

Anticipating the age of 'political spin'? An historical analysis of 1980s government communications

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INTRODUCTION

The ideal of the well-informed citizen served by a watchdog media that holds governments to account, and a government that places accurate information in the public domain, is seen as a pre-requisite for representative democracy. In recent decades, however, this has been considered to be in trouble. Many accounts of central governing bureaucracies in Western liberal democracies claim that the balance of power has tilted in favour of politicians and away from the administrative arm of government (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2010; Hustedt & Salomonsen, 2014). This process is referred to as a form of "top down politicization" in which political parties become the "principal agents" (Peters & Pierre, 2004a p287). Within Westminster systems such as the UK's, which are characterised by an extreme form of executive dominance, the risk of 'party capture' of publicly sensitive functions such as government communication has traditionally been mitigated by a strict, albeit self-regulated, culture of impartiality (Lijphart, 1999; Aucoin, 2012). In the UK government press officers are bound by their propriety codes to provide information that is "objective and explanatory" rather than "party political" (GCS, 2015, p10). Yet from the late 1990s, a series of major controversies, such as the discredited dossier leading up to the 2003 Iraq War, and, more recently, the 2016 EU referendum campaign (Chilcot, 2016; Halligan, 2016; Herring & Robinson, 2014) raised concerns that government communication activities were becoming increasingly partisan and untrustworthy, leaving the public under-served and disillusioned

(Blumler & Coleman, 2015; Foster, 2005; Yeung, 2006). As the Trump experiment indicates, public distrust in media and governing elites is widespread, and one response has been the rise of populism and more personalised forms of direct political communication through social media.

This chapter considers the generative role of changes in government communication practices in response to the rise of the new multi-channel environment during the 1980s. An historical case study approach is used to examine how the Conservative Thatcher administrations of the UK (1979-1990) exploited the opportunities of this challenging media landscape, in order to 'sell' an initially deeply unpopular neoliberal policy of economic and social transformation. The Conservative party had successfully applied political marketing techniques during the 1979 election, and once in power sought to implement a more persuasive style of communication that later came to be known as 'political spin'ⁱ. They met resistance from a civil service culture determined to uphold values of impartiality that had been enshrined in the post-war information model of communication (Grant, 1999; Moore, 2006).

Many accounts relating to the UK case consider ministers and their politically-appointed aides as largely responsible for the decline in public trust in governments, blaming the practice of selectively trading privileged government information to serve party or personal interests. Critics claim this began in earnest with the 1997 New Labour government and is now so widespread as to become institutionalised (Jones, 2006; Wring, 2005). A series of critical government and parliamentary reviews into government communications also blamed political actors, and called for a return to a less partisan style of public communication in order to rebuild trust (House of Lords, 2008; Phillis, 2004; Public

Administration Select Committee, 1998, 2013). A consistent concern of these reviews was the informal media relations role of the rising numbers of temporary civil servants known as special advisers (or SpAds); the partisan officials appointed by and accountable to ministers and exempt from impartiality (Public Administration Select Committee, 2000, 2012, 2013; Wicks, 2003). This small but networked group of political operators whose media relations activities are largely unofficial, and hence deniable, has been demonised as people who practice the 'dark arts' of political spin (Blick, 2004).

Despite these critiques, the ethical and strategic role of government press officers in briefing the news media has been consistently weakened since 1997, while SpAds remain key to government news management (Garland, 2017). Meanwhile, direct communication such as marketing and advertising has all but ceased since the post-2010 budget cuts (Garland et al., 2018; Tee, 2011). According to the *narrative of political spin*, public officials are victims of a political takeover of government communications. Yet this narrative may be too simplistic in at least two ways: firstly, ostensibly impartial public officials may allow loyalty to the government of the day to override their public interest obligations; and secondly, politicians may behave in impartial ways that uphold the public interest. Rather than being mere victims, should public officials as well as political actors bear responsibility for the consistent decline in public trust in recent decades in what governments say (IpsosMORI, 2016; Whiteley et al., 2016)?

This chapter draws on a systematic analysis of UK government documentary and archival evidence dating from the 1980s to argue that, during the Thatcher era, there were signs that politically driven media strategists were already coming into conflict with a civil service communications culture which resisted overt advocacy or persuasion – a tension that

surfaced publicly after 1997. In the struggle to determine government narratives, the balance of power shifted towards ministers and away from civil servants, accepted routines were challenged, and media considerations were prioritised. Archives show how the Prime Minister and her closest advisers, including her chief press secretary Bernard Ingham, challenged what they saw as civil service resistance, to develop a more persuasive and centralised approach to government media management of controversial issues, especially on the economy. At the same time, an analysis of one high profile government campaign shows that a ministerial commitment to impartiality can disregard or override party interest. Indeed, as we shall see, the historical record challenges the long-accepted dichotomy between impartial civil servants (good), and partisan politicians (bad).

In the next section, I begin by outlining the methodological approach and reflecting on the generative role of history in influencing the actions of political and media elites, both in the UK and elsewhere. I then examine documentary evidence in relation to two critical moments in UK government communications during the Thatcher years that illustrate points of conflict and contestation behind the scenes: firstly, the role of the Prime Minister's press secretary Bernard Ingham, in the lead up to the 1983 election; and secondly, the struggle on the part of the Minister for Health to implement the world's first national AIDS awareness campaign in 1986-7 against a Prime Minister, Cabinet and public opinion that held intolerant views about homosexuality. These findings will then be considered as possible antecedents to government communications during the post-1997 New Labour era and beyond. The chapter will conclude with some predictions about the direction of travel, and some thoughts on possible solutions to the problem of public distrust in government communication.

AN HISTORICAL CASE STUDY APPROACH TO GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS

The “qualitative, longitudinal deep case study method” used here is characteristic of the historical institutionalist approach common in political studies, which examines the interaction of institutions, ideas and agents over time (Bannerman & Haggart, 2015, p. 10). This involves selecting the case study and time period, identifying the institution and agents/actors to be studied, the mechanisms that strengthen or weaken the institutions, and the agents and ideas in play, and establishing who gains and who loses during a period of change. Certain groups may be favoured or excluded, options may be constrained or extended, and new debates and agendas may emerge as others recede or drift into irrelevance. Institutions are defined as the “formal and informal procedures, routines, norms and conventions embedded in the organizational structure of the polity” (Hall & Taylor, 1996, p. 6). This approach seeks to overcome what has been referred to as a lack of transparency and rigour, where too little attention is paid to the clear application of historical concepts such as temporal comparison, turning points, the ‘centrality of sequence,’ and too little focus on specific actors’ situational constraints and enabling factors in particular places and times (Stanyer & Mihelj, 2016).

In his groundbreaking study of US public relations during the 20th century, Cutlip demonstrated the value of detailed and contextualised case studies of what is usually a hidden and unaccountable activity. He concluded that to build public trust, PR practitioners must “have the guts to say no to their bosses” (Cutlip, 1994, p. 774). L’Etang’s study of British public relations through a combination of oral history interviews and archival analysis introduced the method of ‘historical sociology’ to the study of PR. She considered the symbiotic relationship between PR and the media to be “crucial and of great sociological

significance”, and argued that PR was not a neutral process (L'Etang, 2009, p. 3). She identified 1980s Britain as a moment when a “massive communication effort” was required both to publicize the new privatization process and to establish corporate identities for the new private utility companies. Rather than sidelining the history of government PR as mere propaganda, scholars should engage deeply with the customs and practices of PR in the light of the “larger processes of transformation” taking place at the time (L'Etang, 2008, p. 321). A symbiosis, or mutual adaptation, between PR officials, governing politicians and media actors has been observed in recent Scandinavian research. An ethnographic study of a Norwegian executive agency found that civil servants who were closest to ministers were more ‘media savvy’ than other officials (Thorjornsrud et al, 2014). Similarly, a documentary study of Swedish executive agencies found that officials sought to increase the media profile of their organization as a way of pleasing politicians, hoping thereby to resist political interference (Fredriksson et al., 2015). Thus, although today’s *narrative of political spin* upholds a dichotomy between civil servants and impartiality on the one hand, and politicians and partisanship on the other, in reality, the picture is more complex and fraught with power struggles that largely exclude both publics and parliaments.

Historical sources

Evidence derived from sources such as memoirs, biographies, government and parliamentary enquiry evidence sessions and interviews are all potentially subject to respondents claiming their particular ‘place in history’. To establish chronology and provide a check on established narratives, three tranches of archived documentary evidence were systematically examined:

1. Archival records concerned with the presentation of government policy from 1981-83 (PREM 19/720/721) and 1983-86 (PREM 19/1775).

2. Documents from the Ingham archive held by the Margaret Thatcher Foundation dated May 1979 to April 1985ⁱⁱ.
3. Recently released archived correspondence relating to the launch of the government's 1986-87 AIDS/HIV awareness campaign (PREM-19-1863).

These data sets were analyzed to test the main claims that underlie the *narrative of political spin* and to ask whether actions from the 1980s are linked through a chain of causality to more recent publicity failures such as the discredited Iraq WMD dossier of 2002, and the failed government campaign of 2016 to remain in the EU. The narrative claims that party news management was progressively brought into government while new partisan PR operators managed government information 'under the radar', bypassing and disrupting the civil service communications hierarchy. Government communication increasingly operated in the party rather than the public interest leading ultimately to a failure to serve the information needs of citizens and a consequent decline in public trust in government communications.

STRATEGIC GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION: THE THATCHER YEARS

From the arrival of the first Thatcher government in May 1979, the Prime Minister's new Chief Press Secretary, Bernard Ingham, an impartial civil servant rather than a political appointment by the PMⁱⁱⁱ, and the Government Information Service (GIS), staffed by civil servants, faced pressure from incoming ministers for a more coordinated and promotional approach to government communication. In this section, I examine documents relating to the little-known (outside Whitehall) *Liaison Committee on the Presentation of Government*

Policy that provide insights into the internal struggles between the Prime Minister, ministers, and civil servants for control over government narratives at a time when the government's survival was threatened. I then examine correspondence relating to the 1986-87 Aids/HIV awareness campaign jointly championed by the Secretary of State for Health and the Chief Medical Officer in the teeth of opposition from the media, the party and public opinion. Finally, I consider why we should rethink notions of impartiality and partisanship in government communication, and how these ideas link to the narrative of political spin.

The Liaison Committee – 1981-83

The *Liaison Committee* was a long-standing but intermittent secret post-war body that was revived briefly in 1981, meeting monthly from the beginning of 1982 amid concerns that the government was not getting its message across. A Number 10 political adviser recalls how “Mrs Thatcher was presented by much of the press as a hate figure and many in the party thought she was leading the country to destruction” (Hoskyns, 2000, p. 357). Voting intention ratings at the end of the year put the Conservatives in third place at less than 30% (YouGov, 2018).

Archived government documents show how the PM, her close advisers and a handful of senior ministers try to develop a more compelling approach to economic presentation which includes regular briefing from Conservative Party HQ, and a drive to turn around media and eventually public opinion. This meeting was so secret that it was not even known to most cabinet members until March 1982. Civil servants in ministerial private offices referred to it as “highly sensitive” and even not quite “sanitary” (PREM 19/720/721). Key actors on the Committee were the minister responsible for coordinating government publicity Francis Pym;

the PM's press secretary Bernard Ingham; the Conservative Party Research Department which produced many of the briefing papers; and Mrs Thatcher, in her role as joint-Chair (with Pym). The Committee initially focused on economic policy but then expanded its remit to tackle a range of priority issues such as industry, pay policy/employment, housing, nuclear defence and education.

The Committee's remit is explained in a briefing document produced by Pym's private office and circulated the day before the Committee's first meeting on 10 February 1982. This stressed the "sensitivity of its proceedings," explaining that "no agenda has been issued for this meeting". The Committee's terms of reference were "to give guidance to MPs and others on the interpretation of government policy and to take such action as in their opinion is necessary to sustain public confidence in the Government." Its priority was "to identify those policy areas *likely to be of key political importance in the period approaching an election*" (my emphasis) by focusing on issues identified by Conservative Party HQ as being "*of primary importance in electoral terms*". This would require "a significant contribution from the Whitehall machine," effectively enlisting supposedly impartial civil servants to an electioneering role.

A short note confirmed that the Committee had agreed to "commission work on specific policy areas likely to be of special political importance" and "*most relevant in the run up to an election*" (my emphasis). These included the economy, industrial and employment strategy, and how the 1982 Budget was to be presented, all of which were then highly controversial. Despite the proceedings' sensitivity, the "major work now in hand", meant that it would, after all, be necessary to prepare papers in advance and produce an agenda, but "great care

must be taken to preserve their confidentiality and the Party Chairman would distribute them personally". Two days before the second meeting on 10 March, Ingham briefs the PM that "it will be important to sell – and to sell hard – the Budget's promises especially as they affect industry". Taking a distinctly partisan tone, he writes that the government will be "talking up political and economic confidence" at a time when "the Labour Party is racked by a new Trot-induced row". The next day he tells the PM that she must "sustain the momentum" and produce a comprehensive presentation plan "before the election" (PREM 19/720-1). The election took place on 9 June 1983, almost a year after victory in the Falklands War, and, in the most decisive post-war election result since 1945, resulted in an increased majority for the Conservatives of 144.

Here we can see why this meeting, taking place on Whitehall turf and serviced by supposedly impartial officials, was so sensitive. Against convention, the Liaison Committee implicated civil servants such as Bernard Ingham in improper partisan practices. Civil service rules explicitly stated that civil servants could not participate in electoral campaigning, a rule that still applies today (GCS, 2015). Although, strictly speaking, such preparatory activity taking place before the official election campaigning period (known as 'purdah' and lasting six weeks) did not overtly break the rules, it challenged them covertly and in spirit.

Accusations that Ingham stepped over the line separating government information from party publicity were made at the time. One of the few to even register the existence of the Liaison Committee, Young argued that Ingham's presence was "a testimony to the intimate linkage even beyond the bounds of Whitehall propriety, between party and government machines" a charge that anticipates later criticism of Alastair Campbell (Young, 1989, p. 299).

Ingham was overwhelmingly committed to Margaret Thatcher, later stating in an interview with this author that “I served the Prime Minister” and that his first responsibility was “not to get her into trouble, to keep her out of trouble” (Interview: 14/11/2014). This meant protecting her not only from the media but from political enemies within her own party. The fact that he managed this task for 11 years to her satisfaction, while leaving on good terms with the political correspondents (known as ‘the lobby’) in 1990, is a remarkable achievement after an estimated 5,000 press lobby briefings, but there were clearly times when he crossed the line into personal advocacy, paving the way for an overtly partisan Director of Government communications in the shape of Alastair Campbell (Seymour-Ure, 2003; Watts, 1997). Ingham’s success with the lobby may also indicate ideological convergence as the media swung round in support of the Thatcher experiment after the 1983 election. His success as the PM’s representative led to accusations that he failed as a medium for properly informing the public because he had become “too partisan” (Cockerell et al., 1984, p. 72), an accusation later levelled at Campbell (Moran, 2005; Tumber, 2000).

Yet such charges are not straightforward given the messy reality of government communications, and by Ingham’s own ambivalence. His first loyalty may have been to the Prime Minister but from taking up his post on 1 November 1979, he fought to promote and defend the work of the GIS¹ under his leadership from what he saw as the scapegoating tendencies of ministers, although, when interviewed, he described the quality of the service that he inherited as “very mixed”. Before taking up the post, in a detailed paper to the Minister then in charge of presentation, he warned that the performance and morale of the service needed to be improved, stating that, although he was “anxious to raise the reputation

¹ Later known as the GICS (1997), then the GCN (2005) and finally GCS (2013)

and status of the Government Information Service (...) it can only be done by a collective demonstration of effort and competence" (Memo 15/10,1979). The archival record repeatedly shows him anticipating, pre-empting and resisting ministerial activism and then going on the offensive by driving through a more coordinated and disciplined approach on the part of the service. We see him roused to anger on several occasions by what he saw as interference in publicity matters by ill-informed ministers. A robust response was provoked in December 1981, for example, when the Chancellor, Geoffrey Howe, complained that press releases produced by civil servants were not persuasive enough and that press officers were not "ideally deployed for the proper presentation of the overall economic message." Ingham dismissed the complaint as "gratuitous, so long as Ministers of the Government cut the Government to pieces." He insisted on being included in meetings about the matter and offered to prepare a paper (PREM 19/720).

He also acted swiftly to pre-empt potential charges of party political bias. On 19 July 1982, the Treasury minister, Leon Brittan, proposed to members of the Liaison Committee that they change the rules about party political ministerial speeches. The Questions of Procedures for Ministers (QPM), the forerunner to today's Ministerial Code, permitted these to be circulated only through the party. Brittan proposed instead that they be circulated through the official Government machine, in order to secure "far more coverage" (PREM 19/720). Ingham wrote to the PM that day insisting that she should "resolutely refuse" to change the rules since these were "well-founded" and had served successive governments well by "protecting Ministers from charges of misusing Government resources for Party ends and the GIS from the charge of party political bias". Two days later, the Liaison Committee agreed that "it would be presentationally unwise for this Government to be seen to be

tinkering with the rules” and the idea was dropped. This incident provides one possible explanation as to why Ingham participated in the Liaison Committee: it put him in a position to detect and pre-empt ministerial activism that might undermine the government’s propriety framework, and, perhaps more importantly, challenge his (and the PM’s) dominance over government narratives. In her 1991 analysis of government news management during the Thatcher years, Scammell concludes that, given the complexities of the role, Ingham maintained his impartiality almost until the end. However, under the 30-year rule, she did not have access to the material presented here which is far more incriminating (Scammell, 1991).

The 1986-87 Aids/HIV awareness campaign

“It was a life and death situation. I’d been to San Francisco, where the wards were full of young men dying. Same in Germany, same in the United Kingdom. There was no time to think about whether it might offend one or two people. And history shows we were right – people took care and HIV cases went down”. Norman Fowler, Health Secretary, 1981-87, interview in *The Guardian*, 4/9/2017.

The world’s first national government-sponsored Aids/HIV awareness campaign, *AIDS: Don’t Die of Ignorance*, was launched in November 1986 with leaflets sent to every home in Britain followed in early 1987 by a hard-hitting film and television campaign produced by the ad agency TBWA (Dunton, 2016). The campaign cost £5m (equivalent to £13m today), the most expensive government health campaign of its time, and was coordinated by a Cabinet Committee chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister, Willie Whitelaw. The ad was intended to shock - featuring apocalyptic imagery such as an iceberg, a volcanic explosion and a tombstone, and a portentous voiceover by the actor John Hurt stating that “anyone can get it”. The government was accused of panic-mongering but the campaign was later hailed as

one of the most successful health campaigns ever, both in raising awareness and changing behaviour, and its tactics were imitated all over the world (Kelly, 2011). How did a government accused of promoting anti-gay sentiment with its restrictive legislation on sex education in schools ('Section 28' of the 1988 Local Government Act) manage to produce, in five months, a powerful campaign that explicitly referred to 'anal sex' and 'rectal intercourse' at a time when homophobia was widespread among the public, in government, the police and the popular press? Government documents covering the period from 28 August 1985 to 31 December 1986, released in 2016 by the National Archives ([PREM 19/1863](#)), provide an insight into how a politician, Norman Fowler, working with the Chief Medical Officer, Sir Donald Acheson, won the argument against a reluctant Prime Minister.

One of the UK's first known AIDS sufferers, Terrence Higgins, died in July 1982 aged 37, but until the first needle exchanges opened in 1985, little was done about what then seemed a terrifying and inexplicable disease that mainly affected gay men and drug addicts. The disease was often depicted as a 'gay plague' and represented by traditionalists as punishment for drug addicts and gay men, rather than a general public health emergency. The Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police, James Anderton, said at a police training event in 1987 that victims were "swirling about in a human cesspool of their own making", repeating it weeks later in a BBC interview (*The Daily Telegraph*, 4/1/2012). By the summer of 1985, scientists were predicting that the total number of UK HIV cases could reach 300,000 if nothing was done, but it was clear that the issue of AIDS/HIV was heavily politicised, with the Prime Minister likely to line up on the side of the traditionalists.

The archived folder begins with a dossier sent to the Prime Minister's office on 19 September 1985, including a submission to ministers from Donald Acheson summarising the medical and public health issues relating to AIDs, and a reference to TBWA having "been commissioned and briefed" to produce a public health campaign aimed at high risk groups. Also in the dossier, are copies of leaflets produced by the Health Education Council and Blood Transfusion Service aimed solely at high-risk groups. Norman Fowler raises the priority of the issue when he writes to the PM on 25 September, copying in senior ministers, describing AIDs as "one of the most serious public health hazards faced by this country for many decades". He constitutes a ministerial steering group, including senior civil servants and the Chief Medical Officer, to coordinate government action. The following day, Margaret Thatcher is advised by her private secretary to "stay clear of Aids!" and leave it to Norman Fowler. She decides not to attend the opening of a new blood products testing laboratory or to agree to the setting up of an official Cabinet committee to tackle AIDs.

By February 1986, the Committee has agreed on hard-hitting text for a newspaper advertisement to launch in March. The tone of the debate shifts dramatically when, on 24 February, David Willetts from the PM's Policy Unit reports that "Norman Fowler is proposing to place explicit and distasteful advertisements about AIDS in all the Sunday papers". Responding to the draft text, Margaret Thatcher adds a note stating "do we have to do the section on risky sex? I should have thought it could do immense harm if young teenagers were to read it". Correspondence between the Committee and Margaret Thatcher's office continues as she repeatedly objects to the explicit content of the ad and the tactic of placing it in mainstream media. The debate culminates in a letter from Norman Fowler on 10 March stating that the Committee is unanimous that "the use of explicit references to sexual

practices (...) are a regrettable necessity” and that not to include this information “would be to jeopardise the public health unnecessarily”. Finally, Margaret Thatcher concedes with a resigned ‘yes’ and the campaign launches on 16 March. Having established a political powerbase independent of the Prime Minister in the shape of the steering Committee, and in alliance with the Chief Medical Officer, Fowler used scientific argument and public interest defence to launch a far more high profile and explicit film and television campaign, but the debate wasn’t over.

By the summer, Fowler reports on the success of the campaign and urges the PM “not to lose momentum.” The Committee is proposing a further round of national advertising that will include the phrase, “Anal sex (rectal intercourse) carries the highest risk and should be avoided”. Again, the PM’s ‘yes’ appears on the document. Two months later, Fowler proposes that in order to bring about the necessary “breakthrough in public recognition” an AIDS leaflet should be delivered to every household in the country. The Cabinet Secretary Robert Armstrong writes to the PM on 21 October warning strongly that there could be “half a million affected carriers” as the disease spreads to the general population, including newborn babies, and that “most of those who die will be young people”. He repeats the proposal made (and dismissed by the PM) a year before, that the authority of the steering committee be escalated by constituting it as a Cabinet Sub-Committee chaired by the Deputy PM. This time, she agrees.

By the autumn, AIDS has become a hot topic in the media and pressure is building on the PM to agree a major campaign. Bernard Ingham makes his first significant appearance in the archive on 29 October telling Willie Whitelaw that he wants the PM to be seen taking a “close personal interest in the issue.” He reports his concerns that, at a dinner for 24 regional

newspaper editors the previous week, Mrs Thatcher had seemed “cautious on the idea of a house-to-house leaflet drop” although the editors expressed strong support for a hard-hitting government campaign. By 7 November, she has said ‘yes’ to the leaflets, and her policy adviser David Willetts is now declaring that AIDS is “the most important health issue this century”, and noting that “there was not a single complaint about obscenity in the newspaper advertisements”. Three days later the Cabinet sub-Committee meets for the first time and agrees new newspaper advertising and poster campaigns, including one aimed specifically at young people, the house-to-house leaflet drop and a proposed TV campaign. The TV ad *Aids: Don’t Die of Ignorance* airs early in 1987. On 18 April 1987, Princess Diana is photographed shaking hands with an AIDS patient.

To put this campaign in today’s context, despite repeated calls for more direct public communication (Phillis, 2004; House of Lords, 2008), there have been large cuts in government campaign expenditure: in 2013-14 external communication by the government cost £237m, compared to £532m in 2009-10 (GCS, 2013). The body responsible for health promotion, the Health Education Council, was closed in 1987 and its successor, the Health Education Agency, was closed in 2000. Before it was shut down in 2012, the Central Office of Information (COI), the government agency that commissioned public campaigns, had been reduced to 500 staff, compared with 1500 in 1970 (Hood & Dixon, 2015). The 1986-7 Aids campaign was the outcome of a well-resourced system of direct communication that had been developed over decades. Given the cuts in such activity since 2010, which has led to a greater dependence on the much cheaper media news management over direct communication, it is doubtful that a campaign on this scale and speed could be run today.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The historical case study approach complicates the narrative of political spin, challenging the long-accepted dichotomy between impartial civil servants (good), and partisan politicians (bad). This dichotomy remains an article of faith in Westminster systems such as the UK although in practice it continually grapples with political imperatives and the messiness of everyday life. In the AIDs case study, we saw a government minister behaving impartially – that is, in consideration of the public good as opposed to personal, ideological or party interest. In the workings of the Liaison Committee, we saw a civil servant pushed over the edge in defence of what he saw as the Prime Minister’s and hence the government, interest. There are some continuities with today. Many of the changes associated with claims of political spin after 1997, such as the central coordination of government presentation, the strategic drive for a coherent party/government narrative, and the demand for a more persuasive style of communication, were already being introduced during the 1980s as the new Thatcher government sought public consent to implement its radical and initially hugely unpopular programme of privatization and economic liberalism.

Ingham’s 1982 appeal to the Prime Minister that an open breach of the code would be seen as “protecting Ministers from charges of misusing Government resources for Party ends and the GIS from the charge of party political bias” reveals the importance of the *appearance* of impartiality. This continues today. Government press officers can claim to provide “objective and explanatory” information to the public while, behind the scenes, special advisers covertly set the government news agenda and brief journalists, disguising a significant internal shift in what is deemed appropriate and acceptable. This is a major discontinuity with the 1980s. Instead of a dichotomous information regime within government in which officials and political actors act as a check on each other to reach a consensus on what should be placed in

the public domain and how, we see a tri-partite system where political actors and government press officers collude with journalists in providing political entertainment. Direct forms of communication, such as that exemplified by the 1986-7 AIDS campaign, have given way to the participation by governments in an ever-expanding and speeded-up political news cycle. In this sense, the answer to the question, should public officials as well as political actors bear responsibility for the consistent decline in public trust in recent decades in what governments say, should be 'yes'. If political strategy is increasingly and covertly being allowed to determine what is placed in the public domain and what is withheld, public trust can only fall further. If a solution is to be found, it must open up to public scrutiny what has been a closed, self-regulatory system that lacks transparency. In doing so it must adopt mechanisms of accountability that uphold the doctrine of speaking truth to power, whether by civil servants, special advisers, ministers, parliaments or publics.

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ⁱ The first use of the term ‘political spin’ can be traced to The New York Times in 1984, in an article about the televised debate between the US presidential candidates Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale. See www.theguardian.com/notesandqueries/query/0.5753.-1124.00.htm.

ⁱⁱ Archived with the Margaret Thatcher Papers at <https://www.chu.cam.ac.uk/archives/collections/thatcher-papers/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Not knowing who to appoint, the PM asked her Private Secretary Clive Whitmore to choose three candidates for the post of No.10 press secretary. She and Clive only saw Whitmore’s first choice, Bernard Ingham, for 20 minutes (Hoskyns, 2000).