
- 2 **Manifestos** – the development of the manifestos varies between parties. Each has their own way of doing things and there are influential people in each party. Some of the manifesto

development is highly formalised, other aspects more laissez-faire. You need to understand the processes and those who are really involved.

- 3 **Policy** – effective engagement in the manifesto process is only as good as the policy suggestions you are making. A whole series of highly aspirational and costly policies are unlikely to see the light of day. Well-argued, detailed, costed and critically deliverable policies may find their way in. The part of the equation that is often ignored is how the policy would be implemented. Does it, for instance, need primary legislation? If so, how would this sit with the priorities of a new Government?

Thought also needs to be given to how political any engagement is. Would, for instance, inclusion of a policy in only one of the three main manifestos be helpful to you campaign?

- 4 **Party conferences** – consideration should already have been given to what engagement is taking place at the party conferences. This too needs to have been timetabled in to the manifesto and policy processes. There is always a debate taking place about how useful the party conferences really are but it is a brave organisation that chooses to skip any of them before a General Election.

- 5 **Post election actions** – it is never too early to think about the actions you will implement once the outcome of the election is known. These could range from the more fundamental writing to new MPs through to something more substantial aimed at exerting immediate pressure on the new administration. The critical element is ensuring that a new Government is held to account for the promises it makes, or fails to make, during an election. Anyone involved in public affairs should love elections, especially General Elections. They are full of twists and turns, egg throwing, speeches, and on-mic comments. But it is important not to lose sight of campaign objectives and this is best done through careful planning now!

Prepare for the longest general election campaign...ever

06 June 2014

The paucity of Bills in the Queen's Speech will leave MPs with plenty of time to campaign hard in their constituencies. It also poses challenges for those seeking to engage with Government.

The Queen's Speech contained a low number of Bills and was obviously a result of intense negotiations between the two Coalition parties. There was a little something from each of them politically which will be essential as we approach the election.

It is claimed that some reforming Ministers had Bills ready to go but were told to leave them in their desk drawers. There was also legislation that had been promised or at least widely trailed as being ready for inclusion which did not see the light of day either.

Just as little legislation was ready when the Coalition came into office, this Coalition will end with a similar whimper in Parliament.

But that does open up some space as well as challenges for political engagement. In the first instance, Parliamentary time may be available for backbench and opposition business. Parliament will want to be seen to be busy, providing a space for ideas for debates, questions etc.

As the election approaches and we enter a climate of near constant political campaigns, parties will need to maintain this momentum and will need ideas to support and achieve this. Organisations need to have a mindset which recognises this. The engagement strategy needs to consider the longer timetable and have to be able to maintain momentum. Politicians will be looking for platforms so do not be afraid to offer them one.

The balance comes in not being seen as too political or too close to one party over another. A lot of campaigns can start off with the best intentions to be cross-party but it is very difficult to maintain control if it is adopted by one particular party. Not impossible, but difficult.

There can often be a fixation with the party manifestos but it is more about getting the policy environment, language and debate right. If you can 'set the scene', then whether you have a policy idea in the manifesto or not becomes less relevant. Anyway, parties do not always implement their manifesto commitments.

A year-long election campaign may suit some journalists but they too will need to keep their coverage fresh. This is a further opportunity which needs to be planned for. So it is about all aspects of communications and engagement not just the strictly political. However, it is important to understand the political context and think beyond a simple list of Parliamentary bills. You need to use this to work out what it means for your engagement strategy.

A week is a long time in politics - a year could seem like a lifetime unless you plan properly.

SECTION 2 - POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS

Why government reports never achieve anything

09 November 2011

In the first place, we need to look at the motivation of government. Was the work commissioned simply to help government avoid making a decision? A lot of reports fall into this category, especially those dealing with challenges which successive governments have been unable to deal with.

What were its terms of reference and what finance was given to it? These provide some valuable clues about whether government has any intention of ever reading the report let alone implementing its recommendations. Similarly, look at the reporting deadlines. The further off they are, the less likely government is to have the time or inclination to accept them.

The commitment to the review by the 'name' leading it can be variable to say the least. Some really grab hold of the agenda and lead from the front whilst others are happy for the civil servants seconded to assist them to do all the work. All too often, the reports are so heavily inputted into by government that they lose all semblance of the hoped for independence. Again, this tends to lessen their impact and provide government with less inclination to do anything substantive with the reports.

Some also blame the inertia and intransigence of the civil service for failing to grab hold of the recommendations. That is certainly a feeling that has taken root in some parts of the Coalition Government and seems to be one of the reasons why Francis Maude announced a potentially fundamental shift in how the civil service works earlier this year - a review that has gone largely unnoticed. But in public affairs, we also need to play our part in making sure that the reports cannot be glossed over by government.

The latest in a long line of reports is Michael Heseltine's report, 'No Stone Unturned: In Pursuit of Growth'. You couldn't turn on the TV, listen to the radio or look at Twitter without falling over glowing endorsements of his work and the recommendations he put forward.

But what happens to that support over time? Do those that support the ideas continue to champion them or is the support merely an attempt to gain coverage at the time of the report's release?

To have any hope of achieving anything, government needs to hear from supporters of the plans over a long period of time and also hear about practical ways in which the recommendations can be implemented. The need to deliver solutions to problems is the fundamental basis of good public affairs. If government knows that not only will they have support but they can really make things happen then it becomes politically more acceptable.

It always helps if you have provided input from the outset. This means taking the time to input and treating the report as seriously as you would any other area of government even if there is some scepticism regarding the outcomes. We also need to continue to press for action even if the main players move. Ministers, as we all know, have a habit of being shifted. Part of our job is to make sure that any new entrant maintains commitment to the report and its recommendations.

The authors of the reports too need to continue to agitate. Too often they disappear once the report has landed on Ministers' desks. Although it is highly doubtful that Heseltine falls into this category! Similarly Frank Field MP was so upset that the recommendations in his 'Poverty and Life Chances' report were not implemented by the Coalition Government that he announced that he was going to implement the anti-deprivation plan in his own constituency. Mary Portas, who did a report into how to save high streets, told an industry conference that she feared that her review was nothing more than a Government 'PR stunt' and was writing to David Cameron to ensure that he implemented her vision.

Some great work has been done and it is a criminal waste of all the time and effort that it is then left to gather dust on the shelf of a long since re-shuffled Minister. But part of the blame rests with us for not following the entire course of a report in the same way that we would legislation.

The political lessons Starbucks missed

06 December 2012

From the moment the story emerged that Starbucks had paid corporation tax in the UK just once in the last 15 years, the company has been on the back foot and under serious political pressure. Some of this pressure appears to have been self-inflicted. As an organisation, it seems to have forgotten some basic political lessons.

- **Empathise** – statements and appearances by the company have failed to show much in the way of sympathy towards the public and the wider economic environment. Suggestions that they pay other forms of tax and meet other legal requirements are not seen as a commitment to contributing to society.
- **Parliament matters** – the company’s appearance before the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) did little to increase their political capital, particularly with Parliamentarians. This made the Committee less likely to pull their punches in the final report. Its Chair, Margaret Hodge MP, did not mince her words and talked about the practice of avoidance being “outrageous and an insult to British businesses and individuals who pay their fair share.” The report has been a lead media story.
- **All communications are public** – there was an apparent disconnect between the evidence given to the PAC and statements made to the company’s shareholders which lauded the profitability of its UK operations. Transcripts of investor and analyst calls reviewed by Reuters even went so far as to show that Starbucks believed that the UK was such a successful operation that ideas could be exported back to the US. It shows that what is said to one audience needs to be consistent with what is said to others.
- **Understand the political timetable** – an attempt to regain the initiative with a suggestion, the day before the PAC report was issued, that the company would look again at its internal arrangements on tax seemed like a late and lame attempt to show willing – too little, too late. If the company was going to take action then it should have said so much earlier, not the day before a critical report was going to be issued and Ministers due to take strong action on avoidance. It is believed that an official announcement from the firm will be made following the Chancellor’s Autumn Statement. Again the timing looks forced and will not make the firm too many friends in Government.
- **Need for lead** – it has not been clear what the company’s lines are and who is speaking for them. This has not helped to clear up the confusion and deliver straight answers. Howard Schultz’s blog on the company’s website was an attempt but the questions he ‘answered’ were not really those being asked.
- **People power** – one of the largest challenges was the mere threat of a public boycott and demonstrations outside of their branches. It shows that activist action still has the power to move corporates and get them to question their policies.

The company should have appreciated the repercussions earlier, rather than wait to be forced into a decision. Their decision to wait until threatened with a withdrawal of custom reinforces the

perception that their prime motive remains profit over social responsibility. Of course, Starbucks has acted entirely within the law, but what these events show is that companies also have to operate within the boundaries of public sentiment. That is particularly so for companies which claim to 'engage with our customers and communities to do business responsibly'. Even legitimate tax avoidance does not seem to chime with a commitment to corporate social responsibility. We will now see what happens to others, like Google and Amazon. Will they be compelled to reinforce their social responsibility credentials or will the Government's commitment to go after tax avoiders reach the big global firms?

Five reasons why personality politics will become more important

03 January 2013

The accepted wisdom is that politicians need to have a personality so that they can 'sell' to the electorate if they are to be successful / elected. It is also claimed that politicians need to mould their personality to fit the wishes of the electorate – 'X Factor politics'.

But very few people ask why this is the case. Why does personality politics continue to rise? There are five key reasons why personality politics will continue to grow in importance.

- 1 **A short cut** – parties have a whole variety of policies on offer, some of which people will agree with, others they will not. The personality of the leader becomes a 'short cut' for understanding the party and what it stands for. As politics becomes more complicated the short cut increases in importance. It also allows for a degree of irrational behaviour on the part of the voters and means that they do not have to go through a process of balancing the party's policies against one another. It also means that they do not have to read the party manifestos which many do not believe in any case....
- 2 **Lack of distinct political parties** – as ideology has waned and people become less sure about what the parties stand for, they look for reasons to help justify their voting intentions. The politicians may claim that they stand for very different things but in the competition for the middle ground of politics, where most of the electorate live, outlier policies do not appeal. If many of the policies are bunched together in the centre then the electorate looks for other things to grasp onto. This, of course, assumes that they choose to vote. Many do not.
- 3 **BoJo** - the Mayor of London has shown that you don't have to be on message and Teflon-coated at all times. Off the cuff remarks or being stuck on a zip-wire needn't be total disasters. There is also a sense that his less than polished style provides a welcome respite from the usual politics. But a word of warning. Polling by [ComRes](#), shows that Boris doesn't score as well outside London on economic trust or as a potential Prime Minister. So a warning to politicians, being recognisable and well-known does not necessarily translate directly into scores for competence or on voting intentions.

- 4 **The media** - their apparent over-stating of the power of Boris is just one demonstration that they like to portray politics in terms of personalities. Whether it is dust-ups between PMs and Chancellor's or attacks from the backbenches, the media appears to find putting debates, discussions or disagreements into personality terms. This isn't a new phenomenon. In the 60s we had Harold Wilson vs George Brown, and before that Aneurin Bevan as the scourge of the Labour leadership but these battles were normally backed by clear policy positions.
- 5 **Lack of ways to engage** – despite the rise of technology, there remain few ways for people to get involved in politics and policy-making. For many, except the most motivated or nerdy, there is a lack of entry points into the political system – locally and nationally. If politics is seen as a closed shop, the preserve of an elite, then consideration of politics boils down to leadership.

What these points also show is that if we want to shift to a different type of politics and a different type of engagement then we have active choices to make. In particular, the parties need to work out how to engage with a wider community if they do not just want to rely on personality.

The impact of government 2.0

10 January 2013

According to Anne-Marie Slaughter, Professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University, the big political idea of 2013 is 'government as platform'.

Writing in *The Wired World 2013*, she describes government's role as becoming less 'command and control' and more about providing the basic hardware and software needed to enable citizen participation, innovation and self-organisation.

This shift is obviously facilitated by information and communications technologies but whilst more power is being placed in the hands of individual citizens, government needs to learn to let go.

The traditional Westminster model has become all about keeping power close to the centre. Whilst the Coalition has made some very welcome moves towards devolution and localism, in essence the shifts so far have been about moving power and responsibility from one level of government to another – Westminster and Whitehall to the Town Hall.

There have been some examples of government crowd sourcing policy initiatives but these have been limited in scope. There has yet to be much of a shift to real people power and whilst petitions can trigger debates in Parliament it is still Parliament (and the government) that controls what is debated and when.

New bodies such as Local Enterprise Partnerships and newly elected mayors in effect have to bid for powers and funding from government rather than there being a presumption of devolution.

Whilst there is an increasing level of community activism taking place the examples are often centred on preventing developments from taking place rather than delivering new services. There are good examples out there but for these to become 'the norm' needs government to fully embrace its role as platform.

The platform idea also needs to be embraced by all departments. The implementation of localism has been patchy to say the least with some departments being far from enthusiastic.

Being an effective platform means not just opening up massive amounts of data about spending but helping citizens to navigate the data, ensuring that they have the skills needed to work the information. It means bringing people together, pooling opportunities, putting them in contact with funding opportunities etc. There will be a snowball effect but government has to be part of the initial facilitation.

Politicians also need to view their roles differently – it will become more about facilitation, joining-up local people to opportunities etc and less about 'simply' solving problems. Some do this already but it is not the norm.

According to Slaughter, the principles of Government 2.0 include transparency, participation, simplicity, open-mindedness and experimentation. Whilst progress is being made on some, it is obvious that government is currently less willing to look at others.

The sea-changer may be Michael Gove's free schools. Once citizens see that they can establish their own successful institutions then they may look at setting up other facilities – health or law enforcement, for example.

It has the potential to shake-up central and local government and the traditional way of doing things. If this approach were to become more widespread, then it would also have massive implications for the Labour Party and the trade union movement. The direct power of the state in the delivery of national services would diminish whilst potentially increasing its ability to touch individual citizens – a smarter state and a smaller one.

The question is whether government really can let go and let technology give citizens the power they want.

Civil Service reform covers up Government shortcomings

29 January 2013

The proposed reform of the Civil Service received a welcome boost with comments made by Steve Hilton, the Prime Minister's former 'policy guru', that Downing Street often learns of government policy through the media.

Francis Maude, Cabinet Office Minister, has been at the forefront of proposed reform and issued the, largely overlooked, Civil Service Reform Plan back in June 2012. He has continued to lead the campaign for reform suggesting that officials do not focus on the direction of policy set out by Ministers. Speaking on the Today programme he went as far as saying that '(we) need a new civil service'.

There are worries particularly about the politicisation of the civil service which could result from reform. But there is also a danger that reform is simply used to cover-up the shortcoming of the political side of the administration and Government – it is not always the fault of the civil servants.

- 1 **Ministerial churn** – there is no guarantee about how long Ministers will remain in post and when a change comes that often, and is often because of, a change in government priorities. Officials are the only constant.

Add to this the largely non-expert Ministers that are appointed, they need and rely on their officials for impartial advice. Ministers may set the big picture but when it comes to detail many are not able to grasp it or are simply not interested.

It also takes time for Ministers and officials to get to know one another, it is not simply a case of a Minister coming in and flicking a switch. There need to be briefings, relationship building and deliverables established. There is a human element to the relationships as well.

Some degree of tension can be useful. A few arguments or battles can actually help to deliver a better policy outcome. Having a series of people who simply say ‘yes’ and are afraid to challenge does not guarantee success.

- 2 **Timescales** – political timescales are not always best suited for long term decision making. You only need to look at the problems over aviation to see an example of where the politics trumps the long term national interest – successive Governments have put off a decision.
- 3 **Coalition government** – in many Departments, officials have two sets of masters and these masters do not always agree amongst themselves. This means that instructions are not always clear and could even be contradictory.

Criticisms of the civil service assume that Government knows what it is doing and that Ministers are all able to direct and impose their will on their officials. This will not come as a shock but some Ministers are better than others, know and understand their issues, and are intellectually up to the task.

This is not a defence of the civil service. There is no doubt that some change is needed. The recent example of the West Coast Main Line franchise shows that sometimes outside help is needed and the civil service should be prepared to bring it in especially in dealing with complex financial matters. They may also need help in negotiations, especially with the private sector, which is adept and used to such situations.

In the run-up to Labour’s victory in 1997, there was a fear expressed by many that the civil service was a largely conservative (small ‘c’) organisation and that it would try to block the bidding of a radical new incoming Blair Government. That did not come to pass. In the early days of that Government at least, there was a clear agenda, vision and path for reform which the civil service helped to implement. It is now slightly ironic that a Conservative-led Government is the one to voice its concerns about the civil service. Although Tony Blair recently weighed into the debate to add his voice to the criticism.

Reform has been seen as a largely Conservative-led part of the Coalition's policy agenda but the party has form for 'taking on' the civil service. It should not be forgotten that one of the big areas of reform under Mrs Thatcher was the development of 'arms-length agencies' (quangos in the more modern parlance), moving parts of the civil service out into new bodies which would have a clearer focus, drive and inspired by business. Their establishment would also slim down the civil service.

The policy was hugely controversial at the time. The danger is though that rather than admit to their failings, politicians will blame others for 'not doing what they were told'. Reform does not always deliver the expected, or hoped for, results. After all aren't the current Government busy abolishing quangos?

Why Politicians don't get music

07 February 2013

It is rare that politicians ever understand when and where to use music. They are forever using it when they don't have permission or talking about it to show that they have a 'real life' outside of politics, that they are just like us really.

What they never seem to understand is that such use of music does more harm than good. Instead of giving them a 'halo effect', helping them to gain credibility and hopefully votes, the potential backlash can be extremely embarrassing especially if it keeps happening. In the worst case scenario it can also land them with a hefty legal bill as well.

What usually happens is that they use music without the artist's permission. However, the legal situation is very complex.

In the US there have been several high profile cases of the artists taking legal actions against the politician concerned. David Byrne, formerly of Talking Heads, sued Charlie Crist, a former Florida Governor, for using one of his songs. The details of the fine settlement were not made public but Crist did have to make an apology on YouTube. This was arguably more damaging than any hoped for financial penalty.

Here, reference to the law is much less frequent. The Manic Street Preachers did take action against the BNP for using one of their songs but other examples are thinner on the ground. However, the threat by Thom Yorke, out of Radiohead, to 'sue the living s**t' out of David Cameron if he used one of his songs marked a shift. It showed that full force of the law would be used and it was also an example of getting retaliation in early.

Instead, artists normally rely on the power of PR, making statements knocking the credibility of the politician or party concerned making it clear that that they have not endorsed the politician, the party or any of their policies.

It could be a simple calculation - the artists will never say 'yes' if we, the politicians, ask them so let's use the music and hope they do not make a fuss. It's a potentially high profile risk.

Cameron, chief amongst his contemporaries, seems to want to use music as a way of being seen to be connected to real lives. However, by citing the Smiths and the Jam, he invoked the wrath of the musicians involved and also seems to have never listened to the lyrics of, for instance, Eton Rifles. He also picked two musicians, Morrissey and Paul Weller, that you would not want to get on the wrong side of. You can now also guarantee that in any interview Weller gives he is asked about Cameron's like for Eton Rifles giving Weller another chance to make his views known.

Endorsements by musicians can work. They can provide a boost but this is often stronger in the US than it is here. A Democratic candidate wanting to show that he has the concerns of blue collar American workers at heart now needs the support of Bruce Springsteen. Hollywood A-listers need to be involved in campaigns because they help to secure donations, host fund-raisers and will speak at conventions are other big gatherings. George Clooney manages to fit in some fundraising dinners for the Democrats although it is unclear if they serve Nespresso coffee.

In the UK, celebrities do not get involved very often. Here there is a large dose of scepticism towards endorsements but the parties would still rather have them than not. The slightly unseemly rush to get Daniel Radcliffe's support showed the parties still want the celebrities.

Our parties used to drag out celebrities at party conferences but the sight of rather less than A-list celebrities didn't always seem to put their favoured party in the best light. The Labour Party has never really got over the Red Wedge tour during which a range of musicians, and later comedians, played concerts in support of the party. The recriminations still play out and Paul Weller, again, seems to have a large dose of his mistrust of politicians from being involved in the efforts. Red Wedge appears to sum up all that can go wrong with the link - politicians trying to get leverage whilst the artists complain about being used.

If there is a genuine love of the music and authenticity then the link can work. My favourite has to be Stella Creasy MP writing the liner notes for a re-issue of the Wedding Present's 'Seamonster's album. Her love of their music is clear and that has nothing to do with politics.

Although it is doubtful that David Cameron would ever want to use 'Paranoid Android' or 'Creep' in a Conservative Party Election Broadcast at least he is clear in what the consequences would be.

What to look out for in a rising political star

28 February 2013

We all like to play 'who is the rising star?' - trying to work out which MPs or other politicians are heading for high office, could carry influence and weight and in whose basket we should place our eggs.

This topic always seems to be a favourite amongst political pundits and there is often a frenzy of commentary on this both pre and post election and ministerial reshuffles.

This judgment is, however, often just a case of gut instinct. There is nothing wrong with that but it is worth considering the reasons behind what makes someone a rising star. It should be a changing list of criteria. What makes a rising star this year may not be the same as next. Undoubtedly being good with the media has risen in importance whilst the ability to make two hour speeches is less so. But if we know and understand any criteria for judgment then we could identify what may be important in

the future - social media abilities being an obvious example. This may also show us who is not so hot! It may help to show people that we would not otherwise have thought of, or maybe shows that someone we thought as being a rising star is destined to burn brightly and then fade.

Criteria for being a rising star could include

- 1 **Personal background** - a history of activism and commitment to the party will help to build a rising stars' personal brand. There are also certain buttons that, if pressed, will impress. A background in business, law or economics/finance has often been a shared trait amongst politicians that have headed for senior office within their first couple of years at Westminster. Academics are often amongst those considered to be 'high-flyers' particularly if their area of expertise and work experience corresponds to a ministerial portfolio that they might have their eyes on. Generally speaking, having had some career outside of politics not just having been a lobbyist (normally removed from any post election CV) or a special adviser can put them in good stead. Rising stars can either conform to type, time served public servants for Labour, or fill a gap, business people for Conservatives.
- 2 **Media profile** - any self respecting rising star will know how to perform well through the media. They don't though want to overdo it. Too much exposure or a too early a profile piece suggesting that they will be Prime Minister within the next decade will simply create enemies.
- 3 **Endorsements** - comments of support from already respected and well positioned individuals will always strengthen the position of a rising star. Such comments will often reinforce the good links and networks that the rising star has and, if they have been doing the necessary level of ground work, they will have been investing time and effort in these networks.
- 4 **Team player** - especially early on in their career a rising star needs to show that they understand the rules of the game and will support those around them (as well as looking out for themselves). Whilst being a rebel may help get selected at a local level, once in Parliament consistent opposition will not impress anyone. However there is a balance to be struck between toeing the party line and not to be seen as a robot that is constantly 'on-message'
- 5 **Parliament** - it remains at the heart of British political life and for that reason it is still important that a rising star has a strong profile in Parliament. As well as allowing them to demonstrate to their constituents that they are active on their behalf, it shows the right level of deference towards the day job, supporting the Government, holding them to account and scrutinising legislation.
- 6 **Campaigning** - the ability to stick a rosette on a donkey and for it then to be elected is nearly dead. Rising stars have to know and understand what makes a modern political campaign,

including new technology. It also requires leadership-style qualities such as the ability to lead and motivate teams, creativity and, frankly, hard work.

- 7 **Career progress** - they has to be development and improvement over time. Politicians, especially, do not arrive fully formed. There is a greasy pole to work their way up and this requires political skills - knowing and understanding what is going on, how to make the most of it, making the friends and allies needed and sidelining those who are 'not one of us'. There is no accounting though for being in the right place at the right time and having the political ability to take advantage of a situation or the pure good fortune. If promotion does come early then there is the chance to learn on the job and they have to, at least, show that they are a safe pair of hands and make no mistakes. Momentum counts for a lot.
- 8 **Achievements** - just being a good politician is not enough, there have to have been some achievements along the way already. These could be local 'wins' or a successful campaign. There are a lot of bright young things that want to be rising stars but only those with some sort of track record that makes them stand out from the crowd will most probably end up being recognised as such.

None of these proposed criteria are mutually exclusive and some may offset others but taken together they mean that we can properly consider where the person is likely to end up. The criteria may also vary slightly between the parties but hopefully by starting to map them out is a step forward and shines some light.

This is, of course, a very imprecise science but is hopefully better than just sticking a wet finger in the air.

The five lessons David Bowie (accidentally) taught politicians

09 April 2013

The recent release of David Bowie's new album sent a major shock wave through the music industry and caused many 'respectable' and 'serious' programmes and publications to fall over themselves in fawning admiration. There is no doubt that he has succeeded in re-inventing the concept of the album launch and has made it an event again.

What has been given less coverage are the lessons that can be applied to politicians from Bowie's approach.

- 1 **Communications** - Bowie's whole approach to launching this album has been on the basis of a real understanding of the nature of modern communications. He has given away power to his fans and made them part of the event - giving them control over the marketing. We are becoming used to the citizen as journalist, community activist, pundit and commentator generating their own content and with them deciding how to consume their media. We now have the citizen as Bowie fan taking part in the marketing across the globe. The power of communication was given to citizens.

- 2 **Age** - Bowie is now 66 and used the occasion of his birthday in January to make the announcement about new music. Political parties have become focused on youth as the basis for their appeal to the electorate rather than age or experience. Bowie showed that this remains a viable way forward.

- 3 **The leader** - all those connected to Bowie during the two year production of the new music kept the whole project totally secret. Not a single word leaked. This demonstrates that if the leader is respected then the clearly defined vision can be achieved. It is though up to the leader to define that vision and to bind people into it.

- 4 **Long term thinking** - the launch and the interest it has generated would not have been possible without the development of a long term strategy. This all took time to plan, execute and, importantly, work out how to maintain interest. We are now three months after the initial announcements and the Today programme are still running stories. There is a back story, a mystery and the whole shock factor of the unveiling of the first track. There does, however, remain the need for the product to be good. Otherwise the flip side of this movement and empowerment is the backlash. But this is David Bowie and the album is good.

- 5 **Media motivation** - Bowie proved that the media can be displaced from their usual positions and are interested in new ideas. They can be wrong-footed with a carefully structured campaign. This campaign has adopted an innovative approach to traditional, online and social media. It included not just the launch of new music but images and the opportunity of an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert museum. The otherwise jaded media took note - not many rock artists get featured on the Today programme, let alone on consecutive days.

Politicians need to take note of all these lessons if they are to be successful and engage effectively with the electorate.

Whether Bowie actually meant to set the agenda for politicians is another matter...alternatively, you could put a white square over this blog.

For data's sake - The Government's flawed use of evidence

23 April 2013

Making more and more information available to the public has become one of the tools used by Government to demonstrate that it is being open and transparent. It is increasingly being used as an indicator of the transparency of the Government.

However, simply making information available is far from the complete answer.

Public consultations bring the issue of evidence into sharp focus. There are debates to be had about what information is and is not made available, how it is made available and in what format. Consultations have often been challenged on what raw data has been provided to the public or what the evidence is behind a particular option or policy that forms part of the consultation.

Of course, those looking to create problems for a consultation will always look for the weak spots to try and challenge it but there is a serious question to be asked about the impact of the evidential base on the design of a consultation.

Too often, there are arguments over what the data really means as well with little or no agreement over the starting point. Some of the basis of the challenges over the Leeds Infirmary consultation and subsequent suspension of children's heart surgery came down to an argument over the data and evidence used and made available.

A similar situation can be imagined for the current inquiry into aviation capacity. Even from the outset there is disagreement over questions of need and capacity. Sometimes the same sets of statistics are used but with different interpretations, on other occasions completely conflicting sets of evidence. The first task is to get some common ground agreed otherwise there will never be agreement on the outputs. Similar discussions between supporters and opponents have taken place over HS2.

Whilst talking about evidence based decision-making, Government does not always release the evidence, assuming that it does exist. Formal consultation papers are not always accompanied by the detailed evidence used to assess the options. Then there are the occasions when the 'something must be done' line is used, for instance on the level of new EU immigrants into the UK, but the Government cannot prove that there is a problem because it does not have the evidence.

Too often information is released by Government or as part of consultations with little or no context or explanation. A mass of information is simply dumped onto the public. This actually has the opposite effect of that intended - Government becomes less transparent and the data builds a wall between citizen and Government.

Far from Eric Pickles having empowered an army of 'armchair auditors', many do not have the time or inclination to wade through the information. Another key problem is the lack of skills that most citizens have to do anything with all the information.

For many in the tech sector what they need is data that can be manipulated so that they can do something useful with it and maybe find an opportunity to exploit it commercially. This is where the real power of Government data and evidence sits for the future.

It has to be recognised that politics and political decision making are not always based purely on evidence. However, the more that we come to expect to see the evidence, the more that Government will have to provide it in an agreed and comprehensible format.

Government doesn't trust government

09 May 2013

One of the consequences of the economic downturn is that government has lost faith in itself. It no longer appears to believe that the levers of the state can be used to deliver the policy outcomes it seeks and instead departments are busy looking after themselves.

This Coalition was certainly very clear when it came to office that the state had become too powerful and that government will be less active than it once was, especially under Labour.

However, one of the myths of the Thatcher era was that she reduced the role of the state - she centralised decision making to an unprecedented degree (if you don't believe this then just read Simon Jenkins' book, *Accountable to None*).

Localism remains in the vocabulary of government but the letting go remains extremely difficult for Westminster and Whitehall, just look at the example of Council Tax - nominally a locally set tax but within the clear boundaries set by central government! Moves towards Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP), whilst potentially shifting powers away from central government, are still constrained. A senior civil servant is on hand to 'advise' each LEP and the LEP itself is majority controlled by business, not local government.

We are also seeing increasing competition between Ministers and a reversion to the practice of bidding wars between departments. A Minister is once again seen to be doing a good job if they can defend their department's spending. This means that any semblance of joined-up government or common goals are lost. Things have got so bad that the PM has had to tell Ministers to stop making public pronouncements and stop their 'nimbyism'. There also appears to be a concerted effort to focus cuts on the welfare state as if that would save other departments from having to make their own difficult decisions.

Some of the biggest changes in the culture of government have been the moves to longer term budget arrangements, a move away from annual settlements. There are, however, rumours that in some places, HM Treasury wants to bring this back. That would be a disaster for long term thinking, especially in the development of infrastructure projects. Yes, it may give the Treasury some of its power back but it would be a short term, retrograde step which is being fought by many.

These turf wars also affect the delivery of infrastructure and its future development. The Treasury seems to enjoy its reputation as the department that other departments do not like. But the increasingly tribal behaviour in a time of no money is leading to perverse outcomes. Infrastructure UK which produces infrastructure plans is largely ignored by other departments despite some excellent people being involved. It is viewed as a child of the Treasury. This means that IUK's plans are hobbled from the outset.

Any sign of weakness is jumped upon and Ministers are less likely to defer to each other. Add in a dose of politics, the tensions inherent in a Coalition government, then coherence is lost.

Take the Growth and Infrastructure Bill, it has taken around 6 months to go through Parliament and has been used as a catch-all for a number of measures that the Government hopes will deliver growth - planning, IP etc. The Bill, in effect, reverses the Government's previous belief that it is not the state's role to legislate for growth.

This is all hugely important when dealing with government. Knowing how discussions about finance are progressing and who listens to who are fundamentals in good political relations and communications. As the next General Election starts to loom then it will take a strong Prime Minister to pull Ministers back on line and show that the Government itself really are 'all in it together'.

What's the story? Why Government needs to lead the debate

27 June 2013

The recent publication of the second Government Communications Plan provided a clear indication of what is expected from all those involved in getting the message out. The six primary functions of government communications recognise that government has a responsibility to communicate with public but also that the communications 'directly influences the public response'.

However, what is less clear is the political side of Government, Ministers, really understand the need to provide a clear overarching picture of policy so that progress can be made towards the desired outcome. In other words, helping to influence the public response.

There are often debates around whether a 'big picture' needs to be set out by Government. Some consider, that as we move away from ideology, politicians should simply concentrate on managing - the economy, the public sector etc.

The recent experience of the Coalition appears to show that this is insufficient. There is a lack of a narrative around key policies and strategic priorities meaning that they are being deflected from delivery in these areas.

Take, for instance, HS2. Rather than focusing on the national need for a high speed rail network - the economic benefits, additional capacity it would deliver etc - there is confusion about consultation, legal battles, arguments over environmental impact assessments etc. Whilst these are all important, it has deflected Government from its vision of the way forward and what it is really seeking to achieve. There is a feeling that HS2 is not being 'sold' the nation by Government and so the level of support is not as high or as solid as it could be.

Again, with wind farms and energy policy, more generally, the debate has coalesced on the powers of local communities and whether Government policies make blocking wind farms and other developments easier. There are very real debates to be had about community benefits of schemes and how these are shared amongst communities but what we do not have is any discussion about when the lights will go out. Depending on whose estimates you believe, we could have energy shortages in three to five years time. The debate though is not about the pressing need to devise a meaningful energy policy and increase generating capacity but how communities should work with developers on potential projects.

It is also far from clear whether individual Ministers fully understand the requirements of modern communications and the media. We seem to have moved from the new Labour era of media obsession to one where several Ministers think themselves capable of dealing with all elements of policy, their party and the media. This may, at least in part, explain why No 10 thinks that it is not in control of events.

The focus of Government has been drawn from the macro to the micro, or from the national to the local. There are a number of reasons for this, not least electoral, but also the success of campaigning groups and individuals. They are deflecting Government from setting out its vision.

Government is spending too much time down in the 'muck and bullets' and not enough time fighting for the big picture. If it did then it would find support which some of these policies are lacking.

The lessons Boris Johnson can teach David Cameron: A tale of two Tories

09 July 2013

Whether or not Boris Johnson ever wants to try to lead the Conservative Party is one of the current great political stories. Journalists search for a story in whether Cameron and Johnson get on, if there is any animosity between the two and pore over every comment made for signs of one having a dig at the other.

All this should not disguise that the Mayor of London has some valuable lessons for the Prime Minister not least in how to set a clear political strategy.

Take the Mayor's recent [2020 Vision](#). Never knowingly undersold, the programme for the future growth and development is called 'The Greatest City on Earth' and is full of Johnson-type florid language.

However, the document sets out in very clear terms what the Mayor wants and expects from London. There are lists of challenges and then a list of projects and policies to deal with the challenges. The document does set out a vision and a belief in what London should be in the future.

There is no doubt that the list of projects is challenging and there is not the money in place for many of them but the document is enthusing and shows that those leading the city know what they want to do. Unusually it is a vision document with vision.

The comparison with the approach at a national level is stark. Looking at a range of policy areas – rail and energy, most notably - you do not see a vision of the future being set out. This, as I describe in a recent [blog](#), means that Government can be more easily deflected and ends up dealing with issues of detail rather than being able to set out a clear narrative.

Johnson's approach has a number of clear advantages – it means more effort can be spent on delivery and less trying to wade through a torrent of detail; it ensures that there are clear battle lines and that Johnson has helped to draw them up in the first place putting him in a better position; and it means he controls the agenda.

By adopting a clear approach to communications, Johnson has also been able to undertake some very effective lobbying of central government, particularly where it comes to long term security of funding and more recently extending the reach of his powers over some suburban train operations. Bigger battles though lay ahead especially if, as the recent finance commission [report](#) suggests, Johnson wants greater financial powers.

London has become the city that others in the country look at enviously and complain that it is treated too favourably and gets more than its fair share. The challenge that these other cities face though is that London can secure a bigger bang for the Treasury's buck.

But Johnson's clear communications and messages also help. London looks and feels more united than some other cities. There is a lack of counter views and whilst active discussions do take place there appears to be a general agreement by a range of stakeholders on the key issues and actions. This strength in depth takes time to build but provides Johnson with the ability to stand up and talk on behalf of London because he knows the support is there. The same cannot be said of other cities (there some notable exceptions to this).

Johnson's approach to communications and engagement is direct and that is part of the reason why he is seen as a successor to Cameron. He also does not duck the big issues – he has stood up for the financial services sector and has challenged government on immigration and visas and other issues. This gives him a little something special as far as the electorate is concerned – along with sometimes outrageous comments...

This is not, of course, a fair fight. The challenges of government are far more diverse and wide-ranging and the level of scrutiny on Boris is far less than on Cameron but these should not disguise the lessons on offer to the Prime Minister. Johnson leads and he leads from the front. Cameron should take note.

Government at war: Who is it this week?

02 August 2013

There is a common misconception that it is only those organisations that are heavily regulated that should engage with Government. That trend assumes that there are some companies that will be in the Government's line of sight and that engagement is needed to help stem the flow of constant new regulations and/or red tape. For other companies, they assume the best approach is keep to their heads down and hope for the best.

This approach fails to understand the ever changing focus of Government, assumes consistency of approach and does not take into account the often competitive nature between Government departments.

Take the recent example of the Government's efforts to 'force' Internet Service Providers (ISPs) into what it sees as firmer measures over child Internet safety. Admittedly, this is an industry already in the public spotlight but the issue highlights how Government can conduct itself. The Government could choose to legislate in this area but that would mean being able to accurately specify what it wants - and it doesn't seem able to do this. Instead it is conducting a campaign through the media trying to say that the industry is not doing enough (something the industry would vehemently deny).

A leaked letter from the Department for Education, blogged about by [Rory Cellan-Jones](#), reveals that Government does not really know what it wants in any level of detail.

For instance, the Department wants the ISPs to fund an 'awareness campaign' for parents but admits that it has little idea what the campaign will be about. It wants to know how much each company will be willing to contribute to this campaign and obviously sees nothing wrong in making this request. The letter also demands a change in language on safety net filters which the industry feels is misleading but the Prime Minister believes will 'improve how we communicate the current position on parental Internet controls'.

In lobbying terms, it shows that officials are often left to pick up and deliver what the politicians want but with no detail being provided to them. Ministers then complain that the officials are blocking policy or are not delivering whilst not realising that their own approach to engagement or requests are the root cause of the problem.

It shows that organisations should not just accept what is put in front of them but should be prepared to push back and ask for the details. They should not be scared just because the Prime Minister is mentioned.

The letter suggests that the companies are also likely to hear from DCMS and the Home Office on the issue as well. This does not bode well and will mean multiple points of entry into Government and, it should not be assumed, a clarity or consistency of requirements from each Department (plus Number 10).

The letter apologises for the short, 'very tight', deadlines which fit the political needs not, it could be argued, the needs of the issue. It is not clear how the companies involved are expected to have considered the issues in the letter, not least the call for money, in the timescale available. Not a business-friendly approach.

Government has to be seen as being in charge and as we approach the next General Election we will see similar positions adopted particularly in relation to child protection, law and order, criminal sentencing and immigration. Both parties in the Coalition will want to show that they are taking steps to ensure that the public is protected even if it is not Government themselves taking the action.

Organisations need to be prepared for this type of approach by Government, appreciate that ideas do not always come formed and that 'discussions' often take place through the media.

All types of organisations can get dragged in, not just those who choose to engage and not just those from already regulated sectors.

The top five lessons crime novels can teach politicians

04 September 2013

All too often politicians and government can become detached from the electorate. There are often claims that politicians fail to take note of the needs of the whole of the country and that they become obsessed only with what is going on in Westminster (or Holyrood, Cardiff or Belfast). They become sidetracked by minor issues that the majority of the country cares little about.

This is, of course, not helped when often media coverage and the main media outlets themselves are also concentrated in the capital cities along with most of the policy-making infrastructure and professional support mechanisms for government. It is up to politicians to lift their eyes to what is taking place around the country and see what is happening.

The British political system gives politicians a unique link back to the communities they serve through their constituencies. This is not, however, sufficient. They need to look for other ways to keep in touch and one way they can do this is by reading more crime novels.

Whilst knowing the names of characters on EastEnders or who came second in the X-factor final can be used to show that a politician is 'in-touch' with people, the modern day crime novel can provide them with welcome insights and a better understanding of what people are really thinking about.

- **Key issues** – the books often examine the issues that are really concerning communities. If you consider, for instance, some of the Scandinavian crime fiction then it revealed much about attitudes towards immigration. The characters in books allow discussions to take place in a more open way than would otherwise be allowed in many other forms of media. The geographical range of crime fiction available, throughout the UK, means that London concerns do not dominate. The novels could be thought of as a more accessible and cheaper form of focus groups.
- **Power relationships** – the novels often consider the structures of organisations and how they actually work, not the theoretical version of how they are meant to work. The narrative of the books take in the private and, importantly, the public sectors so that the reader is not limited in their views of how power works and who controls what.
- Mis-use of power – a favourite theme of crime fiction is how individuals mis-use their positions either through choice or as a consequence of how the systems around them operate. Being able to look at how people go about their work and the weak spots in the systems means that action can be taken. A form of policy and idea generation for political manifestos.
- **Communities** – crime novels make a particular effort to be reflective of their environments and the communities in which they are based. This comes through in the dialogue, the characters and, of course, the plot. For some readers, this may be the first or only time that they are exposed to these communities so that can provide some useful insight.
- **The uncomfortable truth** – as with all fiction, crime novels are able to deal with the truth not as we perceive it but as it really is. Politicians, particularly at a senior level, often surround themselves with supporters and those who are either unwilling or unable to say anything but ‘yes’. More time spent with novels would provide some welcome balance and not allow anyone to take themselves too seriously.

All this should provide useful guidance to any politician. A good crime novel can not only tell them about their local community but also be a source of balance and policy generation. So rather than turning on their TVs, politicians should be opening the pages of a good crime novel. I’d be happy to recommend some to them.

A rich and varied story why really listening to politicians is important

12 September 2013

This may come as a surprise to many but politicians can and do say interesting and important things. For those involved in communications, especially lobbying, really understanding what they are saying can make or break a campaign.

I was very pleased this week to announce the launch of my latest book, the Dictionary of Labour Quotations. A book of quotations may not, on the face of it, seem like a very exciting proposition.

Going from quote to quote could be dry and uninteresting but the Dictionary of Labour Quotations is very far from that. There are also companion books of Conservative quotes by Iain Dale and Liberal quotes by Duncan Brack (all [published by Biteback Publishing](#)).

Only by reading what has been said and written can we hope to understand politics. The context of words is often critical but also too often history is forgotten. How is it that we have even got to this position in the first place?

Political debate never ends and there remain fundamental differences in principle between the political parties. It may suit some to pretend that politicians are all the same but as my book shows, that is not the case.

The big ideological battles may be behind us but we still need to know and understand what they were if we are to campaign effectively. This is also important in the generation of new ideas. Reading the quotes of Marx and Engels reminds the left of its past and shared history but also why it has spread in different directions.

Researching the quotes in the book I was reminded that some of the themes, if not the solutions or rhetoric, continue to resonate. Looking at the speeches of Ed Miliband but tracing back the comments of others, you can see that the Labour Party remains focused on fairness, ensuring that a narrow majority or elite do not dominate or exploit. There are, of course, a whole different set of arguments about whether the reality meets the rhetoric.

The importance of history to political parties should be clear. The Labour Party's debate over Clause IV of its constitution, which committed it to public ownership, came to symbolise that. Tony Blair's proposed change of wording was hugely important, both to the party and the country. Blair wanted to show that Labour was not stuck in the past. For Blair, placing Labour's principles in a modern context meant that people could have faith in it and, it could be argued, this helped lay the foundations for their election wins. Indeed, there are some valuable lessons for Ed Miliband in his current dealings with the trade unions.

Importantly, the book also reminds us about the personality and personalities of the left. Politics feels more constrained in the modern era and certainly the media has played a role in that. That wasn't always the case in the past. Some of the insults hurled around in public are enough to make your hair curl and a fair few are included here. The caricature of the left as bureaucratic and humourless is, I hope, dispelled.

Reading the quotes brings the past to life. It can remind you of the political debates, the political positioning, the decisions to be made, the challenges and sometimes even where things went wrong.

This is critical for politicians themselves but also those involved in political and policy debates.

Leadership in politics

17 October 2013

There are many studies into what makes effective leaders and various models of leadership. However, after writing about the importance of personality politics in a previous blog I came across two studies into leadership which seemed to shed more light on what we can expect of political leaders.

It is useful to consider such traits if the aim of public affairs and lobbying is to work with politicians and political leaders and try to influence the direction of the work, policy initiatives etc. The first study, whilst primarily aimed at looking at leadership as a whole, seems to me to be directly applicable to the political environment. The work by Anita Elberse is centred on the leadership style of Sir Alex Ferguson, the former manager of Manchester United Football Club. In the latest issue of the Harvard Business Review, Elberse describes the key aspects of Sir Alex's leadership style. The work, based on extensive research and interviews, suggests:

- 1 **Start with the foundation** - getting to grips with basis of an organisation and make any changes that are necessary to build long term success.
- 2 **Dare to rebuild your team** - an approach which sees Ferguson as a 'portfolio' manager of talent.
- 3 **Set high standards and hold everyone to them** - install your values, beliefs and aims in the team.
- 4 **Never, ever cede control** - particularly as negative influences can turn an atmosphere.
- 5 **Match the message to the moment** - 'tailoring words to the situation' which in turn helps give confidence to those around you.
- 6 **Prepare to win** - with perseverance being a key requirement. The Ferguson mentality also meant practicing for 'when the going gets tough'.
- 7 **Rely on the power of observation** - according to Sir Alex 'the key is to delegate the direct supervision to others and trust them to do their jobs, allowing the manager to truly observe'.
- 8 **Never stop adapting** - 'you control change by accepting it' and 'I always felt I couldn't afford not to change'.

It is fairly easy to see how these lessons can be applied, or are not being applied, in Westminster both in the Ed Miliband led Labour Party but also around David Cameron's Cabinet. If you look at the most successful political leaders, such as Blair and Thatcher, then these lessons appear to apply very well. Just don't mention Gordon Brown...

This brings me onto the second piece of research. This comes from US firm, Software Advice, which seeks to identify the character traits and psychological profiles of types of leaders in what they term the 'Dream Team'. They look at political leaders (as well as others) as being 'The Champs' - who love engaging with people and are skilled at reading people. They have a confidence in handling people and are adept at interpersonal interactions. They often have a motivating 'chip on their shoulder' and they are characterised by optimism, confidence, being 'people persons' and strive to the best.

A similar personality type can be seen for some CEOs, COOs and, on that basis, you can see why they is sometimes movement between the two professions. It may also explain why politicians sometimes seek to bring in business leaders into political circles because as well as the skills and experience they bring they also feel some 'kindred spirit'. This personality type are also charismatic, energised and are generators of new ideas. It is rare that time is spent really thinking about what makes a political leader. Instead all the time is spent concentrating on the day-to-day issues, pressure points, media angles etc. Sometimes a broader perspective, a longer-term analysis can deliver benefits.

Politics is not dead

23 October 2013

It is often suggested that the fight has gone out of British politics. That we are living in a period of consensus and that the adversarial approach which dominated until around the early-1990s is dead and buried.

That may be the case for some issues but for those involved in public affairs campaigns, there often remains a need to 'take on' government and engage in a fight.

The suggestion that adversarial politics is at an end appears to be a very Westminster village view of the world. Actually if you look at a local level there are a number of real fights taking place over genuine issues of principle. Look at the debate over HS2, post office closures, changes to local services and provision and you then start to see a very different picture. Individual citizens remain highly motivated at a local level and this can then spill over into the national political debate. Issues can escalate from the local to the national if not handled properly.

In such cases this should be a key area of focus for public affairs practitioners to identify and manage.

The political parties look with envy to the likes of the National Trust, CPRE, NGOs etc who are able to motivate large numbers of people in support of a campaign. They themselves are often broad coalitions of interests so this motivation is not always a straightforward task but they have the potential to use their large numbers to lobby government directly, attract media interest and engage in effective social media campaigns as well.

Some politicians, locally and nationally, have tried a number of ways to try and draw the sting of such organisations. A method used in the Netherlands and mentioned recently in a business breakfast we held with Sir John Armit, is to literally invite interested parties 'to the table' where they can thrash out a solution. The only prerequisite to being at the table is a commitment to be willing to compromise.

Too often in the UK, policies and projects are presented without sufficient thought about why they are being developed. This forces a reaction against the proposals and increases the level of politics involved. In essence, if people feel that the relevant decision-maker, ie Government, is not listening to them then it will inevitably force a reaction.

Consultations are another way in which proposals can be worked up but they often have the air of a pre-determined outcome about them (which can lead to them being challenged in the courts). This again increases the potential for conflict and an adversarial approach – the exact opposite of the aim of the consultation.

You often need to fight for a long time to get any change and have to make a nuisance of yourself. This can often annoy MPs. For instance, if you look at the recent appearance by Mary Portas at the Communities and Local Government Select Committee you will see a group trying to savage someone making an effort to deliver policy improvements. Charities have also come into criticism for encouraging people to use a template email to 'bombard' their MP. There are always pitfalls and sensitivities in campaigns.

Even for the most political of operators it can take time and continued effort to secure change. It has taken Michael Heseltine most of his political career to get the Government to adopt a devolutionary approach and give local bodies the powers he thinks they should have (even if the funding to go with those powers are nowhere near the scale he recommended).

So far from politics being low-key, consensual and agreements being reached, there is still a lot of life left in it and serious debates and campaigns to be developed. It is not consensus all the way.

Curated politics

07 November 2013

Consumers are discerning. This is increasingly the same whether they are choosing clothes, technology or how, even if, they are expressing their political views and beliefs. There are direct implications for those trying to motivate campaigners and supporters, not least the political parties themselves.

The rise of choice across all aspects of life is a given. These choices are often made after great deliberation. Information is more widely available and it is rare that any decision is made without reading a series of online reviews/articles or the direct recommendation of a friend often through social media. The decision is also made in a timescale chosen by that person, not the artificial constructs of others.

Politics is now curated in the same way as personal book libraries or music collections. People are unafraid to 'pick and choose' their favoured policies and which they want to get more involved in supporting. The traditional model of political parties is one of aggregating views, some policies you

like, others less so. That is at least part of the reason why people have joined single issue pressure groups; there is less of the problem of aggregation or trading off of beliefs.

That becomes less true, however, as the NGOs become larger and have to widen the scope of their campaigning. For others, the model of a top-down mass membership organisation becomes less appealing to those who want to be involved in decision-making. Personally as a member of one such organisation, I cannot recall ever being asked my opinion on any of the policies they pursue.

This means that trying to motivate people has to be done on the basis of individual appeals. Rarely will appeals to the greater good or mass appeals work. Take, for instance, the recent outcry over The Daily Mail's treatment of Ralph Miliband. This has less to do with the man's politics than a feeling that the Mail had gone too far in questioning his character and the language they used to do so. There was a ground swell of cross party condemnation.

All this opens up space again for the political parties but only if there is reason to join them. What really are the benefits of joining a political party? As an individual curates their politics, where do the political parties stand?

The space is at a local level. Local campaigns motivate people. A good and charismatic MP, council leader or local councillor can attract people. It is also back to personal recommendations and individuals seeing an immediate benefits their actions. This is possible in people's communities.

It also points to the top-down, media-led approach of the political parties as being part of the problem for their failings. As they have become more remote, they have lost relevance. Connections which were important between members and their local communities can be reenergised.

Using the local space also means that people do not have to be particularly political to get involved in a political party. They can dip in and out, for instance if they want to join for six months or a year to focus on one campaign then that is fine. If the campaign succeeds and they meet some good people then they might well stay or at least come back in the future. This means the political parties need to stop obsessing over the simple number of members and instead consider how effective campaigns are, locally as well as nationally, and what value members have drawn from being involved, their experiences etc. Skilling someone for ongoing community activism and engagement even if they are only a member for a year could be viewed as a positive.

It's also not just about technology. The simple ability for large numbers of people to sign online petitions is not the same as securing a large numbers of signatures. Technology is a tool, not an end point in itself but too often it is seen as a panacea, the ultimate way in which to empower.

Until the political parties come to fully appreciate these changes then we will never see a return to 'mass membership' political parties.

For those involved in public affairs and campaigning it means understanding the motivations of individuals, not just groups. It also means being aware of the changes being made by the political parties and not treating that process merely as an interesting aside. Politics is not just about politicians and their behaviour.

The future of the political party

09 December 2013

Political parties need to give serious thought to how to use new technology to attract, retain and work with party members. The age of the top-down political machine is coming to an end but there has to be a meaningful role for members if political parties are to continue to be relevant.

It is not, however, all doom and gloom. Technology is not to blame for the decline of party membership and actually offers hope for enhanced individual engagement and participation in campaigns. If a relationship on this basis can be developed then it is more likely that votes will be forthcoming.

A recent article on Wired.co.uk by Jamie Bartlett concentrated on the fall in party membership and suggested that technology had played a role in this. These are though debates that have been raging for some time. The loosening of community ties, the failing strength in support for political parties, the demise of familial voting patterns etc. are all old arguments that date back decades. The erosion of traditional bases for political parties and falling membership rates did not begin with the advent of Twitter and Facebook. What it does show though is that the political parties have been very slow to adapt to these new ways of communicating. So changing patterns of behaviour are not solely caused by technology but it is potentially amplifying the effects.

In the same article, Bartlett uses the Italian example of the 'loose movement' founded online by comedian and blogger Beppe Grillo. This is very interesting but to try and read directly across from one political culture to another is fraught with danger. The way we view political parties, government, and Parliament are all very different.

Also, the rise in the use of online petitioning is not proof of non-party activity. The parties themselves often encourage people to take part in such activity. Also some petitions are run by political institutions themselves, not least e-petitions. The promise of an issue being considered by Parliament can be a spur to action.

Whilst the number of Twitter followers for the parties may be rising this does not necessarily equate to activity that has any real impact.

Bartlett is though undoubtedly right when he points to the selection of candidates as empowering members.

All this is relevant to public affairs campaigns as well. What makes people active and the type of issues they are prepared to get involved in all impact on campaigns and tactics.

If there is a loosening of central control then we would be looking at a very different form of political parties, decision-making and policy formulation.

It has to be remembered that part of the reason that the Labour Party became so obsessed with the media was because of the public spats between the party leaders and between the party leaders and the membership. You could not attend a party conference in the late 1970s or early 1980s without hearing the word 'betrayal' being bandied about.

Bartlett also suggests that 'our political parties will have to get used to this new type of membership – elastic, less loyal and conditional – which can nevertheless be mobilised at election time'.

But elections are an almost constant feature of political life they do not just happen once every five years for a General Election.

The challenge for the parties is to work out how to utilise new patterns and ways of engagement to ensure that their campaigns are effective and, bottom line, that their candidates get elected.

For instance, the AFL CIO labour federation in the US is looking at 'building a broad coalition to advance a worker-friendly political and economic agenda'. The New York Times outlined the federation's consideration of developing formal partnerships or affiliates to bring in non-union members.

It is critical to enthuse people to get involved in campaigns. It is not just about giving them the tools to do so.

Beware of returning policies

20 December 2013

Organisations often spend far too much time congratulating themselves when they have some success in engaging with government especially if they have seen off a policy threat. They should instead appreciate that the same issue is likely to come back onto the political agenda in the future.

A successful outcome to a public affairs and lobbying campaign should not be viewed as the last word on an issue. Politicians often return to the same idea repeatedly. The policy may not always come back in exactly the same format or with the same proposals but the broad approach and aims will often return time and again.

Politicians increasingly try to look at a wider range of policy initiators to broaden their range of thinking. Without widening the gene pool there is a risk that new thinking does not come in and instead the parties return to tried and tested approaches. However, the problem of periodic recycling remains.

This happens often because the core problem or the issue that politicians are looking to address refuses to go away. They may have promised to maintain a watch on the issue, they may be under pressure from groups or campaigns to deal with it or it may continue to be featured in the media. For whatever reason, the problem continues to be a problem and action comes back onto the agenda.

So what can be done against this backdrop?

- 1 **Keep the campaign going** - not at the same level of intensity or with the same level of resources but the strategy paper should not be consigned to the bottom drawer. Instead, plan for a period of low level activity, maybe even just a watching brief, and making sure that your public affairs actions do not attract attention and raise it up the political agenda.

- 2 **Refresh the campaign** - even during a quiet period consider how the campaign should develop in the case of renewed interest. It won't be possible to just run the same arguments and ideas over. Politicians may become immune and frankly it will be difficult to motivate supporters if they have heard it all before. Sometimes the new government position addresses any previous weaknesses as well, so they learn by their mistakes or at least try to.

- 3 **Maintain the internal focus** - if there is a problem that government has identified then ensure that internally the focus is maintained on doing something about it. When the political focus returns you can then show that action has been taken which may draw the sting of the new attack. If, however, an initial victory was taken for granted and no further action was taken, you may be vulnerable.

- 4 **Maintain your records** - there is no guaranteeing how long it may take the issue to come back. It could be six months or it could be several years. If the time period is longer then it is critical that excellent records have been maintained about the campaign - who was engaged with, what their issues were, how they were followed up, what letters and other papers were prepared etc. Individuals and teams may move on so there has to be systems put in place so that the organisation can retain its collective memory.

The most critical element is to not fall into the trap of thinking that issues are ever truly solved. Complacency can set in and when the issue returns you will be ill-prepared to deal with it. This, in turn, makes your lobbying and public affairs that much more difficult.

What Miliband's One Nation Economy speech means for business

20 January 2014

Ed Miliband's ['One Nation Economy'](#) speech delivered at Senate House last Friday (17 January 2014) showed the ground on which Labour will fight the next General Election. It also showed why it is important that businesses engage with the Party.

It was clear from the speech that policy is in its developmental stage and there were plenty of comments to show that nothing that was said was 100% set in stone. For instance:

“If the banks can't demonstrate real culture change by the time of the next election they will see their high street and casino arms broken up”.

Any new government does not automatically want to pick fights and would rather have worked out solutions in advance. If it does not have these then the early years can be lost and momentum slowed. Labour is trying to balance the need to be seen as having ideas and put forward a distinctive programme whilst not reforming and introducing unnecessary risk just for the sake of it.

I was fortunate enough to chair a business breakfast with [Iain Wright MP](#) last week and he stressed the party's wish to work with business in the development of policy. A report of the event can be viewed [here](#).

Whilst Miliband wants to tackle vested interests, the Party also recognises that it cannot ride rough shod over business and introduce lots of unnecessary risk. But it is also up to the businesses themselves to help the Party (and the other parties as well) in their policy making as this will minimise potential risk and potential costs.

The banks, for instance, need to take action now. Miliband has described what he wants to see and the timescales as well. Other sectors too should take note of this.

Whilst the emphasis has been on energy and banks so far, Miliband also said in his speech:

“Broken markets, from gas and electricity to *transport*, which are not being reformed.”
(emphasis added)

Miliband has subsequently gone further in suggesting that consumer groups will be involved in decision-making (see BBC [report](#)). In essence, any organisation in a regulated sector will now also have to consider the position and agendas of consumer groups if they are not already doing so.

Policy making is an ongoing process but comes most sharply into focus in the run-up to a General Election. Whilst there are formal processes and structures in place these should not be used as an excuse for failing to engage.

Miliband’s speech, and those of Shadow Ministers, shows the country what the Party wants to do. These speeches are also being used to communicate with businesses and other organisations.

These speeches should be mined for information. Taking this speech alone, Miliband talked about the Party’s wish to establish a Green Investment Bank, British Investment Bank and challenger banks. Organisations need to consider this agenda and look to where they can add value, challenge, come up with solutions and take action in advance.

There may also be similar paths that Labour’s policy-making go down. In other words, good ideas which chime with the thrust of policy direction will be listened to.

Also, politicians across the board want to hear ways in which they can connect with the issues of the country. They need to overcome the perception of isolation from ‘ordinary voters’.

The energy sector is already alive to the prospect of reform but others, such as transport, also need to be awake. Now is the time to start engaging.

Parliament is not dead

07 March 2014

The centre of political life has always been seen as Parliament. But as political parties became ever more conscious of the role of the media and, in turn, how this could impact on the public perception of policies they thought less and less about Parliament. Parliament seemed to lose its place but there is now the real possibility of a comeback.

This ‘resurgence’ can partly be attributed as being the product of deliberate change. The shift to elections for chairs of Select Committees has given them enhanced power and standing. Combined with this, some of the committees make calls to the public on [ideas for inquiries](#) whilst others have

recognised public outcry, for instance over tax, and have moved to investigate. The [rise of the select committees](#) has provided a boost to Parliament.

There has been a clear need to rebuild faith in politics following the expenses scandal and the continued low levels of turnout at elections. Unless more action is taken then Parliament will not make the most of the changes.

Enter [Angela Eagle MP](#), Shadow Leader of the House of Commons, speaking to [Unlock Democracy](#) on Parliamentary reform. She put forward a number of potentially radical ideas but critically focused on public involvement. Parliament is rightly seen as the means of securing effective legislation, not merely a way of keeping politicians busy.

Eagle spoke about a new stage to the scrutiny of all legislation in the Commons including a 'Whole House Scrutiny Stage' to take place on the floor of the House. There could be a free-form Q&A session with the relevant Minister, as well as a formal public evidence stage so that members of the public and experts can be heard. Bill committees would then be expected to go through Bills line-by-line.

There is little doubt that improved scrutiny will help to rebuild trust and ensure better legislation. Eagle also suggests that it may mean a move away from a reliance on secondary legislation because of a more 'outline' approach to Bills that has come about in recent years. This was particularly true under Tony Blair's governments. As someone who advises clients on engagement with legislation, I always tell clients to keep watching, the Bill gaining Royal Assent is often only the start.

There are, of course, details to be worked through in Eagle's plans and I do wonder how the 'expert's will be selected in any new stages.

Another big impact that will be felt by Parliament, one that will place it at the very heart of public attention, will be when the HS2 hybrid bill really gets going later this year. The public and media will be looking at how it progresses. Difficult, controversial issues will be played out and opponents of the scheme will want their day in Parliament to air their issues (some of which may be heard but others could well be disappointed). The Bill was meant to be passed by the time of the General Election and many saw this as 'challenging'. However, in an [interview with the Spectator](#), the Secretary of State for Transport, Patrick McLoughlin, has now admitted that it won't.

But moves to strengthen Parliament also have taken into account what the electorate expects of their MPs in a constituency context as well. Twitter has certainly helped open up the world of the MP so people can see what they really get up to. This understanding certainly helps rebuild trust. But people also expect MPs to be highly active in their constituency and fundamentally local in outlook as well.

There is also an agenda to consider the quality of MPs, how representative they are and whether the political parties centrally continue to act as a filter. Many younger MPs especially are forging campaigns in Parliament and want to be seen to be holding Government to account. This isn't regardless of the party they belong to but rebellions have been taking place although [not many rebel regularly](#). I'd recommend you keep a close eye on [The Revolts](#) run by [Phil Cowley](#) and [Mark Stuart](#) which is essential reading for politics everywhere.

People want engagement and the ability to participate. For many, the days of electing an MP who then deals with all the difficult decisions for them are over. There is less trust in the MPs and also

people have more access to information, greater tools at their disposal and greater faith in their own abilities. Parliament and the political parties need to come to terms with this.

Universities watch out! You are the next political battleground

20 March 2014

The news that Ministers have fired a shot across the bows of universities about the pay of vice chancellors should come as little surprise. Pay, especially in the public sector, is a key political issue and will continue to be. But what the Ministerial intervention really shows is that universities are the next political battleground.

It is obvious to everyone that universities have changed. The introduction of student fees and the broken Lib Dem promise over increases to them has made the sector much more of a political issue.

Students now increasingly expect a level of service delivery for the money being paid and the demands they are making on the universities are increasing. Bluntly, they want a return on their significant investment.

Just as Eric Pickles wanted a nation of 'armchair auditors', students will increase the demand for data made available by universities so that they can make assessments before choosing and hold them to account during their period of study. Information is critical.

So universities themselves need to move away from old-fashioned processes, especially around decision-making, and open themselves up to greater student input and scrutiny. A university's executive leadership team has to be more easily identified by their student body and open to greater levels of direct engagement.

The consequences of not taking these agendas seriously will mean that politicians will not just talk about their expectations but will take action. With public funding for higher education being cut it is unacceptable to Ministers that senior pay is increasing, especially if you consider that the pay of other staff is being held down. Just as those in local government and the civil service have already had to come to terms with, senior pay is not just a product of market conditions but of political priorities and expectations.

The issue of public sector pay and conditions will continue well into the next government and beyond. Labour's current consideration of a zero-based spending review is possibly the most important piece of work that is taking place in preparation for their manifesto. Higher education could well find itself the victim of more cuts and public sector pay is bound to focus on as well.

But Government, and the higher education authorities, also has challenges around how to ensure the quality of teaching and research in universities in the new climate, how these are assessed and how they meet the requirements of students.

Government also has to be careful not to drive a wedge between the internationally agile universities with a brand that can be exported across the globe and those that focus on the domestic market.

Reputations for universities are becoming critically important and any damage inflicted either as a result of poor engagement with students or a failure to deal with political priorities could be fatal.

This means a failure to consider the politics of the sector and the full range of implications for reputation management is a serious failure. Universities in many ways operate in a complicated mix of the highly commercial and competitive whilst sitting in the public sector. This does not give them any special dispensation.

Just as other parts of the education sector have had to consider issues such as governance and the behaviour of staff (past and present) this too is bound to come to higher education.

With so many issues relevant to Ministers, and potential voters, occurring in the university sector, it is only a matter of time before the political and media focus is centred on it.

Devolution, devolution, devolution not war

09 April 2014

Ed Miliband's speech on devolution signalled plans for a change in the relationship between central and local government but how should organisations react?

Speeches of this type rarely appear alone. Often they are accompanied by media releases, sometimes policy documents and speeches by others. All these should act as a starting point to work out what to do. They all form part of the evidence base needed to decide on an appropriate public affairs response.

Miliband's speech did not take place in isolation. Michael Dugher MP, Shadow Minister for the Cabinet Office gave a speech to the IPPR on the importance of growth across all the regions. Ed Miliband and Ed Balls wrote to local government leaders and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) on their plans. Various press releases were also issued. However, we will have to wait for the final report of Lord Adonis' Growth Review before anything is published.

It is important to consider what such documents actually say and to not just rely on the media reports. Miliband said:

“Cities and towns that come together with local businesses will be given historic new powers over transport, housing, skills and economic development”

In addition, Miliband mentioned greater control over the funding of skills and delivery of the Work Programme. He also suggested that cities should be working with their universities – but most already are. Miliband also stated that there would be a sharing in the proceeds of local growth (my emphasis added).

Even in this speech there is plenty of scope for organisations to start to work with the party in its policy development. Not least, given the criticism of the previous Labour Government the old target driven approach should not be allowed to creep back in.

Potentially significant changes could come forward. Miliband puts the private sector at the heart of decision-making and looking at the letter we start to find out more. If the plan comes forward then the bodies:

“will receive powers and access to resources from Whitehall the like of which we have not seen in living memory.”

That is some promise and also some incentive for engagement.

Examining Dugher’s speech, he talked about:

“redesigning the relationship between central and local government to spread the power out to our cities and regions.”

He appeared to go slightly further by promising:“radical devolution of power over funding for skills, infrastructure and economic development at a local level.”The speech covered a ‘revamp’ of LEPs and support City Deals. Critically, he also promised to bring back Regional Ministers with the speech listing the role that they would have. There would also be a strong voice for the regions at the heart of Government with a new Regional Committee sitting in the Cabinet Office. What isn’t so clear though is what ‘views’ the Ministers would be representing as ‘regions’ do not actually exist. It could be that the views of LEPs and others are competing in a regional space so how does the new Minister deal with such tensions?

Turning back to the letter, there is a clue in the reference to changes to LEPs saying that the party would like “a single LEP coterminous with the city and county regions”.

The letter also emphasised direct investment in infrastructure such as housing and transport.

So using this one policy announcement it is clear that in looking at a public affairs programme it is critical to consider all the materials available. Only with all the information, clues and questions can a programme be put together.

As Lord Adonis’ report continues to take shape there will be consultation with businesses, local government and university leaders so all should be looking at the details and starting to work out how to react.

And thank you (sort of) to the Kaiser Chiefs for the blog title!

SECTION 3 - PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND ACTIVISM

All information is public

13 February 2013

There is a common misconception that some information and documents produced are secret, that they will never see the light of day. This is no longer the case and that in itself offers a hugely important lesson - never write anything down that could cause embarrassment to your organisation.

Of course, there will always be some information that needs to be formally detailed, for instance for risk management, audit trails or similar purposes, and this may be critical of an organisation and potentially embarrassing. It is, though, the way that the information is conveyed, the language used and the exact terms of what is written down that needs to be carefully considered. Always think 'how would this be viewed if it became public'?

It does however, remain largely unseen as far as planning for risk and crises go. There is interplay between workplace expectations, corporate and HR policies but also common practice which is all still largely ill-defined and considered.

Organisations still think that it won't happen to them. But it can, all too easily.

There are several reasons why we have to beware

- 1 **Leaks** - the nature of electronic materials means that they are more easily shared and that means there are more points at which information can become public. There is very little consideration nowadays as to who should see information, or be involved in discussions on documents. The default position is to share widely but this is not always appropriate. The more information is shared the less personal buy-in there is that process and discussion. This makes leaking easier.
- 2 **Public** - leaks can also mean that details of commonly accepted practices are made public. Recently, allegations about offensive language used by contractors towards their key client groups were broadcast and then repeated in the newspapers. Just look around your own workplace and it is often all too easy to see practice which, if it were made public, would impact on reputation.
- 3 **Freedom of Information** - you have to understand the nature of the client and the legal requirements that they operate under. For instance, working with the public sector could mean that documents produced have to be released following a Freedom of Information request. If that happens, are you totally happy with how you conveyed the advice delivered, the language used, and how any names were named? All too often not enough consideration is provided to the potential audience of the work.

- 4 **Accidents** - some incidents are beyond parody. The Thick of It's episode where discussions about 'quiet bat people' become news because the meeting notes were clearly visible has been often repeated in real life.

Andrew Mitchell, during his time as International Development Secretary was caught leaving Downing Street, not on his bike, with "protected" government documents on display. Bob Quick, then senior counter terrorism officer was pictured holding the contents of a secret anti-terrorism plan in full view - he had to resign. Danny Alexander was photographed holding a memo detailing forecasts for public sector job cuts and Caroline Flint, as a Labour Cabinet minister, displayed a document on the property crisis.

Emails can be sent to the wrong person by accident, sometimes with great hilarity but there are often personal as well as corporate reputations at stake.

Not everything is a big conspiracy and the role of muck-up also comes into play often through employees doing silly things that are filmed and then end up on YouTube. Sometimes there is malicious intent but mostly it is high jinx. Tweets, postings, social media updates, all can generate media and political interest.

Whichever it is there will need to be a reaction with reputation protection firmly in mind.

This means that organisations have to be aware of where potentially damaging stories can come from and have the systems and preparation in place to deal with them. It is not always the actions of isolated individuals but about the way that an organisation goes about its business and practices and behaviours it allows.

Governments lack of consultation on consultation

19 March 2013

The Government's new approach to consultation has received mixed reviews. But it's their lack of 'consultation on consultation' that has angered many involved in public engagement exercises. It also threatens progress when it comes to consulting stakeholders on policy issues.

The 'Statement of Consultation Principles' was published last summer by the Cabinet Office and replaced a well established Code of Practice on Consultation (2008). The main thrust of the new Principles, which is to move towards a more proportionate approach to consultations and to explore alternative forms of engagement such as increased digital consultation, has been largely welcomed.

Although generally highly regarded, one of the common criticisms of the 2008 Code is that it was too prescriptive and forced Ministers to adopt a 'one size fits all' approach to public engagement exercises. It has long been argued and accepted that the best form of consultation is tailored to the subject and stakeholders it concerns, and judging by the Principles, this seems to be the direction the Government wants to go.

What has not been so welcome is the proposed ministerial discretion in the Principles which will allow consultations to be carried out in a minimum of two weeks. The 2008 Code stipulated a minimum of 12 weeks but provided for a ministerial override. If an override was exercised a clear explanation as to why the decision was taken had to be provided.

What has caused even more furore is that the Principles were not consulted on before being implemented. This is despite the fact that there are clear concerns about Ministers opting to consult for the new minimum time period, mainly that it is not enough time for potential consultees to submit a considered response to a consultation. This is particularly true of membership organisations, for example, where it can take time to draft a response, circulate and get it approved before submission.

These concerns were highlighted in the House of Lords Secondary Legislation Committee report reviewing the Principles which was published in January. In this report the Committee called on the Cabinet Office to hold an immediate and independent review of the Principles, open them up to public comment and report back by Easter.

The Government's response, issued last month, has fallen far short of the Committee's recommendations. Oliver Letwin MP announced that the Principles will be reviewed by a quasi-external panel but ultimately spearheaded by the Cabinet Office, will not be up for public comment and will be reported on in July – the first year anniversary of their publication.

Letwin is probably keen to avoid the perception that the Government is 'consulting on consultations', which is often used as an example to illustrate that government consult on anything and everything. However, there are reasons why opening up the Principles to public comment may have been a useful exercise.

Ministers have to be able to justify their decisions over the length of consultations and their judgments have to be applied consistently across departments.

Ministers have almost fallen at the first hurdle by not explaining why they don't want the public to comment. This has heightened mistrust amongst stakeholders who are worried Ministers will try and bypass meaningful consultation exercises to push through unpopular policies.

If the Cabinet Office had asked for comments and set out a detailed response as to why a shorter consultation period does not necessarily equate to an inadequate consultation, this would have perhaps allayed fears in this regard.

The Cabinet Office may have also benefited from experts in the field of consultation and a public involvement exercise commenting on and shaping the Principles. As opposed to having to issue a document because Ministers demanded it.

The Government's decision not to consult or issue a call for evidence is probably symptomatic of an administration keen to speed up decision making via 'light touch' regulation. However, not opening up the dialogue around the Principles to the public and addressing points of concern has meant that it has become overshadowed by arguments around minimum time periods. Issuing a call to evidence and issuing an appropriate and considered response may have addressed the concerns and also emphasised the more positive aspects of the Principles.

The new approach risks losing the benefits of good consultation – robust decisions informed by experts which people can buy into.

The reasons why government fails at consultation

31 October 2013

I recently read a blog by Mark Easton, the BBC's Homes Editor, called ['Consulting... and ignoring'](#). In it Easton uses three recent examples of government consultations to ask what is the point of government consultations? In all three instances, despite apparently strong cases being made against the government's proposals, the consultation results have been ignored and the policy implemented.

Easton's excellent [blog](#) (generally as well as this entry) made me consider some of the issues why government consultations fail and why they seem to get it wrong time and again. There is a further issue to consider - the implication of the continued failure to get consultation right.

As Easton rightly notes 'consultations are not referendums' but this is often unclear to those responding and when the stress is on approaching consultations with an 'open mind' with ministers being in 'listening mode' the clear implication is that at least changes may be made. Consultations work best when there are clear options on the table and an adequate explanation is provided as to why and how those options have been arrived at. A simple take it or leave it approach does not suit most consultations and makes them appear to be referendums based on a single issue. Engagement will increase when input can have an effect.

Consultation has for many in government become a proxy for support for the policy, inferring that it has been developed / changed on the basis of a consultation. This is misleading at best especially when often the number of responses is low.

It could be that the government is completely right to progress the policies concerned. However, the formal government responses to consultations are often badly lacking. They contain simple statements that do not respond to the points raised in submissions. Instead, they highlight the matters raised and go on to restate the preferred policy option. No evidence is used as to why the submissions are being, in effect, rejected and often none used to justify the policy position in the first instance (which can actually make responses difficult to formulate). Restating a policy is not a response.

This is not a party political point - the number of consultations undertaken increased hugely under Labour and their record was far from perfect. However, the Coalition continues to champion evidence-based policy-making but is not always living by its own rules, especially when it comes to consultations.

All this means that public confidence in consultations is being undermined. Along with flaws in the way that some are conducted which have led to successful legal challenges, the public do not believe that they are really being consulted. The implications go far beyond the public sector. The private sector, particularly for those involved in local development, are then tainted as well. Participation rates may fall further and all confidence in them is lost.

Ministers have also complained about the use of judicial reviews and have been looking at ways to reduce the numbers. But it is a problem partly of their own making.

For those involved in public affairs all this shows is the value in being involved much earlier in the policy formation process, ideally before any consultations are put on paper. The chances of having an impact at this stage are limited.

A government consultation should take many forms. A written consultation is but one form and part of a public engagement process. Too often, however, it is the only way in which government formally works with communities and stakeholders in the development of policies. Multi-national corporations are rarely solely reliant on 'traditional listening' tools such as consultations, surveys and questionnaires and invest a great deal of time and resources developing new ways of collecting feedback. Perhaps the Government can take lessons from the corporate world here.

As a side note, I'd also encourage everyone to watch a BBC programme called The Editors, where the corporation's 'on air' editors explore issues in more depth than is usually the case just on the news. Always worth a watch!

Mobilising the masses: Motivating supporters in Public Affairs

28 November 2013

Reversals in policy by the Coalition Government show that they do react to large scale protests especially when backed-up by some well placed media coverage. A look at the U-turn over proposals to privatise the forests in 2011 shows what people power can achieve. But knowing how and when to motivate supporters is critical.

It is important that mass mobilisation does not become the default or starting position for a campaign. It is often the case that more can be achieved by engaging in the policy-making process at an early enough stage. It is also imperative that any organisation tries to work closely with the relevant civil servants. Do not automatically start by going for the 'big bang' approach. See if there are achievable and deliverable options first.

Engaging in any larger scale mobilisation is not without its risks and these too need to be considered. Inevitably, a more political approach to an issue risks alienating Government and politicians do have long memories. Going high profile too soon can cause intransigence and if actually something could have been done about the issue had the advice above been followed, ie early engagement at the right level, then there is a risk of unforeseen adverse consequences.

An early focus on mass mobilisation also risks the campaign losing its power and momentum if the campaigning is not properly prepared. Some useful steps would include:

- 1 **Take time to understand your supporters and/or members** – this can happen in a number of ways but focus groups, surveys, telephone canvassing are all good methods. This may seem obvious but many membership organisations start campaigns without reference to their members and their needs. This can, in the end, lose members or if when the organisation needs the help of its members they find that it is not forthcoming.
- 2 **Plan the campaign** – do not just concentrate on possible media angles but take the time to understand the decision-making process so that efforts can be focused on the right people at the right time. Any efforts need to be planned and mapped out over time.

- 3 **Give the members and supporters something to do** – this ties in with the point above, for instance responding to a consultation, but unfortunately such engagement is often little more than a ‘standard’ response. A whole batch of letters, all the same, can be counterproductive. It may also be the case that opponents to your ideas can also call upon large numbers of supporters and then it becomes a process of ‘tit for tat’. Parliamentarians too sometimes complain if they are at the end of a ‘standard response’ campaign so care needs to be taken. New forms of communication can be empowering but they can also lead to ‘lazy’ campaigns. Members/supporters need a range of options for engagement and specific jobs to do. This sees members as activists, members are citizen journalists which in turn may be used to help motivate others to the cause.

- 4 **Think creatively** – there are some ‘easy’ options for showing support for a campaign, for instance a Government e-petition which if it receives more than 100,000 signatures will be considered for a debate in Parliament (emphasis added). There is, however, nothing worse than an e-petition that limps meekly over the line and one that fails to get there at all can actually prove counterproductive. So do not underestimate the difficulties of an ‘easy’ option.

- 5 **Tell stories** – the real strength in membership/support is not always in strength of numbers but in the first hand experience and evidence that they can bring to a campaign. Getting them to tell their own stories.

Obviously not everyone can call upon supporters or members to assist in their campaigns and that is sometimes why those in the corporate sector will work with others – campaigning groups, patient organisations, charities etc. So alliances and tie-ins can be part of a campaign as well.

However, the approach still needs to focus on what the public affairs campaign needs and this means getting the timings right, knowing and understanding the decision-making process and engaging with the right people. You still need to deliver a solution but maybe you can do that with more people.

The power of hidden influencers

24 April 2014

McKinsey are taking a ‘snowball sampling’ approach to help identify hidden influencers within organisations. Maybe the same principles can be applied to political communications.

I saw a post on the [Diary of a Communicator](#) blog which provides a good outline of the McKinsey approach. The blog also took me to the full article, [‘Tapping The Power Of Hidden Influencers’](#), that goes into more detail.

The article describes the need to find ‘strong change leaders’ to help drive organisational change – those with ‘informal influence’. The challenge identified is finding these people and ‘snowball sampling’ is one suggested way. These work through brief surveys asking those taking part to

identify acquaintances who should be asked to participate in research. On this basis, one name or a group of names, snowball into more.

In public affairs we often try to identify such informal networks, using unofficial information, media coverage and, sometimes, instinct. This type of survey offers the opportunity of putting things on a more formal basis. Identifying patterns and networks of influence are exactly what political communications can be about as well.

The identified influencers may, of course, not all want the same things. It is doubtful that they will be a single coherent group. There remains, therefore, a role for working on specific messages, tailoring the form of engagement and deciding when/if to engage with these people. The work could though be useful in making sure that stakeholder list is more robust. Once identified, ways to engage with the influencers or potentially working with them can then be explored.

This approach can be applied not just to Westminster or Whitehall, where some of the networks may be better understood, but also at a more local level as well where the network could be less clear. The 'organisational chart' of influence is rarely as obvious as people think it is and from McKinseys' experience of organisations that appears to be borne out.

Another potential benefit of the 'snowball sample' process is that it can be repeated over time to see how and if patterns of influences are changing. This can then be used to update stakeholder lists. It may be most relevant at times of significant change, for instance elections, but could also offer great value in seeing if there are shifts in sentiment or changes taking place which could lead to changed policy outcomes. Some may be subtle, others may be more seismic.

At the very least, 'snowball sampling' could be a useful tool in taking stock and act as a useful double check on thinking, one with an evidence base.

'Big data' isn't yet really being applied to lobbying and public affairs but fully considered maybe this method could help to change this.

Activist attacks

30 April 2014

When I wrote '[New Activism and the Corporate Response](#)' just over 10 years ago, companies were struggling to come to terms with how to react if they came under concerted pressure from activist groups. The challenge remains.

The sources of such attacks are varied but they often focus either on the very operation of the organisations, in other words what they do and how they do it, or on their governance, the behaviour of the organisation and those that lead it.

The activists are continuing to push the boundaries of communications and using all the tools at their disposal to disrupt the operation of the organisation, particularly through the use of the law. One only has to look at the [HS2 Action Alliance](#) or [Stop Stansted Expansion](#) to see how creatively the tools are used and how consistent the pressure can be.

Activist groups can also be more militant and radical but that is more true in the international context, although power stations are often invaded and towers scaled domestically as well.

Online activism was still in its infancy when the book came out and action was still focused around websites and emails. Social media was barely a glint in the eye. The possibilities opened up by the Internet were seen as power tools of democratisation but that power has spread further and more globally as well.

As a result, 'slacktivism', an easy normally online action such as retweeting or signing a petition, appears to have got more people involved in campaigns but it is questionable whether it has made the campaigns any more effective. It could be argued that the engagement of large numbers of people is now only the starting point.

Organisations still ideally want to avoid conflict and confrontation and the book examined some of the strategies open to them. The book was unique too in bringing together the views of the activists and the corporates as well. Very often significant barriers remain between the two but organisations do take their reputations more seriously and activists have been able to focus on that.

What is interesting is that the range of organisations coming under pressure has diversified. Charities are increasingly being challenged and more recently NGOs and membership bodies are being questioned as well.

Shareholder activism has become the norm. Indeed, according to [McKinsey and Company](#), 'activist investors are getting even more adventurous'. Vince Cable's threat to introduce legislation if companies do not listen to their remuneration committees and do something about executive pay appears to be offering open encouragement to shareholder activists.

Shareholder activists are often perceived in a negative light particularly because of the time, effort and costs involved in dealing with them. They can, however, help to tackle risks and ensure that issues that may otherwise be ignored are dealt with. Shareholder activism is often stronger when companies are under performing and the better companies seek to develop constructive relationships with their activist groups.

Cable, in sending a letter to the FTSE 100 businesses has signalled a willingness to become an activist government. Just as relationships need to be built with shareholder activists they need to be developed with an activist government. His threat of legislation is though undermined by the lack of Parliamentary time available to him and doubts over whether the Conservative part of the Coalition would be in support of such measures.

Activist attacks or ongoing campaigns are still not considered seriously enough in an organisation's risk analysis or crisis communications plans. Some believe, wrongly, that they remain largely immune and relations with those often considered 'opponents' can be limited or confrontational.

Especially given Cable's intervention, the pressure is now both internal and external. The activist challenge remains a real and vibrant one.

The power of stakeholders and why you should worry

12 June 2014

Many organisations think that they know and understand their stakeholders but few really do. Ill-informed judgments are made and little evidence is ever gathered. Instead, potentially worrying and counterproductive assumptions are made.

Effective stakeholder analysis should not be entirely focused on political, regulatory and media audiences. Instead it needs to draw on the needs of the whole organisation from the supply chain through to internal audiences, investors, customers and others.

Missing groups out or basing engagement on little more than a supposed understanding contains real dangers. Some important considerations include:

- **Prioritisation** - are the right groups being engaged?
- **Delivering the right messages** - are you saying the right things to them or just broadcasting your messages?
- **Effective methods of feedback** - are there ways in which stakeholders can feedback to you or is it a one way exchange of information?
- **Not answering the concerns they have** - any relationship has to be mutually beneficial so you also need to help them deal with their challenges.

If you have not really engaging effectively then you leave them open to the influence and campaigning of others.

When I wrote *New Activism and the Corporate Response* the idea that campaigning groups and activists would target an organisation's stakeholders was only just beginning to take shape. This is now much more common.

I recently had an interesting discussion with [Robert Blood](#) and [Juliet Wu](#) of SigWatch. They actually track and analyse activist campaigns. They can see what is happening now but, critically, consider trends and developments over time. On this basis they can think about what is going to happen.

Stakeholders can change their positions over time but this is not often considered, being sometimes assumed to be consistent. Campaigns need to change to reflect the changing nature and positions of stakeholders. Critically though they need to reflect the actions and campaigns of other stakeholders or NGOs. This can only happen if you alive to what is happening.

The importance of actual data is central to this. Many in public affairs are used to dealing with data from polls, focus groups or asking a question in a survey of politicians but little else. Other sectors are thinking how to use data and where it can be generated but public affairs is behind the curve. It appears that some are afraid of moving beyond personal expertise and insight. That still has a valuable role to play, and always will do, but public affairs needs to keep moving forward.

So rather than assuming you know what is happening with your stakeholders drill down into their behaviour and attitudes.

Stakeholders will fail to support you or could be 'flaky' if you do not do the right things by them. Just look at the way the sponsors of the Qatar 2022 World Cup are lining up to call for proper investigations into the bribery allegations. We have seen stakeholder networks come under pressure in a number of industries.

You may not care too highly for your reputation but your stakeholders care about theirs. Your task is to make sure that your stakeholder network is solid and stands alongside you when needed. You can only do that if you really understand them.

SECTION 4 - REPUTATION MANAGEMENT

Five ways lawyers and public affairs can work together

17 December 2012

For those working in public affairs a close relationship with lawyers is an increasingly essential part of the profession. The law and lawyers can play a constructive role in a campaign and bring an understanding of the wider legal and regulatory environment which may otherwise be lacking. Similarly, public affairs practitioners can offer lawyers the benefit of their expertise by providing communication, policy and political advice surrounding legal processes or in crisis situations.

Of course, having worked for law firms for most of my career I may be slightly biased but the recent news that Weber Shandwick and 39 Essex Street, a leading barrister's chambers, were offering clients joint advice shows that joined up public affairs and legal advice is being more widely recognised.

There is a lot of lazy thinking around about lawyers and law firms but here are five clear ways in which a joint approach can bring real dividends.

- 1 **Parliament** – too often drafting amendments to legislation is attempted by those who look only at the Bill under consideration. There is often a law of unintended consequences and changes made to one piece of legislation can affect others. A lawyer will help you avoid this mistake.

- 2 **Media relations** – especially in a crisis situation, there are things that should and should not be said. All too often what seems an action that seems entirely appropriate and sensible under the glare of the media spotlight may not be deliverable and may actually be unlawful.

- 3 **Regulation** – the operations of most organisations are governed by regulation, some more than others. Whether you are a charity or in financial services, whilst the burden may vary, the need to be aware of what you can and can't do remains. Again, this means that lawyers need to be engaged with as part of a public affairs programme. There are certain campaigns that the regulator may simply let you do. The consequences of a breach can be catastrophic both for the organisation and, sometimes, the individuals involved. There are often personal liabilities.

- 4 **Courts, tribunals etc** – legal processes also need public affairs support. This is where the act of effective communication with a range of stakeholders can help to support the legal case. Helping stakeholders understand the process, procedure, timescales, likely outcomes etc can assist the legal case.

- 5 **Devising solutions** – if public affairs is about anything, it is about devising workable solutions to the problems identified. This means being prepared to engage with all the experts, including lawyers. They know and understand the processes involved, often being able to see a solution without knowing how to go about achieving it.

All this does not mean that lawyers are always right. Their choice of language and the way in which they communicate issues is not always media friendly or acceptable to politicians or policy makers.

The relationship between public affairs and lawyers has to be one of partnership and that needs a mutual respect and recognition of each others' role.

It remains that case that the law plays a critical role which is too often ignored in public affairs and lobbying. This needs to change if the right advice is to be delivered and the full benefits of a campaign secured.

How effective are 'big business' apologies?

21 January 2013

In the wake of a big reputational crisis, consumers, politicians and others often look to national and multinational corporations for apologies and explanations as to why things went wrong. Big businesses often publically apologise in a bid to rebuild trust and shore up consumer confidence, but ultimately to reverse any damage to their business or brand. However, an apology is only as effective as the way it is delivered and when. If not considered carefully, there is danger that an apology can end up sounding like an excuse or even worse a 'non-apology'.

In the most recent example of a corporate faux pas, Tesco have come under fire for selling beef burgers in stores which have been found to be containing horse meat. The revelation has resulted in the supermarket taking out full page adverts in national newspapers apologising to customers who bought the burgers, offering refunds and promising to come back to them with an explanation as to how this happened.

Tesco's response to the horse meat scandal has been speedy but not before an alleged £300m was knocked off the supermarket's stock market value, an FSA investigation was launched and the Prime Minister branded the whole thing as 'a completely unacceptable state of affairs' in Prime Minister's Question Time.

It reiterates the importance of setting the record straight as quickly as possible, something Starbucks failed to do when it was found out for not paying corporation tax in the UK in October 2012. The coffee giant waited almost three months after the story broke before publishing an open letter in The Times announcing a u-turn on its position regarding payments.

Barbara Kellerman from the Harvard Kennedy School, recently wrote that an 'apology which is misguided or ill-conceived can do more harm than good, but similarly where an apology is called for but not given, anger and hurt can fester and difficulties may escalate.' She goes on to set out factors businesses should consider when decided if and how to apologise, but the bottom line being – will it affect your business?

An example of a public apology that went wrong was the one issued by Apple's chief executive Tim Cook on the company website over 'MappleGate', where purchasers of the new iPhone 5 had massive issues with the new Apple Maps function. What users wanted to hear from Cook was why Google Maps had been replaced instead of an admission that a sub-standard product had been delivered. Consideration needed to be given to the basis of the apology – is it what people want you to say sorry about.

Knowing when to say sorry and when to offer an explanation is also an important consideration and it is not normally wise to do both at the same time. In Tesco's 'apology advert' customers are

promised with an explanation at a later stage with the primary purpose of the advert being, as the heading states, 'We apologise'. With the FSA investigation still underway, it is highly likely that Tesco don't have the full facts at their disposal, but focusing the advert on the apology ensures it is heard and readers don't end up focusing on the excuses.

Tesco will want to look like they are fully cooperating and being transparent with the regulator about the investigation and not appear as if they are cutting across them. Other opportunities such as select committee appearances, which the horsemeat scandal will most probably result in for Tesco, are also good opportunity to provide 'explanations'. MPs are looking for details when conducting inquiries, which are important avenue to be able to share them. A strong performance in front of a select committee can also help aid the process of reversing reputational damage and setting the record straight.

Top 5 tips of what to do when a crisis hits

07 March 2013

It is often said that the key issue to successful crisis management is recognising that you are in a crisis in the first place. Recent new stories on allegations, very strongly denied, against Lord Rennard have also become about how the Lib Dems handled the issue in the first place. A whole series of questions which may have huge political and reputational implications for the party are now being asked. Were the allegations considered properly? How were they first considered? Who knew what? Who took the decisions?

The handling of potential crises also shows that the often knee-jerk reaction to try and keep them as quiet as possible may not be the right option. It could be better to deal with them more clearly and from the outset rather than waiting for problems to emerge at a later date. Under these circumstances, not only does the organisation need to deal with the allegations but also give immediate consideration to how they deal with them in the first place.

If an organisation believes that it may be facing a crisis then there are a number of actions that need to be considered.

- 1 **Take advice** – any decisions on the case should not be the preserve of a tightly knit group of people who all have a similar view of the world. This may mean bringing in outside help but it is really about the ability to think through the issue and ensuring some perspective which is the critical factor. A range of options and alternatives need to be considered and all the risks associated with a plan of action mapped out. What may appear to be the correct short term option may not look quite so good when the news comes out later. In other words be prepared to take comments from a range of opinions and disciplines, it will make for a more informed decision.
- 2 **Use the expertise around you** – there will be people in and around the organisation that have relevant experience and this should be utilised. Too often, a crisis is treated as a one-off event and organisations fail to utilise the skills at their disposal. It should not be a case of starting from scratch every time. A properly thought through crisis plan should have a note

of previous experience, lessons learned, individuals involved etc. Making the most of the collective corporate memory is essential.

- 3 **Think long term as well as short term** – the crisis should not be considered solely as a short term, media management issue. Instead the potential long term implications should be part of the decision-making process. The different viewpoint may alter the actions chosen. It may be better to take a short term 'hit' rather than delaying the scrutiny. The short term urge to avoid media coverage may not be the right tactic. It may instead be better to take the 'hit' but use it as an opportunity to demonstrate that firm action has been taken.

- 4 **Investigate, investigate, investigate** – a few conversations here and there handled by someone trusted in the organisations is not an investigation and will not be viewed as a proper investigation by the outside world. This means that when comments are made about an investigation or the promise of one they have to be extremely robust. An independent investigation is often promised but without a full consideration of what that means or entails.

- 5 **Media handling** – obviously a critical factor but again the recent Lib Dem approach seems to show lessons have not been learned - inconsistent messages, denials followed by 'clarifications', a lack of clarity over how the allegations were handled etc. But add to the need for effective media handling, the need to work with and engage a range of stakeholders. For most organisations, the media are but one, albeit hugely important, audience. Too often politicians and policy-makers are ignored but they are the ones who are quoted in the media and make decisions which can have a lasting impact.

Each experience of a crisis should be treated as a learning experience and the resulting lessons should be fed back into the crisis planning process. It should not be considered as a closed or isolated process.

There have been many recent examples from the Lib Dems through to those supermarkets and suppliers affected by the horse meat scandal where effective crisis communications have been lacking. Each will have its own reasons for their respective communications failings but considering the points above will doubtless have helped.

The death of charity

09 August 2013

If anyone was under any doubt that charities face just as much scrutiny as any private sector company, politician or celeb then the 'outcry' over executive pay will have put them right.

William Shawcross, Chairman of the Charity Commission, made comments questioning the pay of some charity chief executives, suggesting that the issue could do damage to their reputations.

Whilst he started off rightly pointing out that it is an issue for the trustees of the charity, not for the Commission, to decide on, he asked whether such pay was fair on donors and taxpayers. 'Disproportionate salaries risk bringing organisations and the wider charitable world into disrepute', he noted.

However, comments such as these by someone as influential and important in the sector as Shawcross have a habit of stirring up trouble and inflicting reputational damage.

By making the comments in the first place, Shawcross helped to give weight to an investigation by the Daily Telegraph. Add in comments from Priti Patel MP, one of the stars of the Conservative Party, and the sector then faces a new problem.

Government itself, then too, has to become involved. Justine Greening, Secretary of State for the International Development called for more transparency from charities, and for charities to open themselves up as Government has done. She said that 'In Government we have opened up the books to improve efficiency and we believe that open data can improve delivery and give people more choice on services.'

The nuances of the arguments are being lost. The charities are often big businesses, complex organisations, with large amounts of employees and, in effect, operations and responsibilities across the globe. The comments, whilst concentrating on those involved in international development, are impacting on all charities.

The selective use of statistics to 'prove' a political point could have far-reaching consequences. The fact that a trawl of charity annual reports which are publically available already provides details of pay, bonuses, income and how the money is used seems not mentioned. Quite what Justine Greening has in mind in terms of more open data is not clear.

For charities, not just those directly in the firing line from the latest media reports, the damage could be significant. Reputation is all important.

- **Fundraising** – Stephen Bubb of ACEVO did not believe that high salaries put off donors, saying that 'this simply isn't an issue for donors'. Consistent attacks by Government and the media could make it one. It remains the case, however, that a prospective donor can look at a charity's accounts to see how its top executives are paid.
- **Regulatory intervention** – whilst the Charity Commission has said it is an issue for trustees they could seek to consider new guidance or pick up on the Government's comments about information provision.
- **Central government intervention** – as Government looks for new targets (see one of my earlier [blogs](#)) the charity sector could well be considered for 'reform'.

- **Media** – if they believe that there is an issue to look at then the investigations will continue and all charities have to prepare for that. The focus may shift over time onto other areas of spending but if they believe there is a story then the scrutiny will be relentless.
- **Contracts** – many charities operate services and have contracts in place with central and local government, as well as other bodies. These relationships can come under strain and private sector partners too may become worried about the fallout for them in being involved with charities whose reputation is questioned.

It would also not be surprising for the one of the Parliamentary Select Committees to open an inquiry into this issue. There may be a dispute as to who 'owns' the issue though, with International Development and Public Administration being two likely contenders. Select Committees tend to have inquiries into issues that have a high profile and if they do then it keeps the whole thing bubbling away for even longer.

Even those charities not directly implicated this time around need to be thinking about the consequences of the comments and considering the implications for their organisations. The question of executive pay is, though, one for the charity trustees. They just need to be prepared to justify their decisions on this question, as for any other.

Reputations have to be planned and built and measures put in place to protect them.

Tony Blair's guide to crisis communications

25 February 2014

The sound of outrage from those on the left at Tony Blair's apparent offer to act as an 'unofficial adviser' to the Murdochs and Brooks has meant that people have not properly considered his advice, as recalled on an email, about how to deal with the hacking crisis. In other words, how he thinks a crisis should be dealt with.

Whilst Blair's office has issued a statement making his position clear, particularly that he knew nothing about the facts of the case, he has not denied engaging with Brooks. Of course, her email is only one interpretation of the conversation and is not a verbatim note.

However, amidst all the furore over the detail of the email, it cannot be ignored that this was advice from one of the longest serving Prime Ministers and someone who prided himself of running, with Alastair Campbell, one of the finest media operations.

So what did he advise?

- 1 **Form an independent unit to investigate the allegations** - this sits at the heart of the advice and should always be part of how an organisation deals with a crisis. The media and the public do not believe organisations who claim to have looked at the problem themselves and have taken action. That does little to protect a reputation. But the email also suggests that the report would 'clear you and accept any shortcomings'. This undermines the whole approach. Any hint that the outcome is already being mapped out or is in any way being

preempted will destroy its credibility and will only add to the damage. The subsequent statement from Blair's office stressed that he was quite rightly suggesting a 'transparent and independent' process.

- 2 **Timing** - what to say is, of course, always considered but when you say it can often feature less prominently especially in the immediate heat of a crisis. Trying to retain control of the story is at the heart of good communications in a crisis. Blair understands this when he is said to advise on when to publish the independent report and about splitting it into two which would fit the needs of the police investigation and trial.
- 3 **Take action** - you have to be seen to be taking action to deal with the problem. Again, Blair is clear on this point. The 'proper fact checkers' suggested , means that audiences will have confidence in the outcome of the report and the resulting actions.
- 4 **'Keep strong'** - is absolutely right from Blair but the email doesn't mention the sheer impact that a crisis can have on individuals and organisations in terms of time, effort and resources.
- 5 **'Rash short term solutions... only give you long term headaches'** - this is correct but can be hard to avoid when the media are literally knocking on your door and possibly many others in an organisation as well...

Where Blair seems to be less insightful, and this could well be to do with his lack of knowledge about the facts of the case, is the belief that 'it will pass'. It hasn't and won't for some time to come yet. It also seemed clear that once the story came back onto the agenda that it would continue to evolve and develop. Of course, many of the revelations have been shocking but the story has grown and developed and the crisis has continued.

What is also missing from the email is any advice about efforts made to avoid becoming the story. Putting details of such conversations onto an email is something that always has to be thought about carefully. He also doesn't touch on the team to put in place to deal with the crisis and how to control communications, who is delivering the message.

Fundamentally though Blair's advice is spot on and should be listened to.

The power of the network – it's not just about contacts

03 April 2014

Too often in public affairs and lobbying, networking is championed because of the contacts, particularly political ones, made. But this is only part of the story. Networking should be more about the ideas generated across different industries and disciplines.

There are a huge number of books available about how to network and how to get the most out of networking. There is no serious challenge to the fact that networking is good and secures real advantages.

However, what is often lacking from this thinking is the way that good networking also needs to focus on the creativity it fosters and the ideas for campaigns that can be developed as a result.

For instance, I recently attended an [Urbano](#) networking lunch which was not focused on politics or a particular policy. Instead it was about meeting business people from a range of backgrounds with a view to making connections.

This event allowed me to talk to people from backgrounds and disciplines that I would not always engage with. It enabled me to mention issues to a different type of audience and gain new perspectives. It struck me that this is often lacking in traditional public affairs networking. It is often the case that we attend sessions held by the political parties, think tanks, lobbying organisations, trade bodies etc. But that means we talk to similar people, doing similar jobs and all involved in politics, one way or another.

It is doubtless the case that other sectors are the same but we too often rely on talking to people of similar backgrounds or outlooks. This results in missed opportunities for generating new thinking and new perspectives that comes from talking to a wider gene pool of people.

The old-fashioned method of networking may favour a political communications consultant that relies on a 'little black book' but this does not always suit those looking at building a campaign or put the issues in a wider context using different forms of engagement.

It is just as much of a mistake to concentrate solely on politics as it is to think about one political party. Good networking should consider how ideas can be cross-fertilised because this fundamentally makes for better campaign advice. Ideas and solutions can be driven by connections and not just rely on caffeine or alcohol!

Politics will always be at the heart of networking, but adopting a wider perspective prevents your focus from being too narrow.

That is what makes good networking essential in public affairs.

Test perceptions, or fail in public affairs

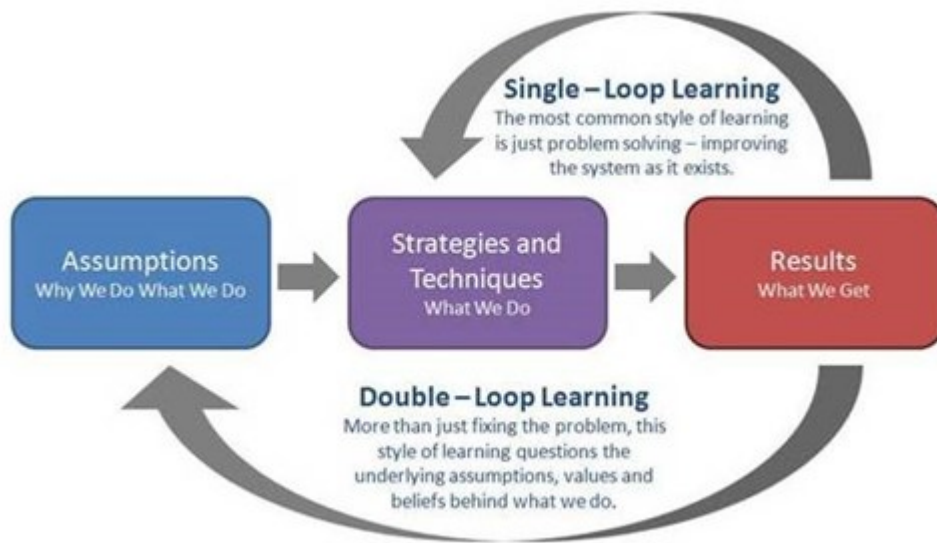
21 May 2014

Some public affairs campaigns fail. It is, however, the consideration given to why the campaigns fail that is one of the most valued techniques in public affairs. Without this re-evaluation campaigns will continue to fail despite effort and resources.

It may seem obvious to incorporate lessons learned, but too often the same approach to campaigning is repeated regardless of the outcome. In such cases, more often than not, deeply entrenched organisational behaviours are to blame. The idea that 'this is how we do things around here' makes changing behaviour extremely challenging. And this is not unique to public affairs.

Listening to Sir John Jones speak recently about challenges facing education, I was struck by how often public affairs practitioners too fail to learn. Sir John highlighted the importance of double loop learning. Chris Argyris (1923-2013) suggested, in my highly simplified interpretation, that organisations despite repeated attempts will keep going at the same goal. Taking a double loop approach, rather than a single loop, means examining the assumptions and shifting, if needed, the goal.

In a diagrammatic form, Andrew Bryant cites the work of Argyris & Schon (1974) in his blog.



Very few campaigns go back a stage in their thinking to consider whether or not their goal is the right one. This is often set by others and presented as what the campaign needs to achieve. There is also a danger that if something is seen to work then it is repeated by others as well. This risks diminishing its returns over time and the more that it becomes accepted practice then the less impact it is likely to have.

Given the amount of variables in public affairs – including elections, changing issues and changing personalities - double loop thinking is an essential. Without it campaigns will fail.

In other words, those involved in public affairs campaigns need to constantly test their own perceptions.

Considering this in a more positive way, in a piece on Stonewall's secrets of successful charity lobbying, their Director of Campaigns, Sam Dick, suggests four simple principles:

- 1 Collecting robust evidence
- 2 Being assiduously non-partisan

3 Resonating with your audience

4 Working with “unusual suspects”

This is the type of thinking that is ready to test perceptions which leads to success. It is not just about more of the same, but of seeing what works and does not, having the ability to learn and then changing tact if required.

In a consultancy environment, it also means having the ability and confidence to go back to clients and saying that the initial approach was wrong, did not work and providing details about the new way forward. This is not always easy especially when the work has been charged for.

Constantly testing perceptions is important, especially in the run-up to a General Election. Policy positions are likely to shift and develop, issues that resonate with the public will come and go and the fortunes of the parties will fluctuate. Common sense says that these need to be factored into campaigns but too often the goal remains absolute despite what is going on around it.

For some, trade bodies etc, shifts in goals can be difficult to achieve when they are usually the common point around which an often diverse membership can coalesce. But without such changes, it could be difficult to achieve anything.

Stonewall stands as an example of what can be achieved.

Public and private do not apply in reputation management

29 May 2014

The idea that a neat line can be drawn between public and private has come to an end. Most organisations and individuals in the public eye realise that everything they say is ripe for comment and media coverage. However, not all of them appreciate that this is not just limited to comments made in public but seemingly ‘private’ conversations, emails, letters etc as well.

Two recent examples show this in stark clarity.

Richard Scudamore, Chief Executive of the Premier League, had his ‘private’ emails splashed across the newspaper. The coverage highlighted his deeply inappropriate comments about women and there were widespread calls for him to be sacked. The Premier League found itself at the centre of the storm which was not relieved when it was decided to keep Scudamore on.

The content of Scudamore’s emails drew comments from a range of organisations and even the Prime Minister took time to comment that they were ‘unacceptable’. There has been obvious reputational damage for the Premier League. As the Evening Standard said [‘Scudamore so lucky to keep his job as football cannot afford to alienate women’](#).

Another recent example saw Prince Charles make a private comment regarding Vladimir Putin which has subsequently featured on front pages across the world. Clarence House said ‘we don’t comment on private conversations’ but are any such conversations truly private? Not just thinking about a still

microphoned Gordon Brown complaining about that ‘bigoted woman’ or a [winking Australian Prime Minister during a live phone-in](#).

So leaders of any organisations need to be fundamentally aware that what they say, write and do is liable to be made public. They have to ask themselves what reputational damage could be inflicted on the brand as well as thinking about whatever personal implications there may be.

There are a range of other outlets as well. Twitter may offer the prospect of genuine interaction and dialogue but ‘tweet in haste, repent at leisure’. There are an ever growing number of examples of inappropriate, embarrassing, inaccurate and libellous tweets being made.

In the case of Scudamore, the legal friend he was emailing has too been featured in the media, investigated by his firm and has issued an apology.

According to Rani Abraham who leaked the emails, ‘I wanted to talk to the HR department but felt that if I did it would be covered up’. She also told [the Guardian](#) that emails contained references to female colleagues and being sent from his work email address meant that she could see them all

This shows that organisations have to have robust processes in place so that reports can be made. In particular, staff also must have confidence in them as well as the independence of the people policing them.

The alternative which some may choose is to use a [whistleblower app](#) or to approach the media. Neither of these provide any legal protection for the individual.

If you have whistleblowing processes in place then they have to be effective. The only thing worse than not having them is having them but not utilising them effectively. Any hint of a cover-up makes for even worse reputational damage and staff retention and morale will be hit.

So reputation management also involves the very way in which an organisation is run and operates. It’s about systems and processes and the belief that staff have in them.

There is no such thing as public and private as far as reputations are concerned, it is just one overall effort to develop and protect them.

So check your employment policies and practices, and social media and crisis management plans, they are all part of the same effort to protect reputations.

Weathering the storm? Charity campaigning under attack

19 June 2014

Expectations of charities are changing. Not only are the media all over how they spend their money, raise finance and the behaviour of senior executives but now politicians are openly taking issue with their campaigns. In particular, whether these campaigns are ‘political’.

The passing of the “Lobbying Act”, or more formally the Transparency of Lobbying Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014, has undoubtedly shifted the agenda. During

the progress of the legislation, charities and other organisations complained that they would be 'gagged' but the Coalition Government reassured them that this was not the case.

There remain uncertainties around the type of activities and expenditure which may now be regulated (see [Free Speech at a Price](#)). The Electoral Commission has promised to publish relevant guidance on the Act by early July which should help. There is though the potential for gaps emerging between the Act and its guidance, and the existing requirements of the Charity Commission.

In the meantime politicians are looking to get their retaliation in first and ensure that they keep up the pressure on what is and is not 'political' campaigning. The latest example of this concerns Oxfam's 'the Perfect Storm' tweet.

Conor Burns MP, has asked the Charity Commission to get involved claiming that the [poster](#) is a political campaign. But his actions have given Oxfam, and its campaign, more publicity than it could ever have hoped for.

The argument has been made that by associating the Coalition with the 'perfect storm', Burns himself made it political. Issues such as childcare costs and zero hour contracts, it is suggested, are being looked at by all the political parties for reform. However, others identify consistent left wing bias and point to suggested links between Oxfam, and other charities, and the Labour Party.

But there have been a whole number of recent political interventions from Peter Bottomley accusing the NCVO of a '[massive over-reaction](#)' against the lobbying bill through Priti Patel's complaints about the salary of the Chief Executive of the Charity Commission through to Burns' latest comments (which have been backed by several prominent Conservative MPs). It has also been claimed that [threats are being made](#) suggesting an air of danger not really seen before in the sector.

These comments are making the issue of campaigns increasingly political and mean that charities have to go 'above and beyond' in checking the legal and regulatory requirements, and even that may not be enough to protect them. The media consider charities fair game and politicians will often step in with a helpful quote to support the article's line. Indeed, the media is already broadening its approach to consider taxpayer funding. An issue raised by the Public Accounts Select Committee and now being [consulted](#) on by the Charity Commission.

The fear of constant referrals to the authorities means that charities will have to take a number of steps.

There will be an even greater need to ensure that all the regulatory hurdles are being overcome. This will involve considering not only the legal requirements but interpreting what they mean in practice and, over time, considering the precedents, cases and other statements that emerge as a result – all will impact on what charities do. There is no hiding that this could cost charities more in administration costs.

It is also important that charities are able to demonstrate what steps they have taken, the safeguards put in place and how campaigning decisions have been arrived at. Charities potentially have to be able to show the regulatory authorities that they have acted properly.

But there are also communications challenges. Before any campaign is ready for the off, the charity will need to be ready to show what safeguards have been put in place. If the campaign could be seen as political by some then some very robust messaging will have to be in place. Not only this but

communications teams will need to consider the prospect of more regular crisis situations and a more adversarial relationship with some media.

This could impact on the reputation of the charity concerned but, almost perversely, may be beneficial. Some have said that people are attracted by a more radical approach in some instances.

None of this will not stop politicians from getting involved but at least starts to put some protections in place.

Campaigning by charities has always had to walk a tightrope with a number of checks and balances in place. That tightrope has been made higher and narrower.

Together with BDB's leading charities practice this is bound to be an issue to which this blog will return.

Five reasons why there is no short cut to a good reputation

20 May 2014

The recent European Court of Justice ruling that individuals have a 'right to the forgotten' under existing law may be heralded by some as a victory for reputation protection. But this is far from the case and will only lead to laziness. Reputations take time and effort to build – there are no shortcuts.

The ruling applies to online search results where the only search term is someone's name. It means that search engines, such as Google, will have to remove links to personal data that is 'inaccurate, irrelevant or no longer relevant' from their results.

There remains a public interest test in place and claims can be rejected but despite this, reports suggest that 12,000 removal requests were received by Google in 24 hours and 41,000 over five days.

Google is currently considering its response via a 10-strong advisory committee and there are still many issues which require clarification, but at a recent BDB business breakfast a number of legal and reputation management issues were discussed.

In terms of reputation it is clear that the decision is not a golden panacea.

- 1 **The information is still there** – even if the details are removed from the search results it continues to exist on the underlying website. It might take a little longer to find the information but it will still be possible. A good journalist or MP has a long memory and will eventually find what they are after. Does trying to remove the information enhance your credibility?
- 2 There could also be more **cross-over between personal reputations and those of the organisations you work for**. The ruling only applies to individuals, but if, for instance, a journalist wants to try to prevent a piece from being removed in the future then they could

look to link an individual's employer in the piece. This could have more impact on reputations, not less.

- 3 **The ruling only applies in the EU** so there could potentially be different results depending on which 'version' of Google is used. It opens up the possibility of quite different reputations for individuals depending on where the online search is being conducted. This is something that big corporates are more used to but could apply more widely.
- 4 If you are going to make a request then your communications **argument for doing so need to be built in advance**. Unsuccessful requests could be publicised as could successful ones. The idea that any action can be taken 'in secret' nowadays is laughable. Any action taken has to be able to be explained and that justification has to be robust.
- 5 **It is important that search results do not get overblown in their importance**. There remains no substitute for hard work. Individuals and organisations need to deliver news stories, shareable content, website updates and positive media coverage. These are all good practice in communications generally. Critically they also need strong stakeholder relations based on a sound understanding on the needs and requirements of those stakeholders.

A delisting is a potential tool but it should not be the basis of reputation management. There should be the attitude of 'let's not worry too much because we can get it removed later'. The chances are this won't happen and even if it does, have you actually inflicted damage on yourself?

For those involved in issues such as a data processing or employment there are some significant implications. But for reputation, the implications of the decision are in danger of being seriously overestimated. Investment in reputation still requires time, effort and resources. What's more, protecting that reputation can come at a much higher price.

SECTION 5 - SOCIAL MEDIA

Perfect Twitter storm

29 November 2012

Lord McAlpine's decision to use the full force of the law to pursue those who made false statements about him on Twitter could change the nature of social media forever.

McAlpine is apparently considering taking action against the 10,000 or so people who tweeted or re-tweeted the totally false allegation made by the BBC's Newsnight programme of his involvement in child abuse. He has already received payments from both the BBC and ITV, but is now pursuing those who tweeted his name.

There is no doubt that McAlpine was smeared, and the nature of that smear has generated strong public sympathy for him. However, pursuing every tweeter with the full force of the law may cause that sympathy to evaporate, particularly if some of them are older, infirm or simply have no money. That does not make their actions right but, in PR terms, pursuing them may turn Lord McAlpine from victim to villain.

He and his advisers appear to have thought this through, as they seem to be adopting a potentially different approach to those who are famous and 'ordinary people'. That may fend off some critics but the law is meant to apply regardless of social status, income or prominence in the public eye. A decision to pursue some tweeters but not others may be difficult to defend in the court of public opinion.

Before PROs rush off and start talking to lawyers about taking action they need to stop and take stock. Just as using the law to deal with the traditional media can go wrong, so too can it backfire with the social media. Legal action, or threats of it, can be seen as too heavy handed, entrench views, cause an adverse reaction or loss of sympathy or simply persuade people to 'get you back at playtime'. Here McAlpine is an innocent victim but, in cases where the public doesn't see it that way, attempts to take legal action may just aggravate the situation. How would anyone cope with a 'viral'

campaign where hundreds of thousands or even millions of people across the world were all tweeting the same name or allegation?

Lawyers and those involved in PR do not always want the same things and do not always speak the same language. PROs need to be careful what they wish for. Whilst taking strong action may seem like the right thing to do, both the financial and reputational costs could be high. There is no guarantee of a successful outcome and, in that event, the PR would need to be put into overdrive.

What this will do is make people think twice before tweeting, recognising that it is no longer a zero cost and risk-free way of spleen venting or allegation hurling. In this case the media has assumed that a name check in a tweet equals liability. It may not be that straightforward, yet the popular media already have Sally Bercow losing her house because of her infamous tweet. It may also make it less conversational, less an instant reaction to events and, in turn, more sterile and less interesting.

So next time you need to know which footballer has misbehaved you may not be able to turn to Twitter for the answer. Even if you do, think twice before re-tweeting it to your followers.

The tech challenge: why UK political parties are struggling

04 June 2013

I had the privilege of hearing Harper Reed speak on his recent visit to London. Reed was President Obama's Chief Technology Officer at the last election and together with a number of others revolutionised the ways that politicians work with technology to campaign. Their results were spectacular and the fresh thinking they brought to campaigning showed the value in recruiting from non-political backgrounds.

However, whilst our parties like to think that they learn the lessons from the US, the General Election in 2015 will not mark a sea change in the way that our parties campaign.

There a number of reasons why this is the case

- 1 **Money** - our parties have less finance to invest in the infrastructure needed to run an effective technology-based campaign. Ask any company about lessons learned in building IT infrastructure and they will explain about the faults, the failures and the cost. The Obama campaign team were able to robustly test their systems to ensure they did not fail but they still needed the mo
- 2 **Campaign finance** - one reason why the Obama campaign was so effective was that it had a very clear need to raise finance. They refused to take money for lobbyists so they absolutely needed to know and understand what made people donate, how to increase rates of donation and how to expand the donation base. The limits on campaign finance here mean

that those imperative are not so clear and are, in many ways, curtailed. The Obama campaign had no choice.

- 3 **Lack of leadership** - it was clear from Reed's comments, as well as the level of investment, that technology was taken seriously by Obama himself and the team around him. That is not the case here. There may be some occasional comment but to the outside world, our political leaders do not get technology. They know it is important but the need to show real commitment to its place in campaigning.
- 4 **Privacy** – we are obsessed by the right to privacy and any hint that a political party, or any part of government, knows what you are thinking will force a reaction. Our political leaders worry about this.
- 5 **Weight of numbers** - whilst tablet and smartphone sales continue to soar, the size of the UK 'market' is smaller and the parties need to balance the resources needed against spending them in targeted marginals. Similar issues exist in the US but here there are only around 40 constituencies that really matter. These are the marginals that parties need to win in order to form a government.

It will come as no surprise that the emphasis will be on the social media aspect of campaigning at the next election but we have still to face challenges about the collection of proper data and how this is administered locally. Those parties that can work the doorstep and collect data in a proper way will have something to work with.

But parties still do not understand the nature of their (declining) memberships. They may know who they are but they have very little idea about what skills they possess and how these can be utilised in a campaign. Mostly members are asked whether they have time to deliver some leaflets and are then frowned upon by more committed activists if they say 'no'!

It is no longer 'e-politics' it is just the normal way of doing politics according to Reed. The UK though still has a lot of catching up to do.

Facebook is changing politics

11 February 2014

With Facebook now ten years old there have been a number of articles published looking at its impact. The one that caught my eye came from the [Washington Post](#) on how Facebook has changed the way we govern.

That may be true in the US, and there are other examples from around the world as well, but it is less true in the UK. In fact, there needs to be more social media activity if politics is to open up.

Looking again at the Hansard Society's '[Audit of Political Engagement 10](#)' it is clear that the 18-24 year old age group is a particular problem, with only 12% indicating that they will definitely vote.

Whilst locally-based campaigning is increasing this has not helped in the recognition of local MPs, “the public are less able to identify the name of their local MP than at any time in the last decade” says the report. Satisfaction with MPs continues to fall.

There are, however, some positive signs. People want to be more involved in decision-making locally and nationally. Yet time remains a real barrier to political involvement and it is not seen as being fun!

It seems that social media can overcome many of these issues. But in the UK it is not even clear how many MPs have a Facebook page and if they do whether it is just used as a way of broadcasting information or if it is used for engagement. Twitter is now a much more accepted channel for MPs, but Facebook still less so.

Again looking at another Hansard Society report, a recommendation in [‘Future News – communicating parliamentary democracy in a digital world’](#) specifically says that

‘Parliament should ... experiment more with Facebook: use of polls; use of Facebook groups; Facebook advertising; and development of a Facebook app for news sharing’.

Social media, particularly Facebook, allows politicians to move beyond their core supporters and makes communications easier. It can provide a ‘behind the scenes’ look at the real person so constituents get to really know their MP. Normally people just see a Prime Minister or a few key ministers / shadow ministers but that doesn’t now have to be the case.

More than anything, an effective social media strategy provides a scale of engagement which can be applied to a constituency level as well. Looking at the statistics provided by Facebook and quoted in the Washington Post, President Obama’s 2012 campaign got 3.8 times the penetration in swing states, where it focused its ad efforts, than it did in non-battleground sites. Also, 72.7 million Americans saw Obama’s Facebook content, more than half those who voted and the virtual ‘I voted’ stickers really did get people out to vote.

Not that Facebook or other social media provide a total solution for engagement but they are valuable tools which, in the UK at least, are not really being grabbed with sufficient enthusiasm.

They can also help to deliver more openness and transparency which the public undoubtedly wants to see and the political parties talk about delivering. Openness should be the new default but that isn’t the case yet and will not be until politicians are willing to grasp the opportunities presented by technology.

That is not to suggest that this is all about technology for technology’s sake but instead using it where it can help to address defined issues and problems.

For those involved in campaigns, MPs are always on the look out for good examples and best practice where it comes to social media. Many MPs still struggle to use emails so opportunities to help certainly exist. In addition, social media can also be about campaigns and working with businesses, it is not just about efforts to increase a share of the vote.

If you are wishing to engage with an MP, you need to make their Facebook and other social media activity, part of your research to help get to know your audience. You too can get to understand them better by seeing what they are involved in and talking about.

Until Facebook really does change UK politics, political engagement will continue to be curtailed.

Big data will change the way Government communicates

18 February 2014

Big Data is being touted as one of the great hopes for the future of government. All the information generated across health, transport and other sectors can be used to tailor services, deliver efficiencies, open up commercial opportunities – the list of benefits seems endless.

Unfortunately, the example of Care.data has caused great anguish. It is becoming the poster boy / girl for how government is failing to communicate about Big Data. If they cannot get their heads around the how to communicate Big Data then the opportunities will be lost.

The changes proposed by Care.data are very basically that GP health records will be uploaded onto a national database which can then be used by researchers and others. The data will also be available to others who pay a fee (a processing cost) for access. The data will be anonymised. The Government has, apparently, been telling us about the new system and our options.

However, a listen to the Wired UK podcast or a read of their recent guide to and blog, provides a great overview of the problems being encountered with Care.data. As Olivia Solon's blog complains:

“The problem is how it's been communicated to patients. It's been an absolute shambles. The junk mail leaflet, the vague FAQs, and the rambling blog posts with inconsistent language and jargon.”

Whilst the issues involved are undoubtedly complex, they are not helped by poor communication. This will only make matters worse, risk public outcry and ensure a Daily Mail style backlash. In particular, set against the backdrop of the activities of the National Security Agency (NSA) and Edward Snowden's revelations then you have a hugely sceptical, and worried, general public. It sets the Big Data agenda back and prevents the benefits from coming forward.

The worries people have about data – leaks, hacking, being identifiable, being used by others for purposes not originally intended, sharing of data etc. – have yet to really be considered by government as the Care.data problems illustrate. These are bigger issues for all parts of government, not just related to health, despite some very good work being done by the Open Data Institute to promote an open data culture across government “to create economic, environmental, and social value.” David Cameron has already called on departments to open up data sets and in a letter he said that “the Government must set new standards for transparency.” The Government is a signatory of the G8 Open Data Charter and published an action plan for implementation in 2013. If full implemented, the five principles contained in the Charter would represent a significant change in the way that government, at all levels, operates.

However, what seems to have been missing so far is any idea about how to communicate all this, including the benefits to the public at large. Tech geeks may find it really interesting, and it is, but if it cannot move beyond these confines and reassure the public, then the benefits cannot be delivered.

There are five key considerations for government

- 1 The need to convey the benefits of Big Data in concrete terms, not just the abstract.
- 2 Ensuring that accompanying opt ins / outs are straightforward and therefore easy to communicate.
- 3 Being clear about who can have access and on what basis (are they buying it?).
- 4 Understanding who they are talking to – GPs, medical professionals, technology professionals and the general public all require their own approach but most of these audiences seem confused by Care.data.
- 5 Get businesses on board with the approach and also work with those who may instinctively be a little more hostile to the agenda.

Government will only develop a robust approach if it is challenged in advance and it can be questioned whether government should be the lead party on this issue.

If Government doesn't get the communications right then the public will ultimately be the losers.

Politicians and social media: Don't get stuck in the past

12 March 2014

According to the Mail on Sunday, David Cameron has used advertising on Facebook as a way of boosting his number of 'likes'. But far from sneering at this behaviour, his team should be congratulated on using social media to widen the reach of Cameron's communications, and others should take note. As a spokesperson for the PM said, Facebook advertising is 'common practice' amongst businesses and US presidential candidates.

According to Facebook for Business:

"President Barack Obama's successful 2012 re-election bid hinged in part on an unprecedented Facebook advertising strategy that reached 47% of voting-age Americans in all battleground states combined and raised nearly \$5 for every \$1 the campaign spent on ads."

Criticising the PM and suggesting that the strategy is all about his ego, fundamentally misses the point. Facebook isn't just about securing more 'likes' as a way of demonstrating popularity. It is so much more than that with new tools launching frequently to improve levels of engagement. A higher number of 'likes' does not just provide more reach, although that is important, but it also improves the chance of a successful appeal being made. There are a range of ways in which a political message can be communicated.

The PM is not 'buying friends' but is raising his profile amongst users of a media that may not otherwise have through about 'liking' a politician, and may not have even have been aware that he had a profile on the site.

Increased online recommendations, and the rise of content being shared amongst friends, means that we are likely to take things more seriously when comments and 'likes' are made. Quite simply, we listen to what our friends say. The belief is that this applies to politicians too, so the more 'likes' received, the greater the chance of this happening.

In the US, Facebook is tied in with media outlets and there is always the possibility that this could also happen in the UK. With this in mind, building a higher presence now seems like an investment in the future by the Conservative Party.

Studies, such as those mentioned in Marketing Week, have also suggested that Facebook advertising doesn't just hit the young but actually draws people in from a broader spectrum. Again, a huge plus point.

There is nothing to suggest that the PM's extra 'likes' are not by genuine people looking to find out what he is up to. There is fundamentally nothing different between this type of advertising spend and others. Indeed if the increase in 'likes' is right, doubling in a month, then it seems pretty effective and good value for money. The value of traditional political ads are often questioned and with budgets limited it is all about getting the best value for money.

A word of caution though, the number of 'likes' or followers should not be the only measure of success. Politicians, and businesses, need to take social media strategies to the next stage and work on genuine engagement and dialogue, not relying solely on pumping out key messages. Those who take social media seriously crave engagement not broadcasting. 'Push' marketing tactics no longer apply and businesses should take a 'pull' approach to their strategy.

Not the PM has totally got to grips with social media. The parodies that followed his recent 'on the phone to Obama' tweet and his reply to Patrick Stewart show that there is still some way to go. However, what it does show is a willingness to engage and to experiment which is to be applauded. His reaction to Ed Miliband's announcement on an EU referendum was tweeted and one of his best received speeches focused on additional spending on research on the 'internet of things'.

Cameron has succeeded in broadening the channels of communication and is trying to take advantage of the opportunities available. Companies too need to do this but they also need to realise that mistakes can be made. Having appropriate guidance in place will help those engaging online, and ensure that if any issues were to arise that you have the necessary plans to deal with it.

Social media in crisis communications: It's not just about speed

17 April 2014

Crisis communication is increasingly focusing on social media but too often the emphasis is on speed. Instead, it is necessary to draw breath before responding and not get too carried away with what is really just a communications tool.

Just looking to respond quickly disguises the multiple impacts that social media has on reputation – building, maintenance and protection. Of course speed is important. Information and allegations can come at an organisation quickly and the response can be made quickly as well. Social media also allows a more direct communication. A defence or response is stronger because it is from the horse's mouth; there is not the reliance of others, the traditional media, to filter your comments or use only small parts of a carefully worded statement.

Just as a press office can be run from the site of an incident there is no reason why social media can't be run in real time from there as well. Live tweeting and images could show what is really happening – citizen journalism becomes corporate journalism.

Social media is, in that case, another tool to be used to help maintain control over the message and prevent a void from being created. It is where such activity is lacking that you can really get into trouble. A social media presence is now expected, if not inevitable.

To really be effective, an organisation's social media presence needs to be established in advance of any crisis. That enables it to have established a reputation for authenticity so that whatever comes out of that channel is treated seriously.

But social media is just a tool. Reputation takes time and effort to build. As Lord Browne, former Group Chief Executive of BP, as quoted in PR Week (February 2014), said:

“Trust begins with honesty and transparency, not with incomprehensible corporate jargon or a 140-character tweet.”

So there is more to reputation than just the social media. But it does need time, effort and resources if it is to maximise its elevated place in reputation development and protection, especially in a crisis.

I spoke at a recent meeting of the Professional Services Group on making the most of social media. It was clear that whilst the role it could play in crisis management was appreciated, it was not always clear to the audience how it could be properly harnessed or, if needed, controlled.

There are also balances to be maintained in keeping the more human, less reverent of differential voices alive in the social media presence in a crisis whilst balancing this against the knowledge that every word and phrase is amplified in importance. And of course there are lawyers around worrying about future liabilities!

However, the central rules of crisis management apply whatever the channel of communication that you are using – apologising, getting to the bottom of what is going on, senior leaders in charge, providing new information as it becomes available, feeding the media, not allowing vacuums to build and not letting the pundits and 'experts' take charge. There also needs to be a consistency in message and you can't let social media wander off on its own.

As Ze Frank, Executive Vice President of Video at Buzz Feed said:

“Despite enhanced communication, there will be no significant advances in the technology of saying sorry”.

TO BE CONCLUDED.....?

Looking across the chapters in this book brought to the mind the challenges that face those working in public affairs every day. Some believe that public affairs still has to prove itself as a profession. Despite books, training and qualifications being available, and the work of representative bodies, public affairs can struggle to be taken seriously. In Westminster, old scandals fail to die away completely and any announcement that you work in lobbying brings a retort that it is all about 'brown envelopes' changing hands. This is so far from the truth that it is painful to hear on a regular basis.

There is also a completely unfounded belief that lobbyists pay politicians for their services. Again this is not true. During a radio interview I did for the BBC, the presenter just assumed that this was the case and I had to be very forceful in putting them right. Until more people from a political communications background make it to Board positions this is unlikely to change. Whilst that is deeply disappointing, it is also realistic. Those from the law, accountancy and human resources continue to dominate. There are a few from a marketing background, step forward Sir Terry Leahy, but they largely remain the exception. Too many from a senior executive position believe that they know and understand politics and can, therefore, give the advice. What this book shows is that there are many, often conflicting, pressures at play and success has many components. Similarly it can be very easy to get things wrong. A stray comment or misplaced or mistimed media article can break relationships that have taken years to build.

Reputations matter as much in political relationships as any other. In fact, it could be argued that the impact of broken political relationships can inflict more damage than those of other relationships. They do, after all, have the ultimate power to pass legislation and regulations. If a political audience turns its fire on a sector or an individual company then share prices dive and markets are closed off. It certainly cuts short the careers of many senior executives.

It is not just the corporate sector that has to be aware of the impact of public affairs, the benefits it can bring and the protection it offers. The charity sector is no longer able to operate without interference. The political and media spotlight are now placed very firmly upon it. To some of the larger players this is not new. To others, however, this represents a significant change and it has come as a bit of a shock. In all types of organisations, communications and campaigns often represent a careful balancing act, internally as well as externally. The needs of audiences and individuals need to be balanced, messages developed, communications channels chosen and the campaign then implemented. Add to this the need to monitor the campaign, pivot if necessary and evaluate outcomes. This makes an effective campaign potentially complex and in need of planning from the outset. Each campaign should, ideally, also be accompanied by its own risk assessment. It is the context and processes involved in any decision that are often not considered or are thought of as being of secondary importance at most. That risks the campaign being an end in itself. The campaign existing only to justify activity with little thought to the end point and the proposed solution to the problem identified, or hopefully identified. But resources have been spent – time and money. Stakeholders will have been engaged and if, in effect, you have been wasting their time then those relationships are placed at risk. Worse still if they take exception to this then there could be a backlash.

The book explores the pressures on public affairs campaigns and brings to light some top tips as well as mistakes to avoid. I have also been able to throw in some accidental lessons from others, such as David Bowie. With each chapter representing a different aspect of public affairs it is difficult to pull

out just a few key lessons to highlight by way of conclusion. Here are three just to act as a broad overview.

- 1) Always offer a workable solution to your problem – too often campaigns fail because they become a way of moaning about a government policy. That may generate a few initial media headlines but will not deliver on the aims of the campaign. If you really want to secure change then explain how that change can be brought about.
- 2) Understand the decision-making process – effective public affairs is not just about talking to politicians. The power to deliver an outcome may not be in their hands. You can only work out who to engage with and when, if you take the time to understand how decisions are being made. It could be a Parliamentary matter, an open consultation, or completely off the political agenda. The issue could be of widespread concern or the preserve of just a handful of motivated MPs. What can be done and when helps the process of mapping out the campaign and putting a workable timetable in place. Unless you understand how the decision will be made then you can end up wasting an awful lot of time engaging with the wrong people at the wrong time.
- 3) Do not assume – it may be your hope that on listening to your well-honed arguments that stakeholders will be convinced and a change will happen soon. That is rarely the case. Instead, it takes time, effort and commitment. Even if a stakeholder agrees to undertake an action they might not. Be prepared to follow-up, chase and cajole, if necessary. Also governments across the world are rarely joined-up. Departments act in a sometimes disparate way and are notoriously bad at working together. You might have to help them act in a more joined-up way and work together. You may consider that to be the job of government but if you do not do it then no one will. It is your responsibility.

I also believe that the lessons offered in this book apply not just in Westminster but across the UK. Not just the UK but also in other countries as well. Of course, each country has its own political structures, personalities, parliaments and ways of doing things. But the fundamentals of public affairs remain the same. We each have to ask ourselves the same sorts of questions and campaigns face the same challenges. That, I think, makes this book relevant to public affairs practitioners wherever they operate.

This book is part of an on-going discussion and there remain plenty of issues to explore. The book is ultimately a call to take public affairs seriously. I continue to write my blog for Bircham Dyson Bell, contribute to the Huffington Post and do guest posts for others as well. I fundamentally believe in the importance of such an approach if public affairs is to become the established profession that I, and others, believe it should. Public affairs needs to prove its worth and it can if some of the lessons suggested and challenges posed in this book are taken on-board.

We should not just wait around for a Board level appointment to help us, the sector needs to help itself and this book is an attempt to assist us all to do that.



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As blogger for Bircham Dyson Bells 'Public Affairs Blog' and the author of 'Public Affairs in Practice', 'New Activism and the Corporate Response' and 'The Dictionary of Labour Quotations', Stuart's reputation has seen him appear on the BBC and Sky News, judging for the PR Week and Public Affairs News awards. He now also blogs for leading news publisher The Huffington Post.

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