



“TEN YEARS AT THE TOP IS ENOUGH”

An English colleague as a trigger for debate?

Director general Hamish Pringle left the British advertising agency association IPA in 2011. He was an incredibly successful colleague. Why did he leave in his tenth year? I recently asked him and I received a written response, which I respond to here.

Dr. Henning von Vieregge

IPA's address is no coincidence but rather a mark of their special reputation: 44 Belgrave Square, London. Anybody who googles 'Belgrave Square London' will discover the area in greater detail: The Duke of Westminster, the richest Briton, owns this part of London. Many VIPs lived there in the 19th century. You can find out how the embassies, including the German embassy, arrived, then later how, with the support of the duke at the time, charity organisations and various associations, including the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising IPA, the British advertising agency association, were able to move in here. And it should be said at this point that advertising has a higher status in England than in many other countries, including Germany. Hamish Pringle was appointed director general of this renowned association in 2001. Gold plates on the clearly visible wall at the typical Victorian building show the names and years of service of all the previous directors of the IPA and that information is also available on the Internet (<http://www.ipa.co.uk/page/ipa-director-generals>); this is another sign of the significance of the position as well as the culture of memory fostered in the association.

But Hamish Pringle left IPA in 2011. I, a long-term colleague on the European stage, read that he left voluntarily and ten years was enough. He was an incredibly successful colleague. Why did he leave in his tenth year? I recently asked him for information and I received a written response, which I draw from as follows. Does the Pringle case have any significance for the German associations? It is crucial to know the facts and arguments in order to make an assessment.

When Pringle was appointed he was given a five-year-contract at his request with an extension option for a further five years provided both parties were agreed. He gave four reasons:



Institute of Practitioners in Advertising IPA Geschäftsstelle,
44 Belgrave Square, London

First, with the exception of one person, his predecessors worked as director-general for an average of twelve years. I would like to quote the three other reasons verbatim:

- Secondly I referred to other quasi-institutional roles, such as headmasters of schools, where from observation the tenure shouldn't last more than a decade before new blood is required to keep the momentum going.
- Thirdly I considered the accelerating pace of technological innovation in Adland and felt that a slight shortening of the tenure to 10 years was about right, and would strike the right balance between continuity and change.

- A fourth and unspoken reason was the dread of over-staying my welcome, and I was determined to depart at a time when people were asking "why are you leaving?" as opposed to "when are you leaving".

If we take a closer look at the arguments we come across a notable conformity with the view of the top managers, which I reported on in an earlier contribution ("Age and honorary positions in associations," in January 2012) based on interviews I held with contemporaries. There is a theory here, either specific to an event or career-related: "Ten years is enough." Pringle's argument that there is a need for new blood after that point in order to maintain momentum is shared. I



Hamish Pringle, former director general of the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising

quote a representative example: *“If someone has been in one job for seven, eight or ten years, has he not implemented all insights he has gained and required changes identified with his team? The probability that this person is prepared to try something completely new is more likely to be lower than for someone who is new to the job. For that reason, I’m a big fan of giving younger people an early opportunity to take a top management position.”* (Johann C. Lindenberg, head of Unilever in Germany 1998–2005)

Hasso Kaempfe, who left Jägermeister in 2007 after ten years as chairman of the board and is now a sought-after consultant, adopts a similar position. *“When working on a product, the argument of diminishing returns is convincing. It becomes repetitive. The drive to change something reduces over the course of time so that I, as the chairman of the supervisory board for such a company, would change the head after ten years at the latest.”*

The further argument of rapid technological change – Pringle refers to “Adland” i.e. the communications business – demands a change to people better ab-

le to deal with it, is often heard in interviews with former leading managers. In particular, when the former managers look back and say what is happening in their company is “no longer their world”.

And his fourth argument also carries some weight in this country. In Pringle’s words: *“I’m leaving when I can find my own way out, rather than being shown the door.”* That is the most used phrase if you do not want to be “driven out of the business” one day.

PLANNED DEPARTURE

Pringle proceeded as stated at the beginning: After five years and a five-year extension to search for a successor. In Great Britain, we learn, it is tricky to prematurely announce your departure. *“We planned accordingly, but despite this careful process the communication that I was stepping down was widely misinterpreted – it was so unusual in ‘Adland’ for someone to give a year’s notice and stick to it so that most people thought I’d been fired and had already left the IPA!”* Here and there, and not just in ‘Adland’, it is completely out of the ordinary to announce an ordered transition at the right time. That cannot be right, why has that happened, something must have happened! It will probably take some time before such career planning is accepted and valued.

GLITTERING DEPARTURE

Hamish Pringle’s departure from IPA was also a glittering one. The IPA website announced: *“At IPA Director General Hamish Pringle’s farewell party, held this week at London’s Royal Horticultural Hall, Stephen Woodford, Chairman and CEO of DDB London, paid tribute to the man he describes as a mix of entrepreneur, head boy and showman.”* And anybody who does not believe can read about and hear it here: <http://ipa.co.uk/news/woodford-leads-praise-at-pringle-farewell-party>.

PERSON AND POSITION

And how is Pringle getting on today? Does he regret his move? He says there was a loss of meaning. But you have to accept that. On the other hand, there could be a confusion between the person and position (probably the most common confusion of all). *“In so doing I should never forget that the institution has primacy and that the position of Director General is the authority, not the person who occupies it.”*

‘ENCORE CAREER’ TREND

There is a fifth reason for leaving. And that is exemplary. Pringle is further living proof for the theory that the ‘encore career’ is becoming the rule rather than the exception. The second career differs from the first in the greater readiness to take up unpaid, honorary posts, and the desire to arrange your working life as required with a greater proportion of free time. That is a sort of personal balancing of time after years of overload. The move to a second career is more successful the earlier it is started. Hamish Pringle is now the strategic consultant for a communications agency and he has time for this and that. And he describes it as follows:

“And of course, leaving the IPA at the tender age of 60 leaves me plenty of time to do new things and I’m enjoying my portfolio life working three days a week for two thirds of the year. I’m busy as Strategic Advisor to integrated creative communications agency 23red with ist Do. Feel. Think. Working as an ASA Council member, and doing the occasional Pringle and Pringle LLP project. Meanwhile I’ve got the time to develop my art activities: <http://www.saatchionline.com/hamishpringle>.”

The fact that this cool, strategic approach to the transition was not so easy is made clear. *“Do I miss it? Yes. Should I have stayed longer? Definitely not. Will I ever get re-involved? Never say never ...”*

“RETIREMENT BEGINS AT 40”

Is somebody like Pringle a solitary exception and is that unthinkable in Germany? No. I will again restrict myself to one contrary piece of evidence but I could provide several others. I refer to the example of a man who told me when he started making plans for his retirement: when he was 40. He is now in his eighties and is gradually winding down his second fulfilling career. The former director of a chamber of commerce and industry explained how the in-house librarian showed him a book once and its title electrified him “Retirement begins at 40”. He then decided he wanted to remain the master of his departure. He wanted to be prepared for leaving and embarking on a new stage in his life. He pursued this project rigorously.

PERSONAL CONCLUSION

Are people like Hamish Pringle the exception? Or is he another trendsetter? I think that associations, chambers and public organisations will also use fixed term contracts (5 plus 5) with leaving the last management position after ten years at the latest becoming the rule rather than the exception. For the reasons given. ■

*N.B.: The quotes used in this article come from an email dated 6.12.2012 from Hamish Pringle to the author or from the author of the book "Der Ruhestand kommt später" (Retirement comes later), Frankfurt 2012. The author's statement that there is trend towards Encore Careers, is discussed in more detail in APuZ (Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte - From politics and contemporary history, a supplement with the weekly newspaper Das Parlament) no. 4-5/2013 of 21.1.2013 pp. 13-17.
www.bpb.de/apuz/153123/encore-career-von-der-ausnahme-zur-normalitaet*

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