



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,  
CANBERRA, A.C.T.



3rd September, 1959.

The Secretary,  
Prime Minister's Department,  
C A N B E R R A.

OVERSEAS PUBLICITY PROPOSALS BY MR. Eric WHITE.

I refer to your minute of 25th August, 1959, No.59/5432, with which you forwarded for advice a copy of a letter dated 27th July, 1959, to the Prime Minister from Mr. Eric White, the public relations consultant.

2. Mr. White's letter appears to boil down to the fact that he would like to take over the Commonwealth's publicity work and representation in certain overseas areas of his own choosing. In particular, he would welcome the opportunity to take over existing official publicity activity in the United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States, but he makes no mention of other areas of activity, notably those in Asia.

3. Mr. White's criticism of existing official publicity work has to be assessed in the light of his declared self-interest in taking it over. His statement that in Europe and America, the Commonwealth is not getting good value for its expenditure is as unsubstantiated a generalization as is his further statement that "the task of disseminating Australian news and information in overseas countries could be handled more efficiently by private enterprise and at less cost". Merely to state a proposition is not to prove it and, contrary to Mr. White's opinion, there is evidence that News and Information Bureau activities abroad are effectively planned and executed.

4. For example, the Australian News and Information Bureau in New York has become accepted in recent years as a model of an effective, small-scale national information effort worth study and emulation by others. During July this year, Ghana and the Arab League (the rival body to the United Arab Republic), both of which have decided to set up information offices in New York, sought and were given permission to study the operations of our New York Bureau. They were advised to approach the Bureau by the Indian Information Office and the French Travel Promotion Office, both of which had previously studied the Australian operation.

5. Mr. White's contention that "N.I.B. personnel overseas have no real incentive to work hard, produce creative ideas or to extend and improve the propaganda issued from their offices" is a baseless reflection on a conscientious group of men whose working day, because they must serve both afternoon and morning press, usually exceeds the normal spread of hours. His reference to the "system of tight local supervision" which would be instituted under private enterprise would seem to imply a major administrative departure from the traditional system of supervision by the Head of Mission of all Australian official activity in a particular country. This Department believes that the Commonwealth would not wish to surrender to outside interests the supervision of any of its official activities abroad.

6. Mr. White's staffing plans for the office he proposes to open in London are his own concern, but in view of his claim that this office should handle publicity work for the Commonwealth, the Government may be interested in his choice of Mr. R. Nelson as his chief London representative.

7. Mr. Nelson, who received special training in the mass journalism techniques of the London 'Daily Mirror' group, was Editor of the Melbourne 'Argus' in the last, rather phrenetic stages of its existence. He was in charge of 'Argus' editorial policy at the time of the Suez crisis and is understood to have claimed authorship of the tag-line, "Eden's War". The sensational journalistic stunts, such as its unsuccessful attempt to call Mr. Krushchev to his Kremlin telephone, with which the 'Argus' sought, in its closing days, to restore its circulation, may still be remembered. Not only did these fail because they misjudged the tastes of the Melbourne reading public but they may also be considered an inappropriate form of training for the discharge of official publicity duties.

8. Official publicity abroad is an instrument of policy. It should at all times reflect that policy in a balanced, authoritative manner, eschewing the sensational. This Department considers that the Commonwealth should have full control over its own publicity activities and that the best way to ensure this is to entrust the work to its own specialists whose professional livelihood is dependent on the service which they render to the country. As this Department sees it, the task of interpreting a nation demands full-time specialization, undivided loyalty and undivided responsibility. It would be unreasonable to expect these qualities in a commercial public relations firm serving more than one master.

9. For the above reasons, the Department recommends against acceptance of those of Mr. White's proposals which have a bearing on the current activities abroad of the News and Information Bureau.

10. The Minister for the Interior, who has studied Mr. White's letter to the Prime Minister, authorizes me to say that he endorses the advice tendered in this memorandum.



(W.A. McLaren)

S e c r e t a r y.