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MR GRAY

PROPOSED NEWSPAPER ADVERTISEMENT TO EXPLAIN GP CONTRACT

I am extremely uneasy about the proposal to spend £150,000 - though the sum is largely immaterial - on the above purpose.

I am positively alarmed when I see the nature of the proposed advertisement.

The justification for this advert is, as I understand it, a similar exercise by the DES to inform the world about the teachers' pay offer in the circumstances of a dispute. I do not regard this as a justification or precedent and I fear such teacher advertising could be condemned as politically motivated notwithstanding that the teachers' dispute may in itself have had a political content.

Nonetheless, a dispute which disrupts the life of the community could justify advertising in order to help people cope. For example, the Switch Off Something campaign in the 1974 election was permitted, in this case by agreement with the Opposition Chief Whip.

But there is no dispute with the doctors over their contract. Nor am I absolutely satisfied that the material setting out what is required of GPs derives entirely from the newly negotiated contract and not partially from the White Paper on which legislation may be required.

The advertisement, explicitly aimed at the ordinary member of the public, is a political response to a failure so far to get over to the Government's satisfaction the impact of the contract on services to patients. As such I do not see how under the rules it can possibly be justified.

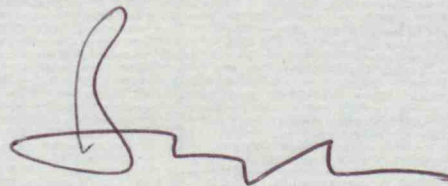


Guidance on Government publicity sent to Heads of Information on March 28, 1989 by Machinery of Government Division, OMCS, explicitly states (para 5) that "if Government publicity is to remain acceptable within the conventions it avoids any doubts about its purpose ... [gaining political credit for the party of Government] must not be, or be believed to be, either the primary purpose or a principal incidental purpose of a campaign."

It might be argued nonetheless that it is an appropriate use of Government money to inform the public of their entitlements under the new GPs' contract. But the imprecise nature of the changes envisaged demonstrate the overt political purpose of the proposed advertisement, eg - doctors doing "even more" to protect the public; doing "even more" to maintain the health of elderly patients; being "more available" at times convenient to patients.

I am sorry, but I must most strongly urge, especially but not because we are at a point of great controversy over Government publicity, that this advertisement should not be allowed to go ahead.

The proper response to the D/Health's perceived need is to prepare a Ministerial article for the widest dissemination among local newspapers etc setting out the substance of the proposed advertisement. This material may not secure the exposure of an advertisement but it would be a fair and reasonable response within the conventions - and cost to the taxpayer would be minimal.



BERNARD INGHAM  
May 16, 1989