

# SOUNDBITES VERSUS SOCIALISM:

## THE CHANGING CAMPAIGN PHILOSOPHY OF THE BRITISH LABOUR PARTY

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### Abstract

The paper will seek to analyse the internal debate that has raged throughout the party's history as to what constitutes the most appropriate form of political communication. Two contrasting views are identified: these are "educationalism," that is the belief that the best way to win public support is through a determined and sustained political education programme relying on meetings, leaflets, labour intensive grassroots' work and informed de-bate; by contrast, what is labelled "persuasionalism" sees the media and mass communication as central to campaigning and places emphasis on the less tangential, image based appeals to what are perceived to be the largely disinterested electorate. The discussion will assess the centrality of the educationalist perspective to Labour Party strategy in the early part of its existence, that is the first half of this century. What will then be demonstrated is how what has broadly been defined as persuasionalism first challenged and then supplanted educationalism as the dominant party approach to electioneering. Discussion will note that Labour, probably like most social democratic parties, has contained elements hostile to the mass media as an agency of political communication. As the paper will show, this is not something unique to contemporary debate, and has in fact been a key theme of strategic discussion throughout the party's history.

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## Introduction

Talk of the 1997 general election has once again focused British commentators' minds on the political role of the mass media and "image-making." This is reflected in the recent controversy surrounding the strategies being employed by the Labour Party to publicly promote its policies and leader Tony Blair. Opponents, notably Conservative Chairman Brian Mawhinney in his 1996 Party Conference speech, have sought to portray Blair as a politician dependent on marketing research rather than principles. This argument has derived inspiration from earlier comments made by Clare Short, one of Blair's Shadow Cabinet colleagues. The senior frontbench MP, in making her feelings public, was careful not to criticise the leader himself but did make telling references to the marketing conscious aides around him. Her anxieties were summed up in the phraseology used to describe what she termed "the people in the dark" (Richards 1996). In developing her argument, Short questioned the wisdom of Labour's and these particular advisers' over-reliance on polling research. Far from being just a point of contention in the Labour Party of the late 1980s and 1990s, this paper will assess how similar sentiments have long informed strategic debate since the organisation was created at the beginning of the century.

## Competing Philosophies of Political Communication

Traditionally, a significant body of opinion within the Labour movement has objected to changes in electioneering which have appeared to involve the dilution of their party's commitment to converting people to its cause. According to Bernard Barker this is evidence of an approach to political communication governed by the philosophy of "educational socialism" (Barker 1972). Labelled "democratic rationalists" by another historian Timothy Hollins, adherents to this view found sympathy and support in a party which prided itself on a belief in utopian ideals designed to emancipate the poor and dispossessed (Hollins 1981, 119). Hollins uses the term in order to clarify the reluctance of many early Labour campaigners to engage in appeals built around anything but straightforward political education.<sup>1</sup> This educationalist conception of campaigning is built on the pioneering work of J. S. Mill. Influenced by Aristotle, Mill was of the opinion that democracy would only properly function if it was based on solid reasoned debate amongst an informed citizenry rather than the populist appeals characteristic of mob rule (McLean 1976, 29; Price 1992, 5).

Education was seen as both the opposite of, not to mention an antidote to, the shallow and emotive appeals of opportunist propaganda. To quote Robert Blatchford, founder of the *Clarion* journal, his and his fellow activists' mission was to "Make Socialists" (Barker 1972). Coming as many organisers originally did from a background in the evangelistic Independent Labour Party or Nonconformist church movement, it was hardly surprising that some party servants saw their task in terms of "converting" the apolitical (McLean 1980). Despite their sometimes emotive tones, Labour organisers saw the use of rational, fact filled discourse as a way of countering opponents' apparent reliance on fear and fiction (Hollins 1981, 126-130). This concern reflected the view of many in the party weary about the increasingly pervasive role of "image politics." Several organisers worried that their mission to educate and ultimately emancipate society would be hampered under a weight of propagandist distortion and subterfuge (White 1938).

In contrast to “educational socialism” was what Hollins terms the “persuasional” approach to political communication. Typically this was couched in language and symbolism primarily designed to provoke emotions rather than a reasoned response on the part of the recipient (Hollins 1981, 122). As Qualter notes, such a perception clearly derives inspiration from the teachings of Plato (Qualter 1985, 11). Countering the Aristotelian belief in the potential for a democracy consisting of an informed populace, Plato feared this an imperfect state of affairs too prone to falling prey to the tyranny of an emotionally charged mob (Price 1992, 5).

An increasingly integral part of political discourse during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, persuasional propaganda began to gather support from advocates inside the Labour Party. This body of opinion gained influential endorsement from leading Fabian and early political scientist Graham Wallas who, in his seminal 1908 book *Human Nature in Politics*, argued that new forms of communication were helping to undermine the long held “intellectualist assumption” of many democratic theorists (Wallas 1948, 87). Wallas believed the advent of manipulative mass propaganda offered a serious challenge to the notion that giving every person the vote would lead to informed, deliberative and stimulating public debate. Practical politicians, he argued, would inevitably develop the use of the “image” based appeals in their attempts to win over the electorate: “It is the business of the party managers to secure that these automatic associations be as clear as possible, shall be shared by as large a number as possible, and shall call up as many and as strong emotions as possible” (Wallas 1948, 84).

Wallas’ sentiments found favour with several Labour veterans of the campaign trail. Faced with what he saw as a sad reality, agent Wilfred Hargreaves urged an abandonment of the party’s adherence to didactic methods: “I infinitely prefer a convinced and thoughtful voter, but we must face the fact that many voters do not think very much, and many years will elapse before they cease to allow others to do their thinking for them” (Labour Organiser 1926). Others agreed and propounded the view that a substantial and critical mass of the public were fluid in outlook and probably disinterested in politics, particularly of the evangelical, intensely educative kind (Labour Organiser 1923). The acceptance of such arguments were a factor in the party’s shift towards using more persuasional methods of political communication during the inter-war period. According to Hollins, this was evidence of the party becoming “as much electorally as educationally orientated” (Hollins 1981, 133). After the Second World War, and the arrival of mass television, modern polling and saturation advertising, the debate between strategists intensified with those holding educationalist and persuasionalist views coming into more open conflict.

## The Rise of the Mass Media and the Prototype “Modernisers”

During the 1950s Labour appointed David Ginsberg, formerly with Government Social Surveys, Head of Research. Together with the leader’s decision to take soundings from leading market researcher, Mark Abrams, the choice of Ginsberg increased the likelihood that the party might invest time and resources in a programme of polling. At the 1957 NEC Publicity Sub-committee which met to discuss the matter, left-winger Aneurin Bevan and his educationalist leaning allies took issue with Abrams’ methods. The debate was heated with one participant likening polling research to the work of notorious Nazi propagandist Josef Goebbels (Butler and King 1965, 67). An-

other adviser present, Professor R. H. Tawney, calmed the meeting before launching a defence of polling methods. The efforts of Tawney were, however, to no avail and further research was not commissioned until after the 1959 election, though Abrams continued to be a discrete confidante of the leader. Then, having had his proposal to mount a post-mortem survey into Labour's subsequent defeat frustrated by elements within the central apparatus, Abrams formally linked up with the journal ***Socialist Commentary*** to conduct election analysis (Worcester 1991, 24).

First published as a series of articles in the ***Socialist Commentary*** during the early part of 1960, Abrams' study gained greater notoriety when it appeared in book form later that year (Abrams et al. 1960). The volume, entitled ***Must Labour Lose?***, proved to be an important and influential source for political debate and made a notable impression on General Secretary Morgan Philips, Research Department head Peter Shore (Butler and King 1965, 67) and the Gaitskellite right-wing of the party who saw it as apparent scientific justification for their revisionist case (Windlesham 1966, 86-88). In essence, the research identified the basis of a move towards the "embourgeoisement" of British society whereby growing numbers of working-class people began to aspire to, and in some cases realise, the comfortable lifestyle more commonly associated with the middle-class: such voters were thought unlikely to be impressed with a proletarian type party committed to a large-scale programme of nationalisation. It was an argument which gathered support in the party. Future Home Secretary Merlyn Rees, a Labour candidate in the 1959 election, addressed himself to the potentially ominous electoral consequences for Labour of an increasingly "atomised society" unfavourable to the collectivist ethos as embodied in organisations like the trades unions (Rees 1960).

***Must Labour Lose?*** also modified the thinking of prominent figures such as Tony Crosland. Crosland was sympathetic to the idea that Labour needed to revamp its image in order, as he saw it, to place itself "in rapport" with the public. In his 1960 pamphlet ***Can Labour Win?*** he argued that the party ought to commission a programme of polls in preparation for the next election (Crosland 1962). At least one motion to the Annual Conference of that year called for the integration of market research into electoral strategy (Teer and Spence 1973, 169). Not long after the NEC appointed Mark Abrams as the party's official pollster. The advent of a coherent strategy for the supervision of opinion polling would not be the only organisational coup initiated by revisionist forces in the party.

The introduction of mass television created considerable interest, not least in the Labour Party. As former BBC producer and Tony Benn saw it: "We must make [television] serve us as surely as the pioneers made the leaflet and the soap box carry the message to the people of Britain" (Labour Organiser 1955). Prior to the 1955 campaign, Benn had pushed for the party to take a more professional approach towards televised PEB production. Although his plans were not implemented, the new medium continued to hold his interest as he admitted in a 1958 article for political journal ***Forward:***

*Just as one hydrogen bomb packs more power than the total load dropped in World War Two, so one television broadcast more than equals a lifetime of mass rallies and street-corner oratory. Old methods of campaigning are as obsolete as conventional weapons (cited in Adams 1992, 142).*

Benn eventually got the chance to put his ideas into practice with the onset of the 1959 general election. Indeed the stylistic and much praised series of Labour PEBs he

helped to produced were such that Lord Hailsham, the Conservative Party Chairman, felt obliged to attack them for being “glossier than thou” (Bulmer Thomas 1967, 249).

The most concerted and sustained appeals for a reorganisation of electoral strategy after 1959 came from senior Gaitskellites and their rank and file supporters in the Campaign for Democratic Socialism (CDS) (Babaz 1980, 142). The Campaign, set up by several youthful supporters of the leader, organised itself during the critical period 1960-64 (Brivati 1992). Ex-MP Brian Magee, a founding member, later summed up the importance of group participants as the “modernisers” of their day (Brivati and Wincott 1993). CDS activists engaged themselves in the organisation of a grassroots campaign designed to win support for the leadership amongst the “quiet majority” of local party members whose views they assumed tallied with their own. If some have questioned the group’s success in reforming policy, it is undoubtedly the case that the Campaign had an effect on the organisation of campaigning.

Unlike other groups active in the party, the CDS excelled in its ability to pursue an informal public relations’ strategy designed to promote the Gaitskellite case through quality and, on occasion, popular press coverage. Here the Campaign’s work was facilitated by activists with media experience such as public relations consultant Denis Howell and political journalist Ivan Yates. These and other forerunners of what are now known as “spin doctors” targeted sympathetic newspaper journalists in the ultimate hope of influencing the course of Labour Party debates. Consequently, the CDS, as Lord Windlesham noted, was able to build up an influential network of opinion forming media outlets such as *The Times* and *The Guardian* (Windlesham 1966, 102). By contrast, CDS opponents had few sympathetic contacts working in the print media prepared or able to use their position to further the Labour left’s cause (Jenkins 1979, 126-129). Despite the apparent imbalance in media publicity in favour of the right, the left did not suffer as greatly as it might have on account of the party’s relatively strong horizontal structures, most obviously the Annual Conference.

Another CDS supporter, Bernard Donoghue, was greatly influenced by his first hand experiences helping the Kennedy presidential campaign during 1960: “that did have quite an affect on me. When you came back from America, the Labour Party really did look like something out of a museum” (Brivati and Wincott 1993). Such a viewpoint did little but compound the notion that the work of Kennedy’s team and, before that, the Colman Prentis Varley advertising agency’s efforts on behalf of the Conservatives between 1957-59, had been crucial to the eventual outcome of the campaign. It was supported by a whole host of people with CDS connections in a range of publications including *Political Quarterly*, *Socialist Commentary* and a special Young Fabian Group report. As one advocate put it: “... the truth is that modern advertising is scientific -- and no more. It is not by itself either good or evil,” before admitting “Of course, one doesn’t try to promote the Labour Party like a soap powder...” (*Labour Organiser* 1963). Ultimately, perhaps, the most significant event during this period was the appointment of CDS activist and Gaitskell’s former press aide John Harris as Labour Director of Publicity in 1962. In post, Harris was able to oversee an intensification in the party’s use of media campaigning.

The analysis and interpretation that followed the publication of *Must Labour Lose?* coupled with the efforts of Campaign for Democratic Socialism members and others helped provide an environment in which serious discussion of the future strategic direction of the party could take place. Even with such a well supported movement in

favour of change, pioneering reform was not so easy in an organisation whose affairs were managed by a complex committee based system within which determined minorities could block transformations. Typically, opposition of this kind was centred on two groups with differing motives: the passive, conservative traditionalists weary of spending money on expensive professional campaigns, and the activist, radical ideologues distrustful of what they perceived to be the leadership's investment in shallow and non-didactic methods of electioneering.

## Dissenting Voices

Whilst groups on the centre-right tended to be in the "revisionist" vanguard, not everybody on this wing of the party had the same aspirations when it came to the question of how party campaigning might be overhauled. This was not least because some Labour right-wingers held an essentially educationalist view of political communication and believed image management to be a dubious and misleading practice. Speaking in 1959 one of them commented:

*You see, I am a rationalist. I like to think that in a mature democracy people reach their conclusions mostly on the basis of actual evidence and argument. I do not like to think that they vote as they do because something appeals to their unconscious* (Butler and Rose 1960, 29).

Given that, in the main, it was revisionists who tended to favour less ideologically based and more professionalised, persuasional methods of electioneering it is perhaps surprising that the above observation was made by their guiding figure Hugh Gaitskell. A man ill at ease with certain aspects of modern mediated politics, Gaitskell initially held a low opinion of advertising, believing "the whole thing is somehow false" (Butler and Rose 1960, 20). By contrast with his policy pronouncements, the party leader's attitude towards marketing was initially more in keeping with those of the Labour left. This is perhaps because, unlike many of his youthful supporters in the CDS group, Gaitskell's background and earlier career had involved him in adult education rather than PR and journalism. During the 1959 general election the donnish disposition of the Labour leader made him appear uneasy on television, particularly when his performance was contrasted with that of his more polished Conservative opponent Harold Macmillan (McDermott 1972). That said, Gaitskell's experience of leading the party during a national campaign converted him into a proponent of political advertising and market research.

Whilst Gaitskell was modest in his criticism of mediated politics, others in the party were not so restrained. Between 1955 and 1958 there were regular motions to the Annual Party Conference denouncing the political role of advertising and modern publicity techniques (Teer and Spence 1973, 167). Even the apparently successful, highly stylistic series of Labour PEBs produced and shown during the 1959 election fielded criticism from party organisers, one of whom concluded: "I feel that the clever television programmes perhaps fortified suspicions of our promises, instead of removing them. For this reason I think our television programmes may have lost, rather than gained us support" (Butler and Rose 1960, 86).

Matters came to a head following the 1959 general election when several senior Labour MPs attacked the Conservatives' high profile relationship with leading advertising agency CPV. Speaking in the House of Commons in 1958, former party broadcasting officer and leading Gaitskellite Patrick Gordon-Walker denounced what he

saw as the debasement of electoral debate through the introduction of the “worst sort of Americanisation” into British political campaigning (Rose 1967, 14). Of all the then opponents of political advertising within the party MP Alice Bacon was perhaps the most important. Reiterating the concerns of Gordon-Walker, Bacon used a parliamentary debate in July 1960 to give vent to her views, attacking the Conservatives relationship with an advertising agency as being “alien” to British democracy (Rose 1967, 63). A leadership confidante, Miss Bacon played an influential role as Chair of the NEC Sub-committee on Publicity. Her antipathy towards Conservative professionalism combined partisan reaction with a defence of educationalist campaign methodologies. Bacon’s views were probably also coloured by a recognition that any imitation of the CPV approach by Labour might seriously erode party finances.

Amongst rank and file organisers there was evidence of some antipathy towards marketing techniques. This ranged from the dismissal of professional advertising and public relations as “Fashions and Fads in Type” (*Labour Organiser* 1957) to Ken Garland’s more hostile denunciation of “Ad Men” as “Institute of Directors fellow travellers”:

*all they know about is appealing to people’s greed, whereas we are trying to appeal to their ideals [...] we ruddy don’t need (these) tricksters [...] If you want a photo on let’s say, Youth and Labour, you don’t need a studio portrait of an impossibly smooth looking teenager wearing clothes that could only be afforded by a Mayfair call-girl. What you do need is a lively outdoor photo of the girl next door with freckles and a saucy grin, against a backdrop that could be your street or my street (Labour Organiser 1963).*

Despite disquiet within the grassroots’ organisation and some on the Labour right, it tended to be left-wingers who voiced the most consistent dissent over moves to “merchandise” the party. Speaking after the 1959 defeat one of them, Harold Wilson, attacked what he perceived to be the revisionists’ obsession with ephemeral rather than substantive issues:

*There is a lot of talk about the image of the Labour Party. I cannot think it would be improved if we were to win, and indeed deserve, a reputation for cynicism and opportunism by throwing out essential and fundamental parts of a creed for electoral purposes (Roth 1977, 233).*

The theme of Wilson’s 1959 speech was taken up by another opponent of the Gaitskellites, Richard Crossman, in his pamphlet *Labour and the Affluent Society* (1960). Written by an expert in psychological warfare and populariser of the metaphor “selling politics like soap,” the publication related its argument with a characteristic mix of insight and invective. Attacking the Gaitskellites for their apparent lack of socialist conviction, Crossman warned against the creation of a British party in “the image of the American Democratic Party” because, as he saw it: “the Labour Party, if it is ever to return to power with a mandate from the people, must remain a socialist challenge to the established order.” Crossman continued his frank analysis in language which influenced the tone of subsequent debate:

*For politicians whose sole object, or even whose main object, is to regain office tend to be opportunists, to hedge and to equivocate in order to appease the voter [...] Appeasement and equivocation are tactics essential to the great Tory tradition by which the British ruling-class has adapted itself to changing circumstances. But a left-wing party which adopts such tactics destroys itself (Crossman 1960).*

The thesis of *Labour and the Affluent Society* formed a counterpoint to *Must Labour Lose?* and the polling data it was based on. If Abrams' research created suspicion on the left it also offended those of a more traditionalist disposition such as Herbert Morrison. An early critic of polling and the "election as game" ethos he believed lay behind it, Morrison scorned what he perceived to be artificial methods and argued the only reliable way to survey changing public attitudes was to go amongst the populace and talk with them (Worcester 1991, 14). Neither did polling impress trade unionist leader George Woodcock who bluntly dismissed the process: "You get the answers you expect" (Hodder-Williams 1970, 80). As Butler and Rose noted these comments were representative of a significant body of opinion: "Many members of the party were ideologically opposed to the PR approach to politics [and] felt [the party] could express the needs of ordinary people without recourse to the findings of market-research experts" (Butler and Rose 1960, 25).

The most sustained opposition to professional research methods (not to mention advertising) came from socialist intellectuals whose ideas influenced those of the Labour left. Invoking Aneurin Bevan's observation that polling is "taking the poetry out of politics," critics railed against what they saw as a vision of democracy ultimately driven by polling data (Butler and King 1965, 50-51). Questioning the premise underpinning the *Must Labour Lose?* study, left-wing historian Raphael Samuel attacked what he believed was Abrams' flawed approach to survey work:

*He sees people as consumers of politics, behaving in politics much as they would — in the motivational research imagination — when confronted with mass-marketed commodities: they "buy" political labels and allegiances as they would any brand associations it promises to afford. Thus Dr. Abrams leaves no standard by which to judge the relationship between Labour and its supporters, beyond the injunction that they must stand - as Mr. Crosland expresses it- in "rapport" with each other (Samuel 1960).*

If some were suspicious about the means, others expressed scepticism about the possible uses of the ends. For Labour radical Michael Foot the notion of undertaking polling in order to inform strategy and possibly dilute the party programme sat uneasily with his and the left's commitment to egalitarian politics. In a passionate rebuttal of the public opinion conscious revisionist case, Foot articulated his position in uncompromising, educationalist inspired terms: "In order to win an election, we have to change the mood of the people in this country, to open their eyes to what an evil and disgraceful society it is" (Howell 1976, 229). Like-minded sentiments formed the basis of Samuel's conclusion to his attack on what he saw as the dubious practice of political polling and the work of Abrams in particular:

*If the Labour Movement were finally to abandon its traditional way of thinking about people - and that alone is truly fundamental - to lose the faith in the power of the word to move people, and of the idea to change them, if it were to let go its conviction in the capacity of human beings rationally to choose between the alternatives which face them, and purposefully to re-shape the society in which they live, then it would be finished, and would find itself trapped in that limbo of the political imagination whose features Dr. Abrams has so meticulously outlined (Samuel 1960).<sup>2</sup>*



## Conclusions

The debate over Labour Party strategy has long been historically analysed in the context of the rivalries that have existed between different factions and bureaucrats within the organisation. This paper has attempted to show how the discussion has also had a distinctly philosophical dimension involving two contrasting views of political communication. Initially popular in the party, the “educationalist” approach to the public was the hallmark of the early campaign work pursued by pioneering socialists in groups like the ILP. With the rise of a mass democracy during the inter-war period, the wisdom of such political methods was challenged and a rival school “persuasive” school of thought emerged. Following 1945 and the intensification of mediated politics, this alternative approach began to gain wider acceptance within the party. Most dramatically it was the same opinion-forgers who once adhered to educational methods, notably leader Harold Wilson and NEC chair of publicity Alice Bacon, that were central to the transformation of Labour into a more marketing conscious organisation during the early 1960s.

## Notes:

1. ‘Democratic rationalism’ is not to be confused with Rose’s concept of ‘rational campaigning’ as defined in his seminal study of media based electioneering in post-war Britain (Rose 1967).

2 It should be noted that there were also less ideological and more psychological criticisms of *Must Labour Lose?*. Analysis in the agent’s journal *Labour Organiser* used Gallup polling data to challenge the substance of report and interpretations affixed it by Gaitskellites, notably Abrams’ co-author Rita Hinden (*Labour Organiser* 1960; *Labour Organiser* 1962).

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