

# Government Communications in the United Kingdom

*Interview with Howell James*

In 2003, the United Kingdom Cabinet Office commissioned an independent and radical review of government communications. Chaired by Robert Phillis, Chief Executive of Guardian Media Group, the Review Group was asked to examine different models for organising and managing the government's communication effort, and to assess the roles played by both civil servants and special advisors with a media focus. Commonly referred to as the Phillis Review, it highlighted a three-way breakdown in trust between the government, the media and the general public. One of its recommendations was that the government adopt a new structure for its communications. As a result, the post of Permanent Secretary, Government Communications was created. In July 2004, Howell James became the first person to hold this post.

Howell James was in Singapore recently to deliver a keynote address at the conference "Collective Wisdom: The Power of Public Consultation" organised by the Public Relations Academy. In this interview with *Ethos*, he talks about his role as Permanent Secretary, Government Communications and shares his insights on government communications.

## How is government communications structured in the UK and what is your role?

I am responsible for the profession of communications, in all its forms, across government. I am there to ensure that communications directorates across government are fit for purpose and that we have a vibrant and confident network of communicators. I'm responsible for bringing the right people in; appointing the right people to senior jobs;

supporting them in those jobs with the right staff; helping them to shape their department so that they recognise and understand the sort of skill sets they need, the type of budgetary requirements they need to support it. I also help to ensure the communications functions are linked to the senior management function for the department as a whole to make sure communications activity lands effectively and is aligned to the department's overall business strategy.

In the past, these issues were always very much secondary. Then the central communications function was run out of the Prime Minister's Office by a director of communications, who understandably put the day-to-day news agenda and serving the Prime Minister at the top of the list. The Phillis Review separated these roles. The day-to-day news management function continues to take place in the Prime Minister's Office and remains the responsibility of the Director of Communications. That role is very much focused around servicing the Prime Minister, and ensuring that news and issues are properly managed and vigorously engaged. It is carried out by David Hill, who is a political appointee. I work very closely with him; we have complementary roles. While the Prime Minister's Official Spokesperson and other civil servants in the Prime Minister's Press Office officially report to me, I am not involved in the day-to-day media handling.

Besides acting as Head of Profession for all communicators, it is also my job to take a fundamental look at the way government communicates. For instance, I need to look at coordinating cross-government issues more effectively by picking out themes and issues; and to make sure departments work closely with each other. I also look at how to set standards of professionalism for communications functions, and standards of propriety for civil servants operating in an adversarial political environment.

My aim is to adopt a more strategic approach, put the public at the heart of what we do, and do this while maintaining the British tradition of an impartial civil service.

**In your keynote address at the Public Consultation Conference in Singapore, you referred to the role of strategic communications and marketing in developing policy. What is strategic government communications?**

I define it simply as using all the professional skills of communication to build an effective mechanism for talking to the public and also hearing from the public. This is why two-way communication is important. What government needs is for communications professionals to engage in the policy-making process early on. They must be able to engage with the key policy officials to offer meaningful advice on audiences and how to reach them. Sometimes that won't require you to put out press releases, but it may mean running an advertising campaign or engaging more actively with stakeholder groups. This is where strategic communications advice plays in early. It can influence the shaping and formulation of a policy or product and start an intelligent conversation about who it is aimed at and how to communicate it most effectively.

Within departments as well, your communications function is only useful to you if it reflects your department's over-arching business strategy. You need to identify where communications can help you deliver your department's objectives—what it is you are trying to achieve as an organisation, where you are trying to get to and how communications can positively assist towards delivering that business end.

**Since your appointment, one of the areas you have focused on is bringing the public voice into policy-making. What are the major challenges in trying to achieve this?**

There are two roles for communications in government. One is a straight-forward exposition of what a service is and how the public can access it—what you need to know, where to get it, and how to get hold of it. For example, information about your pension, health services, local schools or networked government services that are available to you as a citizen, which you may need to access.

The other part of government communications is this relatively new development of more consultation, the role of listening and bringing the public to the heart of the policy process. Traditionally, in the private sector, the role of marketing has been perceived as putting the "ears on the organisation" and calibrating your offerings around an alertness and awareness of what the public thinks. That is not to say that you solely and only shape your offering on that basis, but it does mean that you have to inform it.

We are very much in the foothills of that process in government. Part of it is about better and more effective consultation and engagement of the public around particular issues. But we also need to have in place the structures in departments so that the listening process then feeds into policy. I think that process is still very much in the early stages.

**You started communications work in the private sector but now head government communications. How is public sector communications different from private sector communications?**

First of all, the range of materials that you have to communicate in government is much, much broader. The time-tables of communicating them are also much less in your own hands. The players—the policy-makers, the ministers, the politicians, and the senior civil servants—are an audience much more engaged in and broad-based than those who control communications routes in the private sector.

Private sector communications objectives are fairly focused. For example, communications activity might be run around your quarterly, half-yearly, or yearly announcements because it would be focused around share prices, dividends, or about the performance of your company. That performance will be judged on a very clear empirical basis. In government, measuring performance is less easy. Clear judgements have to be made about what works and what doesn't work in public policy, and whether or not you are delivering a better service. There are a number of ways of measuring these things, but it is much more difficult—you are involved in making propositions and in managing a debate.

The other issue in government is that the pressure of public scrutiny, the interest of the media, the interest of the public, of stakeholders, of the

political parties, is much more intense and many more in number than for most private sector companies. Individual companies, depending on the sector you operate in, will have groups of people such as analysts or environmental groups, who will take a very keen interest in what they do. In government, you have everybody who at some point is concerned or interested. So, I think communications in the public sector is more multi-dimensional, multi-levelled, more open and a less controllable process than it is in the private sector.

### **How easy or difficult is it to engage the British public and media? What are the challenges?**

**T**he British public are very actively engaged in government activity. There is no question at all that new initiatives and activities will always provoke interest in the media and the public. You only have to listen to phone-in programmes, read the newspapers or watch the television to know that certainly, the media, and through the media, the public are truly engaged. There is no problem about sparking engagement in policy issues.

Where I think that there is more difficulty is in the overall engagement of the public with the political process. As individuals, we all tend to take a keener interest in the things that affect us. But because we have busy lives and because of a certain degree of scepticism about the whole political process, we hesitate to imbue the political system with too many expectations. You see that most vividly in terms of turnout at elections. We had 59% of the people turn out in the 2001 election, and that was an election that was deemed to be pretty much an inevitability. The Conservative Party was not in a strong position, they were up against a first-term Prime Minister who continued to have huge support. To a degree, the vigour of the debate was less vivid, therefore people didn't engage so much.

However, this last election was quite hard fought. The Prime Minister clearly had a tough election ahead of him as he went into it. The Conservative Party had become more professional and had a leader who appeared to take on the people in a more vigorous fashion. Yet, even this very powerful campaign only provoked a 61% turnout.

I think this issue about overall political engagement has to do with a degree of scepticism moving to outright cynicism which is damaging. People continue to be passionate about

environmental issues, for instance. Or take another example: In the commitment towards Africa and the contribution of Live8, you can see people becoming very vividly engaged to act, especially in terms of public debate. People are tending to see those kinds of individual activities in a separate arena to the over-arching political structures. The challenge of governments, of politicians, of all of us involved in the mainstream political machine, is to re-engage that machine, to capture some of the passion and interest, and the debate that people are having in those areas and to re-engage people in some of that.

### **How do you put communications into the DNA of public service officers?**

**W**e are involved in a process of advocacy and persuasion. Like all large organisations which have ways of doing things, we are trying to influence the ways the civil service does things, to bring people closer, to make them understand where communications can help. I think you can do it in a number of ways.

One, you have to look at the processes, and the obligatory functions people have to consider when they are fulfilling their task. You have to see if there is some way that we can ensure that some kind of communications element or function plays into that. Clearly, that is about how jobs are scoped, how the responsibilities of those jobs are evaluated, how the communications function and the listening function factor in as part of their job description and the way a job is evaluated.

At the same time, we have to make our case. We have to have good stories to tell about successful communications endeavours, where policy work can work closely with market research, with the marketing mindset of segmenting your audience. We have to show that communicating more effectively has landed policies effectively, so that we can point to it to say, "If you do it like this, you end up with a better product, a better policy, a product better understood by the people and less media contention."

*This interview was conducted by June Gwee, a senior research fellow at IPD. ■*