The media and politics: influencing intra- as well as inter-party debates

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Introduction

In the half century since the formation of Britain’s commercially funded broadcasting network Independent Television News service has enjoyed mixed fortunes. Although 2005 may have witnessed the closure of ITV’s dedicated news channel and uncertainty over the status and quality of its mainstream outputs, its primary legacy to current affairs reporting remains secure. Specifically the way ITN pioneered a less deferential, more questioning style of broadcast journalism helped to transform the relationship between politicians and the media. In the short-term this forced major changes in the BBC’s approach and, over a far longer period, inspired innovations that some critics contend have fostered an overly cynical news culture.¹ The perceived decline of public trust for politicians in recent years has been attributed to this more aggressive media approach.

Modern broadcasters are proactive in investigating political stories despite being legally required to be neutral in the reporting of party matters. By contrast their counterparts in the newspaper industry are under no such obligations and many titles, particularly the national ones, have consciously attempted to influence the democratic process. Yet the marked decline in sales and self-confidence in a highly competitive print media market has had an impact on the quality and quantity of political coverage. Certain proprietors and their editors appear to have become more circumspect in expressing their viewpoints less they alienate existing or potential
readers, advertisers or government ministers. Compared with the certainties of the 1980s when the ‘Tory press’ dominated, it is now less clear who, if anybody, a given newspaper will support on polling day. Furthermore there has been a tendency among the more popular titles to devote less space to politics because the subject is perceived to be of negligible interest to audiences and especially their younger readers. By contrast more public service oriented media like the BBC have invested much in sustaining a 24 hours news service and formidable internet operation. Together with television’s existing status as the public’s most trusted source for information about current affairs, these additional resources have arguably enabled broadcasters to set the political agenda to a greater degree than was the case twenty years ago. This was perhaps most apparent in the run-up to the general election campaign.

The masochism or ‘Heineken’ strategy?

The apparent growth in public antipathy towards Tony Blair was a recurrent theme of news reporting prior to and during the general election. Labour responded by attempting to seize the agenda through the Prime Minister’s ambitious so-called ‘masochism strategy’. This began with four appearances on a single February day of audience participation programming on Channel 5, a news franchise recently acquired by Sky but one not normally thought of as a leading current affairs broadcaster. Nevertheless the coverage was likely to be watched by the kinds of potential voters less interested in formal politics. Labour strategists reasoned that Blair would look like a leader prepared to listen because of his preparedness take to questions from members of the public concerned about Iraq, student top-up fees and other salient issues. There were obvious risks to this approach, but spin doctors were aware that
the realities of a multi-channel media age made it far easier for audiences to avoid political coverage and that dramatic encounters between the Prime Minister and often irate voters were a way of attracting viewers. Other media including the national press ensured many more voters knew about the encounters and much was made of the way women guests on the programmes such as Maria Hutchings, the mother of an autistic child, tackled Blair with their own personal testimonies on the state of education, health and other public services.

Given Blair enjoyed the constitutional right call an election he was well placed to exploit his incumbency prior to the formal announcement of polling day. Few doubted it would be the Thursday he eventually chose but it is still noteworthy just how determinedly and perhaps successfully Labour strategists exploited their incumbency to maximum advantage during the period prior to the campaign in which many floating voters would be deciding who to vote for. Blair’s principal opponents Michael Howard and Charles Kennedy generated nothing like the same media interest or attention, arguably because neither was deemed likely to win the election. Consequently aside from his involvement in the centrepiece Channel 5 broadcasts, the Prime Minister also made guest appearances on popular programmes including GMTV breakfast show, Channel 4’s Richard and Judy talk show, and Ant and Dec’s Saturday Night Takeaway. Each format, designed to appeal to a wide audience, enabled Blair to promote himself as a politician in touch with the kinds of floating voters his advisers referred to as ‘hard-working families’. This strategy culminated with a well publicised visit to Downing Street by Jamie Oliver, the television chef whose recently completed Channel 4 series on the poor state of school meals attracted considerable media acclaim and ministerial promises of more spending. Although
Blair cost Labour votes, particularly amongst those more politically active and opposed to the invasion of Iraq, his masochism (or ‘Heinken’) strategy may have succeeded in reaching at least some of the less engaged sections of the electorate. It is supposition to suggest this might have an effect on the outcome but what is clear is that the Prime Minister’s principal opponent Michael Howard did little to enhance his own popular image during this period.

The campaign proper

When the campaign proper began in April heavy security limited direct public access to major politicians and meant most of their televised encounters were with pre-selected groups of what election strategists termed ‘endorsers’ who were chosen to participate in photo-opportunities with leading figures because of their resemblance to the types of voter the parties wanted to attract. Footage of this kind routinely dominated live coverage of the campaign on the round the clock rolling BBC, ITV and Sky news channels. Yet the extensive entourages of advisers, supporters and bodyguards frustrated attempts by the more inquiring reporters to ask pertinent questions of the leaders on the campaign trail. Whilst media interrogation of the politicians was carefully controlled by spin doctors there was a discernible trend towards favouring local news journalists with access because they were generally perceived to be less cynical and more interested in so-called ‘bread and butter’ issues than their national rivals. Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott did, however, still manage to provoke a row with a regional reporter who he berated as not worth talking to after he posed supposedly impertinent questions on a visit to South Wales.
Conscious of the politicians’ desire to influence and even manipulate the campaign agenda for their own ends, broadcasters responsible for ITV1 and Channel 4 news outputs respectively appended the terms ‘Election Unspun’ and ‘Factcheck’ to some of their coverage. Use of such phrases hinted at the parties’ untrustworthiness. The sense that the leaders were seeking to mislead the public was palpable when selected audiences of voters were given the opportunity to directly cross-examine the Prime Minister and his two principal rivals on ITV1’s Ask the Leader and for a special edition of BBC’s Question Time. The latter culminated with a series of bruising encounters between Tony Blair and some of his vocal detractors in the studio.

A desire to report what was going on ‘behind the scenes’ of the campaign meant ‘process’ rather than any specific policy issue was again the most prominent subject in the reporting of the election. Process is an umbrella term covering the attention given to party strategies, opinion polling, ‘spin’, publicity initiatives and related phenomena and accounted for 44% of all campaign coverage across national broadcast and print media. The next most prominent category with 8% was ‘impropriety’, a theme particularly popular in the two mid-market Mail and Express newspapers. Both titles had been highly critical of the government and were thus keen on exploring allegations that Downing Street’s liberalisation of the regulations on postal balloting threatened to compromise the integrity of the election and possibly the result in the event of a close race. Media critics of the new system were emboldened by a timely legal case which led to the conviction of several Birmingham Labour activists for ballot rigging offences. It also resulted in a memorable riposte from the presiding judge who denounced what he saw to be the lax electoral procedures that had allowed this to happen.
Further evidence of the agenda-setting abilities of the mid-market newspapers was reflected in the prominence given over to asylum and immigration (7%), the fourth most common media theme. The *Mail* and *Express* together with the *Sun* had long prioritised the issue over months and even years (especially the *Express*) backed up by controversial figures supplied by the group Migrant Watch. Reporting on the nominally separate issue of race was routinely conflated in lurid headlines about ‘gypsies’, ‘illegal’ asylum seekers and alleged criminality involving non-white immigrants. The considerable media attention devoted to one such offender, Kamel Bourgass, convicted of killing a policeman during the campaign led to an official apology to the officer’s family: significantly this response came from Alan Milburn, Labour’s chief strategist, rather than a Home Office minister. The reporting of asylum/immigration and impropriety outdid that of the supposedly ‘bread and butter’ issues the public routinely cite as their major concerns such as health, education, crime, tax and economy. These topics each accounted for between 3-5% of all news coverage although it should be noted that a good deal of this material was concerned with topical items like the hospital ‘superbug’ MRSA rather than the wider state of the NHS.

It was predictable that Iraq would feature at some stage in the media coverage of the election but its prominence in the closing stages of the campaign put Labour under renewed pressure. Embarrassing revelations in the *Mail on Sunday* and *Sunday Times* based on leaked government memos ensured the controversy returned to dominate the political agenda at possibly the worst moment for the Prime Minister and guaranteed it became the third most prominent news theme. Even newspapers that had once been
unequivocal in backing the Iraq invasion now expressed dissatisfaction with the conduct of the government and more especially Blair over this sensitive issue. This reflected the way the certainties and stridency associated with the Tory press in the 1980s had to a certain extent declined along with these titles’ sales and arguably their influence. Symptomatic of this was the still relatively rare election editorial declaration by a popular, in this case the *Daily Star*, that favoured no party and which urged people to make up their own minds as to who to support. *Star* editor Dawn Neeson may have been conscious that, uniquely among the nationals, more of the paper’s readers abstained than voted in elections and this one was no different. This stance logically followed from the title’s avoidance of an election it perceived to be of little interest to an audience who were felt to be more concerned with celebrity related news.

The positioning of the *Star* contrasts with that of the more obviously and self-consciously political *Sun* which, although it remains the best selling daily, has suffered a decline in sales. Its uncharacteristically ambiguous editorial stance leading up to the election also undermined its reputation for being to the point and weakened the impact of its endorsement when it eventually came near the beginning of the campaign under the headline ‘One Last Chance’. Admittedly the paper came out with a more passionate defence of Blair following attacks over the Prime Minister’s Iraq policy from rival politicians and media. Prominent among the latter was the *Independent* which had been one of the invasion’s staunchest opponents and whose single-minded pursuit of the issue led to it and the majority of its readers’ supporting the Liberal Democrats. By contrast the other anti-war national newspapers, the
Guardian and Mirror, re-affirmed their strong and enduring support for Labour despite their criticisms of Blair during the second term.

What remains of the ‘Tory press’ in the guise of the Telegraph, Mail and Express, appeared to define their electoral stances more by what they were against, specifically the Prime Minister, rather than from any particular enthusiasm for the admittedly remote prospect of Michael Howard taking office. Like most other nationals and their Sunday sisters, these titles were following a market logic by endorsing the party most favoured by their readerships. Only two newspapers, The Times and Financial Times, departed from this edict arguably because they serve the most heterogenous audiences in that at least a fifth of both papers’ readers support one of the three major parties. In any case it ought to be borne in mind that many more people buy a newspaper for reasons other than those who do so for its political outlook and this was reflected in the print and other media’s routine prioritising of non-election stories during the campaign.

The election of David Cameron

The arrival of mass television 50 years ago heralded a change in the mediation of politics and a greater focus on the personalities involved. Parties responded in kind by reassessing the way they publicised their policies and this led to the increasing personalisation of debate around the leading figures of the day. This trend has encouraged the further centralisation of power within the respective organisations as unelected spin doctors advising leaders have displaced some of the influence previously wielded by (Shadow) Cabinet and other prominent party actors. The focus on key personalities has, however, created problems for those now subject to this
often very intensive and searching media scrutiny. Leaders, favoured colleagues and even their spin doctors have suffered from an adverse press and in some cases this has contributed to ending their political careers. Events during 2005 bore out this trend making it perhaps an unprecedented year for sustained media speculation over the fates of all three major party leaderships.

Michael Howard’s swift decision to step down following the Conservatives’ election defeat meant the party would have to find a new leader. Before the process started there were, however, arguments involving Howard and his parliamentary colleagues over the mechanism by which his successor would be chosen. The debate and the summer recess ensured the race was delayed and only completed at the very end of the year with the election of David Cameron as leader. By then various media commentators had been able to assess the different contenders and particularly their skill as communicators. Cameron’s victory followed a campaign fought according to the existing rules whereby MPs supported candidates in successive ballots until only two remained to go forward to a vote involving the entire party membership. The only previous election involving these rules had ended in recrimination over the defeat of high profile candidates such as Kenneth Clarke and Michael Portillo by the relatively unknown Iain Duncan Smith.

David Davis, another defeated contender in 2001, entered the 2005 campaign as the frontrunner if judged by his standing in the parliamentary party rather than the media or the country. Much of Davis’ initial momentum evaporated at the party conference in autumn when he and the other candidates had the opportunity to address the gathering. The process undermined the veteran fixer whose speech making skills had
never been his strongest asset and journalists including the BBC’s new political editor Nick Robinson readily commented on the frontrunner’s lacklustre performance. In sharp contrast David Cameron’s pitch, presented without notes, was warmly received by those present as well as a specially selected audience of voters assembled for a BBC experiment. The research conducted for BBC2 *Newsnight* by the American pollster Frank Luntz clearly suggested Cameron rather than the veterans Ken Clarke and Malcolm Rifkind was the main threat to their more right-wing rivals Davis and Liam Fox. Previously Clarke had been identified in polls published by newspapers as the favoured candidate of the general public but his brusque manner and pro-European integrationist views did little to endear him to his parliamentary colleagues and he was eliminated in the first MPs’ ballot.

Clarke’s defeat and Rifkind’s prior withdrawal from the leadership race left David Cameron free to promote himself through the media as the candidate most in touch with the public and thus likely to get the party re-elected. When directly questioned by *Observer* columnist Andrew Rawnsley over his past use of illicit drugs, Cameron, a former public relations executive with the Carlton media group, deftly refused to answer. Rather than undermining him, the resulting debate helped raise the candidate’s profile within the media as well as the party. The other contender Liam Fox performed better than expected in the first ballot of MPs but struggled to attract journalistic attention. By comparison David Davis’ failure to capitalise on the media interest in him was symbolised by his ill conceived photo-opportunity with two young women in T-shirts bearing the slogan ‘DD for me’. The incident resembled the kind of stunt foisted on an unsuspecting celebrity by a television satirist but actually turned out to have been conceived by Davis’ team. The resulting images appeared more
suited to a redtop newspaper than as a means of persuading the ageing Conservative membership of the candidate’s credentials.

Though Davis narrowly succeeded in making it into the final ballot by then Cameron had established himself as the clear frontrunner among the party’s MPs and the media. A *Times* poll suggesting the ballot of members might be closer than expected failed to revitalise Davis’ prospects and a rather depressing *Mail* interview with his wife Doreen did little to promote him as a leader with a life beyond politics. By contrast coverage of the bike riding Cameron, his pregnant wife Samantha and their two children, one of whom was disabled, provided the kind of photo-opportunities that made him appear more in touch than his Eton and Oxford educated pedigree background might have suggested. Cameron maintained his momentum in appearances on special editions of BBC’s *Question Time* and Radio 4 *Women’s Hour* in which he debated the issues with Davis. Both were also separately interviewed by Jeremy Paxman for BBC2 Newsnight. Tellingly Davis used the slot together with a background portrait of Margaret Thatcher to reinforce the message that his opponent was essentially a Blair clone whereas he was the more authentic Conservative. Cameron, in contrast, reserved his ire for Paxman by challenging the more famous interviewer over his combative style of questioning. This demonstration of self-confidence and ability to cope with and even unsettle one of the toughest political journalists was used by supporters to underline their candidate’s leadership credentials.

Cameron comfortably won the leadership by a margin of 2 to 1 in the membership ballot after a campaign in which he had made few policy concessions but had
repeatedly contended he would seek to reinvigorate the Conservatives as a more dynamic party in touch with groups of people not normally thought of as natural supporters. He did so having pointedly rejected the agenda associated with more traditional right-wing commentators such as Simon Heffer, the prominent *Mail* and *Spectator* columnist. Other media commentators have, however, demonstrated their receptivity to new self styled ‘liberal’ Conservative leader. Despite recent internal problems and the departure of editor Martin Newland, the *Telegraph* looks set to continue their move away from the dogmatic stance associated with Newland’s predecessors. The title may become Cameron’s key press ally, particularly as its fierce rival *The Times* has become so closely aligned with the Blair government and in doing so attracted fierce criticism from Conservatives such as former party treasurer Michael Ashcroft. The other Murdoch owned daily, the once staunchly Tory supporting *Sun*, opportunistically declared for Cameron shortly before his by then inevitable victory and it is highly probable it would do so again in advance of the next general election if the Conservatives look likely to win. Ominously for his likely opponent Gordon Brown, the new leader met with Rupert Murdoch within weeks of his election. Furthermore Cameron comes to the job as part of an established network that political journalists have termed the ‘Notting Hill set’ because its members tend to reside there. Many of those involved such as former *Times* contributor turned MP Michael Gove and the communications consultant Steve Hilton are highly experienced advisers who look set to play major roles in developing the party’s strategy to win power.
Crisis in the Liberal Democrats

David Cameron’s convincing victory in the Conservative leadership election helped the media precipitate a crisis within the Liberal Democrats over the leadership of Charles Kennedy and his eventual resignation at the beginning of 2006. Kennedy, a popular figure with the public, had overseen modest gains for the party in the 2001 and 2005 general elections and had been largely vindicated over his opposition to the Iraq invasion. The emergence of a personable and apparently more liberal politician like Cameron was enough to trigger intense media speculation at the very end of 2005 when there was little other political news. Unidentified sources and at least one former parliamentary colleague, Paul Marsden, briefed journalists on Sunday papers that Kennedy had a drink problem that was affecting his ability to perform his duties. The leader had previously defended himself against such accusations in an interview with Jeremy Paxman during the 2001 election but this had failed to stem speculation over the state of his health. In the more recent campaign, Kennedy’s failure to respond effectively to journalists’ questions at one of his party’s press conferences was explained by a lack of sleep caused by the arrival of his new born son. Those seeking to undermine the leader cited this incident to suggest it was part of a drink problem that made him unsuitable to lead the party into another general election in which he would be the veteran standing against two new opponents.

The Liberal Democrats are the smallest of the major parties and prides themselves on being the most democratic of the three. The party membership have some influence but it is noteworthy how quickly they were excluded from a intensive debate over Kennedy that gathered pace in the media. Aside from Kennedy’s fate, the episode demonstrated how off the record briefings and other forms of spin have impacted on
the Liberal Democrat leadership in the way they long have on their larger rivals. The attempt to destabilise and oust Kennedy led to speculation that those responsible may include his deputy and potential successor Menzies Campbell. Campbell did little to counter this perception when he gave an ambivalent reply to a BBC journalist as to whether he still supported the leader. In contrast Simon Hughes, the party’s president and the key figure on the party’s left, denied press rumours that he was also plotting and came out strongly in favour of Kennedy, the man who had defeated in the previous leadership contest of 1999.

It would appear the principal force urging a change of leader emerged from around the increasingly cohesive right-wing group of Liberal Democrat MPs responsible for the so-called Orange Book. Its advocacy of more market oriented policies had generated debate and some coverage for the party. Mark Oaten, a contributor to the collection, was to emerge as the group’s likely challenger for the leadership. Oaten was the successor the Daily Telegraph probably had in mind when, during the crisis, it devoted an editorial to excoriating Kennedy which ended with a call for him to step down. The views of traditional Conservative leaning newspapers may not have carried much influence with the Liberal Democrats themselves but their ability to help set the agenda for other news media can have an indirect impact on the party. Similarly right-wing media commentators were not shy in expressing their opinions on the more obviously unresolved question, namely the leadership of the Labour party not to mention the country.
The Brown-Blair saga

The relationship between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown has provided countless opportunities for journalists to speculate as to the origins, nature and intensity of the supposed feud between them and their acolytes within the government, party and media. Distinctive camps supporting the men have grown since they came to power in 1997 and their rivalry has provided the main factional dispute for the media to report. The rivalry was graphically demonstrated in public at the beginning of 2005 when the Prime Minister and Chancellor appeared to speak at their own rival events at exactly the same time that day. Their apparent refusal to co-operate provoked renewed speculation in the media no doubt encouraged by spin doctors that Blair was planning to undermine Brown by moving him to the Foreign Office after the election. Prominent media commentator Irwin Stelzer, a longstanding associate of Rupert Murdoch, questioned whether the Chancellor might embark on a different political course should he become Prime Minister, the implication being were he to move to the left Labour’s News International newspapers’ hitherto support for the party might evaporate.

For most of the second term Blair had contended with negative press reporting, much of it from critics outside of the government. Some of this intensely personalised coverage continued to be directed at his wife Cherie who was attacked, particularly by the Mail, for allegedly profiting from speaking tours to publicise a book she had jointly authored on the role of previous Prime Ministerial spouses. Similarly the Blair family’s holiday arrangements were also scrutinised as was a list of famous guests hosted at their Chequers country retreat. But it was the rivalry with Brown that continued to generate most headlines, particularly after the publication of a
sympathetic biography of the Chancellor by Telegraph journalist Robert Peston. Other Brown allies felt emboldenened enough to go further by writing newspaper articles calling for Blair to resign barely months before the widely expected general election. And although Blair heralded his party’s third victory as an unprecedented triumph, the disappointing result failed to stem further public calls for his departure that were now led by Labour MP and former minister Glenda Jackson. Jackson, writing in the Mail on Sunday later that week, claimed she had been mainly campaigning against voter hostility towards Blair rather than the opposition in her constituency.

The Chancellor was widely regarded by media commentators to have been strengthened by his display of loyalty over divisive issues such as Iraq and the strategic acumen he brought to Labour’s election effort. His prominent appearances at Blair’s side in news conferences, photo-opportunities and a party broadcast were well received and encouraged Brown supporters such as Jackie Ashley, Polly Toynbee and Neal Lawson in the agenda-setting Guardian to restate the case for his early, orderly takeover as Prime Minister. Lawson, a former aide to Brown, pointedly accused the Labour leader of being overly concerned with provoking an adverse reaction from right-wing newspapers owned by the Mail and Murdoch. The Chancellor himself demonstrated the more conciliatory side of his nature by giving the keynote oration at the funeral of his one time colleague and rival Robin Cook whose death, within weeks of Mo Mowlam, robbed the party of two of its most popular figures.
In discussing the succession Blair-inclined journalists have been unable to rally round a single alternative candidate from the No.10 ‘camp’ and this arguably reflects the artificiality of a debate that has been largely manufactured in the media rather than among the senior echelons of a government that still remains relatively united over a range of controversial policies. Whilst Alan Milburn, John Reid, Charles Clarke and belatedly David Miliband have all been touted by commentators as possible challengers to Brown for the succession, none has sustained momentum and it remains possibly that an unforeseen contender such as Hilary Benn may yet emerge with next to no press endorsement. This prospect, like those of the Chancellor’s, remains linked to the fortunes of the British economy over the coming years.

Media speculation over when and how the Prime Minister would be forced from office was curtailed with the resumption of normal government service over the summer months. Blair’s seemingly combative approach to some of his European Union colleagues during Britain’s presidency of the EU endeared him to the perennially sceptical national press. Similarly high profile events like the G8 summit in Edinburgh, Make Poverty History and the successful London bid for the Olympics generated sympathetic headlines and ample photo-opportunities for Blair to appear statesmanlike. But it was ultimately the terrorist bombings of the capital on 7th July and the attempted attacks a couple of weeks later that provided the ultimate challenge for a Prime Minister who was widely judged by many mainstream journalists to have performed well in his handling of the crisis. The eulogising of Blair by the Guardian’s Martin Kettle and other supportive coverage did much to help forge a media consensus which in effect denied the connection between the atrocities and
Britain’s involvement in Iraq in spite of opinion polls which indicated a significant proportion of the public supported such a link.

The tragic shooting of Brazilian national Jean Charles de Menezes, who was mistaken for a terrorist suspect in the aftermath of 7/7 did, however, reawaken media criticism of the authorities and the longer term consequences of this sorry episode were perhaps felt with Clarke’s defeat in the subsequent parliamentary vote over measures that would have enabled the police to detain suspects for up to 90 days without sentencing them. Though the *Sun* vehemently denounced opponents of the legislation by reviving memories of 7/7 this did little to prevent a coalition of MPs from virtually every party from voting down a bill many felt was a denial of human rights. Either way his first major parliamentary defeat was a major blow to Blair’s authority.

*The spin never ends*

The often fraught relationship between the government and media formed the basis of an acclaimed new BBC4 drama, *The Thick of It*, in which a hapless minister was cajoled and bullied by mendacious spin doctors. The series was favourably compared with the classic 1980s comedy *Yes Minister* and won critical acclaim and awards despite its scheduling on an non-terrestrial channel. One of the principal figures in the drama was the prime minister’s seemingly omnipotent and at times vicious spin doctor. The foulmouthed character, played by Peter Capaldi, was widely interpreted as a thinly veiled representation of Alastair Campbell, the by now departed Downing Street Director of Communications. Campbell himself returned as the spin doctor for the ill fated British Lions tour over summer and was prominently featured in the highly negative coverage of the team’s successive defeats. Prior to then he had
enjoyed rather more success as a member of Labour re-election team where his notoriety meant the leak of one his campaign memos became a major story in the *Sunday Times*. It was later revealed that Campbell had orchestrated this coverage in a classic piece of spin designed to amplify a key Labour claim whilst retaining the ability to deny it. The incident underlined how messengers were often complicit in promoting themselves in addition to their message.

Alastair Campbell’s influence within Downing Street was such that his duties were divided between various officials following his retirement in 2003. Further reorganisation to the Downing Street media operation in 2004 led to the appointment of Howell James and continuation of David Hill in roles previously taken by Campbell. Both assumed a far lower profile in their flamboyant predecessor as part of what appeared to be a determined attempt by the Prime Minister to disassociate himself from spin. This should not, however, be taken as evidence that Downing Street was intent on downgrading its public relations operation given that spending on the government’s 72 special advisers had increased to £5.5 million per annum. These political appointees continue to provide the government with its own formidable network of spin doctors.

The publication of memoirs by two former Downing Street press officers provided controversy as well as lucrative serialisation deals from the *Mail*. Lance Price’s *Diary of a Spin Doctor* offered a sympathetic if at times embarrassing fly on the wall account of his career as Alastair Campbell’s deputy. Another behind the scenes book by Christopher Meyer dealt with his difficult period as John Major’s Press Secretary as well as his diplomatic career as British Ambassador to Washington prior
to the invasion of Iraq. His dismissal of senior Labour Cabinet members as ‘pygmies’ triggered an adverse response from some of those targeted including John Prescott who called for the author to stand down from his current position as Chairman of the Press Complaints Commission. Meyer’s contended that Blair had been overly subservient to the agenda set by George Bush and that neither leader had given sufficient thought to what would happen after the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime.

The controversy over the legacy of British involvement in Iraq continued to shape perceptions of the Prime Minister in other ways. Contradicting Meyer’s account, Blair was presented as having some leverage with George W Bush when the Mirror published a dramatic story alleging the president had contemplated bombing the popular Qatar based news broadcaster Al Jazeera. The channel had routinely provoked fury from the American government because of its often critical coverage of western involvement in Iraq and the Middle East. The revelation, based on a leaked memo apparently obtained from an anti-war activist, was followed by explanations that it had arisen from a misunderstanding relating to a joke made by the President. Yet the Prime Minister’s critical response to the ‘plan’ suggested there was more to the story than official denials implied as did the threat of government sanctions against any news organisation which published the original memo. The heavy handed response brought a pledge from Conservative MP Boris Johnson that he would run it in The Spectator should the elusive document emerge. Others, notably fellow Spectator contributor Peter Oborne, returned to the wider issues raised by Iraq in a searing documentary for Channel 4 on the difficulties facing the devastated country.
Oborne also revisited the issue of Blair’s integrity and motivations in a highly critical book.\textsuperscript{12}

The Prime Minister’s judgement was once again brought into question over more domestic matters following the second resignation of David Blunkett. Blair had personally invested considerable faith in the former Home Secretary by re-appointing him to the Cabinet as Work and Pensions minister following the election. In post Blunkett became quickly embroiled in what appeared to be an unseemly briefing war with Downing Street over the sensitive issue of disability benefit reform. Soon after he was engulfed in a row over his own personal finances revolving around a potential conflict of interest arising from his recent tenure as a company director. The minister’s perhaps cavalier dismissal of related stories in the *Observer* and other newspapers led to renewed scrutiny of his affairs and his eventual departure from office. His career in government seemingly over, Blunkett embarked on a new career as a *Sun* columnist and thereby reaffirmed the close links between the Blair leadership and Rupert Murdoch’s News International. The former Home Secretary was also the subject of more unwelcome media attention in the form of a satirical Channel 4 docudrama *A Very Social Secretary*, an at times candid portrayal of the events that had contributed to his first resignation.

Like many other media representations of Labour government, *A Very Social Secretary* identified shadowy spin doctors as some of the most powerful decision makers in contemporary politics. This contention found support in yet another new memoir, this time from former Cabinet minister Clare Short whose account of working alongside Blair suggested the government and party was gripped by control
freakery. This was borne out during the course of a quiescent Labour Annual Conference that failed to devote debating time to the major issue of Iraq because it was supposedly not a priority issue. Party managers’ desire to control debate and media perceptions of the event eventually backfired later in the week when dramatic footage of stewards ejecting veteran delegate Walter Wolfgang attracted considerable broadcast and print media attention. Wolfgang had briefly heckled during the speech Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and the disproportionate force used to remove him from the auditorium was widely interpreted as symptomatic of the party leadership’s intolerance. The incident developed into a public relations disaster for Labour and forced a hasty apology when it the Mail revealed the delegate to be a refugee from Nazi tyranny during the 1930s and a former parliamentary candidate with an impeccable record of activism.

Conclusion.

2005 was perhaps an almost unique in that it was a year when there was serious discussion over the leaderships and thus futures of each of the major parties. Michael Howard’s resignation made it inevitable that there would be media speculation over his replacement although, for once, most of the important debate was conducted on the record. Similarly the Labour succession attracted a mixture of private and public discussion, much of it filtered through the constant journalistic speculation over whether and when Gordon Brown would finally become Prime Minister. Perhaps more surprising was the realisation that the Liberal Democrats had been caught up in the culture of spin that has been long apparent in the rival parties and elsewhere in parliament and government. The extraordinary level of briefing against Kennedy by
his colleagues is an important reminder that one of the media’s principal roles in contemporary political debate is their role as arbiters in intra rather than inter-party affairs. As Rodney Tiffen notes, such disputes increasingly fascinate journalists because their work can play an important part in shaping perceptions when discreet rather than more general political matters are in dispute:

'The mixture of intimacy and opposition is conducive to tensions, but when the interactions and relationships are distilled and exaggerated into news reports, the mixture is doubly explosive. Immediate relations are refracted through the prism of media publicity, itself often clothed in extravagant gladiatorial imagery.' ¹⁴

Given it was also a general election year, leading politicians made conscious attempts to generate a different sort of coverage that which often dominates reporting from Westminster. To this end Blair carefully, even ruthlessly used his incumbency to try and re-establish his dented public credibility by appearing in an unprecedented range of more light hearted formats not readily associated with a serving Prime Minister. It is debatable whether these made much difference to the election result but they once again demonstrated Blair’s abilities as a communicator. This factor appeared to play a critical role in the decision of Conservative MPs and the wider membership to choose a relatively inexperienced candidate David Cameron as their leader.

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⁵ Deacon and Wring, 2005.
8 See, for instance, *Sun* 24th June 2005