

Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom: submission to Government Communications Review Group.

We have noted with considerable alarm the intention of the Government Communications Review Group to conduct an 'examination of different models for organising and managing' the government's information service. We fear this heralds another attempt by the government to hire outside public relations consultants to undertake work currently being performed by more than 1,000 civil service information officers. Our concerns are heightened by the make-up of the Review Group which includes senior executives from four of Britain's leading public relations consultancies.

In our opinion this heavy concentration of public relations consultants as members of the review group - representing a third of its entire membership* - can have only one purpose. The group has been asked to review the 'effectiveness' of the government's information and communication service. The underlying message seems clear: ministers seem to be on the point of extending the contracting out of public services to include more of the press, public relations and information services provided by government departments and agencies.

Our anxieties have been heightened by the failure to include in the review group anyone prepared to advocate or defend the principle of ensuring that the flow of information from the government to the news media should be controlled and managed by impartial civil servants.

The presumption on which the review group appears to be working is that government 'information' is a commodity which, like any other goods or service, can be traded on the open market. Apparently the aim would be to introduce mechanisms to 'validate' the honesty and accuracy of the information services offered by public relations consultancies. We are alarmed by the failure of regulators across the public services to enforce standards and we would have no confidence in such a system. We believe that it is vital that the task of communicating with the public is conducted by impartial civil servants and should, under no circumstances, be subjected to either political or commercial control. We believe the task of the review group is strengthen such safeguards, not weaken them.

(more follows)

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So far much of the discussion in the lead-up to the Cabinet Office announcement (February 2003) about the formation of the review group has concentrated on the need to enhance the neutrality of the information service and to avoid any repetition of the kind of politicisation and interference, which emerged during inquiries into the Jo Moore affair and other related events.

We note that the review group has been asked to recommend ways in which the government can ‘discharge its democratic duty to explain itself and hold an effective dialogue with the public.’ We support that objective and believe the review group should discuss ways to implement the recommendations made (April 2003) by the Committee on Standards in Public Life to strip political special advisers (such as Alastair Campbell, Jo Moore et al) of their status as civil servants and to curb their right to be in charge of government information officers and to give them directions.

In announcing the membership and terms of reference of the review group, no explanation was given for the presence of high-profile public relations consultants from the private sector, nor was any mention made of the fact that the ‘examination of different models for organising and managing the government’s communication effort’ could include steps to privatise the information service. However, this is a long-held ambition of the public relations industry and does seem to have become the government’s hidden agenda.

Over the years, repeated efforts have been made by public relations consultancies to increase their share of government information work- and the pressure has been applied under successive governments. For example, Michael Rice, a former chairman of the Public Relations Consultancies Association, said his ‘biggest failure’ was his inability to persuade Margaret Thatcher to privatise the government information service during the 1980s.

(more follows)

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We believe that the review group has been given a chance to find ways to honour the repeated assurances by the Prime Minister that the Labour government has turned its back on spin. This should be seen as an opportunity to devise new guidelines to restore trust between briefers and journalists. It should not become a backdoor route to hiving off work which should be performed by impartial civil servants who are best able - as the terms of reference require - to assist the government 'to discharge its democratic duty to explain itself and hold an effective dialogue with the public.'

(Submission prepared by Nicholas Jones, former BBC political correspondent and national council member of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom)

* Membership of Government Communications Review Group chaired by Robert Phillis, chief executive of the Guardian Media Group.
(12 members)

Public relations consultants: Colin Browne, the Maitland Consultancy; David Hill, Good Relations Political Communications; Rupert Howell, recently of Chime Communications plc; Howell James, Brown Lloyd James Ltd.

Journalists: John Hipwood, Wolverhampton Express and Star; Charles Reiss, Evening Standard; Richard Tait, recently ITN; and Nicholas Timmins, Financial Times.

Government information officers: Sian Jarvis, director of communications, Department of Health; Sue Jenkins, Government Information and Communications Service; Tom Kelly and Godric Smith, Prime Minister's official spokesmen.

ends

29 April 2003.