The longest running series on television: Party political broadcasting in Britain

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INTRODUCTION

Political advertising in Britain comes in various guises. In a pioneering survey of campaigning activities during the Nineteenth Century Ostrogorski used the term to refer to the literature candidates disseminated during election time (Ostrogorski, 1902). The advent of mass democracy and changes in media and communication after the First World War led to a shift away from politicians relying on this kind of printed material and their embrace of other forms of publicity including the ubiquitous and surprisingly enduring medium of the poster. The rise of mass circulation newspapers led to parties purchasing space in the best-selling titles to disseminate key messages to the growing audiences of readers. But it was the introduction of radio that led to politicians being granted airtime that enabled them to communicate with potential supporters in a more intimate way that mimicked the personal addressing of a public meeting. The ninety year tradition of what became known as the Party Election Broadcast has become a familiar feature of British politics. And like the election poster, the medium has proved to be an enduring feature of successive campaigns.

British broadcasting has long been subjected to rules that enforce impartiality laws including during election times. This regulatory approach also means there has been a long standing ban on paid radio and television advertising of the kind seen in other democracies. Party Election Broadcasts therefore function as the British equivalent of the American political spot. They still exist continue because, despite inquiries and reviews, they offer politicians the rare (and free) opportunity to directly communicate with the millions who watch PEBs and who would otherwise not choose to see them online. Moreover the fragmentation of the party system from the duopoly that dominated the Twentieth Century to the more diverse competitive environment of recent times has meant ever more politicians with a vested interest in protecting their entitlement to publicly subsidized airtime. This chapter explores the origins and development of a now ninety-year-old tradition and considers some of the continuities as well as changes to these outputs.
POLITICAL AND ELECTORAL SYSTEM

In his pioneering analysis of the British ‘political market’, Andrew Gamble identified three components: ‘the existence of a mass electorate; competition between two or more parties for the votes of this electorate; and a set of rules governing this competition’ (Gamble, 1974: 6). While the 1832 Great Reform Act and successive laws in 1867 and 1883-84 paved the way for the development of both the modern party and electoral systems, it was the 1918 Representation of the People Act that marked the emergence of the country as a democratic state. Overnight this legislation more than trebled the electorate, enfranchising the overwhelming majority of men and also some women for the first time. Further reforms followed with the reduction of the voting age to every citizen over the age of 21 in 1928 and 18 in 1969. General Election turnouts have ordinarily exceeded 70% although in 2001 this dropped below 60% for the first time before recovering to 66.1% in the most recent poll of 2015. The voting system is a majoritarian one whereby electors support a single candidate in their local constituency: the winner is the politician who receives more votes than any rival. Currently there are 650 Members of Parliament returned in this way and historically most British governments have been formed by a single party achieving anything between 36% (2005) to 55% (1935) of the poll (Butler and Butler, 2010). The post-war norm to form an administration has required between 40-45% of the vote.

Labour and the Conservatives have been the primary beneficiaries of the Westminster parliament’s majoritarian, ‘first past the post’ electoral system. However these parties’ once seemingly hegemonic position has been increasingly challenged with the rise of various rivals such as the Liberal Democrats (and the merger of its ‘parents’, the Liberals and Social Democrats, in the late 1980s), the Scottish Nationalists (SNP), the Greens and the UK Independence Party (UKIP). Combined the Conservative and Labour share of electoral support has declined to just over two-thirds of the total poll although the majoritarian system still ensures them disproportionately favourable representation in the House of Commons. The 2010 General Election resulted in no single party winning an overall majority for the first time since 1974 and the formation of the first coalition government since the
Second World War. The Liberal Democrats subsequently became junior partners in a Conservative led administration.

The 2015 General Election was won by the Conservatives with only 36.9% of votes but a slim majority of 50.9% or 331 of the seats. By contrast the millions of votes now routinely won by the various challengers have not given them significantly more MPs with one exception. The outlier here was the Scottish Nationalists, unique among the aforementioned challenger parties due to its support being, by definition, so geographically concentrated that when it reached 50% of the ballots cast north of the border it resulted in them winning all but three of the country’s seats in 2015 and increasing their representation from 6 to 56 MPs. This remarkable result followed the 2014 referendum on independence that ended with 45% of Scots voting to leave the Union (Mitchell, 2015). Although this meant the continuation of the UK the result nonetheless provided the impetus behind the Nationalists’ surge in the polls and with it a massive increase in people joining the party. The SNP’s expansion is in contrast to most other parties in Europe where the overall trend has seen organisations experiencing significant declines in membership (van Biezen et al., 2012). That said other British based parties have experience growth albeit for different reasons: UKIP and the Greens have developed because of dissatisfaction with mainstream politics on the right and left respectively. Since the 2015 there has also been a surge of members joining Labour to participate in the election of a radical new leader Jeremy Corbyn; his victory was the catalyst for a further upsurge in those affiliating.

**ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT**

The earliest political advertising in Britain took the form of individuals promoting their candidatures by buying space in an increasingly popular print media. This practice has continued, to varying degrees, in subsequent campaigns and most especially in the latter part of the Twentieth Century when newspaper circulations were highest (Butler, 1995). Allied to this political parties also took to commissioning outdoor advertisements in the form of posters that enabled messages to be disseminated simultaneously throughout the country. Even with the rise of digital media, this practice continues offline in a bid to target the still sizeable number of citizens who are not regular consumers of traditional news or social media. Following the introduction of near universal suffrage the inter-war period was characterised by the
interlinked development of mass democracy, media and communication. Somewhat presciently the pioneering political scientist Graham Wallas foresaw the growing importance of emotive ‘image’ in what would be increasingly impersonal campaigns designed to cultivate larger numbers of voters than any candidate could realistically expect to meet individually during an election. As Wallas observed 'advertising and party politics are becoming more and more closely assimilated in method' and would likely supplement traditional methods such as canvassing and meetings (Wallas, 1948: 87).

The growing interest in using image-based appeals was part of the rationale behind politicians’ earliest experimentations with using film for persuasive purposes, particularly to cultivate the less informed and involved citizen who might nonetheless participate by voting. Consequently the first sustained attempts to use cinema came in the guise of the Conservative Film Association which deployed mobile vans to disseminate short moving image animated and live action features to audiences in impromptu screenings up and down the country during the 1929 General Election. This novel approach was overshadowed, however, by what amounted to the introduction of broadcast political advertising into British politics earlier that decade (Hollins 1981). The development of radio during the 1920s, in the guise of the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) set up in 1922 provided an obvious opportunity to enhance and enrich the mass democratic process. BBC founder John Reith voiced a concern that the new medium might evolve into an American style, overly commercial system in his 1924 book Broadcast Over Britain (Reith, 1924). Rather Reith’s belief in ‘public service’ meant he saw radio as a key (if not the) forum for the dissemination of quality information to a citizenry now consisting of a sizeable mass electorate. The BBC’s pioneer also believed the new system should be scrupulously independent of party and government interference.

Following the return of the first Labour led government Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs) were introduced for the 1924 campaign. Initially these consisted of radio speeches featuring the three main leaders explaining their policies (Antcliffe, 1984). Following the restructuring of the BBC and its re-launch as a Corporation rather than a Company in 1927 the number of Party Election Broadcasts increased. Two years later the General Election featured several more PEBs, thereby establishing an
enduring system guaranteeing the main electoral contenders access to the airwaves and hence the rapidly expanding audience. Although British television started broadcasting in 1936 it was not until well after the Second World War that the medium attracted a mass viewership. The first TV PEBs were broadcast in 1951 to be followed two years later by the introduction of advertising in non-campaign periods in the guise of so-called Party Political Broadcasts (PPBs). The opening Broadcast featured an elderly Liberal politician, Herbert Samuel, reading from a script adhering to a classic talking head format.

In his first televised PEB Samuel inadvertently gave the signal that he was finishing mid-sentence which led to him being prematurely cut-off during his live appearance. The rival parties' presentations were somewhat better. The Conservatives featured one the earliest television personalities, Leslie Mitchell, posing questions to Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden. Eden, who would become Prime Minister four years later, was regarded as a more accomplished TV performer than his leader Winston Churchill who felt uncomfortable appearing on the medium (Cockerell, 1989). Clips of Mitchell’s questioning have often been mistakenly used as examples of the so-called deference demonstrated by early media interviewers towards politicians. Labour also deployed its own double act in an attempt to stimulate viewer interest. The party recognised relatively few voters had ready access to television. The subsequent Broadcast had former journalist turned MP Christopher Mayhew introducing his colleague and celebrated lawyer Hartley Shawcross who made an explicit pitch to a viewing public of relatively affluent voters in which he tried to promote Labour as a party for those from wealthy as well as less privileged backgrounds.

Television rapidly developed during the 1950s in terms of the sophistication of its programming as well as its popularity with the general public (Seymour-Ure, 1974). By the end of the decade over 70% of households had their own TV set on which they could view the BBC as well as its new commercial rivals Independent Television (ITV) launched in 1955. ITV transformed the coverage of British politics so that by its opening General Election of 1959 came to be widely regarded as the ‘first TV campaign’. That year saw TV ownership rising to 11 million sets; in 1946 it had been a fraction of this at just 15,000. ITV adopted a more questioning approach to politics
and politicians between and during elections. TV duly became the most popular medium for entertainment but also for providing many voters with information that they came to value as more objective than their other major source, the highly partisan press (Blumler and McQuail, 1968). The success of commercial television did not herald the end of PEBs and ITV, like its BBC rivals, were subject to laws that required them to offer impartial coverage of politics and to also allocate airtime to politicians free of charge. This state subsidy in kind remains to the present time. Following the growth of television broadcasting there were further innovations in PEB production and presentation. Influential BBC current affairs editor Grace Wyndham Goldie liaised with the major parties to help them finesse their Broadcasts and many other senior Corporation figures such as future Director General Alisdair Milne were seconded to help politicians make these films as appealing and effective as possible (Negrine, 2011).

Alisdair Milne had been a producer on the popular BBC programme *Tonight* which pioneered a more human interest, less solely hard news style of journalism that eventually came to dominate current affairs broadcasting to mass audiences. He and other colleagues working on the series were seconded to help Labour during the 1959 General Election and helped create a highly innovative series ‘Britain Belongs to You’ presented by Tony Benn (Rose, 1967). The by now Labour MP Benn had previously worked for the BBC in North America and had got to know the Democrats’ presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson and witnessed the impact of television on the 1952 US election. Significantly the then head of Conservative broadcasting John Profumo also made the trip to experience Ike Eisenhower’s strategists use of advertising spots to successfully promote a not particularly telegenic candidate (Tunstall, 1964: 168). Benn proved a more effective TV communicator than his friend Stevenson and was keen on ensuring his ‘Britain Belongs’ series retained audiences through use of sounds. Music was seen as a means of preventing mass viewer desertion when the PEB began with the formal requirement to be prefaced ‘There Now Follows…’. Maintaining voter interest was a challenge given the ensuing slots each typically lasted twenty minutes. Labour like rival parties took to segmenting their Broadcasts to include shorter items featuring leaders, candidates, experts (with or without graphics) and members of the public. The Conservatives deployed a former international athlete and former journalist Christopher Chataway to front their
rival series of PEBs, one of which pointedly criticized what it alleged to be the artificial headquarters Benn and his colleagues had suggested existed in their films. It was an early example of how rival politicians were able to use their allotted time to undermine their rivals’ reputations or rebut claims.

An estimated 15 million viewers saw PEBs on either BBC or ITV in the primetime 9pm slot during the 1960s. When the third channel BBC2 was launched in 1964 it too joined in simultaneous transmissions of the Broadcasts during the General Election held that year. Critics bemoaned this amounted to the forced feeding of politics to mass audiences for the now established and highly popular medium (Black, 2010). Politicians appeared reluctant to end the arrangement and it was only later in the 1970s that broadcasters began to vary their scheduling of PEBs. Since then the practice has been for what were the five terrestrial channels and the satellite Sky News service to air the films before or after one of their main evening news bulletins (Rosenbaum, 1997). In terms of content the ‘talking head’ soon became and remained a familiar PEB technique, particularly when involving the party leader addressing the nation. Harold Wilson was anointed the ‘first television Prime Minister’ on account of his ability to use the medium in a more effective way than his predecessors and rivals (Seymour-Ure, 1974). But greater experimentation with various formats also followed courtesy of parties working with professional filmmakers such as Stanley Baker, who advised Wilson, or Conservative supporting director Bryan Forbes.

**FUSING POLITICS WITH ADVERTISING**

Professional film-makers were increasingly conscious of changes in popular culture and the subsequent PEBs they produced drew on contemporary TV genres such as talk and game shows, drama, documentary and even comedy. The experimentation was designed to appeal to the (by definition) more elusive audience of so-called ‘floating voters’ who are prone to changing their allegiance and who also tend to be less politically engaged than their more firmly partisan peers. Representatives of the typical target audiences began to appear in PEBs aimed at them. For instance in one of the first to be made under the supervision of a commercial advertising agency, a 1964 Conservative film featured an actor playing a woman vacuuming her home and evidently annoyed that her husband had forgotten their wedding
anniversary. But later it is revealed he has remembered and bought her a motor car apparently made affordable by the then Tory government’s increase in an individual’s tax allowances. The wife subsequently questions her husband’s hitherto allegiance to the opposition Labour party.

The fusion of politics and advertising was not new and had been pioneered decades before when, during the 1920s, the Conservatives had hired the services of the then leading agency SH Benson’s, soon to be famous for their iconic campaign ‘Guinness is Good for You’. But the 1970s witnessed advertisers taking more responsibility for helping their political clients devise suitable copy. Edward Heath, elected Conservative leader in 1965, lost his first campaign in 1966 but succeeded four years later aided by a strategy devised by Barry Day. Recognising the patrician, remote figure of Heath was not as telegenic as his principal rival, Prime Minister Wilson, Day focused on promoting the party to potential supporters from groups not traditionally associated with voting Tory (Day, 1982). These included married women from less socio-economically advantaged households and out of this an archetypal representative of this segment called ‘Sylvia’ was identified. The eponymous character appeared in a short biopic with a child talking about her personal philosophy and decision to reject her husband’s support for Labour in favour of voting Conservative as the best option for herself and family. Forty years later during the 2010 General Election David Cameron adopted and used a very similar approach in a campaign PEB that narrated the story of Julie, a mother of two who could have been Sylvia’s daughter (Harmer and Wring, 2011).

It was the broadcast advertising developed up to and during the Conservatives’ successful 1979 General Election campaign that is widely seen as offering a paradigm shift linked to the central strategic role of the Saatchi and Saatchi agency. The firm’s formidable creative team devised memorable copy including the poster ‘Labour Isn’t Working’ (Scammell, 1995). The agency took responsibility for all aspects of the party’s promotion including PEBs that looked noticeably more like conventional adverts than political films. Characteristically few words were featured either in written or spoken form in Saatchi copy that focused on narrating Britain’s decline and how the Conservatives could and would turn things around if elected. Significantly the party voluntarily halved its allotted time from the then standard ten
minutes to five in the belief that less was more: the shorter the film the more it resembled the kind of conventional TV advertising that was likely to have some impact. Memorable copy included clips of actors playing voters defending their aspirational behaviour in a courtroom to an unseen authority figure representing the incumbent Labour government. Another had athletes running backwards as a metaphor for the Conservative belief that country was going in the wrong direction. A particularly memorable scene focused on the intercutting footage of striking workers with an increasingly fraught voiceover restating the newspaper headline ‘Crisis? What Crisis?’ to remind viewers of the incumbent Labour government’s alleged complacency and inability to acknowledge the scale of the UK’s economic problems. These kinds of brief film extracts resembled the American style 30 or 60-second spot advertising, particularly in the way they deployed emotive imagery in their attempts to engage with voters (Rees, 1992).

Neil Kinnock was not the first Labour leader to work with professional advertisers but the strategic reforms he oversaw during the 1980s ceded more control and authority to marketers than had previously been the case (Wring, 2005). Consequently members of the so-called Shadow Communications Agency, a network of communications specialists, were recruited to work for the party on a voluntary basis. These professional advisers included a group hired to produce PEBs that, like Saatchi for the Conservatives, began to routinely feature actors playing voters talking about their aspirations and how these might be realized under a future Labour government (Gould, 1998). Here the emphasis was on countering the narrative that the party was somehow overly ideological in its use of language and thereby out of touch with ‘ordinary people’. The nature of PEBs changed with the outputs becoming increasingly slick and professional in nature. Another significant influence on them from the 1980s onwards was that of American campaign consultants who began coming to the UK to advise British politicians. Ronald Reagan’s pollster Dick Wirthlin started working with the Conservatives, Democrat strategist Rick Ridder began his long association with the Liberal Democrats, and President Kennedy’s former adviser Joe Napolitan was hired by Labour.

Joe Napolitan had been the consultant who helped invigorate Hubert Humphrey’s 1968 campaign partly through making a stirring biopic ‘What Manner of Man’ that
focused on the private side of the public figure. The same technique was memorably adopted by Labour in the 1987 General Election with the production of a PEB that became popularly known as ‘Kinnock: the Movie’ (Wring, 2005). The film, directed by ‘Chariots of Fire’ director Hugh Hudson, departed from British conventions by devoting itself to profiling the leader and was emblazoned with his name and not that of the party. This increasingly presidential approach was underlined when John Schlesinger, who made the classic film ‘Midnight Cowboy’, shot a feature on Prime Minister John Major called ‘The Journey’ in which Thatcher’s successor was chauffeured around the parts of South London talking about his humble background growing up there. This trend in personalised political advertising, long a feature of American elections, was confirmed in 1997 when another director Molly Dineen, a specialist documentary maker, followed and filmed hours of ‘fly on the wall’ style footage of Tony Blair before editing selected highlights together. The effect was to create the impression of a youthful, dynamic leader who was also a dedicated family man. Subsequent political leaders, notably David Cameron, have emulated this approach in campaign communications including their PEBs.

MARGINAL EFFECT?

Like its commercial counterpart, political advertising is widely believed to be of limited value in terms of being able to persuade audiences and change behaviour. This is because recipients of such messages tend to be aware that the information being presented has been created by the originating source for the obvious purposes of influencing them. By definition what is being communicated is partial and therefore questioned. But this has not stopped strategists in the US and elsewhere from continuing to invest vast finances in the medium. The most obvious rationale is because to not do so would cede a potentially invaluable advantage to the opposition should they continue to advertise. This alone does not explain the ongoing popularity of this kind of campaigning. Rather strategists still devote considerable time and money to crafting television spots to be aired on mainstream television as a means of reaching so-called ‘low involvement’ citizens who, although largely uninterested in politics, are habitual media consumers who tend to vote. Within this group ‘floaters’, that is those most likely to switch allegiance between elections, are vigorously targeted with adverts shown alongside conventional commercials in between programmes selected because of their widespread or niche popularity.
among certain demographic groups. In the British context, with the ban on politicians purchasing airtime, televised appeals take for the form of PEBs. This necessarily limits their efficacy because audiences, particularly those consisting of low (or lower) involvement, are more likely and able to avoid seeing the Broadcasts. This is because the minutes’ long slots are required to be prefaced with a formal introduction now shorter than the original ‘There Now Follows a PEB from…’, a prompt that a strategist working on the first ‘TV election’ of 1959 recognised was a major turn-off for many viewers.

As has already been noted the major broadcasters are still obliged to provide politicians with free airtime including during elections. Some prominent figures in the media industry such as Peter Bazalgette resent this continuing practice, not least because they think it outdated for schedulers to be compelled to accommodate such ‘dull and boring’ fare given the advent of phenomena like YouTube (BBC, 2009; see also Scammell and Langer, 2006). Although some strategists might agree with Bazalgette nonetheless persist with them because they constitute a public subsidy in kind. Further to this parties increasingly use the slots to air extracts of material available on their online platforms including YouTube channels. During the post-war era the (by a long way) third placed Liberals traditional benefitted from the increased exposure during election time on television and PEBs were a part of this extended coverage (Blumler and McQuail, 1968). More recently beneficiaries of this kind have been those parties that have gained support at the expense of their larger counterparts. Leaders of the SNP, UKIP and Greens have, in particular, appreciated the opportunity to reach and directly address potential supporters unmediated by any editorial interference from journalists. And even though PEBs may be of potentially limited value in campaign terms compared to news coverage and other forms of media exposure, the Broadcasts have provided millions of prospective voters with information direct from the party source (Norris et al., 1999).

Since 1979 there was a marked decline in the focus on issues in part because of the various experimentations with the PEB format (Gunter et al., 2006). This in part reflects the way by then truncated Broadcasts were regularly a quarter or less the time of their more policy dense equivalents during the 1950s. But regardless of differing styles of approach, many of which have been incorporated in attempts to capture the public imagination, the question remains as to whether the present
format can survive as a viable method of political communication. The challenge for contemporary politicians and their strategists was to identify and cultivate voters in a rapidly changing media landscape where audiences were beginning to increasingly fragment. For roughly forty years from the 1950s a few terrestrial channels counted for most viewers’ TV experience (Scammell, 1990). But the rise of satellite, cable and online services has meant audiences can obviously more easily avoid political content including PEBs.

Audience desertion from news and current affairs has meant parties distributing VHS tapes and then DVDs in the 100 or so so-called ‘swing seats’ that are prone to changing allegiance and that historically have decided the national electoral outcome. Labour, for instance, used this approach to strongly promote Blair’s leadership credentials in his first victory of 1997 before switching to provide voters with individualized films about their by now incumbent MP in the subsequent triumphs of 2001 and 2005 (Electoral Commission, 2005). The PEB has nonetheless outlasted the brief fashion for distributing DVDs although the films themselves have been further reduced and in the most recent General Elections of 2010 and 2015 most of the parties used two to four minute opportunities to promote themselves. Several of these broadcasts were reproduced on the party’s own websites as well as YouTube and other channels where further information about the personalities and issues featured in them could be explored. PEBs, not to mention British broadcasting, have come a long way from their Reithian origins. But the free to air slots remain if only because they provide a low cost opportunity for politicians. Such promotions can and do feature as part of wider online viral campaigns.

REGULATORY ISSUES
In Britain, as has been noted, there is a longstanding regulatory tradition whereby broadcasting is subject to laws ensuring ‘due impartiality’ when television and radio journalists are covering politics. The BBC’s oversight body was originally the Board of Governors, later re-launched as the Trust in 2007. Commercial and other broadcasters are regulated by Ofcom, the UK organisation covering most media and communication formed in 2003. The latter body replaced various others previously responsible for monitoring outputs including political reporting and PEBs. These regulators’ work has been made more complex by recent developments involving the
fragmentation of support for what were once the dominant Labour and Conservative politicians. Once routinely labelled ‘minor’ these parties now command and retain not insignificant support: in some cases their rapid rise to prominence has tasked the regulators with having to make some controversial decisions. Ofcom’s decision to grant what it labels ‘major party status’ to the once fringe United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) provoked debate. Despite polling only 3% in the previous national campaign of 2010 the party had nonetheless picked up enough support to place them first in the 2014 European elections. This provided the UKIP leadership with momentum going into the 2015 General Election and enabled them to gain PEB airtime comparable to their political rivals for the first time. Other parties also qualified, albeit more on account of the numbers of candidates they were standing rather than their previous levels of electoral support.

Prior to the Second World War there were few PEBs. Moreover the new monopoly BBC service was often criticized by politicians from across the partisan spectrum who argued their party was poorly served by the existing system either because of its limitations or alleged bias. During the 1930s one leading Labour figure Herbert Morrison even suggested his colleagues should explore the possibility of purchasing airtime on the increasingly popular Radio Luxembourg, a station broadcasting into the UK from continental Europe and therefore free from domestic legal restriction (Wring, 2005). This did not happen but the increasingly popularity of radio continued to exercise debate among politicians and led to the formation of the Committee on Party Political Broadcasts in 1947. It was convened by the main parties and traditionally involved the senior figure of the Chief Whips from the Labour, Liberal and Conservatives parties together with representatives from the BBC who were later joined by colleagues from the newly formed ITV. The Committee was not a pro-active body because there was general agreement for continuing with the arrangements established when PEBs were first introduced in 1924, specifically that there should be fair access to the airwaves for the main electoral protagonists. The formula that has been adopted to allocate airtime does, however, differentiate between larger and smaller parties by acknowledging the number of seats being contested together with votes won (Negrine, 1989: 170). More recently programmers have also had to take account of polling trends due to the fluctuating levels of support for certain alternatives, most notably UKIP. The range of politicians
gaining the right to at least one Broadcast increased during the 1970s onwards with the notable fall in the combined Conservative/Labour vote. In recent decades what were once ‘minor’ parties have come to greater prominence. UKIP’s success in receiving an eighth of the vote in the 2015 General Election and the SNP winning an unprecedented 56 out of the 59 MPs elected north of the border in the same poll has considerably strengthened their case for more PEB airtime in future campaigns.

There have been periodic reviews of the PEB system, most notably under the supervision of the UK Electoral Commission. These have considered the case for ending the provision of free airtime to parties but confirmed the longstanding ban on paid political advertising on radio and television. This reflects the public service ethos of British broadcasting as well as the consensus among politicians, particularly those not in or aspiring to government, that PEBs provide an additional platform that would otherwise be prohibitively expensive at commercial rates. Broadcasts represent the continuing commitment to offer a protected space for political actors to communicate in a more complex and crowded media environment (Rozenberg, 2013). Threats to the continuation of the present arrangements come from those advocating a significant liberalization of regulations including the dilution of the laws requiring radio and TV news outputs to be impartial. Should this happen it would likely be as part of a wider series of changes potentially involving the privatization of some BBC divisions. Paid political advertisements might logically follow because the existing ban on them could be challenged as a restriction on the freedom of expression.

A further threat to the ban on paid political advertising has emerged from changes in the UK legal system. In 2013 the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg was called on to adjudicate in a case brought by an animal rights group seeking the right to buy airtime in order to broadcast on commercial TV. The campaigners’ advert was controversial, featuring a young girl acting as a caged primate. The Court’s adjudication was, however, concerned with the legal context rather than the specific content and upheld the UK’s existing ban on US style paid spots of the kind this particular ad, should it have been aired, would have represented. Critically the ruling accepted the campaign involved a ‘political’ organisation, a category of group specifically mentioned in the existing UK Communications Act of 2003. But perhaps
most intriguingly the adjudication came about after deliberations and the closest of votes with nine to eight in favour. Should this (or a future) verdict have resulted in a different outcome the Electoral Reform Society warned the result would have led to an ‘arms race’ of campaign spending primarily driven by the most wealthy interest groups (BBC, 2013).

The UK’s current regulator Ofcom has primary responsibility for the media emerged during the period and debates that produced the 2003 Act. The body is required by Parliament to oversee the maintenance and enforcement of the official Broadcasting Code covering commercial radio and TV and, in particular, what were once formally designated the ‘terrestrial’ channels- ITV, Channel 4 and Five- as well as leading satellite outlets such as Sky News (Ofcom, 2015). Currently separate regulatory arrangements cover the BBC in the guise of its own Trust. In theory the two regulators could act independently of one another in matters pertaining to PEBs but in practice have worked closely together in the Broadcasters Liaison Group that includes representatives from the Electoral Commission as well as services operating in each nation of the UK. The Group helps co-ordinate its members’ activities in this regard and ensured a coherent and consistent approach has been taken in allocating airtime to parties. This has meant the committee interpreting the various regulations governing the different broadcasters and taking account of the BBC guidelines as well Ofcom’s Party Political and Referendum Broadcasts (PPRB) rules. The Group consequently devised a common set of guidelines for the allocation, length and frequency of PEBs and identified the channels required to transmit them.

Ofcom now takes responsibility for adjudicating whether a given electoral rival has ‘major’ status and, by definition, whether others can be regarded as more minor parties although the description is not formally used. This has significance in terms of the amount of news coverage broadcasters are required to offer the different organisations. UK law requires providers comply with rules requiring radio and TV journalism to exercise due impartiality as explained in Ofcom’s Broadcasting Code and the BBC guidelines. The directives are also important in terms of PEB allocations. According to the PPRB, major parties should be offered at least two slots on the so-called Channel 3, the UK’s main commercial service which in practice
means ITV1 in England and Wales, and Scottish TV and Ulster TV for the other nations. The same applied to Channel 4 and Five as well as the major non-BBC radio stations Absolute, Talksport and Classic FM. During the 2015 General Election the two largest parties, Labour and Conservative, received five PEBs each in England. Their main opponents the Liberal Democrats and UKIP were granted four and three respectively with the Greens qualifying for two. England aside, major party status is enjoyed in the other nations by a wider range of contenders including the Scottish Nationalists, Plaid Cymru (the Party of Wales) and various Northern Irish rivals. There are separate recommendations for smaller parties which, if they qualify, have received a single PEB because they have been able to field candidates to stand in at least a sixth of the seats being contested (BBC, 2015). This principle applies to each of the UK nations and so when the Cannabis is Safer than Alcohol party was able to stand four parliamentary candidates in Northern Ireland, the smallest country, it afforded this new fringe group the right to a PEB to be aired in the province’s 18 constituencies.

Although increasingly produced by marketing experts, Party Election Broadcasts are not subject to the Advertising Standards’ Authority’s Code governing the content of television and radio commercials. PEBs are of course advertisements in the conventional sense that they are wholly controlled by their sponsors, the rival political parties, but are not technically paid for spots because the airtime continues to be granted for free. However the growing fluidity in British electoral politics has meant an ever changing range of organisations qualifying for a Broadcast and with this some occasional controversy regarding their content. Whereas mainstream parties tend to avoid producing material that might alienate viewers some of their smaller rivals relish provoking a reaction. In the 1997 General Election broadcasters refused to show the anti-abortion ProLife Alliance’s PEB because of the graphic medical content (Cull, 1997). Censorship has also been applied to parts rather than the whole of a film. For instance in the 2014 European campaign, a PEB of the far right British National Party (BNP) was shown but subjected to the obscuring of certain scenes that were deemed offensive. The BNP subtitled their film to make clear they had been forced to make the alterations and encouraged the public to view the original version online.
The BNP’s publicizing of the online version of its 2014 PEB demonstrated the potential of ‘viral’ campaigns whereby the televised edition could be used to encourage voters to access related, more extensive material on the web. There are as yet no regulations governing online election campaign content or spending, although in practice mainstream politicians tend to carefully monitor their own digital outputs to ensure this kind of advertising does not bring them in to disrepute. In practice parties have increasingly begun to invest in social media or video-sharing web sites to disseminate the kind of American-style spots currently banned on TV and radio (Wring and Ward, 2015). During the 2015 General Election, for instance, the Conservatives spent hundreds of thousands of pounds on video clips (some as little as 16 seconds long) to try and reach millions on Facebook. One commentator described it as ‘unmediated media’ where ‘party spin trumps press spin’ (Greenslade 2015). The point was underlined by a BBC report showing in the year leading up to polling day, the Conservatives spent £100,000 per month on Facebook advertising including paying for email collection to target potential voters. Furthermore an estimated average of £3000 online was spent on targeting within key individual constituency (Hawkins 2015). By comparison Labour social media advertising spend was approximately a tenth of this amount.

CONCLUSION
The UK system of political advertising in the guise of the Party Election Broadcast has proved to be surprisingly enduring. Since first appearing on radio during the 1924 General Election and on television in the 1951 campaign the format has developed and been subject to several innovations. Most obviously the content has moved away from the traditional single talking head approach that was long associated with the PEB. But it would be an over simplification to suggest the formats, particularly on television, were ever so one dimensional. Rather two of the three earliest Broadcasts featured double acts and both included at least one presenter with the experience to exploit a still young medium. Although quaint by modern standards these innovations nonetheless point to greater sophistication on the part of those involved than is sometimes appreciated, especially compared to the professional marketers who increasingly took responsibility for producing the films and who also used the opportunity to promote themselves as well as their political clients.
It remains to be seen how long the current arrangements for PEBs will endure with the future of public service broadcasting currently under review by David Cameron’s government. Should, as seems likely, the BBC continue to experience reductions in its budget as well as greater competition from commercial rivals both domestically and internationally this will likely contribute to further fragmentation in audiences for what were once mainstream services. Given this scenario, the wisdom of maintaining the present arrangements whereby politicians are afforded state subsidies in kind will be challenged by broadcasters. Programmers are likely to question the maintenance of what they will see as a costly (to them, at least) anachronism that increasingly fails to engage the voting public beyond the older, more politically engaged citizens who take an active interest in news and current affairs. Certain strategists, particularly on the right, might also draw similarly conclusions and argue for the further liberalization of broadcasting including an end to the ban on paid election advertising or, as they will likely argue, ‘freedom of expression’. The result will almost inevitably lead to the introduction of the kind of shorter campaign spot experienced elsewhere. But it is debatable whether these commercials will ever reach the mass audiences once experienced by the longer form PEB that will replace.

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