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Understanding political public relations – what is it; what does it do, and why?

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We set out this paper in three parts. The first will aim to explore political public relations from a conceptual perspective, and the second will do some exploration of what the 2005 British general election tells us about its practice. Finally, there is a note on the historical development of news management in the UK.

Perspective

We define political PR as the bundle of conventional public techniques – those of news management; reputation management; corporate and personal identity management; event management and stunts; exhibition and conference design, and speech making - put to the service of politics and government.

We see public relations as acts of self-presentation by organisations and groups done for attention and advantage, and which are not advertising or marketing.

Political PR is public relations done in the service of political parties and governments. A popular co-terminus term for it is ‘spin’. Another term which largely overlaps is political

news management but this is not co-terminus with political PR for it does not include the other activities mentioned above.¹

We relate political PR or spin to the broader context of British society and politics as follows. There is in the UK's liberal and market-orientated democracy a promotional culture of self-interested messaging which is the communicative expression of an accelerated pluralism of values, belief systems and behaviours by organisations and groups making up British society. Political PR (along with political advertising and marketing) is the political system's share of this promotional culture. Competition between entities in the political economy and civil society is a major driver of this cultural, if not the major driver. We share Blumler's view (1990, p. 103): 'The modern publicity process involves a competitive struggle to influence and control popular perceptions of key political events and issues through the major mass media'.

UK politics is also embedded in another society-wide phenomenon – its media democracy (Meyer 2002) in which communications between electors, elected and contenders for elections pass through the channels of press, broadcasting, direct mail, advertising and e-media. These mass communication channels put the political class and citizen/electors in contact with each other, mostly in a one-way, top-down flow.

We take on balance a benign view about the effects of mass communications on the UK's democracy. We agree with Negrine (1996), McNair (1999), Mutz and Martin (2001) on this. Franklin (2004) and Jones (2001) are pessimistic, with Scammell (1995) neutral about its effect.

Elsewhere we have used the metaphor of a presentational trellis to illustrate political PR, especially at general election time. We see this as the promotional device placed in front of political parties to obscure what they want to hide from the media and voters, and to point up what they want to draw attention to.

¹ This is not the place but it could be argued that spin is a sub-set of political news management, marked out by aggressive, manipulative behaviour towards journalists, and associated with the rise of New Labour in the UK from the mid-1980s onwards.

Finally, we take the view that spin is a minor feature of the political system in the UK. It is a technique – yes with negative consequences – but it is secondary to principle, policy and personality. We do not ascribe to political PR any systemic influences which enhance or weaken the whole political system, influences such as voter disengagement or political apathy. Looked at as a producer activity, it is a field of expertise inside promotional culture and shares the advantages and disadvantages of that phenomenon. These are free expression of opinion in a weak propagandistic form and in an attention-getting manner, versus disproportionate PR power for powerful interests.

Looked at as a producer of messages for the mass communication channels, political PR in the UK has weak propagandistic intentions which are scrutinised by the media and by individual citizens; and rightly so in a liberal democracy. We argue that there should be more scrutiny of political PR. Looked at therefore in the round of politics done in a media democracy, we suggest that the right critical approach to spin is as follows.

We amend Bentham (or was it Johnson?) when he said that ‘publicity’ (meaning free debate) added to the ‘gaiety of nations’ and say that political PR, spin, adds a colourful gloss to true and false statements about the politics of a liberal democracy. The best advice we can give to its consumers is *Caveat cives*. Citizens, cut through the sizzle and find the meat. We suggest the same wary search for essentials by academics. Bertrand Russell (1986, p. 27), mathematician and philosopher, put a general point which is relevant: ‘A system which accords much power to the courtier or the wire-puller is . . . in general not a system likely to promote the general welfare’.

Are we calling political PRs ‘courtiers’ and ‘wire pullers’? Well – sort of. But in a modern, professionalized sort of way. They are professionals, party bureaucrats and civil servants, serving their political and constitutional masters, pulling out all the stops of persuasion to present the favoured case ‘hemispherically’, with only the favourable side showing. (Jensen 1997) That is the wire pulling part. The ‘courtier’ element is seen in persuasion jobs at the top of the political greasy pole, in people like Alastair Campbell,

Peter Mandelson and Bernard Ingham who all showed fierce loyalty to selected rising stars in party factions. They were, are the voices of the dominant political cliques of the time. When their sponsoring politicians fade and fall, the spin doctors fall too. The latter have no independent professional base, being kept in post by the presence of their political superiors.

Political PR is unavoidable in our competitive and promotional politics. It has a positive contribution to make to public debate. So does political marketing and advertising. Let these activities prosper in their proper place. That place is secondary to politicians and they have differing attitudes towards our disciplines². No democratic politics, no political PR (or marketing or advertising). These jobs of persuasion are servicing work.

This conclusion clashes with a current academic tendency to over-state their importance. That tendency can be called our professional deformation: we think our object of study can explain all and our thinking about it is a theory of everything. Sometimes we believe that we see that amongst ourselves. But that is another conference paper!

Electoral practice

Against this framework, what did the general election illustrate about political PR?

One of the objects of our enquiry was to come back with a data snapshot as the dust settled after the campaign. Necessarily, our investigation has been quick and dirty, and our sample unrepresentative. We spoke to three qualified observers to test their personal responses to the campaign: a lobbyist, giving the view from the Westminster ‘village’; a political editor for network TV news, someone who sifted through the trellis on a daily, if not hourly, basis; and a former Labour communications adviser, able to reflect on the practice of his successors. We also conducted desk research to map out the campaign, in terms of chronology; in terms of themes; and in terms of presentational highlights and their impact on voting intentions.

² Kenneth Clarke notes that Margaret Thatcher ‘. . . was a conviction politician who only wanted to do the right thing and stuck to it. She took no notice of opinion polls; she didn’t read the newspapers; she had never heard of a focus group’. See *The Daily Telegraph*, 7.9.05, p. 8. ‘Women love him, so do the young – and he scares the pants off Labour’.

Polls at the start of the campaign varied, suggesting a close race. The *Sun*, whose declaration of support had been a talismanic indicator of electoral victory since the Thatcher era, came out in support of no party. A shot across the bows at Labour, a snub to the Conservatives or merely a reflection of perceived voter apathy?

A YouGov poll for the *Daily Telegraph* suggested a Labour majority of 85-100 seats, and a poll of Westminster lobbyists by Communicate Research showed they were expecting the majority to be at least 70. MORI for the *Financial Times* put the Tories ahead on 39 per cent, with Labour on 34 and the Liberal Democrats on 21; while NOP in *The Independent*, Populus for *The Times* and ICM in *The Guardian* all had Labour showing leads of three, two and three per cent respectively over the Conservatives.

One of the golden rules of modern British campaigning was to set the right tone from the beginning. Labour had been widely criticised in 2001 for Blair's opening "Saint Tony" photo-opportunity at a school. This time around, Gordon Brown played a high-profile role from the off, with a speech on the economy on the opening morning of the campaign, followed by a visit to a group of students in Bethnal Green and Bow.

Iraq rumbled beneath the Labour campaign as a source of dissatisfaction among some of Labour's most loyal supporters, and several Labour figures were to move across to the Lib Dems during the coming weeks. On the opening day of the campaign, Lib Dem leader Charles Kennedy was able to welcome Stephen Wilkinson, until then Labour candidate in Ribble Valley; veteran Hackney South & Shoreditch MP Brian Sedgemore would follow, as would Greg Dyke, former BBC Director General. These were scalps that the Lib Dems were able to mount on the trellis. Strange fruit.

The Conservatives' campaign got off to an unsteady start, following a pre-election period in which the party had been seen to be forcing the pace on immigration and asylum, among other issues. For example the local party in Arundel and South Downs were attempting to find a last-minute replacement for former Deputy Chairman Howard Flight,

sacked after making remarks which appeared to question the Tories' public spending plans.

Both Howard and Blair had cause to be jittery, however. The first poll of the campaign proper, by YouGov for Sky News, put the Conservatives and Labour neck and neck on 36 per cent, with the Lib Dems on 21.

A symptom of Labour's vulnerability over Iraq – and a good example of the strengths and limitations of political media relations - was a five-page handwritten appeal by Tony Blair to disillusioned *Mirror* readers.

Otherwise, a feature of the campaign was a continuation of the trend, successfully started by Labour in 1997, of concentrating on the 150 “battleground” marginal seats almost to the exclusion of all others. All three main parties had their leaders and other key figures hurtling around the country, by bus, train and air.

The first full week of campaigning saw the launch of the party manifestos. A 32-page document detailed the Tories' plans but failed to give specific commitments on the party's plans for lower taxation. The gap on taxation left the party's spending commitments vulnerable to continued attacks from their political opponents as the campaign moved towards its third week, and at a Labour poster launch that day Blair slammed the Tory manifesto for being “full of holes”. He was joined at the launch by his new ‘best friend’, Gordon Brown.

Critics and political opponents attacked the Tory campaign for its negativity and cynicism, especially on the issues of immigration and asylum. It was quickly pointed out that the Tory campaign slogan, “Are you thinking what we're thinking?” bore a striking similarity to the slogan used by Jean Marie Le Pen's Front National in the French elections in 1988, “*Notre programme est-ce que vous pensez*”.

Even the *Daily Mail*, normally considered the last bastion of press support for the Conservatives, failed to feature their manifesto launch on its front page the following morning, and *The Sun*'s reticence the previous week was also interpreted as a sign of the general lack of enthusiasm for Howard's party.

To rub salt in the wound, the next day's *Times* front page prominently featured a Conservative gaffe over asylum. Ed Matts, Tory candidate for Weymouth, had been exposed for doctoring photographs used in his campaign materials.. This is what we call the price of presentation.

Wednesday was Labour's turn to launch its manifesto, which it described, in a phrase used the previous week by the Tories, as a package for "hard-working families". By contrast to the Tory focus on establishing Howard's identity with the electorate, Labour's document was positioned very much as a team effort, with Tony Blair joined at the launch by Gordon Brown, John Prescott, Patricia Hewitt and senior members of the Cabinet.

Labour hoped that the manifesto launch would mark the point from which their campaign could sound a positive note. There were commitments to leave untouched the basic and upper rates of income tax, not to make any real terms increases in student top-up fees, and stricter demands of those in their first 13 weeks of unemployment.

There were also measures designed to appease Labour voters angry with Tony Blair over Iraq - thought to number up to three million - with pledges on tackling HIV and AIDS in the Third World, and commitments on arms exports and trade subsidies which damage the economies of Africa.

epolitix.com summed up the general response to Labour's manifesto thus: "The manifesto contains few real surprises and, despite recent rhetoric, could fall short of the radical agenda some within the party were pressing for."

Nevertheless, two polls published the next day showed Labour pulling away from the Tories. MORI for the *Evening Standard*, based on 1,973 face-to-face interviews, put Labour on 39 per cent, Conservatives on 35 and Lib Dems on 21. Meanwhile ICM's telephone poll had Labour also gaining at the Lib Dems' expense, with 39 per cent Labour, 33 Conservative and just 19 per cent for the Lib Dems.

Charles Kennedy presided over the Lib Dems' manifesto launch that day. Kennedy had been absent from the campaign trail for a few days following the birth of his son.

Commentators reflected that this glimpse of the leader's human side might play well with voters. Unfortunately for Kennedy, his press conference muddled over the amount individual households might pay under the party's local income tax, a flagship policy designed as a replacement for the unpopular council tax, presented him as all too human.

Another eye-catching aspect of the Lib Dem platform was the fact that they were the only party consistently to have opposed the war in Iraq. "I reject a foreign policy placed on 'my ally right or wrong'", Kennedy told reporters at the manifesto launch. "And we say that war should always be a last resort."

However Sir Robert Worcester, chairman of MORI, was sceptical about the electoral impact of Iraq. Sir Robert suggested that Iraq might turn out to be a dog that growled but did not bark. His company had researched the issues that might change voting intentions in their survey for the *Evening Standard*, and Iraq was down at 14th or 15th place, well below perennial subjects like health and education. One explanation for this was the perception that there was essentially no difference between Labour and the Conservatives on the war.

For all the sound, fury, airtime, helicopter fuel and money spent over the first fortnight of the campaign, it seemed to be having little impact on voting intentions. Analysis of poll results for *epolitix* showed the Tories stuck on 34 per cent, five points behind Labour, as they had been a week previously.

Even as the party was bidding for a third term however, the New Labour strategy still left the party vulnerable to attacks from the right on two issues, asylum and immigration. The week closed with a "personal" speech from Blair designed to close down an area which the Conservatives had been highlighting for several months. Echoing a Tory election poster, Blair said: "It's not racist to want your government to do something about asylum and immigration - and we are."

Yet, just as Iraq loomed larger in the newspapers than it would seem to in the polling booth, the evidence that asylum/immigration would be a decisive vote-winner for either party was somewhat contradictory. Unsurprisingly, the Tories enjoyed a huge lead over

Labour on the issue (52 per cent against Labour's 11), but it came some way down the list of issues voters felt were important enough to decide their vote - only 37 per cent cited it, as against 42 for taxation, 49 on pensions, 56 on crime, 61 on education and 67 on health.

Polls were showing something of a pattern by now. Labour support was flatlining at around 39 per cent, with Tory and Lib Dem figures twitching as support churned between the two parties.

Insofar as Iraq came to life as an issue in the campaign, it did so in the last week of the campaign. Pressure on the Government to publish the full advice from the Attorney General on the legality of the pre-emptive invasion had been building since well before the election. Following a series of leaks, the Government released the material on Thursday. But this came after three days of increasingly bitter mudslinging, with Michael Howard branding Blair a liar over the reasons he committed British troops to military action, and the Lib Dems accusing the Tories of hypocritically questioning Blair's conduct regarding action they had, and still did, support.

As the campaign dragged into its final week, Labour attempted to return to its core message about the economy, as party leaders mounted a blitz of key marginals over the last 48 hours of campaigning. Despite the urgent appeals to voters suggesting a close result, the polls were telling a different story. The Times/ITV tracker poll, produced by Populus, had the Tories on 27 per cent, down two; Labour unchanged on 41 while the Liberal Democrats were up two on 23 per cent. YouGov for Sky News put Labour on 36, the Conservatives on 32 and the Lib Dems on 25.

The insiders' view

The above is the context in which the trellis was set up to glitter and to gleam, to hide and to reveal. What did the expert eyes of our observers note about the 2005 campaign? Did they identify some of what we had? Their responses focused on several themes. The first of these was the question of how well-targeted the parties' promotional efforts were. Here is our lobbyist:

“It’s good for democracy if they [Conservatives] have a core set of beliefs that people can relate to, but that is something they’ve struggled with since the advent of New Labour. They still haven’t found their way, don’t really know what they stand for.”

“The Tory campaign was very cynical, and people were starting to get fed up with it. It seemed to be about eroding people’s intention to go out and vote at all, rather than persuading them to vote for the Conservatives. That could explain why the Conservative share of the vote was barely up.”

“Yet the Tories were a lot more professional in 2005, even before the campaign.”

“What Labour has become very professional at is getting the message people hear on the doorstep the same as they hear on television. Labour set about reassuring voters about what they had achieved – it was about being confident with the incumbent rather than going for a new government”

“The Lib Dem campaign, as usual, was opportunistic – in the North they presented themselves as an alternative to the Tories, in the South to Labour. But being opportunistic in the long term doesn’t work, because you get found out.”

The Political Editor:

“There were more controlled campaigning events by Labour in 2005. They would say this was because of the needs of security. By contrast, Michael Howard did more campaigning on the stump. There were more personal attacks by the Tories on Blair, especially than in 2001.”

“They [Labour] ruthlessly stuck to the messages they were concentrating on, namely schools and hospitals. Undoubtedly the Conservatives put Labour on the back foot in the first two weeks, especially with issues like immigration. Labour did address immigration during the campaign, but constantly tried to work the debate back to its favoured ground.”

“Looking ahead we will continue to see the increasing presidentialisation of political parties, the increased importance of the leaders. The Conservatives will attempt to impose greater control on MPs and will meet with much resistance.”

The former adviser:

“The Conservative campaign was much more targeted than previously. They used direct mail, email, they targeted regional and micro-media, visits by members of the Shadow Cabinet in the key 150 battleground seats. In this sort of campaign the national media are too general for that sort of targeted activity.”

“On top of that we now live in a world of 24 hour news, fragmented media, the internet and so on. Pure, old-style media management might shift empathy, but not votes. At the same time a political party exists to be a strong, powerful force that projects its policies effectively.”

So there seems to be agreement here that all three major parties continued to hone their presentational skills for 2005: Labour “ruthless”; the Tories “far more professional” than in 2001; and the Lib Dems “opportunistic”. But a concern too at the cynicism of the campaign effort – not just the Tory focus on asylum and immigration, but the Lib Dems’ opportunism, which the lobbyist said would be “found out”, and that suggestion by the political editor that the degree of control Labour exerted at its campaign events wasn’t simply about security.

Note also that last point: *“Old-style media management might shift empathy, but not votes.”* The lobbyist was particularly scathing about the diminishing returns from political PR:

“The result wasn’t just bad for Labour – it was bad for politics. This time people were a lot more cynical about “politics”, but more interested in single political issues. In a way, people are more content than in the recent past – there’s no mass unemployment, no poll tax, no Cold War. There’s nothing enthusing people apart from single issues.”

“We have a situation where politics has become a small club, with politicians talking to political journalists inside a stadium, but they’re not noticing that everybody else has buggered off.”

He also pointed the finger of blame at the press:

“Journalists are as much to blame. Commentators were sounding off, rather than being analytical. They seemed to be preoccupied with gossip and innuendo. For example they were fascinated by the relationship between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, and the fact that there are these two courts at the heart of the administration, with people around them setting the agenda. I remember one political journalist telling me in 2001 that that was going to be the top political issue until the next election!”

Yet the editor acknowledged efforts to provide “unmediated” spectacle for broadcasters:

“There was also much (Conservative) emphasis (partly driven by us broadcasters) on programmes where the leaders faced direct questioning from public with minimal mediation from professional broadcasters.”

What is worth noting is the fact that all our communicators, including the editor, see a role for the trellis, for spin, going forward, notwithstanding its limitations:

“Spin had its place, and it’s a weapon in the armoury for the parties, but there are other things you should use, like political activism. Spin is all about the next day’s story. What’s important is what’s happening on the ground.”

“As long as parties actively try to influence the interpretation of policy, spin seems to me still to be a useful term. Politicians are always going to try and influence the way their policies are reported - it’s up to the media to sort out the facts from the spin.”

“Was spin ever a helpful term? It’s not a new thing – Harold Wilson was inviting The Beatles to Downing Street in the mid-1960s. Press officers are there to provide information about policies and put them in a good light. In a sophisticated society it’s essential you hire a team with media experience, who know how to shave and dress themselves in the morning. It’s most visible in politics, but it’s no different from what’s gone on more widely in commercial organizations, using research, developing strategy and campaigns.”

“It’s essential. The media need basic information as a public service. It is then expected that press officers are able to comment in an informed way on the part of the party and its policies; to offer guidance on how to interpret a policy announcement, whether it’s a continuation with or a break from previous announcements. You also need to comment on things like someone being sacked.”

“In 2005 there was an appetite to confront the issues, not run away from them into staged events. There was a recognition that there had been too much reliance on presentation, and a need to have things out in the open and ventilated.”

And finally a very short history

If news management is the most noted feature of political public relations, when did it start in the UK and who started it? Apart from the general observation that the powerful have always created and controlled news by their presence at the top of social structures in order to maintain their dominance, it is often noted that the Tudor dynasty in the 16th century used portraits, speeches and dress to communicate messages of power and of policy. One hundred and fifth years later, the monarchy was also involved in the creation of a post which we could today identify as royal news manager and press officer. George 111 (1760-1820), annoyed with inaccurate reports about the royal household, appointed a ‘court newsman’ to give selected information about his activities in a daily bulletin to the London morning newspapers. This became the Court Circular and was itself published in

The Times by the 1820s. A functionary called Doane was the first to hold the post and his grandson filled it later under Queen Victoria. Joseph Doane retired in 1864 and was replaced by Thomas Beard, a friend of Charles Dickens, the novelist. It was a well paid job for Dickens reports the salary to be £400 a year, at a time when London reporters were earning £200 and their editors between £600 and £1,000. Plunkett (2003, pp. 224-9) has traced the court newsman's rise, noting that he '... metamorphosed from a semi-official hanger on . . . into an established royal functionary'. He was perhaps the first public relations professional in the nineteenth century (p. 225). The development of the post tracked the rise of freely published newspapers and magazines with increasing circulations. Newspapers carried verbatim long press releases from the court newsman in 1858 when the Princess Royal married and the circulation of *The Times* increased from its normal 65, 000 to 108,000 (p. 200). For Plunkett (p. 199) what the post represented was a reciprocal but unequal dependency between royal family and an incipient modern mass media.

Another noteworthy point in the spread of news management by institutions is the appointment of Herbert Tracey in 1935 as the first press officer for the Trades Union Congress (Manning, 1998). In the same post-WW1 period, a press spokesman for the Prime Minister first appeared. He was George Steward and Cockett (1989, pp. 3-32) notes the appointment was made during the period of appeasement of Hitler by Chamberlain 1937-1940. Cockett judges that Steward dominated the Lobby (the reporters attached to Downing St.) which allowed itself to be cowed by him, and which rarely criticised the policy. He notes that the Foreign Office head of information Sir Reginald 'Rex' Leeper, similarly had another group of reporters (this time diplomatic correspondents) eating snippets of information from his hand, for the Foreign Office and Downing St. were often at odds on policy.

The full title of Cockett's book is 'Twilight of Truth: Chamberlain, Appeasement and the Manipulation of the Press'. It is a powerful defence for a media independent of government. It traces a government policy of manipulation and control of the press – in part via the Lobby system – with the acceptance of this manipulation and control by

(most) reporters, editors and press barons with the political consequence that a foreign policy – appeasement of Hitler – was inadequately tested in public. It is not too much of a step further to argue that the UK's poor performance in the first year of the Second World War was a consequence.

At the same time, Hitler had a George Steward equivalent. Heinz Lorentz was the Fuhrer's press liaison officer says R. W. Leon who interrogated him as he tried to escape from Berlin, posing as a Luxembourg journalist. (Letter to *The Times*, 2. 10. 2000, p. 17, 'Hitler's cruel fight to twist history')

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