

The 1952 memorandum on government publicity

Aims and methods

Aim is to provide critical historical reflection on a little known episode of UK government public relations in the 1951-1955 Churchill government.

The 1952 memorandum raises interesting historical questions around the lines between party political and government communications, as well as the professionalisation of UK government public relations

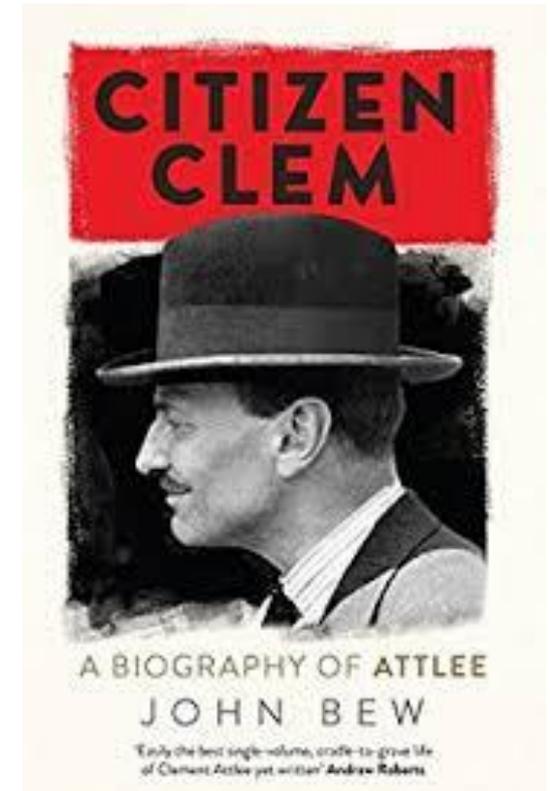
The episode offers an alternative and historically-based view to the dominant orthodoxy of Churchill as master of government/political communication

The paper is based on original archive research at the Conservative Party Archive at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford (including the papers of the 1922 Committee) and the papers of Sir Winston Churchill, Sir Thomas Fife Clark, Lord Swinton and Lord Williams at Churchill Archives Centre, University of Cambridge.

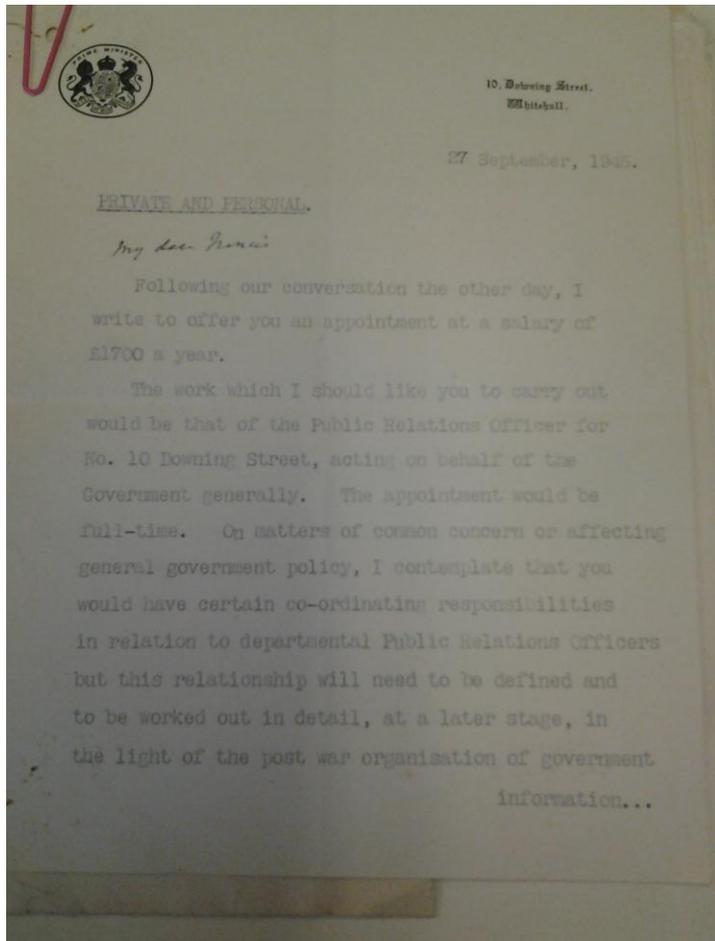
“A modest little man – with much to be modest about”?

Clement Attlee’s 1945-51 UK government was committed to engagement with the public and explanation of policy.

In September 1945, he appointed Francis Williams as “public relations officer for No. 10 Downing Street, acting on behalf of the Government” (Attlee, 1945) and the first press secretary to look after the PM’s “personal” press relations (Cockrell, Hennessy and Walker, 1984, p. 367).



Modern and professional PR approach



“I contemplate that you would have certain co-ordinating responsibilities in relation to departmental Public Relations Officers but this relationship will need to be defined and to be worked out in detail at a later stage in view of the light of the post-war organisation of government information.”

Attlee, C, 1945. *Personal letter to Francis Williams from Prime Minister Clement Attlee.* The Papers of Lord Francis Williams, FRW 8, Churchill Archives Centre, University of Cambridge.

Francis Williams and Herbert Morrison: Modern and professional PR approach



Churchill and the media



On 25 October 1951, Winston Churchill returned as Prime Minister, aged 77 and sought to go backwards in public relations practice, and replace the technocratic institutions (COI), people and processes of the Labour government with pre-war and wartime approach of making speeches to Parliament and broadcasting by radio direct to the people.



“Let them find out for themselves. The Public Relations Officers and the Central Office of Information set up by the Socialist government must be abolished.”

Clark, F., 1973, *Churchill and the Press*. The Papers of Sir Thomas Fife Clark, FICA 2/3, Churchill Archives Centre, University of Cambridge.

Sir Thomas Fife Clark



“Churchill’s relationships with the Lobby correspondents were always remote and never good.

At no stage did he have direct contact with the group at either the House of Commons or No. 10. As peacetime Prime Minister, he gave no interviews for quotation and very few “off the record” – mainly with American commentators.

It was not until after his retirement that the Lobby men were allowed back into Downing Street.”

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Clark, F. 1973. *Churchill and the Press*. The Papers of Sir Thomas Fife Clark. FICA 2/3, Churchill Archives Centre, University of Cambridge.

“You work at the COI? I thought I had shut that down”, he growled

Churchill had an ideological aversion to Central Office of Information (COI) which he sought to dismantle. In fact, the institution survived (until 2011) although he did considerably reduce its staff and close down the Crown Film Unit.

“It must be recognised that the policy towards the press and public relations which Winston Churchill laid down on his return to power in October 1951 was one which as the time went by, damaged first the official information services and then the Government itself.”

Clark, F. (1973). *Churchill and the Press*. The Papers of Sir Thomas Fife Clark. FICA 2/3, Churchill Archives Centre, University of Cambridge.

“Governments do not need PR – just good policies and articulate ministers”



Long-term Churchill ally and fixer, Lord Swinton, described how Churchill “nursed the old-fashioned (and not unattractive) belief that governments did not need public relations, only good policies and articulate ministers.”

But even the “old man” himself was infuriated by his government’s news management when “14 white papers were issued on the same day and on another, the ending of cheese rationing without notifying him or anybody else”

Cross, J. (1982). *Lord Swinton*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

“The variable quality of government propaganda”

On 21 February 1952 (four months after the election) backbench Members of Parliament (MPs) voiced concerns at the 1922 Committee.

John Baker-White “referred to the variable quality of Government propaganda and gave instances of its failure in recent weeks.” Many members supported this view and it was agreed that “the Chairman and one or two other members should see the Prime Minister on the matter.”



On 6 March, 1922 chairman Derek Walker-Smith reported he had “interviewed the Prime Minister about government propaganda and PM has asked for a memorandum to be prepared.”



1922 Committee (1952). *1922 Minute Book 5*, Conservative Party Archive, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

(Access by kind permission of Graham Brady, MP, Chairman of 1922 Committee.)

The 1922 Committee's Memorandum on Government Publicity

Between 6 and 20 March 1952, an undated 2-page memo was received by Churchill and circulated under "Private and Personal" cover for comments by Lord Swinton to the PM's inner circle of: Patrick Buchanan-Hepburn, Government Chief Whip; Anthony Eden, Foreign Secretary; Lord Woolton, Party Chairman; the Marquess of Salisbury, Leader of the House of Lords:

Lord Swinton thought it "dogmatic but not very well-thought out" in a letter to Anthony Eden¹.

The memorandum is not referred to by Churchill in his writings or papers, nor in the six volumes (of eight in total of Churchill's life) by Sir Martin Gilbert, despite this historical aim:

"The aim was, and still is, to make available to students and scholars, and to the general reader who enjoys the raw material of history, a comprehensive selection of the letters, documents, and other contemporary materials covering all periods of Churchill's life and career."

1. Swinton, P. (1952). *Letter to Anthony Eden dated 21 March 1952*. SWIN 3/4, The Papers of Philip Cunliffe-Lister, First Earl of Swinton, Churchill Archives Centre, University of Cambridge.

PRIVATE AND PERSONAL

21st March, 1952.

The Prime Minister asked me for my views on the document which he received from the 1922 Committee. I send you a copy of the note which I have sent to him. From all our work together, I feel pretty sure you will be of the same opinion.

PRIVATE AND PERSONAL

21st March, 1952.

My dear Anthony,

I don't know whether, before you left, the P.M. showed you the dogmatic, but not very well thought out note he had received from the 1922 Committee. The P.M. asked me to give him my views on this, and I am sending you a copy of the note I sent him. I have also given copies to Fred Woolton, Bobbety, Harry Crookshank and the Chief Whip, who had also had the document. Bobbety and Harry have I know agreed with the advice I have given.

You appear to have had your usual triumph in Paris.

PRIME MINISTER

You asked me to let you have my views on the memorandum sent to you by the 1922 Committee. I give you my opinion in the attached note. I have sent a copy of this note to Lord Woolton and to Lord Salisbury, the Leader of the House and the Chief Whip.

SWINTON
21st March, 1952.

MEMORANDUM ON GOVERNMENT PUBLICITY

The reputation of a Government depends not only on what is done, but on how it is done, and on the manner in which its actions are explained to the people. Proper explanation becomes all the more important when, as with the present Government, unpleasant and unpopular things have to be done for the good of the nation as a whole, and to correct the misdeeds of its predecessors. The British people in peace, like the British soldier in war, like to be "in the picture".

Realising this, the 1922 Committee is concerned at what it regards as weaknesses in the presentation of the Government's case, not by the Conservative Central Office which cannot act directly for the Government, but by the Ministers whose statements can be the most valuable publicity of all.

The following examples of badly-headed publicity may be cited.

1. The initial failure to explain that the harsh increases in railway and omnibus fares are not the fault of the Government.
2. The siddle over the increase in milk prices which irritated

The 1922 Committee's Memorandum on Government Publicity

“From these errors the Socialist propagandists have profited. The 1922 Committee has noted that, while the performance of the Socialist Government was lamentable, its publicity was effective; and it had good liaison even with the sections of the press hostile to its policies.

There was a Ministerial Committee which was responsible for putting the Government's case, and high level liaison with the press was maintained through Francis Williams and then through the late Philip Jordan in the Prime Minister's office.”

1922 Committee (1952). *Undated Memorandum on Government Publicity*. SWIN 3/4, The Papers of Philip Cunliffe-Lister, First Earl of Swinton, Churchill Archives Centre, University of Cambridge.

The 1922 Committee's Memorandum on Government Publicity

“The Committee desires to put forward the following proposals for the consideration of the Prime Minister.

1. That there should be a Ministerial Committee, presided over by a senior Minister, with wider terms of reference than those of the Swinton Committee.
2. That the Ministerial Committee should be the link between the Government, the press and the people.
3. That the Committee should have as its link with the press an official of the calibre of Francis Williams, but an anti-Socialist or non-Socialist.
4. That the appointment of any senior public relations officers in the various Ministries who were chosen by the late Government for their Socialist views, should be terminated.”

Historical reflection

Six years after the end of World War II, the Conservative Party's 1922 Committee still uses militaristic simile of soldiers and peacetime voters.

The tone reflects the need to explain “beneficial” policies that was at the heart of local government public relations as explicated by L'Etang (2004)

“The reputation of a Government depends not only on what is done, but on how it is done, and on the manner in which its actions are explained to the people. Proper explanation becomes all the more important when, as with the present Government, unpleasant and unpopular things have to be done for the good of the nation as a whole.”

The terms publicity, propaganda, press relations and public relations and reputation are used interchangeably (as discussed by Bentele, L'Etang and Kunczick, for example).

Historical reflection

The PR void at Churchill's 10 Downing Street led to accusations in the House of Commons by Herbert Morrison (responsible for Lobby briefings in the 1945-51 Labour Government) that “official information services” used for “party purposes” (HC Deb, 498, col 2280).

The memorandum acknowledges that Churchill's attempt to return to a wartime – and more crucially pre 1945-51 - mode of PR operations had failed. The note politely avoids personal criticism but clearly challenges the historical orthodoxy of Churchill as a master communicator.

The solution was to mimic the professionalised and technocratic PR approach of Labour – abandoning the “Parliament first” and direct media (via radio) approach of Churchill in war time.

The 1922 Committee Memorandum advocated a partisan removal of “any senior public relations officers chosen by the late government for their socialist views” when these were civil service appointments. In fact, the orthodoxy of independent civil service public relations officers survived up to the end of John Major's government in 1997.

The fixer's fix

Churchill called on his old ally and wartime fixer, Lord Swinton, to resolve matters. The result – as so often in wartime - was another committee chaired by Swinton to sort the matter.

Lord Swinton also briefed the Lobby weekly and soon established himself as a “powerful and informed advocate” of the Government’s policies and a “most notable friend” of the Lobby¹.

Lord Swinton’s committee identified the need for a public relations adviser to work alongside him in the way Francis Williams had done so successfully with Clement Attlee.

The main obstacle was the “PM’s ideas about press relations...he remained immutable – no journalists or press officers to be allowed inside No. 10”².

1. Thompson E. & Spencer Shaw, E. *Letter to Lord Swinton dated 13 April 1955*. SWIN 174/6/14, The Papers of Philip Cunliffe-Lister, First Earl of Swinton, Churchill Archives Centre, University of Cambridge.
2. Clark, F. 1973. *Churchill and the Press*. The Papers of Sir Thomas Fife Clark. FICA 2/3, Churchill Archives Centre, University of Cambridge

The fixer's fix

To overcome Churchill's refusal to have any media or public relations staff on site, the PR adviser was located in the Old Treasury building, with easy access to No. 10 through the back door, an arrangement described by Lord Swinton as "just a matter of geography".

Thomas Fife Clark, Controller at the Central Office of Information, was appointed to the role of Public Relations Adviser.

He swiftly established himself as an "indispensable aide" as Government PR adviser and Swinton said any success he achieved in turning round press relations was "80% due to a little man called Fife Clark."¹

1. *Interview with Lord Swinton*. Public Relations: The Journal of the Institute of Public Relations. April 1955, p.17.

Pictures

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