Images of Labour: the progression and politics of party campaigning in Britain

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‘Images of Labour:
The Progression and Politics of Party Campaigning in Britain’

By Dominic Wring

Abstract: This paper looks at the continuities and changes in the nature of election campaigns in Britain since 1900 by focusing on the way campaigning has changed and become more professional and marketing driven. The piece discusses the ramifications of these developments in relation to the Labour party’s ideological response to mass communication and the role now played by external media in the internal affairs of this organisation. The paper also seeks to assess how campaigns have historically developed in a country with an almost continuous, century long cycle of elections.

Keywords: Political marketing, British elections, Labour Party, historical campaigning, party organisation, campaign professionals.

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Introduction.

To paraphrase former General Secretary Morgan Philips’ famous quote, Labour arguably owes more to marketing than it does to Methodism or Marxism. Applied to the ‘new model’ or ‘New’ parties of Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair this statement is perhaps uncontroversial. Used to describe the party as an historical actor, it is perhaps more contentious. Yet, by studying how the Labour developed as a campaigning organisation, it can be argued that its interest in marketing predates the present ‘New’ leadership. Furthermore it is important to point out that, contrary to key accounts such as those by Hughes and Wintour (1990) and now Philip Gould (1998), the party’s development as a communications aware organisation did not begin after the 1983 landslide defeat. Nor is it necessarily the case that the Conservatives have always been the most innovative campaigning unit (Cockett, 1994). Being a wealthy party has enabled them to resource and experiment with different strategies. But, in some ways, Labour’s comparative poverty has meant that its organisers have sometimes come up with all the more ingenious and novel approaches to electioneering.

Three particular themes or issues emerge when considering the question of how the Labour party developed as an electoral machine over the course of the Twentieth Century. Firstly there is the communication of politics and the topic of how Labour evolved as a strategic entity: specifically what techniques, expertise and personnel were involved in developing the party as a campaigning organisation? This in turn raises issues to do with the politics of communication. Here there is an ideological concern over the introduction and use of professional techniques and consultants. Whilst some in the party viewed mass communication approaches as an opportunity others perceived them to be a threat. Finally there is the impact Labour’s adoption of media and marketing driven strategies has had on intra-party debates and the distribution of power within the organisation as a whole.
The Communication of Politics

From propaganda to political marketing.

The rise and growing importance of professionalised communication is self evident in many of the major western democracies. The innovative Conservative Party campaign effort of 1979 is sometimes referred to as a watershed in the development of the phenomenon in Britain. Results of that election proved a vital component in the respective success of both the agency and client organisation. Victory heralded the beginning of the three Thatcher governments as well as the start of a period of commercial success for the party’s consultants, Saatchi and Saatchi, culminating in their emergence as the largest advertising agency in the world. The relationship between the Saatchi team and their most famous clients created considerable media interest in the process of political marketing, with the implication that the partnership had been crucial to the Conservatives’ good fortune. The execution of the 1983 and 1987 general elections consolidated the idea that professional consultants were becoming an indispensable part of the modern electoral process. In particular television documentaries such as Michael Cockerell’s 1983 BBC Panorama film ‘The Marketing of Margaret’ helped to reactivate interest in this style of campaigning amongst a previously suspicious Labour leadership.

Partly due to the proliferation of media interest in the subject, political marketing is sometimes equated with modern, sophisticated advertising. A good deal of election coverage has become increasingly preoccupied with the perceived domination of style over substance and image over issue. However, while it is true that some marketing approaches to campaigning use ‘slick’ methods, it is by no means axiomatic that all of them should or do pursue the glossy formula. Marketing is more than just presentational devices and advertising- it also relates to product management. Furthermore the process represents not only a set of techniques but also an approach to managing organisational relationships with their publics.

Arguably the process has begun to play a more significant and central part in contemporary British politics than is suggested by such terms as ‘spin doctoring’, ‘image making’ or ‘power dressing’. Undoubtedly these techniques form an important (and more obvious) part of some
campaigns but they are far from being the sole functions or representations of a political marketing exercise. Increasingly marketing is becoming a central part of strategy as political leaderships attempt to determine, refine and prioritise policy and goals. This process of incorporation of marketing technique and philosophy into party organisational thinking has a longer heritage in Britain than is commonly supposed. As leading advertising executive Winston Fletcher notes:

‘So far from political advertisers copying baked beans and detergents, as the oft-repeated cliché has it, baked beans and detergents have been copying political advertisers, for ages. This should not be surprising. Persuasive communication is the essence of politics, and has been since the dawn of time. The marketing of branded consumer goods is a relative newcomer to the scene.’ (Fletcher, 1994)

When looked at from this perspective it becomes clearer that, far from being such a radical departure, modern professional campaigning is a logical extension of earlier practice. As the leading marketing theorist Philip Kotler argues: ‘Campaigning has always had a marketing character. The new “methodology” is not the introduction of marketing methods into politics, but an increased sophistication and acceleration in their use’ (Kotler, 1982). Consequently, rather than viewing the historical transformation of campaigning in Britain as primarily the result of media or technological innovation, it is useful to see the process as one of strategic change comparable to the development of a company engaged in conventional business activities (Shama, 1976). Like the plan of a commercial firm, the organisation of party campaigning can be seen to evolve greater sophistication through three stages, namely the so-called ‘production’, ‘selling’, and ‘marketing’ orientations. In electoral terms these are the equivalent of what have been labelled the ‘propaganda’, ‘media’ and ‘political marketing’ approaches to electioneering (Wring, 1996).
Following its incarnation as the Labour Representation Committee at the turn of the Century, the Labour party formally fought its first general election six years later in 1906. An ad hoc committee of leading figures led by Ramsay MacDonald oversaw the development of the campaign organisation. Similar arrangements were made for the two elections held in 1910. MacDonald worked with a small headquarters team based in the Victoria area of London. Major changes came in 1917 with preparations for an overhaul of structures as part of the ongoing re-write of the constitution which culminated in the publication of Clause Four the following year. Herbert Tracey was appointed the first ever official to hold the publicity portfolio. Former mill worker Tracey had trained and worked as a journalist. Reflecting his spiritual beliefs, this Methodist lay preacher had been a correspondent with the *Christian Commonwealth* newspaper. If former military and intelligence personnel dominated appointments to the Central Office publicity machine, those from religious backgrounds were prominent within the Labour operation. This difference perhaps embodies something about the two parties’ contrasting approaches to political communication during the inter-war period.

Leading MP Arthur Henderson’s son William, or ‘WW’ as he was widely known, held the publicity job after Tracey’s departure in 1921. Despite a couple of periods in parliament as a Member for Enfield he remained in charge for over twenty years and right up until the end of the Second World War after which he entered the House of Lords. Henderson, like Tracey, managed the party press office and serviced various other initiatives. In doing so they both worked closely with the National Agent and the General Secretary who was, in effect, the chief executive of the organisation. Led by formidable officials like Egerton P. Wake the National Agency took responsibility for supporting the burgeoning party in the country at local and regional level. The department was closely involved in developing the labour intensive type of electioneering that was such a hallmark of inter-war campaigns.

Following senior politicians Ramsay MacDonald and Arthur Henderson, JS Middleton’s stint the post as General Secretary helped establish headquarters’ independence from the Parliamentary
Labour Party leadership. This position was further reinforced by defection of MacDonald and other leading figures, and the subsequent landslide election defeat of 1931 that did so much to drastically reduce the party's number of MPs. Middleton's successor, the formidable Morgan Philips, proved to be a considerable organisational politician. In post Philips thwarted influential rivals including Herbert Morrison and Aneurin Bevan in the course of aiding allies like Hugh Gaitskell. The eventual retirement of Philips in the early 1960s coincided with the party's reorientation to embrace the new, more media driven approach to campaigning. Critical to this was the recruitment of a Director of Publicity who would play a greatly enhanced role within the strategic apparatus.

WW Henderson's successor as head of publicity Arthur Bax maintained a fairly low profile. Bax's replacement, the journalist and Gaitskell aide John Harris, proved to be quite different. Harris, supported by a new deputy Percy Clark, facilitated a wholesale review of communications following his arrival at headquarters in 1962. The death of his patron and former employer Gaitskell did not hinder this work. Indeed new leader Harold Wilson keenly supported developments. Wilson, himself a noted student of organisation, famously chaired the committee whose 1955 report accused Labour of having 'a penny-farthing machine'. On assuming the leadership in 1963 he set about helping to remedy these apparent shortcomings by supporting what amounted to the largest changes in campaigning structures since those introduced in the immediate aftermath of the Great War.

Prior to 1962 Labour had made some attempts to modernise its approach to presentation. During the 1940s and 1950s future ministers like Patrick Gordon-Walker and Tony Benn first came to prominence when working to develop the party's use of radio and television broadcasting opportunities. It was Benn who hosted a celebrated series of innovative Party Election Broadcasts during the 1959 election. After the campaign had ended a group of party sympathisers commissioned market researcher Mark Abrams to undertake a survey of popular political attitudes. The influential work which emerged from this, the book *Must Labour Lose?*, helped raise awareness as to the potential benefits of polling.
By 1964 the party had completed what the Nuffield authors pointedly referred to as ‘The Modernisation of Labour’. A key feature of this process was the work of Harris, Clark and a new grouping of advisers drawn from commercial advertising, market research and public relations’ backgrounds. These included aides like David Kingsley and Michael Barnes whose original offers of help had been refused in 1959. Their work on the successful ‘Let’s Go’ campaign helped return a Labour government and also reinforced the view that good communications were now becoming an integral part of electoral success.

The 1964 Labour victory was followed by more resounding success in the 1966 election. The campaign was organised by the same strategists. The formidable partnership forged between these strategists and the new Prime Minister led to some of them joining Wilson's controversial 'kitchen cabinet'. The charge of presidentialism levelled at the Labour premier for his maintenance of such an entourage drew considerable criticism. These attacks reached a crescendo following the government's loss of office in the 1970 election. This defeat, combined with the ensuing debate over the Labour's programme, resulted in a more robust desire on the part of some to reassert their rights and powers to influence internal discussion within the party's federal structures, most obviously in the form of the Annual Conference.

Organisational issues became the focus of intense factional debate within the party and this inevitably influenced the development of strategy. Percy Clark, now Director of Publicity continued to work closely with the Prime Minister and key campaign advisers. Wilson's retirement in 1976 marked a significant turning point in the party's strategic development. A committed student of public opinion polling, Wilson had supported an ambitious market research programme from pollsters MORI prior to the two general 1974 elections. Successor Jim Callaghan's busy policy agenda combined with his need to manage a precarious Commons' majority left him with comparatively little time for strategic matters. He remained distant from a headquarters now presided over by General Secretary Ron Hayward, a tribune of the party's grassroots' left and an official wary of professional consultants. Following the 1979 election defeat, marketing advisers
such as Tim Delaney and Edward Booth-Clibborn expressed dissatisfaction about their effective isolation within the campaign organisation.

It is ironic that the most traumatic Labour campaign of modern times, in 1983, was also the first in which the party formally retained the services of an advertising agency. That said the relative distance of the firm, Johnny Wright and Partners, from albeit incoherent party decision-making structures limited the company's effectiveness. Nor did Wright have continuous access to Labour's own market research deliberations. These organisational problems were closely linked to political factors and, in particular, ongoing factional divisions within the party. These were in turn exacerbated by the then leader Michael Foot's personal preference for not playing a central role in the management of strategy.

Foot's enthusiasm for the practical rather than managerial side of campaigning created a vacuum. Harold Wilson had been the link person at the centre of an uneasy alliance he had in effect created. This had arisen because Labour's National Executive Committee system, traditionally responsible for campaigns, had been in effect supplemented by a network of strategic advisers. The latter often worked with individuals such as the leader rather than to official structures. Consequently though Foot did support the use of marketing expertise, his relatively low-key organisational role made effective decision-making difficult. The problem was exacerbated by the lack of a core group of leader aides and party officials able to execute committee decisions and liaise with outside advisers. The resulting campaign was thus paralysed before it started.

The experience of the 1983 campaign defeat greatly influenced new leader Neil Kinnock. He made the rejuvenation of campaign organisation a major priority. His leadership would see the party's embrace of political marketing techniques. More profoundly for this social democratic organisation, managerialist thinking also began to inform its approach to electioneering. Kinnock's reform of the party came in two major phases. During the run-up to the 1987 campaign, the first stage saw the reintegration of professional expertise into party structures now overseen by a new Campaign Strategy Committee. To ensure decisions were implemented, the
headquarters at Walworth Road were completely reorganised in 1985. These changes amounted to the most complete overhaul since 1918 and were even greater than those implemented in the early 1960s. A new four person Directorate was installed to assist the recently appointed General Secretary Larry Whitty. The only outsider to join this team, Peter Mandelson, took over a publicity portfolio now redesignated as Campaigns and Communications.

Soon after Mandelson took charge he commissioned advertising consultant Philip Gould to investigate how the party’s political communications might be improved. Following a critical report, Gould set up the so-called Shadow Communications Agency to help develop campaigns (Gould, 1998). Consisting of sympathetic professionals drawn from the marketing industries, the SCA was a voluntary group that helped the party in preparation for the 1987 election. As such it was little different to the informal advisory panels that had helped Morrison in the 1930s and Wilson in the 1960s and 1970s. The SCA also played a critical strategic role following the 1987 defeat. It played a central role in organising and presenting market research findings that proved to be central to Labour’s so-called Policy Review (Hughes and Wintour, 1990). As its title suggests the Review was a wide-ranging process that cumulatively served to firmly reposition the party towards the right.

Following the Review, and the disappointment of the 1992 election defeat, Labour continued to use marketing and advertising expertise. Initially key strategists under Kinnock, like Mandelson and Gould, were isolated under the new leadership of John Smith. Smith, however, did continue with the modernisation process in his brief tenure as leader between 1992-94. He, like successor Tony Blair, was adept at using the media to mobilise opinion within a greatly changed party apparatus. During this period much was made of the party’s ‘spin’ doctors’ ability to manipulate debates. The election of Tony Blair as leader in 1994 and Labour’s subsequent victories in 1997 and 2001 have done little to diminish this speculation as to these actors’ supposed power to subvert and control every facet of the organisation.
The Politics of Communication

Ideological Tensions.

The 1997 general election focused commentators’ minds on the political role of the mass media and ‘image-making’. This was reflected in the interest (and controversy) concerning the strategies being employed by the Labour Party to publicly promote its policies and leader Tony Blair. Opponents, notably Conservative Chairman Brian Mawhinney in his 1996 Party Conference speech, sought to portray Blair as a politician dependent on marketing research rather than principles. This argument had derived inspiration from earlier comments made by Clare Short, one of Blair’s Shadow Cabinet colleagues. The senior frontbench MP, in making her feelings public, was careful not to criticise the leader himself but did make telling references to the marketing conscious aides around him. Her anxieties were summed up in the phraseology used to describe what she termed ‘the people in the dark’ (Richards, 1996). In developing her argument, Short questioned the wisdom of Labour’s and these particular advisers’ apparent over-reliance on polling research. Far from being just a point of contention in the Labour Party of the late 1980s and 1990s, similar sentiments have long informed strategic debate since the organisation was created at the beginning of the century.

The debate over Labour Party strategy has long been analysed in terms of the historical rivalries that have existed between different factions and bureaucrats within the organisation. Yet the discussion has also had an ideological dimension involving two contrasting views of political communication. Initially popular in the party, the ‘educationalist’ approach to the public was the hallmark of the early campaign work pursued by pioneering supporters in groups like the Independent Labour Party and Socialist Sunday Schools. With the rise of a mass democracy during the inter-war period, the wisdom of such political methods was challenged and a rival school ‘persuasional’ school of thought emerged. Following 1945 and the intensification of mediated politics, this alternative approach began to gain wider acceptance within the party. Most dramatically it was the same opinion-formers who once adhered to educational methods, notably leader Harold Wilson and the Party’s Chair of Publicity Alice Bacon, that were central to the transformation of Labour into a more marketing conscious organisation during the early
1960s. With the advent of modern political marketing, the debate has been submerged. However, as Clare Short’s comments suggest, the tension is not far from the surface.

The growth of political marketing has also led to the raising of ethical questions about the nature of elections, participation and democratic accountability. The primary concern relates more to the ends rather than the means of the process and is likely to feature in future Labour party not to mention scholarly debates. Put simply the political marketing concept raises a fundamental question about how democracy operates and, more specifically the place of those social and economic groups who are predominantly stable in their voting habits. With political marketing the underlying assumption encourages parties to concentrate their most serious efforts on winning support from the elusive undecided or ‘floating’ voter. Consequently large sections of the public and their views, needs and wants may be taken for granted primarily because they exhibit at least a moderately firm partisan disposition. Commenting on the 1992 general election, one observer summed up the consequences of such an approach to politics:

‘In image terms, then, the denouement of British democracy’s ultimate drama was already defined as a dust-up between ‘electability’ and ‘niceness’, to be fought out against a backdrop of deep public scepticism.’ (Hill, 1992, p. 3)

Media coverage has exacerbated the perceived importance of targeting: witness the constant references to the Conservatives’ victory in the working-class Essex seat of Basildon in 1992. In 1997 it was Labour’s triumph in Edgbaston, a constituency disproportionately home to the middle income groups of so-called ‘Middle England’, which was deemed so important to the overall result. By 2001 the talk was of the key constituency of ‘pebbledash people’, so-called because they are aspirational voters living in semi-detached houses. This emphasis on such targets, sometimes the most politically ‘volatile’ segments of the electorate, can have a detrimental effect in that large sections of the public come to be regarded as ‘voting fodder’. Labour, in particular is caught in a dilemma when it attempts to attract new groups of supporters whilst simultaneously trying to retain the support of its core vote amongst the communities of the poor, unemployed, the North, and ethnic minorities. In the aftermath of the election of the first far-
right British National Party Councillor in 1993, an editorial in a leading left journal highlighted this problem when it stated:

‘The white working-class who have moved towards the BNP are not ‘naturally’ or innately racist. A large part of their drift towards the far right is the product of their abandonment by the established parties—particularly the Labour Party, in its modern, managerial, middle-class guise. Their concerns need to be addressed, their opinions valued, their needs dealt with, not dismissed or ignored.’(New Statesman and Society, 1994)

Arguably a desirable and democratic consequence of modern political marketing is to make parties responsive to the widest section of the electorate. But the implementation of this very approach can result in having the opposite effect in that some voters appear to become ‘more equal than others’. The dramatic decline in turnout at the 2001 general election has underlined the twin problems of voter disengagement and democratic accountability. Ironically this is occurring at the same time that marketing expertise and techniques are, in theory, enabling politicians to better understand their audiences.

**Intra-party Power.**

Avraham Shama(1976) noted that, in adopting a political marketing approach to campaigning, communications become targeted as groups other than the general public, such as the party (in particular those who vote in leadership elections), and the agenda-setting media. Labour’s adoption of this professional political communications’ approach has helped alter the nature of the party (as well as the political environment it operates within) over the course of the last decade. In this way the non-party media, especially the national press, have been able to play an increasingly influential role in internal matters including the recent leadership contests. Thus, in 1994, the newspapers read by the bulk of Labour party members were able to help by running features in sympathy with the central message of Blair’s case, founded as it was on the belief that he could best realise the party’s aspiration to win governmental office (Franklin and Larsen, 1994; see also Wring, 1998).
The adoption of a political marketing approach to the electorate has been an important precursor to the development of the so-called 'New Labour' party led by Tony Blair. Set in historical context, this shift has enabled the current Labour leadership to exercise a greater amount of control over electoral strategy than was afforded their predecessors. As Richard Rose noted: 'The activities of campaigning are less concerned with the flow of influence from voters to candidates than they are with the flow of influence within the political party themselves' (Rose, 1974, p. 90). By comparison with modern political marketing, the eras of mass propaganda and media campaigning were characterised by a more flexible, diffuse approach to political communication tempered by various internal party dynamics which militated against the investment of supreme power in the leadership. Recently this has been challenged through the professionalisation and centralisation of the organisation under the present leadership and its guiding faction, the 'modernisers'. And arguably here there is a connection with the organisational legacy of previous self-styled moderniser Harold Wilson given it was he who first integrated professional advisers into the party's strategic decision making structures. As one contemporary critic put it, the campaign team regularly had to listen to smartly dressed advisers in 'gingham shirts'.

The Labour leadership has been able to use the marketing concept to redefine policy, increase control over campaign strategy and formulate political agendas to their advantage. Introduced during the Policy Review of 1987-91, the new strategic orientation has greatly benefited the Party hierarchy. This has been done through the promotion of what Panebianco refers to as 'electoral professionals' in order to help them manage the proliferation in decision-making functions at the centre (Panebianco, 1988, p. 264; see also Webb, 1992; and Shaw, 1994). Reflecting their status in the Labour Party this group can be identified as the 'Leader's Executive' (Minkin, 1992). In addition the embrace of political marketing has also allowed the leadership to involve what might be termed 'auxiliary institutions' in party business. This has meant favoured external media have increasingly come to set the internal agenda as have the views of those segments of potential Labour voters, as represented by commissioned private polling, whose electoral decisions are deemed essential to the party's future. Reflecting on his own experiences as an adviser to the now defunct Social Democratic Party, senior advertising
executive Winston Fletcher concluded that such a mode of operation constituted an integral part of the modern political marketing process:

‘The things that were achieved were done by individual politicians, working with other individuals, bypassing the committees. This is the only way marketing can be carried out effectively by political parties: short lines of communication between leaders and the doors. That's the way the Tories operate; that's the way Labour now operates. It's the only way that works.’ (Fletcher, 1990)  

Leon Epstein’s far-sighted ‘contagion from the right’ thesis would appear to have been largely borne out in the case of the Labour Party (Epstein, 1967). The leader and his agents now direct an organisation that once boasted strong horizontal structures and a participatory democracy. Within this framework, contributions were drawn from a wide cross-section of affiliates including members of the Shadow Cabinet, Parliamentary Labour Party, National Executive, local parties, trade unions and allied pressure groups. Now these actors are more marginalised in the decision-making process. Arguably this change has less to do with the force of argument but more with the entrenchment of marketing within the organisation. It is a transformation that has not been universally welcomed by those who have stood to lose out. Speaking at the 1992 Annual Conference, delegate Teresa Pearce received a warm response when she commented:

‘We have allowed ourselves to be marketed by paid image makers, but in whose image are we being made? It is not an image I recognise. It is not an image I want to recognise. We should beware of the paid image maker. These are people, mainly middle-class graduates, who have learned their socialism from market research and opinion polls.’(Labour Party, 1992, p.68)

And yet widespread support in the auditorium and indeed from some on the platform Pearce’s views, and those of many like her, have done little to halt a ‘modernisation’ process built in no small part on the wholesale professionalisation of the party. Critically this in turn helped to catapult Tony Blair into the leadership in 1994 and then government in 1997.
Conclusions.

In order to trace the historical transformation of electioneering in Britain it has been useful to draw on an evolutionary model popular in marketing. Three different periods of campaigning can be identified, each comparable with what are known as the product, sales and marketing orientations in the development of commercial strategy. With reference to electoral politics, the respective phases can be labelled the propaganda, media and political marketing approaches to electioneering. Using this framework it is possible to understand the important, if previously largely unrecognised, part that basic marketing concepts have played throughout the campaigning life of the Labour Party in Britain.

Contrary to popular perceptions, advertising and image consciousness have had a place in party strategists’ considerations since the granting of near universal suffrage in 1918 ushered in an era of mass electoral propaganda. The arrival of mass television in the 1950s strengthened the need for image management and Labour, under Harold Wilson, openly embraced media campaigning and the advice of professional publicists. Here the party began to abandon its traditional adherence to more didactic means of political communication in favour of mass media approaches to electioneering.

The final stage of strategic development, the embrace of political marketing, came during the leadership of Neil Kinnock and revealed the depth and scale of change that has taken place in Labour Party organisation since the 1983 defeat. This application and usage of marketing from the mid-1980s onwards has led to important structural changes within the party which have collectively combined to afford the leader and his aides greater power over all other sections. Arguably the management of Labour under Tony Blair is now more centralised than at any time since 1931.

Bibliography.


Neither is political marketing in this country a product of American importation: witness the Conservatives’ decision to hire Guinness advertisers’ S.H. Benson during the inter-war years. This section is drawn from Wring (1997).

Fletcher’s view was confirmed in a leaked memo from Labour marketing adviser Philip Gould which made headline news when it was made public. In the ‘Unfinished Revolution’, Gould argued for a greater centralisation of decision-making within the party, something that had effectively already happened (The Guardian, 12th September 1995). The memo later became the title for Gould’s campaign memoirs (Gould, 1998).