

FRANCE

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mw M. Alison. MP.  
PPS | PM.

MR BEASTALL

cc -

Mr Unwin w/o pps  
Mr Legg " "

VISIT TO BRITISH COUNCIL, PARIS OFFICE, 7 FEBRUARY

I took advantage of a free morning in Paris to take up Sir J Burgh's offer to arrange a visit here. I attach a background note prepared by the London headquarters. I met Mr Bryan Swingler, the Council Representative (Grade A, = Under Secretary plus) and five of his staff, and later had lunch with them: names in note. Here are a few additional points.

Premises

2. Burgh warned me that the premises were 'rather more palatial than the usual Council offices'. They are. Situated in the former town house of the Comte de Paris, on the Esplanade des Invalides - bought freehold at the insistence of Lord Soames when British ambassador - superbly reconstructed and redecorated by a British architect, deeply carpeted and hung with excellent paintings ( a Lucien Freud and a Richard Hamilton) - they give an impression quite different from even a major British Embassy. The Council pays no property taxes - see note; but believes that high French social security contributions offset this advantage, so that their costs in Paris are roughly equivalent to French cultural costs in London. The S of S for the Environment owns the freehold as trustee. But the Council is not tied to PSA and regards their charges as uneconomically high!

Staff

3. I met all five London-based (ie permanent cadre) staff. Swingler is a long-service Council man, very near retirement: served in India. His main interests are clearly literary (I had a look at his bookcase) but he showed a good grasp of the financial issues and was familiar with the modern IT installations, which were lavishly available. (Surprisingly his French wasn't very good.) The other four (arts; education; science; and general) were in different ways impressive. Two are ex-language teachers; one a physicist; one from a British gallery) I also met two locally-engaged staff; a British librarian (with a special responsibility for promoting sales of British books) and a French art-expert from Wildensteins, now engaged in organising exhibitions, like the big Turner show (I was bribed, with a free copy of the catalogue). Total staff, including part-timers in the Library, are about 100.

### Objectives

3. The usual lack of clarity, despite the Seeborn/Chorley report. The language training chap had the clearest idea - to promote the latest methods of teaching English (not direct teaching) by running courses for teachers; with the ultimate aim of getting people to 'think English', buy British goods and visit Britain. English is well-established as the second language in the Grands Ecoles: post-graduate engineers, for example, all speak it. But in many markets (eg Middle East) this is necessary anyway. Are we merely training French salesmen to out-sell us? In other areas, like art and drama, the objective is mainly flag-waving (Turner, Gainsborough, RSC). The book trad, though expanding rapidly, is worth only £7-8m a year. The science division is mainly engaged in pump-priming, setting up short visits to and from British universities etc; it does not have the funds for undertaking joint research projects. Here, the aim seems to be to awaken interest in areas where we have a technological lead and have something to sell.

### Output measurement

4. To my surprise, Swingler himself mentioned this (though most of his examples were really activity statistics, like those in the note). He realised the problems of measuring success when objectives were so difficult to define. But he claimed to use such figures in deciding how to run the office.

### Activity reporting

5. Following the Chorley report, all staff including Swingler maintain time-sheets, classifying each visit, phone call and under standard headings laid down from London. Answering silly questions from the Treasury was not one of these. But this is all post-hoc; there is no attempt to budget activities in advance.

### Budgeting

6. They have no firm budget for 1984-85 yet and did not know of the PEWP/Estimates figures. Rumours from London spoke of a further cut-back. He hoped for stability at the present (real-term) level. If he had to cut back sharply, Swingler would prefer to drop one complete function - I fear it would be science. If he had any increase in funding, he would spread it across the board, though not uniformly. Once he has a firm figure for 1984-85 he will allocate it to activities, holding some back centrally: but because of difficult patterns of past overspending, he would overallocate to some sections. When I floated the idea of a firm multi-year programme, the staff jumped at it: Swingler was less sure. All of them enter into long-term commitments without guaranteed funding, and hope for the best. Unlike most Council posts, they have little opportunity to maximise income: in Paris, language-training (the main money-spinner) is done by a different outfit.

Relations with FCO

7. The Representative is the Ambassador's Cultural Attache. He and his deputy have diplomatic status and one of them attends the weekly staff meeting at the Embassy. No love is lost.

Liaison with BBC and BTA

8. Apparently non-existent.

Political environment

9. Despite French linguistic politics (a live issue again under a left-wing government which does not speak English much) they thought the climate was anglophile and receptive.

Overall impression

10. Nice, hardworking and clever people doing a difficult and largely unnecessary job in fairly unpromising conditions. I doubt very much whether the pay-off for the UK (economic or political) is worth the investment of £1.4 million a year; but it is the flagship of the Council's operations and I see no chance of torpedoing it.

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P Mountfield