

DRAFT

FROM: T KELLY
DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS
04 March 1998

cc PS/Mr Murphy
PS/Mr Ingram
PS/Mr Worthington
PS/Lord Dubs
PS/PUS
PS/Mr Semple
NI Perm Secs
Mr Thomas
Mr Steele
Mr Stephens
Mr Hill
Mr Watkins
Mr McCusker
Mr Maccabe
Mr Bell
Mr Brooker
Mr Beeton
Mr Woods
Mr Warner
Mr Fergusson, RID
Ms Healy

PS/SECRETARY OF STATE

REFERENDUM INFORMATION CAMPAIGN

We are embarking on what in effect will be the most crucial election campaign in Northern Ireland's history. During the next ten weeks we need to convince the Northern Ireland public both of the importance of what is at stake, and also convince them that not only is agreement possible, but they have a vital role to play in endorsing it.

If we are to do that, then the government's message needs to be clear, simple and direct. It needs to prioritise its key messages, and keep repeating them at every opportunity, to reinforce the big picture, even while it deals with the detail.

It should be a message that is not afraid to recognise and build on the public's desire for peace, and uses that, in parallel with the progress in the talks, to build a momentum as we approach the referendum.

But that will require a sustained, committed and coherent effort right across government. The message needs to be reinforced on every conceivable opportunity and the benefits of an agreement underlined in every possible way. The Northern Ireland public needs to be in no

doubt about how a deal will improve every aspect of their quality of life. We need to convey that message.

That means a concerted effort by all ministers and departments in every speech, interview and meeting. The momentum towards an agreement and the people's decision in a referendum must become a central part of every message government sends whether the context is the economy, health, or, even agriculture. It can no longer be an add-on at the end of the speech. It must be the central part of every piece of communication we do.

That will not only help flesh out what an agreement would mean for the everyday life of people here, but also keep the message fresh by introducing different faces delivering the message.

That will be greatly enhanced if we can also find different formats in which to deliver the message. Given that a central part of the government's approach is that we are not imposing a deal, but giving the people a choice, it is particularly apt to look for occasions in which ministers will be able to talk directly to people rather than at them. The ideal are situations in which question and answer sessions can develop. These would not be designed to focus on the minutiae of the talks, but rather to underline the historic opportunity facing the Province.

If this is to happen, however, we need to look for the right occasion and location, and devote sufficient resources to ensure that it delivers the right result. While vigorous questioning is, if anything, to be welcomed, equally a succession of shouting matches will be counter-productive. Help from divisions and departments will therefore be needed in selecting and preparing such occasions.

Key Themes and Lines

Considerable work has already been done on identifying the key themes and messages which will underpin our efforts between now and the referendum, and many of those were reflected in the round of interviews by ministers last weekend. But this effort needs to be sustained.

We should be developing key lines which will underpin the whole campaign. These, in turn, should be updated on a weekly basis, or more often if necessary, to inform and structure our response to the changing course of events.

In practical terms we propose listing these key lines at the start of the Weekly Information Bulletin to serve as a ready reminder. This then would provide a starting point for Mr Murphy's daily handling meeting. Any necessary amendment or update to the lines would

be circulated following the meeting as happens at present. We intend to start this practice next week.

We will also be reviewing the effectiveness of lines on a weekly basis. Again, this could act as a useful starting point for the Monday meeting.

Monitoring

But we will only be able to effectively refine the message and respond to apparent concerns, if we have an effective monitoring system.

Essentially this will include a survey of media coverage, particularly changes in tone and attitude; the intelligence gleaned from informal contacts with key media people; and similar input from officials in NIO divisions and departments, as part of their normal community contacts.

For our part we are conscious that there will be an immediacy to this campaign which will be reflected most notably by the broadcast media. We need, therefore, to enhance our early warning capacity to allow us to be in a situation to take the initiative, before others set their own agenda.

We intend therefore to supplement our existing morning digest, cuttings, and broadcast transcripts by a more considered view of reaction carried on the airwaves. This in turn will feed into our updating of lines at the morning meeting.

In addition we will be undertaking a similar service at lunchtime as well as teatime. Again we would propose re-visiting the daily lines as necessary.

Key audiences

But the media is not the only audience we are playing to. There are the voters themselves, and we need to target and monitor our message towards key groups.

Amongst those, at the broadest, are the main elements of unionism and nationalism. But also we need to know how other groups, such as the young, first time voter, and the East of the Province "middle class silent majority" type, are responding. This will take other means.

Focus and research groups

A key requirement in developing our communications strategy will be a continuing flow of information about public attitudes and response. On some occasions this will be helpful to

our cause and on others not so. It will be important therefore to ensure that not all of the results of opinion polling, etc, will be in the public domain.

It would be open to us to encourage some degree of public opinion polling by for example newspapers and current affairs programmes, where we believe the results are likely to be supportive. Some of this can be encouraged during meetings and briefings of senior media people.

It is also open to us through our existing contract with McCann Erickson to have both quantitative and qualitative research carried out, without it being seen to be Government inspired. This applies whether we are doing any advertising or not. McCann Erickson are developing proposals for some work in this area.

Particularly for quantitative research we could expect to have preliminary results within a week to 10 days of commissioning; qualitative research (involving small selective groups representative of social, religious and geographical sectors) might take 2-3 weeks.

Further and more overt work through focus groups could be instigated by for example Political Affairs Division.

Champions

Each focus group should be representative of a section of the wider community. Those wider groups in turn each have someone they look up to as a representative figure. We should, where possible, be enlisting the help of those people to champion our cause.

While any overt manipulation could only be counter-productive, a carefully co-ordinated timetable of statements from these people will be helpful in giving our message credibility with those they represent. It has the added benefit of providing a fresh face for that message, and ensuring that it is not only government which is seen to be selling the process.

While Information Service can do our part, it is essential that other divisions and departments use all their available contacts not only to identify suitable people, but also to advise on how best to cultivate their support.

Advertising

Advertising on its own will not convince the public to vote in favour of the referendum. But as part of an integrated campaign it could play a crucial role in alerting the public to the precisely what is at stake.

It is the only means where we would be in total control of the message and be guaranteed near universal coverage if we use TV.

But serious consideration needs to be given to the timing and content of any messages because it could be seen as "big government" imposing its view, which would be entirely counter-productive.

For that, and reasons of government impropriety, the focus should be on selling the concept of an agreed future, rather than its precise details.

The central message will be "It's your choice".

Initially that choice will be posed as being between the failure of the past and the future towards which we are making progress. Once an agreement is in place, the message will change to encouraging people to vote for their future.

Internet

This is clearly a medium which we cannot afford to ignore. It provides an opportunity to offer instantly updated information to a world-wide audience and at very modest cost. The revamped NIO site is already attracting a very high level of interest and visits and many of our regular media and other clients are now taking their feed of press releases, etc from our Internet site; the value is clearly proven.

The probability is that we should have a dedicated site for the Referendum/Settlement and Information Service is now looking urgently at how this work should be carried forward.

Identifying Opportunities

An essential element in the planning process will be a rolling composite list of forthcoming events and announcements which will provide platforms for speeches and interviews together with early warning of issues which may present potential difficulties in presentational terms. This will be updated and circulated weekly by Information Service/Central Secretariat.

This list will allow us to see at a glance the range of opportunities and the variety of audiences already in the programme, and to consider and develop ideas for reaching audiences not covered.

There are about 10-12 current affairs broadcast programmes with which Information Service will liaise closely thus allowing us to have early warning of programmes into which we might wish to have input. We will also wish from time to time to offer suggestions for other programmes which would improve knowledge and understanding of the process and the prospects for a satisfactory outcome.

Briefing

We will wish to put more emphasis on briefing of media people generally, both to ensure that they are fully informed and to encourage them to develop their own ideas for programmes on the Talks process and later the Referendum. We will be particularly anxious to use this means of exerting some influence on the content and quality of media coverage. The many weekly newspapers around Northern Ireland offer considerable scope for us to present our message and the editors of these papers should feature in the efforts of Ministers to cultivate the media..

The work of meeting and briefing media representatives should be spread around all of the Ministerial team and there is no reason why on occasions officials shouldn't carry some of this burden. I will myself arrange a number of occasions on which I will bring together selective influential media people.

None of this work will obviate the need for some form of regular 'message from the Talks' briefing of those who regularly cover the process. This might be done at both the start and finish of the Talks week; Mr Murphy would be the obvious choice for this, with the Secretary of State lending support at particularly significant times. If neither is available, either I or some senior officials could ensure continuity. These sessions might be undertaken on 'off the record' lobby terms.

To complement this for the national media I propose to explore with the Prime Minister's Press Secretary the possibility of a once-weekly briefing on Northern Ireland affairs as part of or immediately following the regular No 10 lobby briefing.

I also intend to use the opportunity of Thursday's IGC to open dialogue with Dan Mulhall of Foreign Affairs and Joe Lennon of the Taoiseach's office as to how we and Dublin can co-ordinate our messages to better effect and avoid unhelpful clashes.

TOM KELLY

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