

How Labour Will Win With Old TV and New Media (Says Douglas Alexander)

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A combination of new and very traditional media could yet win the election for Labour, according to one of their key campaign strategists, Douglas Alexander MP.

Speaking at the LSE to Political Communications students just minutes after the ink was dry on a deal for [Election TV Debates](#), Alexander was bubbling with a sense that this election is still up for grabs. For a campaigner who has known brutal defeat (Dukakis 1988) as well as epochal triumph (Blair 1997) this is a novel battleground, but one that he refuses to surrender.

Gordon Brown should be dead and buried. He has presided over an economic collapse, repeated coup attempts, accusations of bullying and woeful poll ratings. And yet the talk is of a possible hung parliament, if not a Labour minority.

This is how Douglas Alexander sees the campaign strategy.

He goes back to basics. He says that first of all you have to frame the question for the campaign. You must insist that you are not simply providing a different answer to the same question. You must ask different questions.

You have to frame the agenda by asking the basic question of what this election is about. In this case, for Labour it is:

- Security versus Tory Risk
- Protecting Frontline Services versus Tory Cuts
- New Industry and Jobs versus Tory Recession
- Many versus The Few

Then once you have framed the agenda you have to control it. That means dominating the media.

Then you have to communicate the message.

In the past that meant disruptive messaging whereby you interrupted the voters' lives with posters, adverts and leaflets. Now you have to use [Seth Godin's](#) idea of permissive messaging. That means going to supermarkets to meet voters on their territory and on their terms.

Alexander points out that voters are now swamped with messages. A digital junk mail deluge. You have to be relevant and accessible.

He thinks that this election will not conform to the agenda of old media. The routine of morning press conferences, photo opportunities and evening launches will be disrupted by Twitter, bloggers and YouTube.

"There will be a much more exciting and anarchic environment in this campaign than ever before"

Alexander believes that the Conservatives have made strategic mistakes. He thinks that they are still conducting a 'broadcast election in a networked age'.

He thinks that this is as important a shift as we saw in '97 when British electoral campaigning adopted the US

techniques of spin, control and focus group. Even the technology of that period feels dated now: who uses fax, pagers or soundbites any more?

And yet Old Media has raised its ugly head in a last magnificent gesture that has caught Alexander's attention. The decision to hold TV Leader's debates – 40 years after America – has opened up political possibilities for Alexander that surpass even his enthusiasm for new media.

Alexander believes that the TV debates offer an opportunity for Brown to take Cameron on:

'It helps deal with idea that the election is already decided. It counters the media narrative that this is over. It prises open the contest in the journalist's mind'

According to Alexander it might also change voters' minds. He thinks that it will dominate the campaign for nine days- three days for each debate – it could make as much as three points difference. In a tight election, that might just save Labour's bacon.

No wonder that the unelected but influential Conservative activist [Tim Montgomerie](#) thinks that the Tory decision to agree to these debates when they are ahead in the polls, was 'crazy'.

I am not so sure. This is a bizarre election. A Labour Prime Minister, unloved by his party or the nation, is running against a very pleasant Conservative leader. Brown was way behind in the polls and the underlying trends are still against a Labour win. And yet Cameron is also unloved by his party or the nation.

Neither of them is talking policy, neither of them has any vision to offer or policy alternatives that they are prepared to articulate in public.

That is why the campaign will matter. Tactics and the media coverage will be unusually significant.