

## Leaders, authority, parties: the situation after 5.5.05

In the way that a bizarre dream can tell us something important about the dreamer, the weirdest statements of an election campaign can give clues to the present state and the prospects of its protagonists.

We did not have to look hard for weirdness. Take the Conservatives' anti-smirking campaign. Howard said on 5 April that the Prime Minister was 'already secretly grinning' at the prospect of victory. Here, a claim to knowledge of the PM's inner mind is used, along with a comment on his outer facial expression - the reference to 'smirking politics' - to tap the public distrust of Blair. This moves the trust issue away from Iraq, where politically the Conservatives have no clear blue water between the PM and themselves, to a generalised psychological space where alleged states of mind and emotional characteristics are being judged rather than policies or decisions.

The notion of a 'smirking politics' is of course a vacuous one. Its absurdity was picked up by, for one, Mick Hume in *The Times* on April 15, though - in keeping with his on-line magazine *Spiked's* version of no-nonsense politics - he derided its triviality. This may be to underestimate its purchase on the public mind. The cinema advertisement offered by the Conservatives suggested they clearly saw value in this anti-smirking campaign: to a musical soundtrack of 'Take that look off your face', there are various clips of the PM, most with a characteristic smile or broad grin.

The anti-smirking message was emphasised again as we entered the final week of the campaign, as it had been at the beginning and various points throughout. This time it was Liam Fox claiming that the PM had a 'secret smirk' at the prospect of another victory, when he unveiled a hi-tech changing image 3-D poster showing the smile being wiped off the PM's face. And then on Bank Holiday Monday 2 May, Howard treated a gathering of party workers to a poem: 'People have had enough of spin and smirk, they just want someone who'll make things work.'

Labour finally joined in this business of diagnosing the mental state of their opponents, though their contribution came from the Celtic fringe: Rhodri Morgan suggested (to *ePolitix* on Tuesday 3 May) that 'retro-fetishism' lay behind the Conservatives' proposals to restore matrons to their former glory, as the key to combating MRSA. An interesting label, perhaps, though there are no grounds for thinking that the appeal of this formidable maternal image is restricted, as Morgan suggested, only to public schoolboys.

A schoolboy theme has also appeared in the LibDems communications effort. One of their PEBs was a short comedy about 'The boy who cried wolf', a schoolboy Prime Minister (with a similar Leader of the Opposition) who insisted there was a wolf and would not apologise even when the woods had been searched and no trace of one had been found. The surprisingly violent phrase which they took up, 'Give Tony Blair a bloody nose', also originates in the school playground, albeit most fittingly belonging in a public school setting of the 1950s where it is right to mete this punishment to a cad. This LibDems' play with images of childishness ironically captures their position as the child of the party system: small, inexperienced in running things, looking forward excitedly to a coming day of real adult involvement.

What these off-centre fragments illustrate is the powerful swirl of feeling around images of authority in this, as is very likely in any other, campaign. In a representative democracy, elections are fundamentally about leaders. For this reason, demands that they should be about 'policies, not personalities' can miss the mark. Howard was quite correct to stress the choice of leader which May 5 offered. The public perceptions of party leaders offer us choices about what kind of polity we want or feel we must settle for: what kind of person we can trust (or distrust least), what capabilities we demand, what sensibilities we value, whose language do we feel most comfortable with, whose presence in power do we think will most enhance our national life? This General Election has probably seen these questions more sharply and persistently raised than in any previous one.

The parties' key slogans in the final days tied in – for better or worse - with the positions the leaders had by then acquired in public esteem. The LibDems' 'The real alternative' could trade on Kennedy's status as someone perceived to be less tainted by spin and lies, but thereby also called into play their chronic positioning problem as the minor, outside party. Even if able to land a punch on the nose of the villain, can he subsequently boss the playground? The Conservatives' 'Taking a stand' clearly echoed the Howard campaign's stress on issues of national identity, crime and school discipline – the stand was a righteously defensive one, offering us protection from invaders and yobs, and identifying Howard with the reassuring, unreconstructed authority figures of policemen whom yobs fear and matrons who will brook no dirt. As such it reinforced both the effectiveness of this approach amongst some groups, and the narrowness of the campaign's and leader's appeal. Labour's comparatively ineffectual-sounding 'Forward not back', while intended to echo the stress on economic stability and on the move to greater social justice, may have had subliminal counter-effects amongst some voters. Its 'no reverse gear' association can revive the Blair-Thatcher comparison, generally not a helpful one for the PM, while its connotations of Blair as military leader - advance not retreat – were precisely what the campaign strategy had sought to avoid.

Also, with the figure of Gordon Brown foreshadowing a post-Blair era, it was more complicated for Labour (even apart from the Iraq factor) to embrace this leader-focus. In this context, their tactic of presenting a strong united front between the two – in their first PEB, and now increasingly in many public appearances – was a very necessary one. Confronting head-on the image of the Blair-Brown relationship as irretrievably distrustful and acrimonious, the PEB was a cinematic celebration of their partnership. While the contrivance here was obvious to all, there may have been some subliminal impact on voters' perceptions of or level of concern about whether there is a bitter feud at the centre of a Labour government. Coupled with talk of some 'deal', this film may have helped defuse this issue for Labour.

However, the attacks specifically on Blair by the other parties combined to detonate explosive mixes of anti-war feeling, Little England-ness, chattering-class contempt and free-floating resentment, to blow away Labour's majority in a good number of marginals. The overall result, it seems, has significantly weakened the PM and the national consensus he has sought to establish around the New Labour project. But where has the campaign left political authority as a whole in Britain? With what images of leadership do we enter the third term?

In pursuing their anti-smirking campaign as they did, the Conservatives were aiming partly to find some common ground with those of more social-democratic or liberal inclinations, who might not be attracted by nationalist rhetoric but who are disaffected over Iraq or anti-terrorism or student fees, and whose disaffection is focussed on Blair. But in doing so they drew on a deep-seated tendency in human nature, which is to feel resentful towards the current leadership, whoever that may be. It is said that people become 'bored' or 'disillusioned' with leaders, but it runs deeper than that. In this submerged, non-rational area of mental life, as the sociologist Hans Schoeck suggested many years ago, 'to be a leader is a crime', and we as followers feel resentment and envy towards the people who have power over us and who loom large on our screens and front pages.

It is inevitably a tempting opportunity for a long-term opposition to tap into this reserve of feeling. However the reinforcement it offers to this knee-jerk resentment is not good for any of us in the long run. The childish anxiety that our leaders are contemptuously smirking at us and routinely lying to us, and the resentment at their power, can, if encouraged in this way, increase the risk of alienation from democratic life and from the public sphere.

Another, more focussed, form of resentment also drove the emphasis in the Conservatives' campaign (or at least in many media treatments of it) on immigration and asylum. There are as we know some toxic feelings of hatred amongst white Britons towards foreigners and non-whites, especially ethnically Asian Muslims, which can be mobilised. However many years of polling data suggests these extreme feelings are not of widespread strength amongst the British public. More common is an anxious, rivalrous resentment, producing negative feelings which range from ungenerous to hostile.

So in the immigration/asylum debate, as in the trust issue, resentment is central. Maybe an election is a time for some of the worst in a nation's psyche to be exposed, and the pointers here are towards a strong streak of resentment running through the British public, towards leaders and strangers alike. Of course the main issues ought to be about how much this feeling is justified (whether by the actions of the leaders or by the effects of the strangers' presence), but we also need to understand that free-floating feeling can become attached to these issues.

The effect of the Conservatives' campaign on our perceptions of political authority has therefore been to put resentment at the centre: resentment at the leader per se, and at the alleged failure of the current leadership to protect us from the demands of also-resented strangers. Their own positive assertion of leadership was, as Rhodri Morgan's exotic observation suggested, cast in a psychologically retrogressive mould: simplistic images of formidable paternal and maternal strength, good and necessary perhaps in children's literature but inadequate for framing the capacity for more complex emotional resources which leaders now need.

Labour's representations of its own authority, and of the alleged fraudulence of the Conservative claim to it, were for the most part simply laid out along the dimension of competence. Don't go back to the bad old days of inflation and instability; stay with

the steady hand of Labour on the economic tiller, generating greater affluence for 'hardworking families' and funds for public services investment. Notwithstanding the real achievements which may be invoked here, both in economic management and in refurbishing the welfare state, this appeal was disappointingly limited. It made little reference to any values-based issues which, we may suppose, remain a key differentiator of the parties and an essential element in the legitimacy of government. And it sought to exclude references to the Iraq War and to the PM's leadership around that issue. This strategy may have underestimated the extent to which it might have been possible to neutralise the virulent antipathy towards Tony Blair that has developed, especially but not only in reaction to the Iraq War. The US pollster Frank Luntz reported at the start of April that when his 'people-meter' technique was given a run-out here it showed remarkable hostility to the PM. In the last two years Blair has seemed to have attracted a breadth and depth of vituperation we have not seen since Margaret Thatcher divided the country, with less robust countervailing sentiment being expressed by his supporters than Thatcher continued to enjoy from hers well into her decline. Yet Luntz' final focus group for *Newsnight* showed a strong shift in sympathy and respect for the PM, in response to the defences he had been obliged to give of his actions. Moreover an ICM/Guardian poll in the final week suggested there was still a lot to work with in terms of the PM's perceived strengths – majorities thought he is 'respected' and 'charismatic'.

The absence from Labour's campaign of a clear, values-led personification of what the government stood for left a large, asymmetrical gap, and gave the Conservatives a space which they were able to exploit to some electoral advantage. But neither of the two main parties offered an enriching, credible model of political authority. Labour returned to a Wilsonian claim of go-ahead administrative skill. The Conservatives returned, at least in rhetoric, to the comforts of incipient authoritarianism. Overall, we probably have to conclude that the campaign as a whole damaged the emotional vitality of British democracy, not dramatically, but as a contribution to the slow erosion of possibilities for viable leadership.