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## *Selling socialism*

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***Selling socialism - Marketing the Early Labour Party.***

The way marketing has come to dominate modern politics was graphically underlined in 2000 with the publication of a memo to Tony Blair from chief strategist Philip Gould in which the latter wrote about 'New' Labour being a 'contaminated brand'. Gould's correspondence further explored how they might set about winning over the public a year in advance of a general election (in which the party was, of course, comfortably re-elected). The memo proved controversial and made front-page headlines and, in doing so, garnered disapproval from those who took issue with the analysis, Blair's reliance on it, or both. These criticisms added to the longstanding charge that Labour was obsessed with style to the detriment of substance. It is important to recognise similar things were said of Neil Kinnock., the leader who arguably supervised the more fundamental changes to party policy and organisation that Blair would eventually inherit. Similarly it is noteworthy that many of Kinnock's main lieutenants, including Gould and Peter Mandelson, took up influential positions when Labour eventually gained office in 1997. Many contemporary accounts (particularly journalistic ones) of the Blair phenomenon fail to acknowledge the role and significance of the changes made to the party to 1992 and before the 'invention' of 'new' Labour. If the Kinnock period is somewhat neglected, less is said and relatively little is known about the previous party strategists who began experimenting with marketing techniques in developing their campaigning.

If studies consider the historical development of electioneering in Britain at all, there tends to be an assumption that professional involvement began some time after the Second World War and that it was primarily due to the arrival of mass commercial television and the concurrent expansion of the advertising industry. Consequently the Conservative victory of 1959 and the Labour win in the subsequent campaign of 1964 are sometimes identified as breakthrough elections whereby the major parties embraced advertising, public relations and market research expertise. In the latter case Harold Wilson recruited a formidable 'kitchen cabinet' of largely un-elected advisers and hired 'spin doctors' including the (in)famous North East political fixer T. Dan Smith. Here there are obvious parallels with the Blair leadership and these can be further extended to the way both men campaigned on the theme of a 'New Britain' and were compared to youthful, charismatic US Democratic Presidents. And like his

successor, Wilson's approach to political presentation attracted internal criticism for being preoccupied with images rather than issues. Interesting in both cases those supporting and opposing Labour's highly self-conscious changes to its publicity appeared unaware that they were participating in a debate that had raged almost as long as the party had existed.

### ***Dealing with a Mass Electorate.***

The Representation of the People Act 1918 trebled the electorate and awakened politicians to the campaigning possibilities of mass communications'. Prior to then electioneering had been largely conceived of in terms of canvassing, leafleting and platform oratory and these activities remained an important aspect of campaigns well into the Twentieth Century. Consequently following the First World War party strategists began to evaluate opportunities offered them by more novel means of propaganda in the form of film, broadcasting and professional advertisements. The wealthy Conservatives were quick to investigate these methods although Labour fared less well due to a combination of bureaucratic inertia, internal rivalries and inadequate finances. The party did, however, form its first Press and Publicity Department in October 1917 as part of a wholesale organisational review that coincided with the introduction of a newly revised constitution. The section attempted to promote the party's case through a largely hostile, privately owned print media and a nominally independent but heavily regulated BBC. It soon became apparent that Labour would need to try and engage the electorate more directly and many organisers believed the party should do so by promoting the cause through the interpersonal means its healthy activist base.

A minority of Labour strategists began to dissent from the view that the grassroots' approach to campaigning was the only or most effective form of campaigning. Their view drew inspiration from the work of thinkers, notably as the prominent Fabian Society member and London School of Economics professor Graham Wallas. In his 1908 book *Human Nature in Politics* Wallas applied psychology to the study of democracy to question the widespread assumption that an informed, rational electorate existed. From this perspective, he argued 'image' was likely to play an increasing role in a more mediated politics in which the more successful campaigners might be those who were able to invoke 'as many and as strong emotions as possible'. Wallas's sentiments resonated with a number of Labour organisers with direct experience of the democratic process. In 1922 Philip Snowden argued propaganda should be designed to primarily appeal to 'very matter-of-fact people' rather than the 'higher intellectual'. Similarly in a 1924 article on 'The Psychology of Political Advertising' also for the party agents' journal *Labour Organiser*, the author acknowledged modern publicity methods could be used to

cultivate 'primitive emotions' but nevertheless encouraged his colleagues to investigate their potential deployment.

The desire to understand electorate became a prominent *Labour Organiser* theme during the 1920s. Contributors wrote about 'psychological appeal', the 'political psychology of the moment' and the need to strike the 'human chord'. Compelling evidence of the new 'scientific' approach came with publication of the highly original *Labour Organiser* series 'The Psychology of Political Parties' in 1922. The first instalment warned of the need to outdo Prime Minister Lloyd George in his ability as 'a past master of the psychology of the British people', and continued: 'Once we understand these psychological appeals and the hold they give on this or that strata of society we can understand better the lines upon which political policy, strategy, warfare, organisation and propaganda may best proceed'. Similarly a fellow commentator alluding to basic marketing concepts, urged fellow organisers to consider structuring appeals so as to reap electoral award by winning over of non-aligned voters or 'outsiders'. Emphasising the market analogy, another contributor wrote about the concepts of electoral 'swing' and the 'barometer' of public opinion.

***'Stratified Electioneering': theory and practice..***

The most important evidence that inter-war Labour organisers had some rudimentary conception of 'market research' came in December 1922 with the publication of an article by Sidney Webb, the leading intellectual who is less remembered for his important strategic work. The piece, entitled 'What is Stratified Electioneering', forms the earliest known attempt to 'segment' the electorate by dividing it up into different target groups of voters. In the article Webb noted: 'It has occurred to me, in watching the process of combined propaganda and advertising that we call electioneering, that one refinement of which it is capable is a certain amount of stratification'. Observing that mass democracy was 'characteristically grey', Webb argued Labour should consider targeting the constituent elements because, as he put it:

'Every elector has his own "colour", if we could only discover it. He differs in character and circumstances, temperament and vocation, religion and recreation- and in a thousand other ways from his fellow men. At present we tend to address them all in the same way, with the result of achieving everywhere a certain amount of "misfit". The 'colours', or 'strata' as Webb called them, could be placed in several categories, most obviously occupational classifications like liberal professional, shopkeeper, insurance agent and others.

Sidney Webb's call for stratified electioneering struck a chord with an influential group of party agents. The article itself earned the rare honour of a reprint in *Labour Organiser* within a decade of its first appearance. In organisational terms, the most significant endorsement came from party secretary Arthur Henderson who extolled the virtues of the concept to local agents prior to the 1929 general election. Similarly the official party campaign guide *The Conduct of Elections*, first published in 1931, also gave prominence to Webb's analysis. Author Harold Croft formulated his own set of 'strata' in segmenting the electorate and subdivided voters according to the psychological categorisations 'reliable', 'sympathisers', 'hesitants', 'opponents' and 'inert'. Others followed Webb's advice and used more standard terminologies to identify target voters as weak Conservatives, Liberals, workers, women, religious and in other ways.

Several Labour strategists were keen to court the support of non-traditional supporters and their discernible interest in the middle-class vote predates the major debates over this issue in relation to the party and its future that would take place in the 1950s/60s and again in the 1980s/90s. Consequently as early as 1922, agent Frank Smith was appealing to colleagues to not 'slag off non-manual working-class people'. Writing the following year Herbert Morrison posed the question 'Can Labour win London without the Middle-classes?'. In firmly answering 'no' Morrison encouraged organisers to gain the confidence and votes of what he called 'brainworkers'. Others began to recognise many professionals were not innately Conservative. In 1925 one *Labour Organiser* contributor urged the party to target teachers because of their vulnerability to attacks from right-wing newspapers like the *Daily Mail* which were critical of so-called 'progressive education policies'.

***Brand Labour: the image in politics.***

Image based appeals had, in a sense, already formed a part of the earliest Labour publicity appeals contained in the symbols, banners and the other insignia associated with the trades unions and socialist societies that had been responsible for launching the party. Even the party's name can be viewed as the first of several attempts to develop a distinctive 'brand' identity; as the Conservative Party Chairman Lord Woolton acknowledged half a Century later:

'The word "Conservative" was certainly not a political asset when compared with the

Socialist word "Labo

In 1924 a brand conscious Labour leadership had devised a competition, inviting supporters to design a logo to replace the 'polo mint' like motif that had previously appeared on party literature. The winning entry, emblazoned with the word 'Liberty' over a design incorporating a torch, shovel and quill symbol, was popularised through its sale, in badge form, for a shilling. Later the same decade another image of

the then leader Ramsay MacDonald was merchandised in recognition of the potential influence and symbolic power of 'presidential' appeals. The same leader made a somewhat prophetic move in 1925 by announcing a competition to find a replacement for the traditional party anthem, Jim Connell's socialist anthem 'The Red Flag'. Launched in conjunction with the sympathetic *Daily Herald* newspaper, the contest fielded 300 entries. But, in spite of this stiff opposition, Connell's song remained the party's and outlived the leadership of the later to defect MacDonald.

In the same year as MacDonald's song contest, a rival politician and publicist Sir Charles Higham wrote that 'the Labour Party since its inception has used advertising'. Higham was no doubt mindful of the early campaigners' many visually arresting posters such as the 1906 election classic 'Hope for Labour' and Gerald Spenser Pryse's anti-House of Lords' masterpiece 'Labour Clears the Way' depicting workers storming the doors to the chamber. Pryse and other designers provided further material including the striking 1923 image 'Greet the Dawn: Give Labour it's Chance' image which formed the backdrop to the election after which the party took office for the first time. Prior to that campaign the Conservatives had also considered hiring an advertising agency, a first for a modern British party, but it was not until 1929 that they employed two firms, Holford Bottomley and SH Benson's.

The Holford and Benson firms were members of an industry that rapidly grew to be worth around £100 million per annum during the 1920s. Benson's continued to work for the Conservatives and its National coalition allies in the 1930s, the same decade in which the agency produced its most famous slogan and images for the 'Guinness is Good for You' brewing campaign. In response Labour considered hiring an agency to help with advertising prior to the 1935 general election but abandoned the idea, officially on the grounds of cost. Given the subsequent campaign was one of the most expensive in history, it is likely that those in the party who objected to publicity methods more readily associated with capitalist persuasion played an influential role in preventing the recruitment of an agency.

***Selling Socialism: the London experiment.***

Several Labour politicians and supporters remained sympathetic to using commercial style methods of campaigning and one even argued the promotion of 'Bovril' offered a role model. In 1937 some of these strategists took part in a conference on 'Selling Socialism' organised by the prototype Labour 'think tank', the Fabian Society. Delegates including future leader Hugh Gaitskell, Richard Crossman and Michael Stewart discussed the role of the press, BBC and publicity related events at home and abroad. They were also joined by George

Wansborough, who had recently played an influential role advising what, in marketing terms, had proven to be something of a landmark campaign for the Labour party. Wansborough together with Clem Leslie, Robert Fraser and others associated with major advertising agencies including the London Press Exchange had been recruited by the leader of London County Council Herbert Morrison to help ensure Labour was re-elected in 1937 after serving its first ever term running the authority. Morrison had already overseen the reorganisation of Council publicity with the help of professional consultants and was keen to do the same with the local Labour Party.

Having spent part of his early career working in the media, Herbert Morrison greatly valued the use of advertising and public relations and was himself a skilled self-publicist used to giving off-the-record briefings to favoured journalists and staging 'photo-opportunities'. Consequently he recruited a team of volunteers including Wansborough and his colleagues to help him plan for the election. With the aid of a healthy budget, the team devised an advertising campaign promoting the key issues of housing, education and the leader. The themes were distilled into various arresting poster images including one featuring Morrison with two children against a background slogan of 'Labour is Building Healthy Britons'. In true Blair style the image was accompanied by mention of five 'pledges': 'Better Homes, Good Schools, Health Care, Play Fields, Lidos' and rounded off with 'Let Labour Finish the Job'. The promotion of the leader and his determined control of the campaign were criticised within the Labour Party but the influence of their objections was mitigated by the subsequent victory which even a leading trade journal proclaimed had 'set the standard' for business. Needless to say they are remarkable parallels between Morrison's approach and the similarly controversial career and work of his spin-doctoring grandson Peter Mandelson half a century later.

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