

Prime Minister

William Davies

He is unable to
go to chequer on
Sunday 25: August.

C.R.

21/8.

I have since received
no attached. Shall I
find another time?

22/8

FROM: William Davis

17th August 1985

I would like to offer the following brief comments on some of the charges frequently made in the media - charges which, the polls suggest, appear to have a considerable influence on a large section of the electorate.

An apparent lack of any clear sense of direction.

There does not seem to be a central strategy with a clear objective in mind - the kind of inspiring vision of the future which appeared to be there when you first took over and which captured the imagination of so many people. It may exist, but it does not come across, so that there is a widespread impression that the Government is drifting. People understood the original aims: lower taxes, a free society, self-reliance. They understood the Falklands, and they understood the stand against the miners, because these issues were clear-cut. But there is no longer the same sharp focus on basic issues and, as a result, there is considerable disillusionment - and, in the case of the media, boredom. People don't really know where you are leading them - what the end result is going to be. How do you see Britain in the next decade?

The lack of focus allows opposition parties to claim that they know how to build a "better Britain ". It is a cliché, of course, but it still has a lot of appeal. Voters tend to ignore the small print. Everyone wants a "better Britain" and it is comforting to know that there are people who appear to know what it takes to build one.

Suggested Solution:

A co-ordinated propoganda campaign which takes us back to basics - which restores the vision. You are, of course, the prime mover in this, but you

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need all the backing you can get from your colleagues. At present you appear to be leading a Government of administrators rather than a Government of politicians with strong convictions. They seem more concerned with the process of governing than with the end result. It happens to all Governments which have been in office for a long time, and it is damaging. They need to be reminded of the basic problems and aspirations of ordinary voters and the importance of appealing to the heart as well as the mind.

A feeling that the Government is "out of touch with ordinary people."

This is directly linked to the above, but it also has a great deal to do with personalities - and the way in which they project themselves, or are projected.

You are the most charismatic figure in the Government, which is why so much of the attention is focussed on you. It has great advantages, but there are also some obvious drawbacks. It gives the impression that you are the only person who counts, which in turn leads to the charge that you are a "dictator". All one can say is that dictators don't have to defend themselves in parliament, and that dictators don't allow a free press. The charge is nonsense, and it's worth saying so in TV interviews. But the less serious charge that the Government is a "one-woman" band is also damaging, not just to the Government itself (no-one wants a weak team) but also to your own position: it leads to the conclusion that you are personally to blame for everything that goes wrong (which is clearly absurd) and, in the end, that all the problems can be solved by replacing you. This is what happened to Ted Heath, as you well know.

You have gone to a great deal of trouble to show that you do understand the feelings of ordinary people. I am sure that the public accepts this much more readily from a "grocer's daughter" than from an old Etonian. It is well worth concentrating your own efforts on this: you do it superbly. I

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wish one could say the same for some of your colleagues. The plain fact is that some of your key cabinet colleagues come across very badly. It is they, rather than you, who are perceived to be "out of touch" and "uncaring".

People like Nigel Lawson, Leon Brittan, and Geoffrey Howe are thought to be grey, dull, uninspiring, self-righteous, and smug. They may be good at what they do, but they are bad at projecting themselves - especially on TV. Nigel is a good example. At school, he was known as "smuggins". Nothing much has changed. He may be academically brilliant, and good at his job, but he certainly does not know how to make himself liked. Given his position, this is bound to be ^a serious handicap in the run-up to the next election. Leon Brittan is respected but, like Nigel, he does not inspire affection. The same is true of Geoffrey Howe, Patrick Jenkin, Selwyn Gummer, and Keith Joseph. All have great qualities - but the ability to project a likeable personality is not among them.

Suggested solution:

Faced with the same problem, Harold MacMillan disposed of all the dull people in one go. I am not suggesting that you should do the same - it would look like panic. But it would surely be worthwhile to remind them that they have a role to play in projecting a more friendly, more down-to-earth, image of the Government. You get plenty of advice on how to be effective on TV: perhaps it's time they also paid more attention to marketing.

Another approach, of course, is to give more prominence to people who are charismatic. Selwyn Gummer lacks star quality, which is why he is so widely regarded as unimpressive. Norman Tebbit has star quality, and

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after Brighton he also commands affection. And he has a sense of humour, which always goes down well with the British public. Michael Heseltine and Peter Walker are self-made men who, with a little effort, could develop the "common touch". Cecil Parkinson is excellent because he is handsome, likeable, and able to communicate in plain English. For what it's worth, I think the public has long forgiven him - his decision to stay with his wife pleased every married woman in the country. The press might still have a go at him, but voters think that he is human and that he has behaved with dignity and style.

But there are also younger men who are both likeable and impressive. Kenneth Clarke is an example. He is good on radio and TV, and he has the great merit of being a) relatively young and b) a "new face". As you know, one of the best ways of conveying the impression that a Government is still vigorous is to push new - and young - people to the forefront. Voters - like the press - get tired of the same old faces and there is a lot to be said for giving them a new one to talk about. It also, of course, has the merit of making the younger generation of MP's feel that there is hope for them.

The Government wants to cut too much on health, education and other services.

This perception is based largely on the much-publicised insistence on cuts, and on isolated examples highlighted by the media. The facts are ignored and people have not understood the reasoning behind the cuts. Government money is still regarded as an abstract concept, so people feel free to spend it. The link between spending and issues which directly affect the individual, such as inflation and taxation, is not clearly understood, so the Government is regarded as "mean" and "heartless" rather than as the

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champion of the individual's rights. There is, obviously, a major communications failure.

Suggested solution:

The Government has defended its position, but it has tended to weaken the impact of its message by doing so in a rather pedantic and disjointed fashion. It can only be put right by a skilful publicity campaign which meets the issue head-on and which concentrates on the essentials of the argument. A headline-making phrase would set the ball rolling. Fleet Street could also help by running articles which put the whole thing into perspective.

A feeling that Britain is in a perpetual state of crisis.

This, of course, is largely the fault of the media. A crisis makes good headlines - this is why it's a crisis when the pound goes up, and another crisis when the pound goes down. We have grown so used to hearing the word "crisis", throughout the post-war period, that there is a weary acceptance that nothing will ever come right. The public is thoroughly fed up with it, but it has come to regard it as an inevitable fact of life. The opposition parties do nothing to help: it is obviously in their interest to strengthen this defeatist mood. Inevitably, the Government gets the blame.

Suggested Solution:

There should be more emphasis on our successes - not just the Government's successes, but the country's. There is no shortage of examples, but we lack a co-ordinated campaign to restore our self-confidence. You have done so much in this field, but again your colleagues have provided insufficient backing.

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The same is true of the business community and the media: both could do a great deal more to make us feel better about the Britain of the 1980's.

Journalists are, by nature, addicted to bad news. There is a widespread feeling that disaster sells newspapers: good news does not. Lord Beaverbrook, for whom I worked as a financial editor, never took this view: he was the great optimist and, in his day, the Daily Express was immensely successful as a result. We need a behind-the-scenes campaign to persuade the business community - and Fleet Street - to take a more cheerful view of Britain's achievements and our prospects. Last week, it was announced that overtime and production are at their highest level for five years and that there was a rise of 9.2 per cent in average earnings in the 12 months to July, compared with an inflation rate of 7 per cent. That hardly sounds like a crisis!

When Victor Matthews took over the Express Group I persuaded him to take a more cheerful, more positive line. Alas, he has failed to keep it going. Yet people long for good news. The media could do a lot to restore morale; perhaps a quiet word with Fleet Street editors and proprietors would have some effect? Ministers, of course, could also do a great deal to make the public aware that things are better than they seem.

A feeling that Mrs. Thatcher believes in confrontation.

It's odd, isn't it, that strong leadership - a refusal to accept weak compromise - is ^{so} often seen as a desire for confrontation. People accepted that your stand on the Falklands was right, and they accepted that the stand against Scargill was right. It follows that there must be times when confrontation is the proper policy. So why the complaints? Partly, I think, because the British have a curious addiction to compromise - to avoiding

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"fuss". They accept the need for confrontation the really big issues, but they don't want it all the time. Your Government is perceived to relish confrontation for its own sake, which is damaging.

Suggested solution:

It surely should be pointed out - by you - that it is others who seek confrontation. You did not ask the Argentines to invade the Falklands; you did not ask Arthur Scargill to take his miners out on strike. It is in the public's interest that you should stand up for what you believe is right.

The use of language has a lot to do with the way these situations are perceived. There are times when strong language is justified; there are many more times when it simply adds to the impression that your Government relishes a fight. I suggest the time has come to tone it down a bit - to react more in sorrow than in anger.

Clearly, too, a lot of confrontations can - and should - be avoided. The recent BBC episode is an obvious example. Why provoke a public battle when a private chat between the Home Secretary and the Governor of the BBC could so easily have solved the problem? Why create tension when you don't need it? It simply gives the other parties more ammunition, and strengthens the view that we are coming close to being ruled by a dictatorship. Leadership is one thing; giving the impression that we are being ruled by bullies is a very different matter.

Mrs. Thatcher doesn't care about the unemployed.

This, obviously, is going to be the big election issue. You have appointed all sorts of people to study the problem, and you have done your best to find solutions. But the extent of this endeavour is clearly not

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understood by the public - hence the charge that you don't care. It is the biggest single public relations failure of this Government.

Suggested solution:

I think it is essential to stress, time and time again, that:

1) It is not just a problem for Britain, but for all Western countries. The main reason is that the whole industrialised world is in a period of transition: modern technology has far more to do with it than the action of Governments. The solutions proposed by the Labour Party and others will simply postpone the inevitable.

2) The Government is doing all it can to shield people from the effects - through unemployment benefits, retraining programmes, enterprise zones, and all the rest. It does care, but there are limits to what it can do.

3) There is some progress - the situation is not as hopeless as people seem to think. Last week's CBI survey provided useful backing for the optimists. It showed that some 380,000 new jobs have been created since last year, the highest net increase of any of the European community countries. According to the CBI, the UK is still on course to achieve a million new jobs over the three years since 1983. The service sector (which is labour-intensive) is growing and in some parts of industry there is actually a shortage of ^Ksilled labour.

People are going to have to get used to the realities of the 1980's and beyond. It means a willingness to accept that change is inevitable - and that the individual has to become more flexible. He has to be prepared to learn new skills and to move from job to job, and from area to area.

The famous "on your bike" comment summed it all up, but it was badly received

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because it was an off-the-cuff remark which suggested insensitivity. The same thing could, and should, be said in a more carefully considered (but equally eye-catching) way.

A feeling that Mrs. Thatcher's Government is "the Government of the Rich".

This, of course, has a lot to do with the old class divisions - it would be said about any conservative Government. But it goes further than that in your case. The gospel of self-reliance has given the impression that you only care about the people who are successful, and that there is now a new "them and us" structure - the people who succeed and the people who fail, often through no fault of their own. It is a vague, ill-defined, feeling that the people who do a humdrum job - teachers, nurses and all the rest - don't count for much in Mrs. Thatcher's Britain. It may be unjust, but it produces a lot of resentment.

Suggested solution:

I believe the emphasis should be shifted from the pursuit of material success to the pursuit of excellence in every field. You don't have to make millions to be someone: you just have to be good at what you do. The honours list could be used to underline this: excellence should be rewarded and the public should be made aware that you are doing so. The Honours list provides a splendid opportunity to get this across: imaginative awards always capture the imagination.

Two further suggestions:

1) I don't think the public appreciates how many people from all walks of life have taken part in your "entrepreneurial revolution". The heroes

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of the Thatcher era should surely not be big businessmen, but the individuals from humble beginnings who have made something of themselves (as you did) through their own efforts. You don't run a closed shop: everyone can take part. Prince Charles has done a lot of good with his scheme to help young entrepreneurs. The Government has also done a lot to help, but the various gestures - tax concessions and the like - have been promoted in such a dull, unimaginative way that they have made little impact. It is surely not enough for Chancellors to announce concessions in boring legal jargon: someone has to show, in plain language, that a wide range of people have benefited. Perhaps the Government should come up with a national scheme which would capture the imagination in the same way as Harold MacMillan's premium bond did all those years ago. I know the banks and others would readily respond to a lead from you.

2) There is a widespread "grass roots" feeling that, under your government, the greedy can get away with anything. The phenomenal growth in the black economy disturbs a lot of people. Why not announce a major campaign to stamp it out? I'm sure it would be well received.

A feeling that "it's time to let someone else have a go".

This, of course, is what people always say when a Government has been in office for some years. It is an expression of many things: disillusionment, boredom, resentment of change, and a stubborn belief that there must be an easier way. The media has a particularly low boredom threshold. But moods can change very quickly - as Harold Wilson used to say, a "week is a long time in politics". The idea that it is "now too late to reverse the trend"

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is complete nonsense. There is a long way to go to the next election, and there is plenty of time to put things right.

Suggested solution:

I believe that the Government is, at present, far too much on the defensive. It is reacting to situations, rather than controlling them, and it is not focussing enough attention on the positive side of the story and on the unappealing (and, in many cases, unrealistic) alternatives proposed by the opposition. People hear the other side's propaganda: they have not, as yet, studied the implications. No-one really believes that the Labour party can end unemployment: it didn't last time. And some of the statements made by people like Roy Hattersley should surely frighten a large section of the electorate. Roy Hattersley was, for example, allowed by the Government to get away with the extraordinary comment that a couple whose joint income exceeds £20,000 a year is "rich" and under a future Labour Government, would be taxed at penal rates. It means that my secretary and her husband, who works for a local authority, are "rich"! The workers who are currently earning all that overtime should be reminded what a Labour Government would do to their income.

The business community - amazingly - seems to be just as blind. If it were fully aware of what a Labour Government would do to them, they would give you a lot more support. Perhaps its time to issue a forceful reminder.

The forthcoming Tory party conference should provide a useful platform for dealing with all these points. But it is clearly essential that your key Ministers should give you full backing. It should not all be left to you. There needs to be a central strategy - and a vision of the future -

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which the public can understand, which means that it has to be explained in plain, headline-making English. If Ministers are seen to lack a clear sense of direction - and confidence in the future of Britain - voters can hardly be blamed for deserting the Party.