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Communicating the Assembly

Written evidence submitted to the Assembly review of procedure group by:

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Summary of Recommendations

Communicating with the people of Wales

1. That the Assembly develop a robust communications strategy to engage with the electorate in Wales, and to ensure that policy initiatives undertaken by the Assembly are recognised as such.
2. That clear and consistent titles are used for the executive/cabinet/administration and for the members of the cabinet, in order to develop the profile of the administration and of the relevant ministers.
3. That administration initiatives are recognised as such and communicated to the public as achievements of the administration.
4. That ministers and/or Assembly civil servants engage in a planned series of question and answer sessions around Wales dealing either with particular policy issues, or providing a forum for local residents to engage with the leaders of the Assembly.

Communicating with Westminster

5. That the Assembly develops a strategy to ensure the successful embedding of Welsh devolution within the machinery of government of the UK.

6. That the Assembly develops further its relationship with the Wales Office, and ensures a permanent Assembly representation in Westminster.
7. That the Assembly makes representations regarding developing training provision for civil servants in Whitehall departments where significant responsibilities are devolved to the Assembly.
8. That the Assembly develops a scheme of secondments with a view to bringing civil servants from Whitehall to the Assembly and to sending civil servants from the Assembly to Whitehall departments such that greater understanding of Welsh devolution can be developed within the home civil service.

Introduction

The evidence presented here will focus on two particular aspects of the Assembly's operations:

Issues for comment 2.1 The Assembly's relationship with all parts of Wales

Issues for comment 2.3 The Assembly, the UK government and Westminster

Two key relationships, which are crucial to the success of the Assembly, thus form the core of this evidence – the relationship between the Assembly and the people of Wales and the relationship between the Assembly and Westminster. In both cases the Assembly has thus had an undistinguished record, and the challenge is to communicate the Assembly effectively within these central relationships.

I should note at the outset that I have restricted the comments to the remit of the review and therefore I shall not be addressing the widespread consensus, which has emerged in the academic community regarding the weaknesses of the current devolution settlement. Further, I shall not comment in-depth on the detailed operations or legislative process of the Assembly – these issues are addressed particularly effectively in the papers of Professor Rawlings and also in the evidence presented by the Institute of Welsh Affairs.

Communicating with the people of Wales

'Securely located within the framework of a strong United Kingdom, the Assembly will give the people of Wales a real chance to **express their views and set their own priorities.**' (A Voice for Wales, 1997: 31)

Turnout at the National Assembly elections: 45.9%

The disappointingly low turnout at the National Assembly elections underlined the challenge faced by the Assembly in developing interest and enthusiasm on the part of the electorate. The turnout was initially thought to be a reflection in part of hostility towards the Assembly, but work on the Assembly election survey undertaken at Aberystwyth, has since demonstrated that rather than antipathy towards the Assembly, the low turnout reflected a deep sense of apathy about this new institution of governance. Work on voting behaviour suggests that at the very least two conditions need to be satisfied in order to ensure a high turnout. Firstly, the election must be seen as important – a first-order election. Secondly, voters must perceive that the result of the election may make a difference to their lives.

The question can therefore be posed: what progress has the Assembly made in the eyes of the public?

At the outset it should be noted that the information available on the Welsh electorate between elections is sparse, due to the relatively small number of opinion polls conducted in Wales. This situation is in sharp contrast to Scotland where a wide range of data are regularly available. Whilst clearly beyond the remit of the Assembly, a series of regular opinion polls in Wales is long over-due.

Tables 1.1-1.4 Selected evidence relating to public perceptions of the Assembly

Table 1.1 Are you generally satisfied or dissatisfied with the performance of the Assembly?

Satisfied	23%
Dissatisfied	36%
Don't know	42%

NOP/HTV Opinion Poll, January 2000

Table 1.2 One year on, do you believe the National Assembly has made a positive difference to the running of ...

	Yes	No difference	Made matters worse	Too soon to say	Don't know
Agriculture	7%	42%	10%	29%	11%
Economy	11%	43%	10%	29%	6%
Health Service	18%	43%	15%	19%	5%
Education	22%	41%	7%	19%	11%

NOP/HTV Opinion Poll, May 2000

Table 1.3 Which of these in your opinion would be the best for the future of Wales?

An Assembly as we have at the present	21%
A Parliament as in Scotland	21%
Wales to be independent	20%
Wales to be run from Westminster as before	33%
Don't know	4%

NOP/HTV Opinion Poll, January 2000

Table 1.4 Recently the steel-maker Corus announced large numbers of redundancies at several sites across Wales. Do you think that each of the following bodies is doing enough to deal with this situation or should they be doing more?

	Government at Westminster	National Assembly in Cardiff
Doing enough	15%	14%

Should be doing more	77%	74%
Don't know	9%	12%

NOP/HTV Opinion Poll, February 2001

The verdict is clear here - the Assembly has failed to make a significant impact on the Welsh electorate. This is undoubtedly a reflection in part of its recent establishment. However, I would also submit that when compared to the Scottish Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly, the record of the Assembly is somewhat undistinguished. This may reflect a lack of distinctive policy initiatives and / or the ineffective communication of such initiatives where they do exist.

The Scottish Parliament has been particularly adept at bringing forward a range of headline grabbing initiatives and thus policy divergence is clear. At a more limited level even the Northern Ireland Assembly, in rather more difficult circumstances, has succeeded in putting forward a range of Northern Ireland specific policy initiatives.

The Assembly must strive therefore not only to make a difference to people's lives, but to be seen to be making a difference. My personal test of the Assembly is what I call the Welsh Office test. If the Assembly is such a step forward in the governance of Wales, what has happened, which would not have happened had the status quo pre-devolution been in force? I appreciate the sensitivity and difficulty of such an exercise, however if it is claimed that the Assembly has added value to the governance of Wales, then some attempt should be made to identify this added value.

These comments underline the necessity of the effective presentation of the Assembly and its cabinet. If the cabinet takes an initiative, then it is entirely appropriate that the relevant cabinet ministers take the credit for such initiatives. This not only enhances the profile of the relevant minister, but also of the cabinet as a whole. An analysis of the Welsh media suggests that there is significant divergence of practice amongst ministers. The effective presentation of cabinet initiatives is not only politically expedient for the ministers involved but also serves to enhance the profile of the Assembly.

There is also apparently widespread confusion as to how the cabinet / executive / administration should be referred to in the media, and how relevant ministers should be introduced. Over the past week I have encountered nine different formulations of the cabinet, along with various permutations of ministerial designations. For the Assembly and its political leadership to communicate effectively a set of clear guidelines should be produced.

Furthermore, where these guidelines are not adhered to, this should be addressed in an appropriate manner. Thus, within six months, a minor, but not unimportant, aspect of communicating the Assembly may be effectively addressed.

Given a desire to communicate the actions of the cabinet more effectively it may also be appropriate to designate certain officials to work for the committees of the Assembly. It might, for example, be an effective use of resources to have designated press officers issuing press notices on behalf of subject committees.

A further innovation to develop the communications strategy could involve ministers in a series of roadshow type sessions across Wales. With effective local planning, our centre, the Institute of Welsh Politics conducted two major public lectures (delivered by Alun Michael and Rhodri Morgan). This experience demonstrated the extent of real interest in the Assembly and a genuine desire to engage with the speakers in the question and answer sessions that followed. On both occasions over 300 people from the region attended. With effective planning and local partners, the success of such events could be replicated in towns and villages across Wales, and thereby enhance the standing of the Assembly.

These wide-ranging set of comments on communicating the Assembly to the people of Wales, demonstrate the fundamental necessity of an effective communications strategy. If such a strategy is not developed and implemented, then I fear that turnout at the next Assembly election could fall considerably below the 45.9% achieved in 1999.

Communicating with Westminster

Given the much-discussed complexity of the Welsh devolution settlement the relationship between the Assembly and Westminster is a fundamental and key relationship to ensure the enduring success of the Assembly. The Institute of Welsh Affairs monitoring reports and several papers by Richard Rawlings have noted the piecemeal and inconsistent approach to the transfer of functions to the Assembly under primary legislation. While all of this is clearly very important in the legislative sense, I would submit that such difficulties are a reflection of a wider problem within the machinery of governance within the UK, and that is that the Assembly is not embedded within the system.

The key challenge therefore is to embed the Assembly within the UK system. If an initiative is planned for example on GP recruitment by the Department of Health, a part of the planning process must be interaction with the National Assembly; or if the DETR is bringing forward legislation, then Assembly civil servants should be involved at an initial stage.

One can also raise the issue of what training provision is made for civil servants for dealing

with devolved issues, particularly in the Welsh context where the dividing lines between the National Assembly and Westminster are considerably less clear than is the case with regards to Scotland. It would seem entirely appropriate that a widespread programme of training is provided for civil servants in departments where certain responsibilities are devolved to Wales. One could also develop specific staff secondments where civil servants from Wales spend six months at a Whitehall department and likewise staff from Whitehall spend periods at the National Assembly. All of which would serve to embed devolution to Wales within the system in a manner, which hitherto, has not happened.

This also raises the issue/question of the Assembly's base in London. Currently the Wales Office provides a base for Assembly Ministers in London, but given the centrality of the relationship with Westminster one might suggest that this relationship should be further formalised, and that the Assembly should have specific officers based permanently in Gwydyr House.

Conclusion

The Assembly is making significant progress in developing its internal procedures. This review will undoubtedly further hone the internal mechanisms, and may address such issues as the role of regional committees, the specification of the policy development and/or scrutiny role of the subject committees, and the most appropriate mechanism for ensuring an appropriate division of labour between the cabinet and the Assembly, while at the same time preserving the corporate body status.

All of which is important, and is quite understandably a focus of many members and commentators who work in and around Cardiff Bay. However, if the Assembly is to succeed and to ignite enthusiasm and interest from the people of Wales, as was envisaged in the White Paper, *A Voice for Wales*, then greater attention needs to be devoted to effective communication of policy initiatives and developments. The second key challenge discussed here for the Assembly is that of embedding the Assembly and Welsh devolution within the wider machinery of government of the UK. This is crucial if the current devolution settlement is to deliver. Westminster retains pre-eminent importance and this key fact should not be overlooked in developing the structures and policies of the Assembly.

Dafydd Trystan

Aberystwyth, March 2001