
By Mark Dunton

The history of 1970s Britain has been re-appraised by journalists and historians in recent years. This article seeks to encourage contemporary historians interested in the 1970s to carry out detailed investigation of government files held by The National Archives, as these records give real insights into the mindset of government officials and ministers of the time. The records created by the Central Office of Information, and information officers in key government departments, are a rich source highlighting the relationship between government and the public. This is illustrated by the records of a proposed anti-inflation campaign of 1972 which are revealing on several levels. The records reveal: the level of concern of politicians and officials, faced with the danger posed by the new threat of spiralling inflation in the early 1970s – a concern reflected in the dramatic language of draft publicity texts; the low opinion of officials regarding the public’s understanding of the inflation problem; and the dangerous prospect of a government overstepping the normal conventions regarding objectivity in government publicity. The case study shows how detailed probing of the public records can enable historians to acquire a richer and fuller understanding of the governance of Britain in the 1970s.

Keywords: Inflation; Prices; Incomes policy; 1970s; Edward Heath; Anthony Barber; Public Relations; Central Office of Information

For some, the received wisdom about the 1970s is that it was a ‘dismal decade’ – a period which is automatically associated with inflation, power-cuts, the three-day week and over-mighty trade unions. This is a shorthand version of the 1970s which is not a universal view: many of those who lived through the period do not necessarily share it. Indeed, it can be argued that most Britons enjoyed a huge rise in living standards during that decade; and that it is a mistake to treat the 1970s as a whole. However, the stock market crash of 2008, and the return to harsh economic realities after a long boom, has prompted popular commentators to compare modern-day Britain with 1970s Britain. Driven partly by this climate, and also nostalgic impulses, the political, social, economic and cultural history of 1970s Britain has been dissected by journalists and historians in recent years. A plethora of books and articles have been written, reassessing this controversial period, and interest in the 1970s has been heightened still further by various television programmes. New perspectives have been opened up, which sometimes challenge the ‘doom and gloom’ shorthand version of 1970s Britain that has tended to prevail.

Contemporary historians who draw on the public records often focus on the high level ‘core executive’ material – the cabinet papers, and the records of the prime minister’s office, following the ‘grand narrative’ of events, and the richness of these sources is not in doubt. But this article seeks to encourage contemporary historians to

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be prepared to investigate departmental files which some might be tempted to dismiss as records of a purely administrative, ‘dry’ nature: not so, these records give real insights into the mindset of government officials and ministers of the time. Government in the early 1970s was routinely interventionist in a way that can seem bewildering to the generation that grew up during Margaret Thatcher’s premiership, when the role of the state was recalibrated. The public records enable us to meet the challenge of understanding the motives of politicians and administrators who governed Britain during the 1970s. Detailed searching can reveal files which have been overlooked by historians.

Importance of the Central Office of Information

Many historians studying governmental public relations focus on the ministry of information (MoI), 1939-1946, but very few focus on the peacetime work of the central office of information (COI), created in 1946. It produced a diverse range of information campaigns over the years, designed to inform the public on a wide range of issues such as health, safety, welfare, education, and rights. By the early 1970s, the COI was a tried and tested public relations (governmental) organisation, and they were proud of their achievements: ‘examples of campaigns which have increased knowledge and had some effect on attitudes and behaviour and for which research findings are available are decimal currency... drink/drive 1964... and the wearing of seat belts’.2

To date, propaganda during wartime has attracted by far the greatest interest amongst historians (boosted further by the digital releases of INF 3 artwork on wikimedia commons), rather than the public information campaigns of peacetime. This article attempts to rectify this by demonstrating that the records created by the COI, held by the national archives, are a rich source of material highlighting the relationship between government and people, revealing the methods used by government and Whitehall to convey their key messages to the public. COI has recently been disbanded, and historical interest in its activities is likely to grow as further transfers of its records are made to The National Archives.

The researcher needs to be aware of the dispersed nature of the COI records. The British Library holds the master set of COI publicity material, deposited in 2000; and the British Film Institute acquired the entire moving image archive of the COI when the agency closed on 31 March 2012. The National Archives is strongest on the policy aspect – through TNA’s records we can see the interaction between ministers and government officials on the policy issues of the day.

This article explores the politics of 1972, a year of great pressure and stress for Edward Heath’s government. Particular emphasis is focused on ‘the campaign that never was’: the work carried out by officials (in COI and other departments), and ministers, to prepare a campaign on the issue of inflation in the summer and autumn of 1972. It was intended to ‘educate’ the public about the link (according to the orthodoxy of the day) between high wage claims and price increases.

The participants

There were several different strata of ‘players’ involved in the anti-inflation campaigning of the early 1970s. In government, the key figures were Edward Heath, the prime minister, and Anthony Barber, the chancellor of the exchequer. Heath came to see the

battle against inflation as a cause that could unify the nation, enabling him to make
appeals in the spirit of Churchill – ‘the conquest of inflation came to assume for Heath
the character of a great national crusade’. Barber had been appointed chancellor in
1970 by Edward Heath following the sudden death of Iain Macleod. Barber was well
qualified for the job, but, in the words of John Campbell, ‘he signally failed to develop
a political personality independent of his master’ – Edward Heath.3 There were figures
in the wider Conservative party, who also made influential interventions, such as
Reginald Maudling, who argued the case for a statutory incomes policy.

There was another group of ‘players’, some of whom are quoted in this article –
government officials, who strived to remain aloof from party politics. These officials
were well-educated (most had university backgrounds), and would have been classified
as executive class and above in the civil service of the early 1970s. The majority of
the information officers who engaged in governmental publicity possessed specialised
qualifications in public relations or other types of media work. Two of the officials
mentioned in this article belonged to the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS) which
was a unit within the Cabinet Office tasked with formulating long term strategy and
established by Edward Heath in 1971 (Heath referred to it as the ‘Think Tank’). The
unit was filled with ‘high-fliers’, who were encouraged to think and work creatively.

The records

The research on which this article is based draws extensively from the public records
held by The National Archives. The key source for the research is TNA series INF
12, Central Office of Information: registered files – within this series, the publications
division sequence and the COI director’s files. Fruitful material was also found in the
following series: LAB 112, Department of Employment: incomes and prices division:
registered files (PI Series); CAB 184, Central Policy Review Staff: files, various; Prime
Minister’s Office (PREM) series, Treasury (T) series and records (for the 1960s) of the
Department of Economic Affairs and Department of Employment and Productivity
(EW).

These records are reasonably well catalogued, though the general file titles give few
clues as to the true riches to be discovered.4 For example, one of the most interesting
files is INF 12/1179, described in TNA’s catalogue as ‘Price freeze advertising:
correspondence 1972 Nov 01-1973 Jan 31’. Only when one looks at the file does one
discover that it contains proofs of an advertisement placed in the national press
publicising the special service set up by the government to deal with public enquiries
concerning prices when Heath introduced his ‘freeze’ on pay and prices in November
1972. The mechanics of the relationship between the COI and the Benton and
Bowles advertising agency are documented. The file also reveals that the chancellor,
Anthony Barber, was concerned about the use of the word ‘freeze’. It was reported by
a Treasury official, writing to COI, that the chancellor ‘preferred “standstill” on the
grounds that he has been using this term to distinguish the present situation from the
previous freeze [by the Labour government] which was accompanied by deflationary
measures’. It was also reported by the same official that ‘the prime minister attached

4 Because of general file titles, in order to gather references to files for investigation it was necessary to carry out
keyword searches on TNA’s catalogue (‘Discovery’) using broad terms such as ‘publicity and inflation’, ‘publicity and
incomes’ and so on, thinking laterally about terms and combinations that might work; it was also necessary to trawl
through a large selection of documents in order to find useful information.
great importance to referring to a standstill, rather than a freeze'. And so the final version of the advertisement, published in the press on 13 November, was entitled ‘Price Standstill’. All of the interesting insights into the Government’s concern with presentational issues are contained in this file with an innocuous title.

**Historical background and context**

For the western ‘developed economies’, the scale of the problems associated with inflation intensified in the twentieth century and an upward trend became particularly acute in the 1970s. Inflation became the scourge of governments, especially British governments. The issue of inflation was a vital element in the Conservatives’ electoral success in 1970. It seemed to have risen to the top of the national agenda in a way not previously witnessed at election time. In their manifesto of 1970, the Conservatives stated that ‘we utterly reject the philosophy of compulsory wage control’. However, after winning power, the conservative government was immediately subject to pressure to restrain wages. The orthodoxy of the time stated that the chief cause of inflation was high wage settlements, therefore wage increases had to be curbed. The monetarist critique – that in order to control inflation, governments needed to control the supply of money in the economy, principally by controlling expenditure, was a minority view at this time. The government’s response to inflationary pressures was the ‘N minus one’ policy, which took root in the autumn of 1970. It was applied to public sector workers to encourage the private sector to take the same direction of travel. The aim was to try to ensure that each public sector pay award was 1% less than the previous (hence ‘N minus one’ – the ‘N’ standing for ‘norm’). It was not a statutory policy – but it was interventionism, albeit indirect interventionism.

1972 was a testing year for the Heath government, a ‘year of reversals’ in the words of Heath’s biographer John Campbell. In January, the crude figure for unemployment reached the symbolic figure of one million. January also saw the start of a six week strike by the miners, in support of a 47% pay claim. On 18 February, a court of inquiry into the pay dispute, headed by Lord Wilberforce, produced a package that was worth more than 20%, and after further negotiations, a settlement was reached. This settlement, set against a background of high unemployment, changed the government’s attitude towards incomes policy. Ministers were convinced that the ‘N minus one’ policy was broken beyond repair. Many believed, at the time, and long afterwards, that this was the point where the escalation of pay increases began again in earnest, although the evidence suggests otherwise. At the time, the settlement of the miners’ dispute was a political defeat which demanded a new strategy.

There were increasing pressures in 1972, on several fronts, for a stronger incomes and prices policy. The government was now pursuing 5% growth through a series of reflationary measures. This was done partly to counter unemployment; another important factor was that Heath wanted Britain’s economy to be reach top gear so that when Britain entered the European Economic Community (EEC), set for 1 January

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6 ‘The whole climate of pressure for incomes policy took for granted that the major impetus of inflation came from wages rather than monetary and other wider economic factors. In fact, wages were only one factor in an inflationary spiral which towards the end of 1972 was being fuelled by new pressures – some outside the control of the unions and Government alike, some actually caused by the Government. On the one hand there was the effect of floating the pound in the summer, and the onset of rising world food and commodity prices. On the other, the Government’s own massively increased spending in pursuit of growth with social justice...was far more inflationary than any number of high pay settlements’, Campbell, Edward Heath, 471.
7 For more detail, see Samuel Brittan and Peter Lilley, The Delusion of Incomes Policy (1977), 165.
1973, it would be strong enough to handle the competition within the common market. This explains why the Heath government was so anxious about inflation as early as 1972. The government wanted a booming economy to underpin Britain’s future performance in the EEC – but they feared this strategy would unravel if a vicious circle developed of higher wages leading to higher prices (through manufacturers passing on their costs).

On 12 July 1972, Douglas Wass, deputy secretary of the Treasury, who was later to become (joint) head of the civil service, wrote to Frank Bickerton, director-general of the COI:

> There have been suggestions in recent months that one major weakness in the presentation of Government policy in the prices and incomes field is the general lack of public understanding about the causes of inflation and the connection between wage increases and price increases. We have therefore been considering in consultation with the Department of Employment and the Press Office at No 10 the possibility of a sustained campaign to educate the public on these points. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has now asked that further consideration be given to the forms that such a campaign might take, including the possibility of paid advertising and perhaps Government literature on inflation. He has authorised us to seek your professional advice and guidance on this.8

Barber had set the ball rolling for a possible anti-inflation campaign. From the same letter it is clear that one of the main drivers was government concern at the degree of sympathy among the general public for the miners’ case:

> the general objective . . . should in our view be to point out the connection between wage increases and consequential price increases in such a way that people would realise that there is a real price to pay for the sympathy which they might feel inclined to extend to those who press unjustifiably high pay claims.9

What form would the new campaign take? By late July an outline of the project was beginning to take shape. The plans envisaged ‘a 6 month campaign involving nation-wide distribution of simple factual leaflets . . . at regular intervals’.10 E.R. Kelly, director, publications division, COI, who had a strong journalistic background, anticipated that “there would be enough material to sustain up to 12 short popular leaflets”.11 Posters were also considered.

In the meantime, Prime Minister Edward Heath had embarked on a series of talks with the CBI and the TUC about the management of the economy, which were to endure for several months. The uncertainty surrounding the outcome of these talks was certainly an unhelpful factor for the anti-inflation campaign planners.

**Why are the records about the anti-inflation campaign so worthy of attention?**

The files that formed the basis for this research are largely those showing internal discussions and debates within Whitehall. The material in these files reveals the

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thought processes behind the interventionist and paternalistic approach of government during this period – and the anxieties that were sometimes voiced by those working in the Whitehall machine about the limits of government intervention in a free society. It would be tempting to dismiss internal discussions between government officials as being of marginal interest; however, the comments they make often have much wider ramifications for society as a whole.

Take, for example, the many drafts of possible leaflets for the anti-inflation campaign, or text intended for ministerial speeches on the subject, created by government publicists. In several cases, their opening paragraphs contained dramatic and arresting statements. It is interesting to reflect on the language and tone of these statements. Some are very pessimistic: ‘Inflation is here to stay. In Britain we have been living in the age of inflation for the last 30 years. However, in the last few years the rate of inflation had accelerated considerably’.12 The experience of hyper-inflation in the Weimar Republic is referred to in some texts:

In Germany after the first world war, inflation became so acute that prices rose a million million times . . . the social upheaval this caused is often said to have paved the way for Hitler. The example of what happened in Germany half a century ago offers a dramatic illustration of what can happen if inflation is unchecked.13

A frightening vision was being evoked, from the not-so-distant past, of suitcases full of banknotes being hauled around by ordinary members of the public, with a hint of the terrible consequences which could follow such rampant inflation. There was also a great deal of emphasis in the draft texts on the unfairness of inflation – a distinction is drawn between those with ‘fixed property’ and those on ‘fixed incomes’:

Inflation is, above all, unfair. The powerful, the sharp ones, those with property, survive and flourish. The weak, the old, those whose working life is done, suffer.14

Some statements seem calculated to create a fear, even a ‘terror’ of inflation among the general public, as evidenced by these quotes from draft briefing material prepared by the Treasury and the Department of Employment: ‘Rising prices affect everyone. They are a serious problem that no Government has solved’, and ‘inflation is the silent, insidious robber. Every housewife knows that continuously rising prices rob her little by little of the real value of her housekeeping money’.15 One draft text for the proposed booklets opened with this dramatic flourish: ‘What is happening to your money? Inflation is burning it up’.16

This shows that the official copywriters (under the guidance of their masters), turned to hyperbole to describe the problem of inflation as early as the spring and summer of 1972, even though inflation was relatively mild at this time, when compared with the very worrying levels it was to reach in the mid-seventies (peaking at 26.9% in August 1975). In a memo of 29 September 1972, P.R. Browning, a Treasury information officer, quoted the rate of inflation as ‘6.6 or 6.8 per cent, or even 6.2 or 6.1 if

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13 TNA, INF 12/1194, Inflation Campaign – Booklet texts, ‘Inflation’ attached to draft note from E.R. Kelly to Director General, n.d.
14 TNA, LAB 112/31, Inflation Publicity: Draft briefing notes, attached to note from P.R. Browning to Douglas Wass, 2 June 1972.
15 TNA, LAB 112/31, Inflation Publicity Briefing, attached to letter from P.R. Browning to D.W.G Wass, 2 June 1972.
16 TNA, INF 12/1194, Inflation Campaign – Booklet Texts (E.R. Kelly to Director General, COI).
three monthly comparisons are taken’. 17 The hyperbolic language used in the draft texts predates, by two years, the hellish vision of the effects of inflation given by Keith Joseph in his famous Preston speech in September 1974, when he claimed that ‘Inflation is threatening to destroy our society’. Margaret Thatcher also gave several warnings about the severe dangers of inflation in speeches given in the mid-1970s. Jim Tomlinson addresses the purpose behind this hyperbole, drawing on E. H. H. Green’s study of Thatcher: ‘as Green suggests, it fitted with the desire to play down the relative importance of attempting to reduce unemployment, at a time when almost everyone assumed there was a trade-off between lower unemployment and higher inflation’. 18 However, in the early seventies there was no such ulterior motive behind the anti-inflation rhetoric, which was founded on the orthodoxy of the time – that high wage settlements were the chief cause of inflation. As noted above, the rhetoric was fuelled by the government’s alarm at the level of public sympathy for the miners’ wage claim in early 1972. Given what was to come, these draft texts for publicity leaflets were ‘inadvertently prophetic’, in the way they described the new problem posed by inflation.

The Government publicists often set out with dramatic statements about the horrors of inflation, as mentioned, but, inevitably, they found it difficult to sustain a dramatic and gripping tone. Officials commented on the difficulty of writing about complex subjects in simple terms. Douglas Wass described the intended outcome in a pithy manner: ‘we want to create a message that will be understood by the man in the pub’. This intention was very difficult to square with concepts such as the effects of inflation on exports and the importance of wages and salaries in the national economy – and civil servants and ministers realised this. D. J. Howells of the Department of Employment commented ‘it is clear that some points in the paper “Inflation Publicity” are too sophisticated for some people’. By mid-July Anthony Barber was reportedly telling his officials that the material produced so far ‘needs pointing up to make its theme and object clearer’ – a sure sign that the publicists were struggling. 19

The generalised assumption that Whitehall officials were not in tune with the concerns of ‘ordinary people’ would not come as a surprise to many; but what is striking about the records is the blunt language used by officials regarding the general public and their level of understanding: ‘the public at large is ignorant. Various surveys have shown that the simple relationships between wages and prices and productivity and real incomes, are not appreciated by the ordinary man’ stated R.E. Crum of the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS) in a memorandum of 18 February 1972. H.C.G. Hawkins (also appointed to the CPRS) shared this view: ‘public opinion is almost unbelievably ill-informed about the relationship between wages, prices, productivity and real incomes’. This perceived ignorance was seen as an obstacle to a successful incomes policy. Hawkins elaborated on the need to educate the public on the causes of inflation: ‘if we are to have an effective prices and incomes policy without resort to totalitarian methods of enforcing it, we must educate public opinion and mobilise it on the side of restraint’. But he realised that ‘at present there is very little knowledge or experience of how to carry out this education process most effectively’. 20

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19 TNA, LAB 112/31, D.W.G. Wass to P.R. Browning re Inflation Publicity Briefing, 5 June 1972; D.J. Howells, Publicity on Inflation, 2 June 1972; D.J. Derx, Publicity on Inflation, 11 July 1972.
Heath’s government does not seem to have realised that it was in danger of breaking the normal conventions regarding objectivity in government publicity. The COI, with the support of successive governments, had developed certain conventions within which publicity campaigns were expected to operate. These had evolved over the years, but were not formalised until the cabinet office gave evidence to the Widgicome Inquiry on the conventions governing the use of public funds for central government publicity in 1985. Referring to the early 1970s, the existing conventions – though they are not referred to as such – can be deduced from a work by Sir Fife Clark, director-general of the COI from 1954 to 1971. In his concluding chapter, Clark emphasises the non-political nature of the COI: ‘a line must be drawn between advocacy and factual presentation, between official and party grounds . . . deliberate informational activities paid for out of public funds cannot be carried out in an atmosphere of prolonged controversy’.21 This stricture was reconfirmed by the later conventions with greater clarity – as a prime ministerial cabinet paper put it in 1988, ‘Government publicity . . . should not be, or be liable to misrepresentation as being, party political’.22 It was perfectly acceptable to carry out campaigns to facilitate the decimalisation process, or to reduce drink/drive road deaths, or to promote the wearing of seat belts, and the COI enjoyed proven success in these areas; it was a great deal harder to address the subject of wage restraint with a universal message for all sectors of the population.

The COI were aware that there were real dangers lurking with the anti-inflation project, and flagged this up for ministerial attention: ‘any campaign on such a contentious subject would be attacked as an improper use of Exchequer money for political purposes…a campaign might be seen as an attack on the working class and trades unions’.23 A clash was looming with the non-political principle advocated by Sir Fife Clark (and embedded in the thinking of COI officials). The general objective of the proposed campaign was to emphasise the connection between high wage claims (emanating from the trade unions), and high inflation (though the COI argued that a campaign should concern itself with profits as well as wages). Officials were worried that inflation could easily become an open-ended topic, and that it could be difficult to limit discussion. Nonetheless, a great deal of time and energy was expended on taking the campaign forward in the spring and summer of 1972, once Chancellor Barber had initiated it. So convinced was the government that it had ‘right on its side’ – Edward Heath spoke of a ‘national crusade’ against inflation – that it did not seem to have occurred to ministers that they were in danger of overstepping the normal conventions regarding objective publicity.

Pressure for a firm incomes policy came from various quarters at the time. The Treasury was keen to restore a statutory system, even though previous attempts at this had become unstuck. Some key figures in the Conservative party, such as Reginald Maudling, argued the case for it. The majority of newspapers argued that the government should adopt statutory powers, but the COI director’s files show that the thinking was not all one way. The draft texts for publicity leaflets reflected anxieties about resorting to statutory pay and price controls in a free society, the very course of action that Heath was later to take. In a draft text for a possible booklet, entitled What is happening to your money? the question was posed, ‘Isn’t it up to the Government to find an answer?’. The answer was duly given: ‘in a free society there are limits to what the government can do. On wages, the tradition of free collective bargaining between

22 TNA, INF 12/1489, C(P) (88) 1, Conventions on Government Publicity and Advertising, February 1988.
employers and unions must be preserved’ and, the text continues, the government ‘cannot freeze prices of goods and services’. With the value of hindsight, it could be argued that the government should have attuned its ears more carefully to the doubts expressed about the statutory controls option within its own (proposed) publicity material.

Some comments by officials hold a powerful resonance for the Britain of today, and underline recurring social and economic themes. Bernard Ingham, who was to become Margaret Thatcher’s chief press secretary during her premiership, was chief information officer at the Department of Employment in 1972. Ingham was not persuaded of the merits of an anti-inflation campaign, and in a handwritten note to D.J. Hodgkins, assistant secretary at the Department of Employment in early 1972, he made a pertinent analysis of the situation:

The problem, I think, is not to persuade people that there is a link between pay increases and price increases, but to act on that realisation. This is a major problem because it requires individuals to act in their long-term interest in a way that is contrary to their short-term interest. And in these days of HP etc., the short-term matters for more to most people than the longer term because they are up to their ears in debt.25

If one substituted ‘credit cards’ for ‘HP’ (Hire Purchase), this is a comment that could equally be applied to British society at the time of the banking sector crisis of 2007-8. Ingham’s comments were part of an internal departmental discussion, so they did not make a public impact at the time they were made – but they are thought-provoking, when one considers the deep-rooted nature of the individual debt problem in Britain today.

The public records also contain evidence that Whitehall officials were aware that there was a significant obstacle at the heart of their enterprise – they were trying to provoke a fear of inflation that did not yet exist. The files contain many journal, magazine and newspaper articles, which officials had considered.26 These articles raised questions about just how ‘bothered’ the general public was about the issue of inflation in the early 1970s. As mentioned previously, inflation was relatively mild at this time (or so it appears, with hindsight, compared to the worrying levels inflation was to reach in the mid-1970s). A New Society magazine article dated August 1972 quoted the results of a survey carried out in December 1971, in which 40% of the people interviewed stated that they were very worried about rising prices – officials may have hoped for a higher figure. Considering the language used in the draft leaflets on inflation, it seems that the government and public perceptions of the problem were at variance. The verdict of the New Society was that inflation was making people more careful with their money ‘but has not dramatically affected what is bought’. The article concluded ‘the public is very worried about inflation, but in the somewhat abstract way that it once worried about the effect of an atom bomb test’.27

Evidence such as this challenges negative views about life in 1970s Britain. Despite inflation, British living standards continued to rise during this decade. Dominic Sandbrook documents the rise of consumerism, reflected in the widespread acquisition

26 The presence of these articles in the files is of great benefit to the researcher, as articles which might otherwise be difficult to find in the British Library (without lengthy and detailed searching), are highlighted in the files in a convenient manner.
of electrical goods: ‘by 1971, 64 per cent of families owned their own washing machine, 69 per cent had a fridge, and more than 90 per cent had a television’. This was a paradoxical aspect – despite the recurring economic crises, strikes and power cuts, most people enjoyed greater affluence than ever before, as the real costs of electrical goods were falling. A *Daily Mail* article of May 1972 which had caught the attention of Whitehall officials, highlighted the rise in living standards using figures from market research. In order to earn the price of a 19 inch black and white television set, the average British worker would have had to work 208 hours in 1961. By 1971 this figure had fallen to 85 hours. Material comforts helped to ‘take the edge off’ economic difficulties, and therefore, for most people living in Britain in 1971–2, inflation was not the terrible bogeyman that the government publicists were trying to conjure up. This situation was set to change with the dramatic increases in oil prices by the organisation of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) from October 1973 onwards, and Britain’s rampant inflation in 1974–5.

The planned anti-inflation campaign of 1972 was never implemented. Following the breakdown of the tripartite talks between the Government, the TUC and the CBI, Heath announced the introduction of statutory controls on pay and prices (a freeze for 90 days) on 6 November. The COI immediately launched a new advertising campaign in national newspapers, focused on getting everyone to comply with the new measures. As this emphasis side-stepped sensitive political considerations, the COI were on much safer ground that the proposed anti-inflation campaign.

The fall of the Heath government in 1974, and James Callaghan’s in 1979, showed how high the stakes associated with pay policy were, before the whole strategy underpinning incomes policies was swept away by Margaret Thatcher’s government. For this reason, it would be profitable for researchers in this area to explore the records of publicity for incomes (and prices) policies from the 1940s to the 1960s, to see what patterns may emerge from this recurring activity, as well as the records of the Price Commission (TNA departmental code CX) and the counter-inflation publicity unit (set up by Harold Wilson) which operated in 1975–1976 (main source: PREM 16).

**Conclusion**

The proposed anti-inflation campaign of 1972 has escaped the attention of historians, but this article shows that a detailed investigation of the plans for the campaign is a rewarding exercise, as it is revealing on several levels. The records created by the central office of information, and information officers in key government departments, are a rich source highlighting the relationship between government and the public, and help us to understand the nature of public discourse at this time. The exchanges between officials, captured in these documents, had wider ramifications for society as a whole.

Politicians and officials reacted to the danger posed by the ‘new’ threat of spiralling inflation in the early 1970s with consternation, demonstrated by the dramatic language of draft publicity texts. Officials were trying to provoke a fear of inflation among the general public that had not taken hold at this time. The evidence which gave officials ‘pause for thought’ – the journal, newspaper and magazine articles and surveys that they deliberated over – challenges assumptions about the 1970s being unremittingly gloomy. The blunt language used by officials reflected their low opinion of public

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29 *Daily Mail*, ‘This is what ten years of rising wages and prices have meant to you’, 16 May 1972.
understanding of the inflation problem. In 1972, the government was so determined to ‘educate’ the public on the issue of inflation, and so convinced that it had ‘right on its side’ – that it does not seem to have occurred to ministers that they were in danger of overstepping the normal conventions regarding objectivity in government publicity. Through this case study, we have gained all these insights into the mindset of government officials and ministers of the time, enabling us to acquire a richer, fuller understanding of the governance of Britain in the 1970s.