

MANAGING A WHITEHALL CRISIS

On 18 September, Lord (Tim) Boswell of Aynho talked to the Club about managing a crisis in Whitehall and he said : “You have to start somewhere, and there can be no better introduction than ‘Yes Minister’. Most of us would describe it as inspired light fiction, but for insiders it was a documentary, and even sometimes a training video. I’ll offer two lessons from it. First every crisis is different in its own way - I think it was Tolstoy who said all happy families are happy in the same way but unhappy families are unhappy in their own way. Second, the programme captures perfectly the small world of ministerial offices and their counterparts. As an aside when I was very much on the bottom rung as a Junior Whip - all right we did inhabit No 12 Downing Street - I was taken by the Chief Whip to a meeting. ‘Where are we going to? Cabinet. Gosh!’ But that was only a one-weekend crisis, so no more of it.

I pretty much came cold into this world in the early 1980s (although I did a bit of Civil Defence Planning when still at school). I was farming in Aynho when the phone rang, and was put through to Michael Jopling who was then Minister of Agriculture, whom I had once worked with long before. ‘Tim, Europe has agreed to reduce the butter mountain by introducing milk quotas – would you like to come up to help us invent them?’ As Eric Morecambe would have said ‘There’s no answer to that’. So I took off my wellies, and went up to Whitehall officially for two days a week, to become what is now known, often rather notoriously, as a Special Adviser. I stayed on for the best part of three years, not just for milk quotas, but long enough to go also through the Chernobyl crisis (with radioactive sheep in the Lake District) and it all led to my going into politics, and eventually having some time as a Minister back in my old Department, with Sir Tony Baldry as a colleague, though he then took most of the strain on mad cow disease.

You might think it a bit tasteless to couple milk quotas, radioactive sheep and mad cows alongside the huge pandemic crisis Whitehall is now facing. Yet while the subject matter is very different, handling it is very much the same. I’ll deal first with the mechanism for getting through it, and then touch on some of the wider lessons to be learnt (or relearnt). Incidentally, I think it makes little difference which Party is in Government, though personalities can be important.

The top tip for someone going into Whitehall is to make the best of the element of surprise. ‘Who’s that? A threat, or even a spy?’ By the time they have worked you out you are an established part of the scene, and if you can be civil and constructive, and not too bumptious, that’s a bonus. I used to think often of the academics and others recruited in 1939 for the war effort, and I hope and guess they were made as welcome as I was. And if you can bring a few extra perspectives to their problems, you have it made.

A second aspect in any crisis is that you never know where you are when you start out. An example; you may think you can dish out milk quotas to dairy farmers on the basis of past production, but you have to leave a reserve for hard cases like the young farmer who has only just started, or the farmer whose herd has been depleted by animal disease. We even set up a tribunal for the hard cases. So also with a health crisis- you start simply enough by

trying to suppress the virus, and you immediately add an economic crisis and soon a social crisis, probably with a mental health element. And as a pandemic is by definition worldwide, so you cannot turn your back on what is happening in other perhaps less advantaged countries. There are many feedback loops, all seized on by litigious persons (think of insurance claims) arts lobbies (not to mention the culture war over the Last Night of the Proms) or disability interests. And now, which I never directly experienced myself you have all the apparatus of devolution and (slightly) different rules to explain.

Here is a prescription for coping:

- a) Pick a small team with one or two who know the subject (obviously doctors if it's a health crisis)
- b) One or two people who can think imaginatively - a Whitehall crisis unlocks inner creativity.
- c) At least one lawyer who can also think outside the box
- d) Someone who likes strategy, thinking forward to the next hurdle.
- e) Someone checking implementation. So often you think or claim you have pulled the lever and nothing happens, or it gets caught up in something else.

This team needs to work frequently together and to bounce ideas off each other. I wonder whether my own claim to fame will have been to pioneer the introduction of colour in application forms - 'Farmer Jones, just fill in the green one'

This team needs also to work closely with those who handle relationships. Part of this is traditional liaison, with No 10 and Ministerial and Parliamentary colleagues, including the devolved administrations, (previously) EU colleagues, and local authorities and stakeholders. Only then and in parallel the wider public, and not too much 'spin doctoring or tweeting'! I think we forget Churchill and Attlee had served together in wartime, and Ministers need to keep a wary but real relationship with their 'shadows'.

These teams can be fluid, but you do need a Minister in overall charge. As hinted above, I feel that the general public will respond to clear leadership. You have to navigate the tensions between evolving knowledge, explaining what you are doing about it, and deciding what the public needs to be told. The longer it continues the tougher it gets.

Let me say a few words from the other side of the coin, media in particular. This year has put great strain on them - how much of the schedule to allocate, how much to cover personal interest stories, and how to maintain some kind of balance? There is an implied steady state normally in public life where Government governs, whether or not you support it, and is only subject to a bit of grief from the media and parliament and the wider checks and balances in society like local authorities and trade associations. This breaks down in a crisis when people who would not normally worry too much about politics realise that there is a real threat, and that it is affecting them and their families.

To stimulate your thoughts, let me offer you what I feel should have been said at the beginning of the pandemic:

This is a new and serious health emergency affecting us all

We don't know how serious yet, but we will try to use the best knowledge available to do the right thing

We will try to tell it straight and not over-claim

We will take responsibility for what we do, including inevitably mistakes

We will do our best for you and ask in return that you respond in the same way

Two thoughts finally. We should always make the best of a crisis and learn lessons, but you can't ration the number of crises-try simultaneously COVID, BREXIT, floods and a cyber-attack on New Year's Eve. Then cheer yourselves by reflecting on the Queen's wisdom when she reminded us 'We'll meet again' !"

Tim then fielded a series of questions which provided further insight into the mechanisms of Whitehall and the present issues regarding the Covid-19 Pandemic. Altogether a most interesting talk and question time.