

DESIGNER POLITICS

Designer Politics

How Elections are Won

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palgrave

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Preface and Acknowledgements

'Does Britain need a Clinton?' – Lord Parkinson, *New Statesman and Society*, 23 September 1994.

Tony Blair, the 'British Clinton', greatly exercised Tory strategists in the months following his election as Labour leader in July 1994. 'If Blair turns out to be as good as he looks, we have a problem,' John Maples, Tory deputy chairman, warned in a top secret strategy paper, intended only for the Prime Minister's eyes. Embarrassingly for Maples and the Conservatives, the paper was leaked to the *Financial Times*.¹ Maples notoriously proposed a multi-pronged assault on the Labour leader: set loose the backbench Tory 'yobbos' to 'knock him about a bit'; set another team to operate 'more subtly' on Blair's changes of mind and 'huge' differences with his own party; and introduce legislation, such as identity cards and public service strike rebalots, with the specific purpose of either splitting Blair from his party or exposing him as soft on crime and weak on trade unions.

The Maples paper, described by the *Financial Times* as 'rather more frank and perhaps cynical than the normal ministerial soundbite', captures much of the essence of marketing in modern British politics. It illustrates the key role of market research in party strategy: its conclusions were based on discussions with focus groups of working-class wavering Tories, whose support is vital for a fifth successive election victory. It demonstrates the importance to party strategy of political image. The standing of the parties on certain image dimensions, competence, unity, credibility, moderation and leadership, is thought crucial for success. Policy discussion is related, not to intrinsic merits or national interest, but to potential effects upon party images. And these images are relative; one party's loss is another's gain.

Tony Blair, according to the Maples research, is 'the only thing' Labour has going for it, besides the National Health Service. Hence, the logic of the particular proposals for

attacking him. Crack Labour's main asset, test the moderate rhetoric to destruction, expose Labour's internal divisions and eventually the vacillating Tories should scurry back to the relative security of the devil they know.

Former Conservative chairman, Lord Parkinson, offered a more subtle approach when he proposed 'Does Britain need a Clinton?', as a potential campaigning slogan for the beleaguered Tories. Parkinson's question taps into widespread reservations about the new Labour leader's double-edged reputation as a 'media candidate'. Like Clinton, Blair looks good on television and is adept at soundbites which have a resonance across the usual party divide and a durability beyond the average political slogan. 'Tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime' and, latterly, 'a new, grown-up politics' are two examples. However, doubts remain that he has the experience to be a genuine national leader on the world stage, or the stature to carry with him internal party critics or to stand firm on matters of principle against a hostile media and the goading Tories. In short, is there authentic substance behind the admirable campaigning style?

Blair has made an impressive start. His first address as leader to the Labour Party conference was one of 'the great speeches of recent years', according to the respected *Guardian* commentator, Hugo Young (*Guardian*, 5 October 1994). Blair tackled head-on some of those concerns about his political courage. He volunteered the word 'socialism', banished from Labour rhetoric in recent years, to describe his brand of politics. He risked controversy with the demand that Labour modernise its constitution and abandon the Clause IV commitment to nationalisation. He argued the case for mainstream left-of-centre politics as desirable on its own terms, not simply because it is electorally pragmatic. 'There is no choice between being principled and unelectable; and electable and unprincipled. We have tortured ourselves with this foolishness for too long. We should win because of what we believe.'²

These are early days and, at the time of writing, it is too soon to offer judgement of Blair. Thus far he has had a relatively easy ride as the Conservatives have floundered in sexual and financial scandal and been torn asunder by internal divisions about Europe, VAT and privatisation. However, there are some indications that he is more than Labour's most media-friendly

face. The signs from his conference performance were that marketing, with its sensitivity to public opinion and media presentation, will be important. But, perhaps rather like Margaret Thatcher, marketing will be harnessed to, rather than substituted for, a clear political project.

Labour's lesson of the 1992 general election was in the limitations of marketing and the difficulties of changing party images. For a while, at least, it seemed as though marketing was in retreat. Labour's team of advertising and media advisers, the Shadow Communications Agency (SCA), caught much of the backlash for defeat. The 'beautiful people', as John Prescott called them, needed to be brought to heel and they seemed to be, under John Smith's brief leadership. The SCA was disbanded and it seemed that the image-makers were to be put back in their place as hired consultants and *not* a central and independent power base. Meanwhile, the Tories have found themselves hoist by their own marketing petard. The VAT rises in the new government's first budget made a nonsense of Saatchi's 'Labour tax bombshell' election campaign. Major's trustworthiness, his great advantage over Neil Kinnock, was damaged, possibly irreparably. His post-election 'back to basics' family values campaign backfired amid the successive tales of Tory sleaze. Further weakened by the difficulties of uniting his party on Europe, Major's leadership has looked tenuous for more than a year and his government has so far failed spectacularly to reap the usual opinion poll rewards of an improving economy.

In the light of all this, what then can we say about the use of political marketing in contemporary Britain? First, marketing is entrenched in the modern political process. Blair may exercise stricter political control than previously over the image-makers, but he remains a Labour moderniser, attuned to the value of market research and the importance of presentation. The Maples report, prepared for the prime minister personally, confirms the continued importance of marketing to Tory strategy, despite the mixed, sometimes anti-marketing signals offered by Major. Second, marketing does *not* offer magic solutions for the winning of elections. It does not exist in a vacuum. The evidence from studies of British elections is that political images are not easily changed. Moreover, the best-laid plans can be buffeted by political events and will

certainly be tested by political opponents. Even marketing that seems successful in the short term can recoil with dire consequences over the longer haul. Third, that the use of political marketing needs to be closely monitored. Much of the literature on political campaigning and politics and media generally claims that the marketing approach is actually or potentially subversive of the democratic process:³ rational political debate is reduced to advertising soundbites, political image is becoming a matter of style and appearance, campaigning a matter of attacking opponents rather than promulgating policies and the whole process of electioneering and worse, governing, becoming a squalid enterprise, similar in conception and execution to commercial salesmanship.

There is an undeniable case for a close watching brief on the use of political marketing. However, I do not share the rather overwhelming pessimism of much of the literature in the field. The pages that follow will argue that many of the most damning criticisms are either simply not proven, or rely on a contrast with a mythical golden age of rational political debate. As already suggested, it is important also to remain sceptical about marketing's power to persuade. Voters' choices are made for the most part in the prosaic long-term, influenced more by socio-economic factors than any short-term campaigning wizardry. Moreover, marketing may bring real democratic benefits by improving two-way communications between voters and politicians and theoretically, at least, allowing both parties and voters to be better informed and make more rational choices.

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My friends, relatives and colleagues cannot be blamed for any errors or omissions that remain in this book, for which, of course, I'm happy to take responsibility.

MARGARET SCAMMELL

Notes

- 1 See Robert Preston 'Tories need "killer facts" to stop electoral death' *Financial Times*, 21 November 1994. John Maples, as well as Tory deputy chairman, is also chairman and chief executive of Saatchi & Saatchi Government Communications Worldwide.
- 2 Speech by Tony Blair, 4 October 1994, Labour Party Conference, Blackpool.
- 3 See, for example, Bob Franklin *Packaging Politics* London: Edward Arnold, 1994).