



James Woudhuysen takes a look at how the spin of a New Labour government can be translated into the role of a facilities manager

JAMES WOULDHUYSEN

Ten commandments

There are 15,862 silver disks on the surface of Selfridges in Birmingham's Bullring shopping centre. In June, Europa Support Services spent over 12 days cleaning each of them – by hand. Meanwhile, Janine McDowell, director of Bronzefield prison in Ashford, Middlesex, described how the colour schemes recently installed for her 450 women inmates had given them 'a new, nice, attractive facility'.

These two developments give a sense of the growing irrationality that surrounds the still-adolescent discipline of FM. That discipline has yet to create its Thomas Edison or its Gordon Moore. Too often, even the most thoughtful visions of the future of FM come down to little more than lists of things to look after. So allow me to make my own list of what New Labour would like facilities managers to do.

Thou shalt not install lifts and escalators – even in tomorrow's new Bullrings. Of course, thou shalt marvel at the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act coming into force in October. But since thou shalt also show no obesity, even older workers must take some exercise by climbing stairs.

Thou shalt assure business continuity in the event of an Al Qaeda attack. A conference has just heard from three major generals on this matter. To quote the blurb for the bash: 'Even if you are not a direct target, you may be caught up in someone else's incident'. That's reassuring. Clearly, steps must be taken not just with thine own building, but thy neighbour's too.

Thou shalt never conduct an office move again. Moves burn fossil fuels and increase carbon emissions. They are also deeply stressful, and likely to fall foul of the Health and Safety Executive, which in 2003-04 'achieved 122 per cent of the target for inspector time allocated to stress' – pretty stressful for the inspectors, at least.

Thou shalt install video cameras. They are needed to smite down workplace smoking, workplace bullying and shopping centre smacking, too.

Thou shalt not bother to read the 28 articles and two annexes of the 11 December 1997 Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate – the Kyoto Protocol. But somehow thou shalt believe everything the government says about the need to build windmills, turn off computer monitors, and install cycle racks everywhere. Thou shalt collaborate more with the construction industry to save energy – but thou shalt not burn too much midnight oil in the process.

Thou shalt miss the point about Gordon Brown's disposal of £30 billion of government assets by 2010. It is true that asset sales and PFI deals are sweeping the old EU, they will move on to the new east European members and, in time, to China. But

these are not merely economic events. As we know from telecoms, rail and utilities, privatisation can be accompanied by greater regulation. All the assets sold and PFI deals done will be accompanied by more state inspections. The trumpet shall sound. Avenging government angels of sustainability and supply chain diversity will be among us.

Thou shalt expect to communicate more during the full inquisition that will surround every planning process. Will that new facility verily generate quantifiable benefits for the local community? Will it regenerate Britain's regions, once they heroically adopt, in this November's referenda, their democratic regional assemblies? Thou shalt have the arguments and the key performance indicators (KPI) and the lawyers to hand.

Thou shalt KPI everything and give more work to quangos in the process. In 2003, Britain's Constructing Excellence quango issued a mosaic wall chart of 10 graphs with which builders could measure factors such as productivity, profitability and client satisfaction. Eight graphs contained no units of measurement beyond percentage changes on 2002 and subjective ratings. In February 2004, a consortium won a DTI funded five-year contract with the DTI to produce an annual suite of construction industry KPIs. What another construction industry quango – the Building Services Research and Information Association – calls 'The UK KPI hierarchy'.

With KPIs, inimitable prose claims: 'Competitors are doing it and reputations are at stake. Clients are demanding it, particularly with more take-up of framework and partnering projects since setting of targets and benchmarking is a key mechanism on such projects'. KPIs, it is felt, highlight 'weaknesses'. With KPIs, therefore, thou shalt bear thy soul at all times, in the manner of Saint Clinton.

Thou shalt ensure that all catering and cleaning is dietetically and ecologically correct.

Thou shalt abdicate all responsibility for making facilities less labour-intensive to operate. Instead, thou shalt evoke a Damascene conversion on the positive effects of trendy facilities design on the retention, morale and mental health of customers and staff.

You may think that I exaggerate. But I say unto you that these ten commandments will reverberate around facilities management long after Tony Blair has left the workplace he enjoys so much.

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