

HOW NOT TO BRIEF THE PUBLIC IN A CRISIS (Or indeed ever)

Another day, after another night waking just after 3, and another idea for another 20-point list whirling around my head. This one was partly inspired by the weekend briefing [during the 2020 COVID-19 Virus Crisis] by Business Secretary Alok Sharma, who scored very highly on the cliché-ometer. He clocked up a fair few of the phrases below.

Clichés are best avoided at the best of times, which these most certainly aren't. These are times in which clear straight talking is highly recommended. This is best done accompanied by hard fact and detail. I remain baffled as to why the government briefings are so light on fact, though Michael Gove and Robert Jenrick gave us a few more in theirs in recent days. I still believe every briefing should start with a clear factual demonstration, supported by graphics, of cases, deaths, and issues of capacity such as beds, masks and protective clothing, ventilators etc. Provided he is in reasonable good health, Boris Johnson could do these from self-isolation.

I am unpersuaded that a letter from Johnson to all citizens is a good use of public money. I understand why he wants to communicate directly to people. But he can always be heard in a crisis and the money spent on a letter to everyone in the country could buy a lot of protective equipment and tests for NHS staff.

As for the phrases that it would be nice not to hear, whoever does the briefings, here we go ...

1. We're leaving no stone unturned. (*Show don't tell*)
2. We're working round the clock. (*Show don't tell*)
3. We're ramping up. (*Show don't tell*)
4. We're straining every sinew. (*Show don't tell*)
5. We're moving heaven and earth. (*Impossible*)
6. 100 percent focused. (*Should go without saying*)
7. 110 percent focused. (*Even worse*)
8. Whatever it takes ... whether on tests, masks, protective clothing, ventilators, support for new small businesses, charities, Brits stranded abroad, there are too many things on which they have so clearly not done whatever it takes. So drop it. (*This will be a major problem for them at the public inquiry.*)
9. We're following the science ... say this only if you share the science which you are following. (*This could be a major problem for them at the public inquiry.*)
10. We're putting our arms around you. (*Odd thing to say when the message is social distancing.*)
11. Shoulder to shoulder. (*ditto*)

12. This is unprecedented. (*A Rishi Sunak favourite*)
13. We have been clear all along.
14. The Prime Minister has been very clear.
15. Let me make this absolutely clear. (*Only to be used if followed by genuine clarity.*)
16. What we have said from the start.
17. Nobody is pretending.
18. I must level with you. (*suggests you don't normally*)
19. Absolute top priority. (*There can only be one, so if you use this, make sure it is always the same one.*)
20. Hi folks.

There we go. Hope some of it is helpful to the government comms team. And watch out later today for my piece for GQ online on 20 good things that would not have happened without Covid-19.

Alastair Campbell

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