

From: J P SPENCER

Date: 17 May 1989

The Right
to life
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 MR SAUNDERS, TREASURY

 cc PS/Sir Robin Butler
 Mr H Phillips
 Mr Ingham ✓
 Mr Devereau

PROPOSED NEWSPAPER ADVERTISEMENTS TO EXPLAIN THE NEW GP CONTRACT

I have now seen the Secretary of State for Health's letter of 15 May to the Chief Secretary, which I had earlier discussed briefly with you and with Hayden Phillips.

2. The audience for these advertisements is clearly the public at large, given the intention to use the national press. But if we ask what the objective of the publicity is, in terms of the way in which the behaviour of individuals is to be influenced, I do not believe that the primary purpose could genuinely be held to be one of seeking to persuade citizens to take measures to improve their health (e.g. by more regular screening and more regular health check-ups etc.). The objective is pretty clearly to persuade citizens that the changes in doctors' contracts negotiated by the government are desirable. But (bearing in mind that the public has no direct interest in the terms of these contracts, only an indirect one), I would judge that a change in "behaviour" of this kind - see paragraph 10(ii) and 10(vi) of the supplementary guidance on government publicity - is open to representation as being party political.

2. Given that the Chief Secretary took the high moral ground in yesterday's debate on government publicity, saying that the Government always and fully complied with the conventions on government publicity, I do not believe that it would be wise for the Government to engage in a publicity campaign that was right on the margins of acceptability at this juncture. I am, of course, assuming that the detailed text of the proposed advertisements can in any case be justified as being factually true and not misleading (see yesterday's judgement on the Greenwich Community Charge case - copy attached).

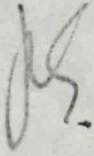
3. If the advertisement were to be rejigged so that the main focus was on persuading members of the public to take up new opportunities for preventative health care available under the new contracts - informing the public about the services on offer in Mr Clarke's words - I would have fewer worries on propriety. But only the first three of the starred points in Mr Clarke's text bear on this, and then not from the standpoint of encouraging citizens to use these new/expanded services. In any case, you told me that such research evidence as there is suggests that such advertisements are not regarded as very effective - eyeball to eyeball confrontations with individual GPs are thought to be much better. But this is essentially a value for money consideration for you to assess with the Department of Health.

4. Alternatively, I would have no objection to material along the lines proposed (assuming it to be factually correct) being used in the form of simple and inexpensive leaflets for distribution to MPs and members of the public who write in to the Department with worries about the new doctors' contracts. Nor, of course,

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would I have any difficulty with such material being used in Ministerial speeches and articles.

5. In short, I should want more evidence of the bona fides of Mr Clarke's proposed press campaign before being able to advise the Chief Secretary to give it a green light.



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