

Privatising spin

By David Miller

Stirling, UK | May 21, 2004

The appointment of Howell James as Britain's first ever Permanent Secretary for government information is a strong indication of the shape of things to come in government spin. His post is the most powerful civil service propaganda job since the second world war. James is the former Director of Corporate Affairs for both TVAM and the BBC, overseeing the latter's commercialisation. Latterly, this 'close friend' of Peter Mandelson ran his own PR firm, briefly advising the Hinduja brothers in the donations for passports row which led to Mandelson's second resignation from the cabinet. In his role as partner of PR firm Brown Lloyd James, he also sat on the Phillis committee which recommended the creation of his new post. Phillis abolished the half century old Government Information and Communication Service in February, which had inhibited the progress of spin, leaving its incumbent director Mike Granatt, jobless. This was the culmination of the New Labour reforms of spin set in train by Mandelson and Campbell in May 1997.

The Guardian thought there was a 'whiff of cronyism' about the appointment, but this is to see only the surface personal links in the tight knit New Labour milieu. [1] In fact the problem goes much deeper. James' appointment is an indication of the profound changes set in train by Phillis which are most notably about opening the way for £ hundreds of millions of public money to be spent on private sector PR consultants. The future of government information is not the much heralded end of spin. Instead, we will have the wholesale adoption of private sector PR techniques, the defining characteristics of which are cynical manipulation and lying dressed up as openness, consultation and 'partnership'. Their job will be to use the latest techniques for manipulating or bypassing public opinion thus undermining democracy by further insulating government from the people.

James appointment sets a further record as the most senior propagandist ever to be appointed to a civil service job from the private sector. But typically the network of connections and revolving door links goes much further. James himself was a special advisor to Lord Young at the self styled 'Department for Enterprise' in the 1980s and later political secretary to John Major. He oversaw the Tories 1997 election campaign.[2] He sat on the Phillis committee along with a brace of other PR consultants. All have direct interests in prising open the £ multimillion PR budgets for the private sector.

Privatising spin / 2

For example Chime Communications was represented on the inquiry by Rupert Howell and by David Hill of its subsidiary, Good Relations. Good Relations, along with other Chime owned companies Bell Pottinger PR and the Quentin Bell Organisation already had government PR contracts including with the COI, Dept for Education and Science, Dept of Transport Local Government and the Regions, Royal Mail, Royal Mint, NHS National Programme for Information Technology, Meat and Livestock Commission and the Crown Estates.^[3] In a further indication of the speed with which key personnel revolve in the power nexus, David Hill left the committee before it reported to take up the post of Director of Communications at 10 Downing Street.

It was only under Labour that a roster of PR consultancies for government work was set up. The full roster is a secret but at least some of the PR consultants on it have been associated with public scandal and alleged wrongdoing.^[4] To highlight only those represented on the Phillis committee gives the general picture. Colin Browne is a partner in the Maitland Consultancy which was implicated in 'dirty tricks' for British Gas^[5]. Sir Tim Bell of Chime Communications is well known to have criminal convictions and to have involvement in, at best questionable public relations activities.^[6]

The appointment of James is not the only indication of the process underway. The first indication came within weeks of the report of the Phillis committee. The Scottish Executive advertised on its procurement site a contract to cover advertising, web design and PR for itself, ten agencies, 23 health bodies, 35 quangos and several government bodies. These include the PR activities of the Scottish parliament - an obvious structural conflict of interest.^[7]

In April, the Department of Health followed the trend by appointing James Herbert as Director of Communications of the NHS National Programme for IT. Herbert used to be head of global media relations for Shell, itself well known for its dishonest PR tactics. While Herbert was in charge Shell worked closely with the International Chamber of Commerce to undermine the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, ensuring that no binding agreements were signed up to.

In his new post, Herbert reports to James Granger. Along with the NHS IT programmes PR consultant (Good Relations again) Granger has been involved in dubious PR practice by accusing 'respected IT journalist Tony Collins' of Computer Weekly of 'breaching a confidence by reporting doubts about the IT programme expressed by delegates at a conference, which was later demonstrated to be a public event'.^[8] This is typical of the deceptive approach taken in the private sector. But a further development is the importation into the public sector of manipulative techniques of consultation and 'partnership' pioneered by corporations aiming to evade democratic pressures for regulation. On taking

Privatising spin / 3

up his post Herbert claimed that 'the style of communication we adopt is critical to our success and it will be characterised by dialogue and trust'.^[9] It would be wrong to dismiss this as PR spin, designed simply to mislead. In fact this is just the kind of corporate spin technique used so successfully by Shell and other Trans National corporations to avoid democratic control as in the example of the Johannesburg summit. The wholesale adoption of techniques of manipulation and deception pioneered in the corporate world is the trajectory in view for government PR.

FOOTNOTES:

1 A faint whiff of cronyism Leader Friday March 26, 2004 The Guardian
<http://politics.guardian.co.uk/whitehall/story/0,9061,1178350,00.html>

2 Matthew Tempest 'Profile: Howell James' The Guardian,
Thursday March 25, 2004 <http://politics.guardian.co.uk/media/story/0,,1177761,00.html>

3 The PRCA Yearbook 2002, London: PRCA; <http://www.goodrelations.co.uk/political.asp>

4 For more details of PR contracts with government bodies see David Miller Submission to the Government Communications Review Group Commercialisation of government communications May 2003 <http://www.gcreview.gov.uk/evidence/miller.pdf>

5 David Michie, (1998) *The Invisible Persuaders*, London: Bantam Press: 104-148.

6 Mark Hollingsworth (1997) *The Ultimate spin doctor: The life and Fast Times of Tim Bell*, London: Hodder and Stoughton.

7 See V. Rodrick and M. Aitken, 'Outrage as McConnell spends £100 million on spin', Mail on Sunday, 29 February 2004, p13; Sharon Ward, 'Firms to fight for share of £100m advertising and PR contract' The Scotsman, Sat 6 Mar 2004,
<http://business.scotsman.com/index.cfm?id=261462004>

8 Patrick Barrett 'Former Shell PR man to tackle NHS project', The Guardian 11.30am Friday April 30, 2004 <http://society.guardian.co.uk/health/news/0,8363,1207004,00.html>

9 Communications boss appointed by national programme e-Health Insider
28 Apr 2004 <http://www.e-health-insider.com/news/item.cfm?ID=719>

*David Miller is a member of the Stirling Media Research Institute, Scotland.
David.miller@stir.ac.uk*