

Journalists v politicians (Polis@Labour Conference)

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Charles Clarke MP and Andrew Gilligan clashed at today's Polis/YouGovStone fringe meeting debate at the Labour Party conference in Manchester. The old wounds from the Iraq/Hutton row between Labour and Gilligan are still raw. But the underlying issue was whether journalists or politicians call the shots in present political life.

[charlesclarke.jpg](#)

Gilligan is convinced that almost all the power lies with the politicians (despite the findings of a YouGovStone poll of 'influentials'). He argues that journalists have the attention span of a goldfish and an insatiable appetite for novelty. This means they are too easily led.

[gilligan_415x275.jpg](#)

Gilligan said that Journalists can amplify public opinions but they can't create them. Politicians can be incompetent and untruthful but if journalists get things wrong they are subject to libel law or the sack.

Charles Clarke has been poisonous in his attacks on some journalists in the past [check out his speech to Polis back in 2006] and he did have complaints today. He spoke about the media obsession with "the drama of personality". He also asserted that many Westminster journalists lack basic political knowledge. And he wanted to see less opinion and more facts in the news.

But he was also ready to accept that in the end it is up to politicians to be more open and honest in communicating ideas and debates with the public. He acknowledged that politicians too often repeat a single text instead of listening and arguing in an accessible way. (That could have been interpreted as a veiled attack on Gordon Brown's obsessive repetitious mantra soundbites...but I am sure that was very far from Charles Clarke's mind).

Clarke does not think that New Media is in itself the answer. He worries about how exclusive some Online forums are and how unreliable some websites can be.

One interesting thing that both Clarke and Gilligan agreed upon was that the media is not to blame for the current speculation about the Labour leadership. And Mr Clarke should know. Some delegates speaking from the floor said that the media made it all up.

Andrew Gilligan (who is covering conference for the London Evening Standard) said that the truth was that it was Labour politicians who were spreading the stories. Indeed, Mr Clarke's point was simply that it would be better if the debate could be had in the open.

You can read my views [here](#), but the point I made at today's panel was that both the media and the politicians have the same problem. They are fighting over a declining prize. The public is losing interest in both old politics and old media.

Journalists are making major efforts to use new technologies and fresh ways of communicating to re-connect with the public. Politicians need to do the same. For both groups it means giving up some of their grip on power.

This conference is the most surreal I have ever attended. It's not that everyone is miserable. In fact, there's quite a lot of gallows humour about. The really strange thing is the dualism on display. Everyone knows they are about to lose the next election. One senior Trade Unionist told me how they are simply waiting for Opposition and the debates that will begin then. And yet John Prescott is running around handing out 'Go Fourth' stickers.

Everyone knows that Gordon will not be leader after the next election (and I was surprised by how many people think he might still be gone by Christmas) and yet all the on-the-record talk is how he is uniquely able to guide the nation through the current global financial crisis.

It all goes to prove Charles Clarke and Andrew Gilligan's point. Until politicians are prepared to have open and frank debates with the public, the charade of spin and rumour will continue.

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