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The Marketing of Politics and the Politics of Marketing

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A defining characteristic of the so-called 'new' Labour project is its ignorance of history. This is self-evident in a strategy that has continually emphasised the importance of the present and future over the past.[1] The party's approach to political communication is offered as an example of how much Labour's image has been transformed or, to use Tony Blair's preferred phrase, 'modernised'. By contrast this study has attempted to place recent developments in historical context is mindful of leading theorist Philip Kotler's observation: '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'. Drawing on his own experience the eminent practitioner Winston Fletcher has developed this point:

> '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.'[2]

The preceding chapters have traced Labour's evolution through the identified stages of propaganda, media and marketing campaigning. The early party adhered to an approach predicated on gaining maximum exposure through direct and mediated communications in an inter-war era that also witnessed limited but significant innovations in electioneering technique involving experimentation with film, advertising, radio, image projection. During this time Labour introduced its first logo and the party even began winning plaudits from pioneering American students of campaigning like Ralph Casey and Dean McHenry.[3] The early 1960s saw Labour embracing mediated electioneering through the use of public relations, market research and

advertising expertise. Thereafter professionals would help to craft the party's message in each subsequent general election, albeit with varying degrees of influence. But it was only with the organisational and policy reforms of the mid to late 1980s that this tier of consultants finally emerged as the key source of strategic thinking. The result was that marketing concepts as well as personnel and techniques now informed everything the party did. This concluding discussion explores some of the key themes that have arisen from this study and assesses the continuities as well as changes in the way Labour has developed as an electoral organisation over the course of a century.

The Eclipse of Educationalism.

Analysis of Labour's internal divisions has understandably focused on factional and ideological disputes. Less recognised are the tensions that have existed over political communication. Early campaigns were dominated by an 'educationalist' approach associated with Robert Blatchford, the ILP, the Socialist Sunday Schools and others who believed in 'making' socialists. It was their didactic methods and evangelical fervour that shaped Labour's early identity:

> '(Its) policies… are of a special type; they presumably flow from a philosophical perspective which makes a critique of existing society and enunciates as a major objective the reconstruction of the social order. That the Labour Party is branded with a special stamp has more than once been indicated by Harold Wilson: "(It) is more than a political organisation; it is a crusade, or it would be better that it did not exist."'[4]

Educationalist orthodoxy encouraged inter-personal, fact-filled communication as a means of converting the public to the 'cause' in the hope of winning votes and countering the Conservatives and their media allies' frequently emotive appeals. This effort required a healthy grassroots network of local activists ready and able to proselytise on the party's behalf.

Universal suffrage led some organisers to challenge the efficacy of trying to make socialists and, influenced by ideas associated with Graham Wallas, they began arguing it would be better to 'sell' socialism to a burgeoning electorate through the mass media and advertising. Wallas' fellow

Fabian Sidney Webb urged campaigners to discriminate between voters and target certain groups. His advocacy of what he termed 'stratified electioneering' reinforced the persuasionalist case for making shorter-term appeals to what was perceived to be a largely apathetic public vulnerable to fear filled Tory overtures. To this end one agent suggested Labour adopt 'perpetual electioneering' while another championed the brand Bovril as a campaigning role model. The preoccupation with winning less committed voters encouraged Herbert Morrison to talk up the importance of cultivating non-traditional supporters like the middle-class 'brainworker'. Morrison promoted the value of professional publicity on Labour's National Executive although he failed to persuade colleagues to appoint an advertising agency in time for the 1935 campaign. The following election, held a decade later, appeared to vindicate the educationalist approach when a relatively unmediated, inter-personal campaign culminated with a famous victory.

The landslide triumph of 1945 rested on Labour's declared intention to rebuild the country through a collectivist welfare state designed to empower and emancipate the citizenry. The government's social democratic covenant pointedly identified 'ignorance' as one of the five 'giant' problems and resolved to combat this through a massive extension of state schooling. Educationalist thinking also continued to directly influence Labour's campaigning, most notably during the party's 1955 'penny farthing' inquiry into organisation. The 1959 defeat to a highly professional Conservative operation began a more urgent strategic re-evaluation and led a Fabian report to call for a 'permanent' campaign. Aneurin Bevan inspired the opposition in a debate that culminated with the once sceptical Hugh Gaitskell and Harold Wilson embracing mediated electioneering. Their actions provided an important rejoinder to the critiques of 'admass' politics that had previously influenced party thinking. Wilson, in particular, became a highly effective television performer and popularised soundbites such as the 'golden handshake' and 'white heat of technology'. Professionalism soon became something of a 'cargo cult' within the party and underlined how, in the words of one adviser: 'the managerial element in the party (had) won the argument and the theorists lost'.[5]

The leader's image and other presentational considerations dominated party campaigns whose primary purpose became 'winning votes not education'.[6] Like Tony Blair, Wilson used the 'New

Britain' slogan, employed controversial spin-doctors such as T Dan Smith and was compared to a charismatic Democratic President. But the earlier prime minister's career was soon beset with serious problems which contributed to the 1970 defeat, undermined Labour's unity and weakened the leader's authority. The ensuing shift to the left fostered the re-emergence of an educationalist coalition of radical activists and more conservative traditionalists keen on reasserting the importance of grassroots' campaign initiatives. Wilson's successors James Callaghan and Michael Foot responded by promoting Labour as a virtuous party against the slick Conservatives and their high profile advertising agents Saatchi and Saatchi. Foot, like his mentor Bevan, was a living embodiment of the educationalist tradition and preferred addressing public meetings to taking part in studio interviews. His reticence to engage with the media created difficulties for strategists such as Johnny Wright & Partners, the first advertising agency formally retained by Labour during the 1983 election. The work of the firm and other advisers was hampered by an unresolved dilemma over what campaigning was for as one of the professionals involved later revealed: 'Electioneering is about persuasion not education (Labour, are you listening?)'.[7]

The educationalist critique of impersonal, image based electioneering transcended Labour's traditional factional divide by attracting support from across the movement. That said the most vocal proponents of the position tended to come from the left and is why the Greater London Council's campaign against abolition proved crucial in changing party attitudes towards marketing communication. The role of leading left-winger Ken Livingstone in this high profile venture promoted the benefits of advertising, public relations and market research to a sceptical internal audience. The GLC campaign helped new leader Neil Kinnock and his campaigns co-ordinator Robin Cook form an advisory 'breakfast' group of professional advisers which acted as the precursor to the Shadow Communications Agency. Cook was greatly influenced by the Conservative approach depicted in BBC Panorama documentary 'the Marketing of Margaret' although in many ways the leadership were picking up where Wilson had left off, albeit in a different political and media environment.

The eclipse of educationalism was symbolised in the way the Policy Review of the late 1980s began with the ill-conceived Labour Listens process, an exercise designed to appease

traditionalists but which actually succeeded in misrepresenting their approach as outmoded, impractical and irrelevant. The later, and similarly hollow, Policy Forum and Big Conversation exercises served a similar purpose by promoting the illusion of dialogue between the leadership and whomever they wanted to mollify. The kind of political culture fostered by the Review and the later pseudo consultations attracted criticism from within the party. As Ken Livingstone put it following the 1992 defeat, Labour had been turned into 'some sort of advertising agency'. It was a concern increasingly being voiced outside of the labour movement; as *The Financial Times* demonstrated on the day the party was re-elected after 18 years out of office:

> 'It (the election) was a struggle between packaging and content, between politicians as soap powder and parties as vehicles for informed debate. Without question, the soap powder won… marketing was all that was left'.[8]

The once influential belief in educationally based campaigning had become an alien concept to the contemporary party leadership. Chief marketing strategists Philip Gould admitted as much when he advised the by now Prime Minister Blair that Labour's 'contract' with voters was as 'emotional' as it was 'rational'. It was precisely this kind of sentiment that had earlier led former deputy leader Roy Hattersley to revisit Wilson's famous aphorism in concluding his party was now 'less of a moral crusade and more a marketing exercise'. [9]

Communication and Control.

The organisational and policy reforms that transformed Labour during the 1980s were anticipated by at least one commentator during the party's deep crisis at the beginning of that decade: '… the development of mass communications has accentuated the importance and autonomy of political leaderships over their actual followings. What is in effect political marketing, via opinion polls and television image, has become a principal instrument of political power, displacing the apparent importance of corporate attachment to unions or party membership- these may even appear to be liabilities'.[10] The relationship between intra-party power and bureaucracy had previously been explored in the work of Ostrogorski, Michels, Schumpeter and others. Michels' case material had been the European social democratic party and although the study did not

explicitly examine Britain, it informed subsequent research on Labour. Far from being a peripheral exercise, electioneering came to be seen as increasingly crucial in defining strategic objectives as Schumpeter concluded: 'The psycho-technics of party management and party advertising, slogans and marching tunes, are not accessories. They are the essence of politics. *So is the political boss*'.[11]

Ironically the catalysts for Labour's post-1983 centralisation of power- leadership defections followed by a landslide defeat- had also been the motivating factors behind the reassertion of intra-party democracy half a century before. The traumatic 1931 election had led the party's extra-parliamentary wing to promote its collective influence and reign in the PLP leadership's authority. The National Executive's primacy in strategic and organisational matters was confirmed and the committee became less dependent on key individuals like Ramsay MacDonald and Arthur Henderson and more receptive to union and constituency affiliates. The reassertion of a participatory model of decision-making was one reason why London leader Herbert Morrison denied his educationalist inclined local party an effective role in the 1937 election because he feared they would veto the use of advertisers. Morrison's belief in professional advisers was not widely shared at a national headquarters distrustful of what Cole had termed 'clever' outsiders. The prevailing organisational culture meant experts only came to prominence after three successive election defeats in the 1950s and a protracted debate in which revisionists on Labour's right identified renewal of the party's image as a major issue. Their belief that mediated campaigning would enable the leadership to better co-ordinate and, by extension, control the message met firm opposition from left-wingers like Richard Crossman:

> 'A Left party, moreover is inevitably more concerned with policy than with image, just as a Right-wing party is inevitably more concerned with personality and image than with policy. A Left party is inevitably democratic in a way that a Right party is not.'[12]

The pro-Gaitskell Campaign for Democratic Socialism demonstrated the practical advantages of public relations when it covertly lobbied sympathetic journalists working for mainstream news organisations in a bid to counter the grassroots left. It was, however, former left-winger Harold Wilson who did most to augment the strategic influence of the post of leader. Wilson was

characteristically presidential in both his image and party management and worked in close consultation with a kitchen cabinet of mainly unelected advisers. His aides co-ordinated a wider network of marketing and public relations consultants, one of whom later acknowledged their influence: 'As we translated policies into language that electors could understand, wrote ads and developed literature, not only the tone change but the emphasis and relative weight of the policies did too'.[13] The arrangement underlined the relevance of Epstein's far-sighted 'contagion from the right' theory on the replacement, by stealth, of mass democratic parties by unelected professional experts. In effect Wilson's tenure served as a strategic 'half way house' between the parties of MacDonald and Blair and demonstrated the increased importance of electioneering as 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'.[14]

Party dissatisfaction with the Wilson government's performance found an outlet with the revival of serious factional disputes between the Labour right and left in the 1970s. The leader's power base was challenged by a more proactive and left-wing National Executive and General Secretary. Wilson's immediate successors both faced serious crises that made effective party management and use of marketing specialists difficult. Michael Foot supported the reassertion of National Executive authority and the replacement of Wilson's informal expert consultations by a more transparent committee based decision-making. Changing a campaign structure that had been fostered over twenty years created problems that were compounded by the recriminations that engulfed the 'very internalised' party that had emerged from the 1979 defeat.[15] Preparations for the subsequent general election of 1983 were paralysed before they started and the subsequent campaign was undermined by internal rivalries, unclear decision-making procedures and, most crucially, the absence of a network of aides and officials able to implement agreements.

Foot's successor Neil Kinnock invoked memories of the 1983 debacle in his mission to convince the Labour of the need for change. An unprecedented programme of organisational and policy reforms greatly enhanced the power and influence of his own aides, key officials, marketing consultants and specially recruited American political consultants. Collectively what Shaw terms

the 'strategic community' subverted and then usurped the authority of the National Executive whilst simultaneously marginalising rival sources of advice from independent minded consultants such as occasional PR expert Lynne Franks and Labour's longstanding pollsters MORI.[16] Directing this process was head of Campaigns and Communications Peter Mandelson, a loyal Kinnock lieutenant and the contact person for the secretive Shadow Communications Agency. Ad hoc initiatives like Red Wedge were phased out in favour of a more tightly controlled and explicitly mediated approaches. Like his grandfather Herbert Morrison, Mandelson developed a formidable personal reputation and a keen interest in forging links between the party and its sympathisers in the marketing industry. Morrison's innovative London campaign and the Mandelson co-ordinated general election effort fifty years later were both lauded as groundbreaking efforts and parallels between the campaigns extended to their content, much of which revolved around promoting the leader's image. In the latter case the exposure Kinnock got helped him defy the conventional wisdom that losing elections necessarily weakened a politician.[17] Ultimately both campaigns demonstrated how the secretive cultivation of professional strategists, media contacts and wealthy donors could and would be used to subvert the party's democratic ethos and structures.

The 1987 defeat led to the Policy Review, an exercise whose value: '… lay as much in persuading the party of the need for change, as in persuading the public of Labour's electability'. According to one of the SCA advisers involved the aim of the process was to create a synergy between Labour's substance and its now rejuvenated style.[18] Some left-wingers viewed the Review as a threat to the autonomy of the Annual Conference and National Executive and supported a leadership challenge in 1988. Kinnock's subsequent victory in that contest helped forge the highly centralised operation Tony Blair would eventually inherit. Blair also reassembled most of his predecessor's team. Philip Gould reoccupied his influential role as chief marketing strategist and advised Blair to pursue the 'unfinished revolution' by taking untrammelled control of campaigning. Yet as one practitioner observed, this was something the Review had already delivered:

> '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.'[19]

Like other influential aides, Kinnock's former chief of staff Charles Clarke joined the Blair entourage before being eventually appointed to the new Cabinet post of Party Chairman after the 2001 election victory. Gaitskellites had first proposed such a portfolio; the fact it appropriated the title of its Conservative counterpart not to mention the name of the elected head of Labour's National Executive underlined the degree to which the party could now be reorganised according to the leader's whim. The sidelining of the party's representative structures was encouraged by the introduction of more ad hoc forms of 'consultation' involving forums and ballots which, according to the foremost authorities on Labour membership, were hardly an effective substitute: 'Plebiscitary politics is really designed to legitimise decisions already taken by the leadership and is not in any meaningful sense a deliberative process involving grassroots party members. In this kind of politics a small group of people around the leadership decide which issues will be put to a vote of the members, and they decide on the framing and the wording of the questions'.[20]

The party's affiliated trade unions, collectively the most potent source of internal opposition, became increasingly reluctant to challenge the leadership due to a combination of self-restraint, internal rivalries and policy divisions. Despite their role in sustaining Labour throughout its troublesome the wider movement's involvement in intra as well as inter-party politics was routinely questioned in hostile media coverage. Just as the Conservative New Right benefited from the prejudiced and distorted reporting of the unions during the 1970s so did Labour's leadership twenty years later. The emasculation of party structures meant the Blair government sustained only one Conference defeat in its first term despite vigorous internal opposition to certain policies. A fast declining membership increasingly became of marginal influence in a series of debates over controversial measures such as single parent benefit cuts, public private partnerships and finance initiatives, foundation hospitals, student top-up fees and, most critically of all, the invasion of Iraq.

If the post-Review settlement diminished the importance of party members it simultaneously encouraged the growing myriad of policy entrepreneurs working for think tanks, lobbyists, pressure groups and assorted front organisations funded by corporate interests. They found a welcome audience in a leadership that was proud to proclaim Labour as 'the party of business' in a 1997 election broadcast. The private sector reciprocated by helping to finance a burgeoning tier of 'electoral professionals' undertaking capitally intense marketing activities aimed at the 'opinion electorate'.[21] Polling feedback and those responsible for collating it were now integral to the policy making process although there was a marked restriction on the flow of this kind of information within the party hierarchy. When Clare Short criticised the 'people in the dark' advising Blair she made the arguably more revealing observation that National Executive members were denied access to Labour's own focus group findings under Blair (and Kinnock though not Smith). The admission confirmed that only a few trusted aides were in any position to make informed comments on the quality or implications of the polling. By contrast the rest of the party had to rely on key media 'auxiliaries' from those agenda-setting and :Labour inclined newspapers like the *Guardian* to provide them with partial accounts of leaked researching findings.

The leadership approach of Kinnock and Blair was effortlessly reproduced in office when the party finally took over an already highly centralised system of government in 1997. Prime Ministerial Press Secretary Alistair Campbell, now supervising a public relations state inherited from Thatcher, did little to dispel Labour's reputation for ruthless news management. Campbell's reformed communication and information service was routinely subjected to the familiar charge that it was dominated by spin, the desire to be 'on message' and the kind of 'control freakery' associated with the party's Millbank headquarters. The image of a malign, manipulative government was reinforced during the so-called lobbygate saga in which Labour insider Derek Draper made various embarrassing claims including the plausible observation that most of the 17 most influential people in government were unelected aides and not ministers.[22] The Prime Minister's allegiance to this burgeoning network of loyalist appointees was demonstrated in 2001 when ministerial spin-doctor Jo Moore sent a colleague an e-mail on the morning of September 11th suggesting it would be 'a good day to bury bad news'. Blair's failure to orchestrate the

immediate removal of Moore led to more intensive questioning of Downing Street's media ethics during the government's second term. The resulting culture of mistrust was a contributory factor to Campbell's eventual departure from government in 2003.

The Completed Evolution: how the new right emasculated the Labour Party.

In a compelling critique of Downs, Mauser argued conviction politicians could further their interests by adopting a positioning strategy designed to appeal to both core and less partisan voters alike. The success of Thatcher, Reagan and Mitterrand underlined how marketing professionalism was about more than responding to public opinion because, as Heath and his colleagues explained: 'Situating oneself close to the policy preferences of the median voter is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for electoral success'. Conservative dominance of an 'oligopolistic' political marketplace during the 1980s was based on a realisation that a minority vote share of between 40-45% was enough to comfortably guarantee office.[23] Thatcher's coalition building 'politics of support' was, however, only one dimension of a wider project involving what Gamble describes as a 'politics of power' intent on reshaping the political landscape in the furtherance of ideological objectives; and herein lies an important difference between electoral and more conventional marketing theory and practice: elected leaders are more readily able than individual commercial firms to shape their environment and most notably the institutions of state.[24]

Since its foundation Labour has been primarily engaged in forging a politics of support aided by extra-parliamentary sympathisers in the trade union and socialist movements. The party found itself operating in a state moulded by the innately conservative (if not Conservative) hierarchies of the church, monarchy, law, military, commerce and civil service. Collectively these institutions fostered a hostile climate where 'the best propaganda (was) completely unorganised'.[25] Blair's portrayal of Labour's failure in a 'Conservative Century' is based on a superficial historical analysis that neglects the underlying dynamics. Ultimately it took a most momentous event, the Second World War, to finally propel Labour into majority party status and a period of government

in which it came nearest to embracing the politics of power through a massive extension of the public sector and Welfare State.

The Attlee governments forged a social democratic consensus that withstood thirty years until the New Right sponsored programme of economic liberalisation designed to enrich business entrepreneurs and give voters the right to buy their council houses and shares in publicly owned assets. As Tony Benn observed it was now Margaret Thatcher and the Conservatives, not Labour, who were pursuing something akin to an educationalist campaign in their promotion of market individualism. The resulting redistribution of income in favour of the wealthy also gave the burgeoning middle and skilled working-classes more modest but perceptible gains. Despite its electoral success, the Thatcherite project remained controversial, blighted by poor polling ratings and dependent on powerful allies in the City and 'Tory press'. Labour's ultimate response was, to use Gould's phrase, 'concede and move on' through a Policy Review which downgraded its social democratic instincts and acquiesced to an emerging neo-liberal consensus.[26] The perception of electoral trends became as important as the trends themselves in a 'marketisation' of policy that eliminated apparently unpopular commitments but also succeeded in paralysing creative thinking:

> 'Unlike the revisionism of the 1950s, Kinnock's Policy Review was not so much a restatement of socialism (however flawed), as a cynical image-building capitulation to a seemingly hegemonic Thatcherism (which ironically, however, came too late, at a time when Thatcherism's own appeal and radicalism were waning)... Labour's philosophical bankruptcy became glaringly apparent. In the event, a party almost entirely concerned with image and media strategies failed to convince the electorate and lost its fourth consecutive general election'.[27]

Though the Policy Review encouraged caution it was a radical departure in its scope, status and the way polling contained in the report *Labour and Britain in the 1990s* played a formal agenda-setting role denied *Must Labour Lose?* thirty years before. Similarly whereas qualitative methods had been used since the Wilson era, the Review ensured they now became an indispensable tool of voter analysis. The motive for using the increasingly ubiquitous focus group was likened to the Rousseaun preoccupation with comprehending the General Will of 'the people'.[28] Selected

findings from studies would be leaked by leadership acolytes to media contacts in a bid to convince the party of the need for further reform. Labour's potential strengths were consistently underplayed and all but one of its perceived weaknesses exposed to scrutiny. The exception was Neil Kinnock, a leader whose poor public standing had led the previous pollster to question the decision to presidentialise campaigning in the run up to the 1987 election. Political expediency meant this issue was repeatedly suppressed in the party's qualitative research and analysis as the strategist responsible later explained: 'It is true I presented without compromise all negatives about all other aspects of Labour but not about its leader. I went far, but not the whole way. I put loyalty to Neil first'[29]. The protection of Kinnock's reputation culminated with an orchestrated campaign to implicate the party union link as a major contributory factor to the 1992 defeat. This largely irrelevant issue dominated the post-mortem and focused attention away from the shortcomings of a 'new' (model) Labour project that was, contrary to popular understandings, defeated in what was effectively its first electoral outing.

If the self-styled modernisers' coloured interpretations of focus group material continued to serve their own ideological purposes it also revealed the pervasive way these kinds of research findings were increasingly entering public debate at a time when traditional polling was being ridiculed for having 'failed' to predict the 1992 result. Given their trajectory the modernisers can, in spatial and historical terms, be more appropriately categorised as Labour's 'new right'. A defining characteristic of this group was the invaluable support it garnered from the national newspapers favoured by the membership as well as the initially sympathetic audience it received from the anti-left press and broadcasters whose impartiality was less rigid in covering intra-party affairs. Collectively these media uncritically accepted and framed debates in terms of 'moderniser' versus 'traditionalist' rather than the conventional left-right formula. The importance of journalistic agenda-setting was further demonstrated by the way it gave momentum to the new right's candidate for the leadership, Tony Blair, prior to the beginning of the formal contest in 1994. Similarly news coverage of the Clause Four debate reinforced Blair's claim that a 'new' party was emerging in place of 'old' Labour, a dubious concept that quickly became an accepted term for incompetence, extremism as well an unlikely range of ideological rivals. If it meant anything 'new' Labour created the circumstances that gave rise to Blair rather than he it. Subsequent changes

might be better characterised as a rebranding exercise designed to position the party further to the right on welfare, social and criminal justice policy matters in support of the leadership's pursuit of 'desperate respectability'. According to Naomi Klein this so-called 'triangulation' strategy closely imitated that of the 'new' Democrat strategist Dick Morris:

> 'Blair… took a page from the marketers of Revolution Soda and successfully changed the name of his party from the actual description of its loyalties and policy proclivities (that would be "labour") to the brand-asset descriptor "New Labour".'[30]

The disparity between the representation and reality of Labour's newness offered an early insight in to why the Blair leadership would become synonymous with hyperbole and 'spin'. The claim for novelty formed an important dimension to an ongoing 'corporate populist' turn that was encouraged by advocates of a 'progressive' politics devoted to championing a 'revolution' in attitudes and practices and being more 'responsive' to 'the people' in delivering 'what works'. The combination of zealous pragmatism and managerial rhetoric reflected the neo-Marxist origins of leading new right Labour thinkers and their predilection for styling themselves as 'radicals' confronting 'the forces of conservatism' and 'elitists' within the party and beyond.[31] Like the new-old formula, such terminology downplayed the linear concept of left-right and promoted the leadership as dynamic and forward thinking. But actions were more instructive than words and Labour's sharp repositioning in the 'radical centre' in pursuit of a 'third way' underlined its attachment to rhetorics and stances more readily associated with the Conservatives. Contrary to the leadership's insistence on transcending traditional politics their activities actually confirmed the importance of a spatial view of party competition.

Labour's development was conditioned by, to borrow Miliband's phrase, a 'composite view' of floating voters as disillusioned and anxious Tories. Such a perception arose from and was reinforced by successive focus group research studies for and about the party's public standing. Like the New Right before it, the Labour new right project became highly attuned to certain strands of voter opinion as portrayed in polling studies.[32] The resulting crude Downsian motion, reinforced by populist newspaper reporting, rested on questionable assumptions about the electorate.[33] Nevertheless Philip Gould believed focus group studies about Labour, most of

which he personally conducted and analysed, gave voice to a largely ignored strata of public opinion consisting of 'powerful autonomous' individuals. Self-proclaimed 'populist' Gould argued market research was integral to the forging of a 'new' politics and accused his left-wing detractors of 'progressive elitism', a charge previously levelled at GB Shaw for his contention that universal suffrage encouraged irrational political campaigning.[34] A less judgemental Fabian, Graham Wallas, came to similar conclusions in suggesting that politicians might benefit from making more short-term, image based 'persuasional' appeals aimed at what Philip Snowden termed 'matter-of-fact people' rather than 'higher intellectuals'. Wallas and Snowden were of course active in the early part of the 20th Century but they were among the first to identify the apparent disconnection between Labour and wider public opinion that would come to preoccupy successive generations of strategists.

Following the 1979 election several commentators argued the party lost because of its poor reputation and described it as having a cloth cap image, being old fashioned, extremist and beholden to 'minorities'. One defeated MP attacked Labour as 'elitist' for wilfully ignoring popular sentiment as defined through opinion research evidence.[35] It was not long before this changed. From his earlier work for the party in 1985 onwards, Philip Gould promoted a broadly similar analysis to that offered by a dissenting minority after 1979; the difference now was that it became received strategic wisdom. Despite its emancipatory pretensions, the reality of opinion research was that it encouraged a secretive, hierarchical culture within the party and an ideological conservatism antipathetic to spontaneity and transparency. The resulting caution was hardly surprising given marketing is a capitally intense function of strategic management rather than a participatory form of democratic dialogue. Labour's electoral professionals, like corporate executives working on commercial projects, determined who counted (and who did not) in their calculations and, by extension, the wider democratic sphere. This trend was if anything exacerbated by focus groups because they, more than quantitative forms of polling, promoted the demographic as well as psychological characteristics of those voters increasingly seen as crucial in the pursuit of power. Yet here there was scope for misperception arising from widespread ignorance among the media and political elite as to the methodology, purpose and role of qualitative research. Even those responsible for the influential *Southern Discomfort* study

appeared unaware that their sample of five seats included two that ranked among the top ten in terms of *Sun* readership levels. The consequence of the widespread ignorance about focus grouping could be seen in the way selected findings were inappropriately used to analyse the popularity or not of certain politicians, policies or proposals.

The aspirations of most of the voluntary party and core vote became increasingly marginal to a strategy that sought to align Labour with popular opinion on a range of salient domestic issues including tax, crime and the Euro. Blair's discourse of progressive politics was anything but on occasions and some policy initiatives appeared reactive if not downright reactionary in responding to populist right-wing press concerns over benefit claimants and asylum seekers. Strategic memos to the prime minister based on focus group analysis suggested media campaigns were having an impact on key voters who were interpreted as desiring what was euphemistically termed 'economic' and 'cultural stability'.[36] Blair's sensitivity to public opinion, particularly through feedback from qualitative research, became a recurrent theme in the reporting about his motives and actions. Underlying this type of commentary was a failure to appreciate how this kind of study was more concerned with the depth rather than breadth of public opinion on a given subject. Consequently sympathisers and critics alike interpreted the most significant crisis of the prime minister's career, Iraq, as the policy that finally undermined his image as a focus group obsessive.[37] Yet there is no necessary disparity between being a control freak and a politician highly conscious of polling research given the latter is malleable and lends itself to being formulated and interpreted according to the pre-existing bias of the former.

The Blair leadership's interest in pandering to broader public opinion has always been secondary to its preoccupation with the discreet targets within the electorate who have disproportionately populated the focus groups disclosed in journalistic reports. These are invariably the voters who have moved between the two major parties and whose loss to a rival is in effect worth double the value of any other defector or abstentionist. Given the defining characteristic of 'floaters' was their propensity to change allegiance, they were precisely the kinds of people likely to move from opposing to supporting the conflict in Iraq once hostilities had begun. The large movement of voters who swung behind the government position did so encouraged by a formidable coalition of

the two main party leaderships and a vocal section of the agenda-setting press.[38]   More fundamentally the real effect of political market research and analysis is not felt in relation to specific policies, no matter how important, nor from week to week or month to month. Rather the influence can be felt in the focus group evidence amassed and accumulated *over decades* and which has conditioned the Labour elite's thinking about voters' perceived prejudices and convinced them to jettison social democracy. That the original research programme began in earnest two decades ago at the height of the Thatcherite ascendancy helps put the Blair government's indulgence of neo-liberalism in context.[39]

The Perils of Stratified Electioneering.

The theory and practice of political marketing raises important questions about the nature of modern elections, participation and democratic accountability. Although it is claimed that opinion research represents the views of a silent majority who otherwise might be ignored this laudable ambition conflicts with the primary motives of those commissioning private polling: the desire to cultivate support, win votes and/or get elected.[40]   The healthy functioning of democracy is a secondary consideration and, at most, something to be addressed once politicians are safely in office given: 'marketing tends to focus upon satisfying short-term customer wishes rather than long-term individual or group needs'. There is then no paradox, as has been suggested, between a political elite using unprecedented amounts of research to gauge the opinions of an increasingly disillusioned citizenry.[41]   Where there is an irony it is in the way polling has placed a barrier between politicians and the wider electorate with discernible consequences for more complex matters of long-term public concern involving everything from civil rights and justice to health, education, transport or (not) joining the Euro.

At the core of Labour's politics of support is an approach preoccupied with the 'aspirational', owner occupiers, certain women, first time voters and those living in the English marginals of the south east, north west and west midlands. This is because the modern application of stratified electioneering is devoted to understanding the groups seen as being 'key' to future electoral success, namely the 'new middle-class'.[42]   The strategy has persistently disregarded those

traditionally associated with the party such as the public sector workforce, committed partisans, blue-collar workers, ethnic minority communities, trade union members and the poor. By contrast the preoccupation with the security and aspirations of the new middle-class is reminiscent of the motivating factor behind *Must Labour Lose?* There is, however, a major difference between now and then in that the original 'revisionists had an ideological compass to steer by, Kinnock had opinion surveys'.[43] As Rita Hinden warned in her prescient conclusion to *Must Labour Lose?*, the party ought not to embark on an 'extreme' polling conscious strategy:

'… the more (Labour) could fashion itself on the lines of the present-day Conservatives the more successful it would presumably be- for what the Conservatives are giving is, it seems, what the people want. This may be an inglorious path, but- so it is claimed- it is the path to power… (This meant) destroying the socialist inspiration of the Labour Party and the source of its vitality. The Labour Party has always been something more than a class party… the philosophy of socialism gave it its ideals and won for it the devotion of people of all classes. If it reduces itself now to an imitation of its rivals, its emotional strength will be disastrously undermined'.[44]

Hinden's fears were realised decades later with the rise of what Galbraith termed a culture of contentment in which the increasingly vocal 'haves' threatened to limit the ability of social democrats to represent the 'have nots'. Shortly before becoming leader Tony Blair rejected Galbraith's thesis in a televised encounter between them in which the latter argued the overriding goal for the left was winning office. The Policy Review ensured Blair's view had already become party orthodoxy and its image reinvented in a 'modern, managerial, middle-class guise' before he succeeded to the leadership.[45] Despite its professed desire to fashion a more 'inclusive' society, the Labour government would repeatedly alienate or ignore those who had traditionally formed its most loyal supporters. In contrast the Thatcherites engaged and mobilised core voters in formulating their party's strategic engagement in a politics of power. Labour's preoccupation with the least committed (or uncommitted) elements of its electoral base resulted in the leadership complaining about unrealistic demands from left partisans including a trade union movement that was told to expect 'fairness not favours'. Blair dismissed the unions as 'vested' interests, yet this is arguably a more fitting description for the various corporate bodies that continue to exert

considerable influence over the political system. As former party insider Derek Draper put it, his ex-colleagues in commercial lobbying working on behalf of multinational corporations were in an better position to modify government leglislation than even the exemplar '8 people drinking wine in a focus group in Kettering'.[46]

Draper's observation touched upon the way neo-liberalism increasingly subordinated the political to the economic and the democratic will to that of the market. If corporate interests have been the beneficiaries, the losers in this process have included the agencies of social democratic change on the orthodox left.[47] Both as and within parties these forces were denigrated by a 'market populism' that found particular resonance in the rise of the 'new economy' during the 1990s. Allied to this the 'new politics' movement championed alternative forms of public participation and accountability designed to bypass traditional debate. Predictably Draper's former employer Peter Mandelson became a prominent advocate for the new political economy and, in his most memorable speech as Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pondered whether the era of representative democracy was about to be replaced by referenda and marketing based consultations involving focus groups and citizen juries. Mandelson's vision for Westminster reflected the kind of settlement that had already been imposed on his party. This is because, as Finlayson observes: 'New Labour doesn't like intermediate collective political institutions… that get in the way of the direct relations between individual citizen and their political market choice'.[48] This strategic focus undermined the importance of the collectivist perspective, a key tenet of social democracy.

The increasing marketisation of the political system and its evocation of the 'citizen-consumer' have subsequently placed greater emphasis on the value of economic activity as a form of public participation.[49] Despite some claims made of it, this process it is not about democratisation not least because those who form the core Conservative and Labour votes come from different social strata and resource backgrounds. The latter have been historically more dependent on their party and the public realm to safeguard and advance their material interests and is why the neo-liberal inspired promotion of 'depoliticisation' has had such a profound impact.[50] This registered most profoundly in 2001 with the director of the British Election Study describing the record near

40% of voters abstaining as 'a crisis of democratic politics in Britain'.[51] Previously Barry Cox, one of Blair's closest allies, had ventured to suggest a lack of political activity might actually be a sign of democratic stability and maturity. The 2001 turnout undermined this facile notion:

> 'Elections confer equal citizenship on all adults, as a counterweight to the inequalities of the market and natural endowment. In 2001 turnout fell to an exceptionally low level in the most deprived areas of Britain's cities. In 67 constituencies, all in such areas, the majority of the registered electorate failed to vote; in a few, under 40 per cent did so. The majority of the poor, the unemployed, the unqualified, single mothers on benefit and blacks disengaged from the election. The socially excluded felt politically excluded and so excluded themselves from the electoral process'.[52]

Disquiet has rightly been expressed over the way the packaging of politics has led to debate being manipulated by spin doctoring and image making.[53] But marketing's colonisation of campaigning raises other, more fundamental concerns about the ends as well as the means of the democratic process and, more specifically, the way stratified electioneering devalues the importance and influence of the predominantly stable sections of the voting population. The logic of Dick Morris and Philip Gould's position is that it actually counter-productive to have a fixed principled stance. This is 'political' marketing. To paraphrase George Orwell all voters may be created equal but some have become more equal than others. Blair, the supposed enemy of electoral complacency when it concerned floating voters, revealed the professionally sanctioned cynicism that had long informed party strategy when he calculated a section of his core vote would stay Labour because they had 'nowhere else to go'. The dramatic fall turnout at the 2001 general election suggested otherwise.

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[1] McKibbin,1998; Marquand,1999,p.226.
[2] Kotler,1982; Fletcher,1994.
[3] McHenry,1938; Casey,1944.
[4] Turner,1978,p.5.
[5] Altman,1964.
[6] Bryan Murphy, 'The Purpose of Propaganda', *Labour Organiser*, no.511,1966. The author was a public relations adviser.
[7] Worcester,1985.
[8] Livingstone interviewed on 'Kinnock: the Inside Story' (London Weekend Television,1993); *Financial Times*, 1st May 1997.
[9] *The Sun* 19th July 2000; *The Observer* 26th November 1995.

[10] Rustin,1981. Similarly there was a realisation among the party leadership that marketing 'required a diminution of internal party democracy in order to increase sensitivity to the electorate at large', Scammell,1995,p.12. See also Kavanagh,1995,p.94. Webb notes the leader now enjoyed 'an institutionalised battery of resources upon which he can draw to enhance his grip over the process of developing party policy and strategy' (Webb,1994).

[11] *Emphasis added.* Schumpeter,1943,p.283. Famously Michels commented 'he who says organisation says oligarchy' (Michels,1962,p.365). Drucker observed how Labour evolved formal, bureaucratic structures governed by codified rules as a guard against the centralisation of power evident in existing 'bourgeois' parties (Drucker,1979).

[12] Richard Crossman interviewed by David Butler in 1960, cited in Kavanagh,1995,p.79.

[13] Mitchell and Wienir,1997,p.52.

[14] Epstein,1967; Brivati, 1997, p.189; Rose,1974,p.90. Seymour-Ure also discussed the importance of political communication effects beyond voter persuasion (Seymour-Ure,1974,pp.62-63).

[15] Wickham-Jones,1996.

[16] Shaw,1994,p.57-9.

[17] As one observer put it, 'the position of Labour leader- which, according to (Robert) McKenzie's criteria, should have been crippled by the party's heavy defeat in 1987- was seemingly enhanced as a result, Kinnock using electoral rejection as the excuse for bracing internal reforms which, on the whole, boosted his own authority. For those students reared on the McKenzie thesis, the 1980s clearly left behind a series of perplexing questions' (Kelly,1994).

[18] Hughes and Wintour,1990,p.48; interview.

[19] Winston Fletcher, *The Guardian* 4th June 1990. The 'Unfinished Revolution' appeared in *The Guardian*,12th September 1995 and became the title for Gould's memoirs (Gould,1998).

[20] Seyd and Whiteley, 2002.

[21] Panebianco,1988.

[22] Draper's '17 people who count' were elected Cabinet members Blair, Gordon Brown, John Prescott, Jack Straw, Chief Secretary Alistair Darling and appointee Lord Derry Irvine. The only other elected politician was Minister without Portfolio Peter Mandelson. The appointees were strategist Philip Gould and Downing Street aides Alistair Campbell, David Miliband, Anji Hunter, Jonathan Powell, Geoffrey Norris, Sally Morgan and Roger Liddle plus two of Brown's advisers, Ed Balls and Charlie Whelan (*The Guardian* 10th July 1998, *The Observer* 12th July 1998).

[23] Mauser,1983; Heath et al., 2001, p.53-4, 156 and 166. See also Dunleavy,1991 on politicians' preference shaping and accommodation strategies.

[24] Gamble,1974; Gamble,1994.

[25] Jennings,1960.

[26] Gould,1998; Hay,1999.

[27] Desai,1994,pp.185-86; see also Anderson and Mann,1997, pp.384-5; and Taylor,1997. On Labour's acceptance of people's capitalism or rather its perceived successes, see Heffernan,2000,p.166.

[28] Cited in Lloyd, 1999; see Mair,2000 on the significance of 'the people'.

[29] Gould,1998,p.144. See also Barratt-Brown and Coates,1996,p.200.

[30] Crouch,2000,p.66; Klein,2001,p.70.

[31] Mandelson and Liddle,1996; Barnett,2000; Nick Cohen 'People's elite, *The Observer* 31 August 2003. On the advisorial role of Charlie Leadbeater and Geoff Mulgan, see Frank,2001, pp.349-53.

[32] Lewis 2001,p.71; Miliband,1961.

[33] Norris,2001.

[34] Clarke,1983; *Tribune* 24th August 1999.

[35] Leonard,1981. See also commentaries from others on the Labour right, notably Mitchell,1983; and Selbourne, 1984.

[36] *The Sun* 19th July 2000.

[37] See, for instance, Matthew Taylor, 'Moral values and strategic thinking', *Inview*, the Institute for Public Policy Research newsletter, Spring 2003; and the editorial 'Listen Up', in *Progress*, January/February 2004.

[38] It should be noted that Labour consistently led the Conservatives in all but one of the polls taken by MORI in 2003.

[39] The Private Finance Initiative was arguably more complex and its popularity debatable if somewhat difficult to determine. For a critical perspective see Seamus Milne, *The Guardian* 11th April 2001.

[40] Those broadly sympathetic to the role of marketing in politics include: Harrop,1990; Scammell,1995; and Lees-Marshment,2001.

[41] Mauser,1989,p.44; Tyrell and Goodhart ,1998.

[42] Gould, 1998, p.397

[43] Marquand,1999,p.219

[44] Abrams and Rose with Hinden,1960,pp.101-2

[45] *New Statesman & Society*,18th March 1994. The editorial was a response to the rise of anti-system politics on the far right.

[46] Quote from the BBC2 documentary series *The Century of Self*, Nick Cohen, 'Primal Therapy', *The Observer* 31st March 2002.

[47] Mair, 2000.

[48] Finlayson,1999; and Finlayson,2003, pp.111-14. This picks up on the earlier work of Samuel, 1960; and Wainwright, 1987, p.301.
[49] Crouch,2003; Needham, 2003; Marquand,2004.
[50] McKibbin 2000; Frank,2001,p.xiv; Leys,2001; Finlayson, 2003, pp.208-12.
[51] Whiteley. et al.,2001.
[52] Crewe, 2002, p.224; Cox, 2000.
[53] Franklin, 1994.