Political Communications

The General Election Campaign of 2005

Edited by Dominic Wring, Jane Green,
Roger Mortimore and Simon Atkinson

Political Communications

Previous titles in this series from EPOP are:-

POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS: The General Election Campaign of 1979 *(edited by Robert M. Worcester and Martin Harrop)*

POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS: The General Election Campaign of 1983 *(edited by Ivor Crewe and Martin Harrop)*

POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS: The General Election Campaign of 1987 *(edited by Ivor Crewe and Martin Harrop)*

POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS: The General Election Campaign of 1992 *(edited by Ivor Crewe and Brian Gosschalk)*

POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS: Why Labour Won the General Election of 1997 *(edited by Ivor Crewe, Brian Gosschalk and John Bartle)*

POLITICAL COMMUNICATIONS: The General Election Campaign of 2001 *(edited by John Bartle, Roger Mortimore and Simon Atkinson)*

Political Communications

The General Election Campaign of 2005

Edited by

Dominic Wring
Senior Lecturer in Communication and Media Studies
Loughborough University, UK

Jane Green
Hallsworth Research Fellow in Politics
University of Manchester, UK

Roger Mortimore
Senior Political Analyst
Ipsos MORI, UK

and

Simon Atkinson
Director of the Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, UK

Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Preface and Acknowledgements

This is the seventh instalment of *Political Communications*, a series that began publication following the 1979 General Election and which has appeared after each of the subsequent campaigns. The books offer a unique insight into the electoral process from the perspective of those who took part as strategists, pollsters and journalists; they have also enabled academic commentators to offer in-depth analyses of a given political communication related development or phenomenon. Cumulatively the series has tracked the evolution of the so-called 'permanent campaign' over the last three decades and has enabled students of elections to compare and contrast the strategic thinking of the Thatcher and Blair leaderships in particular. The first instalment, edited by Robert Worcester and Martin Harrop and published in 1982, set a high standard with perceptive commentaries from Barry Day and Tim Delaney amongst others. Since then successive volumes have grown in size and scope in response to the growing interest in (and intensification of) political communication.

This edition, like its predecessors, is divided into several sections, each dedicated to discussing a particular aspect of the General Election. The introductory essay seeks to sets the campaign in recent as well as more distant context by assessing the continuities as well as changes in political communication. Attention is also paid to the arguably important period in early 2005 prior to the Prime Minister's formal declaration of the election. The final, concluding chapter offers a comprehensive overview of the key issues raised in the book, identifying 'apathy and disengagement, party control on message targeting, and the localization of the campaign' as particularly noteworthy components of a 'non-General Election' in which much activity was devoted to convincing a select group of voters rather than the electorate as a whole.

Part I of *Political Communications* features contributions from the major parties by the strategists and officials responsible for planning and executing their respective campaigns. Each of these chapters offer an invaluable first hand account touching on their respective parties' main personalities, differing techniques, key messages and other relevant material. Part II contains essays from academic experts that complement those of the professionals by focusing on three forms of electioneering – advertising, localised and internet based – which attracted greater attention not to mention resources during this election. Part III on polling, involves

leading opinion researchers discussing their methodologies and findings. Considerable attention is given over to their differing approaches and the implications of using telephone and new media technologies.

Part IV, devoted to public opinion, considers how the voters perceived the campaign and, more specifically, whether they were especially interested in the election. Attention also focuses on how and where the electorate obtained their information. This part closes with a qualitative based exercise in which participants were invited to comment on the party leaders' attributes and competences. Unsurprisingly most of the electorate relied on news media for their political information and the remaining part of the book analyses the role and content of journalism. Part V, on broadcasting, considers the role of the three major current affairs networks from the differing perspectives of a reporter/editor and an academic. Implicitly or explicitly each recognises the continuing importance of television whereas Part VI, on the national press, explores why the influence of this once feared source of news appears to have declined. By contrast the parties' growing interest in cultivating the media beyond Westminster is motivated by a perception that local journalists are less cynical and more receptive to and in touch with their audiences. Consequently this makes the chapter on the relatively neglected topic of regional press coverage a particularly welcome addition to the volume.

The editors would like to thank various colleagues for making this volume possible. John Bartle, David Denver, Justin Fisher, David Sanders, Kristi Winters, Chris Wlezien and members of the Elections, Public Opinion and Parties group of the UK Political Studies Association provided invaluable support for this venture. We would like to express our gratitude to Gill Carter, David Jordan, Patricia McLernon and Steve Perkins for their help. We would also like to thank previous editors for establishing and making the series such a valuable contribution to the literature. We are grateful to Alison Howson, Gemma d'Arcy Hughes, Amy Lankester-Owen, Ann Marangos and their colleagues at Palgrave Macmillan for all of their support and advice for the venture. Finally we would like to thank all of the authors involved for their valued contributions.

DW, JG, RM and SA

Notes on Contributors

Simon Atkinson is Director of the Social Research Institute at Ipsos MORI, which works with national government, local public services and the not-for-profit sector.

Paul Baines is Senior Lecturer in Marketing at the School of Management, Cranfield University. He is co-author of several books including *Public Relations* (2003 with John Egan and Frank Jefkins) and *Explaining Labour's Landslip* (2005 with Robert Worcester and Roger Mortimore).

Gavin Barwell was Director of Operations for the Conservatives until 2006. Previously he was Special Adviser to Secretary of State John Gummer prior to 1997 and then held posts at Central Office before working with Lynton Crosby as Deputy Director of the Party's General Election campaign in 2005.

Michael Billig is Professor of Social Sciences, Loughborough University. He has published on a variety of subjects, including the extreme right, nationalism, rhetoric and social psychology. His most recent book is *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (2005).

Adam Boulton has been Political Editor of Sky News since the 24 hour channel was founded in 1989 and is a frequent contributor of articles to the UK national press and his weblog on the Sky News site. He previously worked for TV-AM, the BBC External Service and Interpress.

Rosie Campbell is Lecturer in Research Methods at the School of Politics and Sociology, Birkbeck College, University of London. Her previous research has covered gender and voting behaviour, political participation and political representation. She is part of the British Representation Study 2005 team, which is a survey of the attitudes and backgrounds of MPs and candidates, and author of *Gender and Voting Behaviour in Britain* (2006).

David Canzini was Director of Campaigning for the Conservatives from 2001–2005 having worked for the party for twenty years. During the General Election he was responsible for all aspects of the target seats operation.

Greg Cook is Head of Political Strategy for the Labour Party and has worked at Head Office since 1994 where he has been responsible for

polling and electoral analysis. A contributor to *Political Communications: The General Election Campaign of 2001*, he is an editorial board member of the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*.

Andrew Cooper is Director of Populus Limited, opinion pollsters for *The Times*. Prior to then he worked as an official at Conservative Central Office and was a contributor to *Political Communications: The General Election Campaign of 2001*.

Stephen Cushion is a Lecturer in the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies where he teaches about youth and the media, research methods and public opinion. Recent publications include work on youth, politics, public opinion and Elections in various journals including *Journalism Studies, Journal of Public Affairs, Representation* and *Cyfrwng: Media Wales Journal*.

David Cutts is a Simon Research Fellow in the Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research at the University of Manchester and has published in the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* and the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*.

Scott Davidson is a doctoral student in the Department of Social Sciences, Loughborough University. His work on the electoral implications of an ageing population has appeared in the *Journal of Marketing Management* and the Age Concern report *Winning in 2009: the Importance of the Baby Boomers*.

David Deacon is Reader in Media and Politics at Loughborough University. Recent research has appeared in *British Politics, Journalism Studies, Media Culture & Society* and *Parliamentary Affairs*. He is currently completing a book on British news media reporting of the Spanish Civil War (Edinburgh University Press).

David Denver is Professor of Politics at Lancaster University. He is the author of *Elections and Voters in Britain* (Palgrave, 2003) and has analysed constituency campaigning at general elections since 1992.

John Downey is Senior Lecturer in Communication and Media Studies at Loughborough University. His work on war coverage, new media technologies and the European public sphere has appeared in various publications including the *European Journal of Communication, Journalism Studies* and *Comunicazione Politica*.

Justin Fisher is Professor of Politics at Brunel University and co-editor of the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion & Parties*.

Edward Fieldhouse is Professor of Social and Political Science at the Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research at the University of Manchester. He is author of many books and articles on electoral behaviour and research methods including *Neither Left nor Right? The Liberal Democrats and the Electorate* (with Andrew Russell, 2005).

Bob Franklin is Professor of Journalism Studies in the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies, Wales and editor of *Journalism Studies*. His many publications about local journalism and political communication include *Local Journalism, Local Media: The Local News In Context* (2006) and *Packaging Politics: Political Communication in Britain's Media Democracy* (2004).

Peter Golding is Professor of Sociology and Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research at Loughborough University. He is Co-editor of the *European Journal of Communication* and his most recent book is *Communication Theory and Research* (with Denis McQuail and Els De Bens, 2005).

Philip Gould has been a strategic and polling advisor to the Labour party since 1985, working on five elections. Educated at the Sussex University, he is a visiting Professor at the London School of Economics, and was created a life Peer in 2004. He is the author of *The Unfinished Revolution* (1998).

Jane Green is Hallsworth Research Fellow in Politics at the University of Manchester. She was previously the Lecturer in Politics at Corpus Christi College, University of Oxford, and completed her DPhil. on party competition theories and British politics at Nuffield College, Oxford in 2006.

Vanessa Hyland is Head of Ad Hoc Research at Ofcom where she manages a team responsible for providing analysis of the media and telecommunications markets. Educated at University College London, she previously worked on the commercial agency side of market research, specialising in brand and advertising evaluation.

Peter Kellner has been Chairman of YouGov since December 2001. He was previously a journalist and political commentator for more than 30 years with *The Sunday Times, Independent, New Statesman, Evening Standard, Newsnight*, BBC Election programmes and *Channel Four News*.

Roger Mortimore is Senior Political Analyst at Ipsos MORI. He is co-author of *Explaining Labour's Landslip* (with Robert Worcester and Paul Baines, 2005) and Journals Review Editor of the *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*.

Chris Rennard has been Chief Executive of the Liberal Democrats since September 2003. Previously he was Director of Campaigns and Elections and helped organise the party's 1997 and 2001 General Election campaigns. He became a member of the House of Lords in 1999.

Jackie Rowley was Charles Kennedy's Spokeswoman and Director of Communications until he resigned as party leader in 2006. Previously she has been a BBC documentary film director, reporter and News 24 presenter, a Sky News foreign correspondent and presenter, and a contributor to several national newspapers.

Andrew Russell is Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Manchester. He is joint author of *Neither Left Nor Right? The Liberal Democrats and the Electorate* (with Ed Fieldhouse, 2005). His other work includes research on party politics and the party system in Britain, electoral turnout and engagement, and young people and politics.

Nick Sparrow is Managing Director of ICM Research where he is responsible for opinion research. He was awarded the Market Research Society's Silver Medal for work to improve the accuracy of polls

Jennifer van Heerde is Lecturer in Political Science at University College London. Her research interests include party finance, political communication, and campaign dynamics. Recent research 'Barriers to Participation, Voter Sophistication, and Candidate Spending Choices in U.S. Senate Elections' (with Shaun Bowler and Martin Johnson) has appeared in the *British Journal of Political Science*.

Kristi Winters was the Research Officer for the 2005/06 British Election Study and is a doctoral student in the Department of Government at the University of Essex.

Robert Worcester founded MORI. He is Chanchellor of the University of Kent and Visiting Professor at LSE, Warwick and Kent universities. He is co-author of *Explaining Labour's Second Landslip* (with Paul Baines and Roger Mortimore, 2005).

Dominic Wring is Senior Lecturer in Communication and Media Studies at Loughborough University. He is author of *The Politics of Marketing the Labour Party* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and Associate Editor for Europe of the *Journal of Political Marketing*.

1

Introduction: General Election Campaign Communication in Perspective

Dominic Wring

The 2005 General Election will probably be best remembered for resulting in an unprecedented third term for a Labour government, albeit on a reduced total of 35.2% of the poll (356 seats, down 56) against the Conservatives' 32.4% (198, up 32), Liberal Democrats' 22.0% (62, up 10) and others' 10.4% (31, up 3). Despite a modest share of the vote, the party was returned with a comfortable working majority of 66. The prior campaign was a somewhat muted affair when compared with the massive debate over the Iraq situation that had engaged politicians, journalists and the wider public two years before. Although this crisis and its aftermath raised serious questions over the government's conduct, the economy continued to remain a strong positive for Labour and helped the party to a further victory. A parallel can be made with the Conservatives' third consecutive win amid the relative affluence of 1959 following another potentially debilitating (Suez) crisis in the Middle East. And like that earlier campaign the 2005 General Election witnessed some innovative uses of strategic communication and saw the further crystallisation of a trend in favour of targeting key groups of 'floating' voters. Consequently many of the resulting messages were designed for less committed sections of the electorate rather than core supporters. Labour's difficulties did, however, result in strategists giving greater attention to how the party might re-engage with loyal partisans whose votes it had hitherto appeared to have taken for granted.

The impermanent campaign: Labour's second term

Labour's second parliamentary term in office was very different to it first and marked by serious controversies, none more controversial than the debate over Tony Blair's decision to support the US led invasion of Iraq in

2003 against an influential opposition from within the United Nations, European Union, Britain and the Prime Minister's own party. Though even this momentous event failed to end the government's lead in the opinion polls, not least because there was little to differentiate Conservative from Labour policy, the conflict and its aftermath undermined public trust in Blair. Part of the Prime Minister's response to this loss of confidence was to reappraise how Whitehall and, more especially, Downing Street managed its communications. In 2003 the Guardian Media Group's Chief Executive Bob Phillis was appointed to chair an investigation into all aspects of the government information service operation. Somewhat symbolically a process designed to revitalise the machinery of government public relations was itself ultimately overshadowed by the culmination, during the same week of January 2004, of Lord Hutton's inquiry which con-sidered the events leading up to the invasion of Iraq.

The Phillis Review's central contention that communication should be as important to government as policy and delivery was willingly accepted by Blair as were a number of suggested reforms to what became known as the Government News Network. Hutton's pro-government report was also welcomed in Downing Street but his Inquiry's investigations only served to raise further questions over the circumstances leading up to the invasion of Iraq. The related propaganda operation had required the public relations state to refocus most of its efforts on mobilising media and popular opinion behind a controversial policy based on what turned out to be the false contention that the Iraqi Ba'athist regime had possessed weapons of mass destruction (Wring, 2006). From an electoral perspective, this intensive news management effort limited the ability of the Labour leadership to continue the kind of permanent campaign that it had effectively pursued since coming to power in 1997. The 2005 General Election would be fought in a very different context to that surrounding Blair's relatively effortless triumph in 2001.

The robust news management style of Downing Street's Director of Communications and Strategy Alastair Campbell provided one of the motivating factors behind the Phillis and Hutton inquiries. Campbell's departure from his post in 2003 together with (from a government perspective) both reports' largely positive outcomes strengthened the Prime Minister's professed desire to 'move on' from the issues that had necessitated the two reviews. This was reflected in the theme Labour chose as the main slogan for the 2005 election campaign: 'Forward, Not Back'. But the ongoing situation in Iraq and new revelations over the circumstances leading up to the invasion ensured related debates continued apace in the media and the country. Furthermore the situation appeared to bring

renewed vigour to opponents of other key government policies on law and order, asylum and immigration and the reform of the public services. These and other daunting problems led to the eventual return of Campbell to take up again a key post as a temporary public relations adviser to Blair going in to the election. Significantly the leader also faced public dissent during the campaign from longstanding opponents within his own party such as Bob Marshall-Andrews who openly criticised the Prime Minister in a televised interview broadcast on the weekend before polling day (Smith, 2005, p. 233). The MP's comments reflected some of the simmering resentment towards Blair and were reminiscent of the attacks on his Labour predecessor Michael Foot during the run-up to fractious 1983 election. Yet for all the troubles of the second term, the government still looked on course to secure a third consecutive spell in office.

Although Blair had lost some of the public popularity that had helped him to win the 1997 and 2001 General Elections it was also apparent that he remained an asset when compared with his principal rival Michael Howard (Evans and Anderson, 2005). In 2003 Howard had been unanimously acclaimed as Conservative leader in place of predecessor Iain Duncan Smith following a successful revolt initiated by disgruntled MPs aided by those like wealthy party donor Stuart Wheeler (Kavanagh and Butler, 2005, p. 40). The former Home Secretary was well positioned to lead the Opposition as an experienced veteran of the Thatcher and Major governments but this same quality also appeared to be a impediment when it came to convincing the public. Howard was not widely admired if judged by his standing in the opinion polls and his ratings consistently trailed those of both Blair and their mutual opponent, Liberal Democrat Charles Kennedy. Kennedy, fighting his second General Election, continued to work with a team of longstanding strategists led by Chris Rennard. Significantly they received a significant boost with a huge £2.4 million donation from supporter Michael Brown that enabled party agency Banc to mount a formidable advertising campaign.

Michael Howard responded to his own and his party's deficit in the polls by making some changes to party communications. The most important of these initiatives was the recruitment of Lynton Crosby, a consultant closely associated with the successive electoral victories of Australian Liberal Prime Minister John Howard. As Campaign Director he attracted a significant amount of media attention because of his influence overseeing the Conservatives' efforts; his remit extended beyond that of previous strategist, the former Orange telecommunications marketing executive Will Harris. Crosby's status was symbolically underlined during

one photo-call when those taking the pictures asked Michael Howard to stand aside so they could get a better shot of the Australian.[1]

Back to the future: continuities and changes in national electioneering

The election was another capitally intensive campaign with the two main competitors involved proceeding in many ways like business firms operating in the commercial marketplace. This reflects the importance of a marketing rationale that now dominates electioneering and has done so since the closely fought 1992 General Election. Since then it has become increasingly commonplace for commentators and strategists to use concepts such as branding, positioning, targeting and triangulation when analysing and discussing the modern campaign. However, it should also be noted that there has been some continuity as well as change between elections. Contemporary political marketing derives from innovations to electioneering made over the course of a century and more particularly since 1918 when the introduction of near universal suffrage greatly increased politicians' interest in mass communications.

Prior to the advent of mass television and more pervasive marketing communications during the 1950s, electoral strategists sought to exploit the potential of rudimentary forms of advertising, public relations and what might be loosely termed opinion research. Though this era of propagandist electioneering was still dominated by traditional labour intensive campaigning it also witnessed serious attempts by national headquarters' organisers to co-ordinate more of their parties' promotional efforts. Most obviously the Conservatives and Labour appointed their first full-time press officers during the second decade of the century. And though they had nothing like the power enjoyed by contemporary professionals like Lynton Crosby and Philip Gould, inter-war communications strategists such as the Tory Joseph Ball and his Labour rival William Henderson began to acquire significant influence within their respective parties. The Liberals eventually responded in the 1930s by appointing William Allison, a former executive with advertising agency J Walter Thompson, to head their media operation (Wring, 2001).

As Publicity Director at Central Office Joseph Ball was one of those responsible for forging serious relations between a political party and an advertising agency. During the 1929 General Election the Conservatives retained the services of leading firm Bensons, now better remembered for the 'Guinness Is Good For You' slogan devised a few years later. The

client–agency relationship would endure although not as long as that between the Tories and their more recent advisers, Saatchi and Saatchi. It also signalled the beginnings of the financially expensive professional campaign that would later come to dominate elections during the late Twentieth Century (Pinto-Duschinsky, 1981). Labour never forged the same kind of partnership that its main rivals did with advertising experts until well after the Second World War. But it should be noted that Herbert Morrison did work closely with executives from the major agency London Press Exchange during the inter-war period. LPE staff helped the then London party leader to identify five salient themes as a means of best representing and publicising the party's extensive manifesto for the local elections of 1937 (Wring, 2005, pp. 30–2). The slogans they chose to summarise this detailed programme were: 'Better Homes. Good Schools. Health Care. Play Fields. Lidos'. Whilst the first choices are self-explanatory, the last two were key aspects of a major initiative to raise public health awareness. By presenting their case through specially chosen themed slogans, the pioneering London strategists demonstrated how complex messages might be made more palatable for voters' consumption. The method has since become commonplace in the modern campaign, notably in 1997 when the Labour campaign, by now headed by Morrison's grandson Peter Mandelson, used a pledge card to highlight specific policy intentions. Significantly the number of themes chosen 60 years later was also five. The device reappeared briefly during 2001 and in the opening stages of Labour's 2005 campaign but it was Conservative strategists who made more obvious use of the technique by designing their own five point synthesis of party policy. The chosen themes comprised 'More Police. Cleaner Hospitals. Lower Taxes. School Discipline. Controlled Immigration'.

Allied to the early parties' more professional publicity outputs there is also evidence that, on the less obvious input side, politicians began to develop more systematic ways of analysing voter opinion. There was, of course, little to compare with the forensic work of the teams who conducted Labour and the Conservatives' private polling in 2005. But it is important to note that whilst the earliest research had nothing like the impact such analyses would have towards the end of the 20th century, it was motivated by a similar concern with understanding how different audiences engaged with the democratic process. Much of this work focused on less motivated voters, a constituency much discussed in recent elections, and encouraged politicians to think about how they might make politics more relevant to those with little interest or weak partisanship. This sentiment informed comments from party propagandist

Maurice Webb speaking at a 1937 conference on 'Selling Socialism' that would not have looked out of place in one of the many Labour strategic re-evaluations written in the mid-1980s:

> (party publicity) was too diffuse and lacking in simple central ideas; tended to be gloomy and out of touch with human interests, was too obviously propaganda and often directed to the politically interested section of the population only: it lacked a patriotic tone
> (cited in Wring, 2005, p.19).

The focusing of finite promotional resources on key 'swing' or 'floating' voters was a marked feature of the 2005 General Election but the lineage of this particular preoccupation is again longer than some realise. When Labour strategist Sidney Webb devised the concept of 'stratified electioneering' in 1922 to distinguish between different electoral groups it would be some thirty years before mainstream marketing theorists popularised a variation of an idea they termed 'segmentation' (Smith, 1956).

The proliferation of quantitative psephological studies during the 1940s led both major parties to commission their first extended analyses of public opinion. Advertising firm Erwin Wasey made available findings from a national survey of voter attitudes to Labour whereas the Conservatives funded a sub-division of their then agents Colman Prentis Varley to produce a report on *The Floating Vote* (Wring, 2005, pp. 49 and 55). The documents provided strategists with useful insights into the electorate and helped them to differentiate between some of their core and target voters' characteristics. Demographic criteria such as class, sex and age featured as they would in later private polling. The Conservative report also helped identify some of those who have since become the classic floating voters: weak partisans (especially Liberal supporters), women, parents with school age children, and young people who, despite being perennially less inclined to turnout were, by definition, likely to have more opportunities to participate in future elections (Taylor, 1997). In 2005 the major parties once again gave considerable thought as to how they might best convince each of these groups of voters and, most especially, those Blair and Howard now routinely referred to as 'hard working families' (Smith, 2005).

During the 1950s and 1960s the major parties began to supplement their traditional quantitative based polling with qualitative, depth research methods geared to understanding more about electoral psychology. A particular motivation for this work was a desire to analyse and respond to what were perceived to be the growing numbers of 'aspirational'

voters belonging to the burgeoning lower middle-classes of Britain's post-war 'affluent society'. Critically the availability of more scientific kinds of research fostered a shift from propagandistic to more mediated kinds of campaigning and this enhanced the role and influence of advertising and public relations consultants within the political process. Professionals increasingly relied on polling to identify and target more specific groups of prospective voters. For instance, during the 1970 General Election, the Conservatives designed a campaign featuring Sylvia, a representative of the kind of working-class wife with children whose vote they were so keen to win at a time when more women were asserting themselves as citizens and in the workplace (Day, 1982). Ostensibly the same targets were labelled 'school gates mums' by Labour strategists in 2005 as they and their rivals went out of their way to court them. The Conservatives also revived a technique, film advertising, they had first pioneered with outdoor display vans in the 1929 General Election and used more recently in 1979 to influence the many younger people who make up a sig-nificant proportion of the cinema going population (Hollins, 1981; Bell, 1982).

Party strategists' deepening interest in targeting groups and sub-groups of voters greatly intensified with the growth of qualitative polit-ical analytical techniques. Consequently focus groups became increasingly commonplace from the 1980s onwards and the method now dominates the modern British campaign. This change is emblematic of a wider shift from the mediated approach to electioneering, in which feedback is pri-marily used to refine the message, to a marketing driven campaign whereby opinion research informs policy as well as every aspect of its presentation. It is no coincidence that representatives of the most advanced campaigns industry, American political consultants, have become routine visitors to the major party headquarters over the last twenty years. It was of little sur-prise when two of the world's leading focus group researchers, Mark Penn and Frank Luntz, were revealed to have been helping Labour and the Conservatives during their respective preparations for the 2005 General Election (Kavanagh and Butler, 2005, pp. 24 and 44). The presence of these and other consultants together with the widespread use of political mar-keting techniques has made the modern campaign an expensive one.

A new localism? Taking the message out to the country

A recurrent theme of one of the Labour government's favourite think tanks has been so-called 'new localism' with its emphasis on devolving greater powers to the regions (Corry and Stoker, 2002). Similarly there

has been a notable revival of interest in the efficacy of sub-national electioneering amongst practitioners and academics. Yet there is debate over the extent to which new localism really does involve Westminster relinquishing substantial control over policy to the regions and, from a campaigning perspective, this was an issue during the 2005 election. The recent marked decline in local activity has led to parties embracing 'astroturfing', that is creating inauthentic grassroots' organisations, to greet visiting politicians and broadcasters.[2] Invariably those used to represent ordinary members and supporters were carefully selected because they are photogenic and representative of key target groups such as those with young children and first time voters. Other aspects of local campaigning have been similarly orchestrated from the national headquarters' organisations.

The rise of a more capitally intensive form of campaign has diminished the role and influence of the parties' voluntary memberships. Organisers have, however, attempted to offset the subsequent decline in these activists' participation by employing staff and using the latest information technologies to identify and contact potential supporters. Campaigns have come a long way since the major parties first experimented with rudimentary Pet computers in the early 1980s for direct marketing purposes. DVDs featuring candidates and other luminaries have now become commonplace in addition to more carefully tailored electronic and printed voter correspondence. Telephone canvassing has also changed since it was first experimented with in 1927 and then popularised in by-election efforts some 60 years later (Swaddle, 1990). In 2005 both major parties invested in state of the art call centres from which trained canvassers attempted to elicit support from thousands of voters as part of a clinically controlled operation. The Scottish National Party even used a mass dial up technique that enabled them to leave a message from celebrity supporter Sean Connery on voters' telephones.

The Conservatives' acquisition of Voter Vault and Labour's use of the similarly sophisticated Mosaic consumer profiling technology helped them to refine their so-called 'get out the vote' campaigns in marginal constituencies. The Tory effort in certain key seats was augmented by targeted donations from Lord Ashcroft, their former Treasurer. Ashcroft openly questioned the wisdom of Party Co-Chairman Lord Saatchi and other officials' decision to focus resources on so many constituency campaigns during the General Election (Kavanagh and Butler, 2005, p.43). The debate reflected the now recognised bias of a majoritarian electoral system that has long favoured the winning party by returning a comfortable majority of MPs for governments with a minority share of the

vote (Johnston, *et al.*, 2005, p. 143). Ashcroft's intervention may have been a factor in helping the Conservatives to win several seats and to create a sizeable group of highly vulnerable 'super marginals' which significantly increases the possibility of a hung parliament after the next General Election.

Campaign strategists' growing interest in segmenting the electorate in order to target voters with seemingly more relevant and engaging messages has been in part influenced by a recognition that mass media audiences (together with their partisan allegiances) have significantly fragmented in recent decades. This trend had long been predicted with the uptake of non-terrestrial television in the 1980s and the Internet the following decade but, as with telephone canvassing, it has taken some time for the parties to seriously exploit these technologies for election purposes (Scammell, 1990). Allied to this a significant response to the decline in audiences for national print and broadcast coverage of current affairs has led strategists such as Labour minister Douglas Alexander to promote the electoral importance of regional and local media (Alexander, 2002). Political journalists working away from Westminster are viewed by spin doctors as being more concerned and more in touch with the kind of 'bread and butter' issues of most interest to their readers and viewers. Consequently these outlets are viewed as being less cynical and self-serving than their national counterparts and thus more likely to engage voters as citizens.

The diminishing level of public interest in elections, if judged by the marked fall in turnout since 1992, has coincided with a notable decline in national newspaper circulations. Business logic would indicate politics is now less of an asset to owners and editors of the increasingly human interest driven populist titles that are striving to survive in a highly competitive market. These newspapers' downgrading of their campaign coverage has combined with increased partisan dealignment in their editorialising. The vehemently Tory press of the 1980s is no more and in its place is a relatively more nuanced and less predictable form of print journalism (Deacon and Wring, 2002). Whether newspapers influence voters is a much discussed topic but it is reasonable to assume that if they have ever had any impact on elections it is more likely this was between 1979 and 1992 when there was a stark contrast between the representation of the two major parties. Compared with the print media the same degree of change has not, however, been evident in the approach taken by public service broadcasters whether at national or local level. They retain an abiding interest and commitment to reporting elections despite a fall off in audiences similar to that experienced by their print rivals. Rather television

has continued to perform its traditional role as the main distiller of campaign information and as such has continued to enjoy more access to party leaders than newspapers.

The 'Heineken' strategy: populism, personality and the presidential approach

Tony Blair underlined the continuing political importance of broadcasting by appearing across a range of programmes during the run-up to the 2005 election. With his electoral credibility challenged over Iraq, Blair used these media displays to re-launch himself as an engaging and listening politician as part of what his strategists termed 'Operation Matrix'. This initiative became more popularly known as the 'masochism strategy' on account of the considerable public hostility the Prime Minister encountered. By campaigning in this way Blair ruthlessly exploited his notoriety and incumbency in a bid to reach the kind of people not particularly interested in politics but nevertheless likely to turn out on polling day. He started to do this during the weeks and months prior to the formal announcement of the election date during a period when many voters would have been deciding how to vote.

What was effectively Blair's pre-election debut came in a whole February day's programming on Channel 5. Labour spin doctors calculated it would be worth having their leader appear on four separate occasions because of this primarily light entertainment network's ability to reach less politically engaged sections of the electorate. Blair's principal opponents Michael Howard and Charles Kennedy were both granted their own day's worth of exposure by the channel but neither attracted anything like the same amount of publicity. Much was made of the spectacle of often irate but usually articulate members of the public questioning the Prime Minister in the kind of prolonged exchanges he was only usually subjected to in interviews with professional interrogators like Jeremy Paxman.[3] Arguably Blair's comparative success in generating media interest in these and similar appearances merits his campaign being described as the 'Heineken strategy' in that it reached audiences in ways rival leaders did not or could not (Smith, 2005, p.125).

Labour strategists further exploited Blair's incumbency in a series of photo-opportunities, interviews and guest appearances that attempted to recreate the kind of 'people's prime minister' imagery that had dominated his first term. The leader's presence in less formally political media formats was a central feature of his often frenetic public relations' activities. Previous Prime Ministers have appeared in these kinds of outlets

but none have done so with the same frequency, intensity or proximity to an election. Blair followed up his Channel 5 programming by appearing, also pre-campaign, on the popular ITV light entertainment *Saturday Night Takeaway* show having invited the two children's presenters, young Ant and Dec, to Downing Street for an irreverent interview. Strategists presumably calculated this kind of outing would portray the Prime Minister as a good humoured and friendly man but also guarantee him exposure to millions of voters belonging to the crucial audience of 'hard working families'. Consequently Blair indulged the programme's producers with access to Number 10 and by participating in numerous photo-opportunities with his young interrogators (Remnick, 2005).

Tony Blair's desire, even desperation, for popular exposure was further demonstrated with an appearance on Channel 4's afternoon talk show *Richard and Judy* in which the Prime Minister featured as a guest in the prize quiz part of the programme. His failure to identify several of the answers about everyday subjects left him open to the charge he was out of touch. This impression was compounded with Blair's impromptu live call to compliment Jono Coleman on the DJ's final day presenting on Heart FM radio. Their exchange turned surreal when a disbelieving host suggested his guest was really a well known impersonator; Blair retorted by stressing he was the Prime Minister and not satirist Jon Culshaw. The potential danger of courting a more populist media for electoral gain was further demonstrated during the formal campaign period. In an eve-of-poll appearance in the *Sun*, Tony and Cherie Blair featured in a sympathetic and favourable interview with editor Rebekah Wade and political editor Trevor Kavanagh. Whilst their questioning was largely reverent, that of the accompanying photographer Arthur Edwards led to light hearted exchanges that provided the more salacious headline '5 times a night', an allusion made by Edwards to the Prime Minister's reinvigorated health following his publicised heart problems the previous autumn. This was subsequently interpreted by commentators such as *Daily Mail* columnist Quentin Letts as distasteful given recent tragedies in Iraq. The episode underlined the risks of engaging in joking asides with the media.

The Conservatives responded to Blair's Heineken strategy by arranging photo-opportunities with Michael Howard involving his wife Sandra, children, step children and grandchildren. The display of Howard's extended family was part of a concerted attempt to humanise a leader who had consistently trailed a now less trusted Blair in the opinion polls. But initiatives designed to heighten public awareness of relatives leaves them potentially more vulnerable to unwelcome journalistic attention.

It was evidently a concern that led Charles Kennedy and his wife Sarah, herself a public relations consultant, to shield their new son Donald from the media following the obligatory photo-call shortly after his birth during the opening stages of the campaign. The Kennedy baby's arrival inevitably complicated Liberal Democrat electoral preparations and restricted the ability of his father, the most liked leader according to polls, to respond to the Prime Minister's charm offensive.

It should not be overlooked that the fourth personality in this highly presidential campaign was Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown. Brown, the other principal though then as yet undeclared candidate for the leadership of the country, was eventually drafted into a prominent role in order to shore up Blair's faltering position during the closing stages of the election. It was perhaps a demonstration that Labour's pre-campaign focus on its leader had only taken the party so far and that it needed to promote other more popular figures. This began in earnest with a manifesto launch that featured several leading ministers introducing the relevant passages of the document. The initiative was reminiscent of the team efforts used to bolster the by then faltering electoral popularity of long serving politicians like Harold Wilson in 1974, Margaret Thatcher in 1987 and Neil Kinnock in 1992. However the eventual decision to focus on Brown and Blair created a campaigning partnership not seen since the Alliance's dual leadership of the 1980s.

Conclusion

With the guarantee of three new main party leaders, the next General Election looks set to be a somewhat different affair. Yet 2005 may be remembered as a transitional campaign that offers a foretaste of future trends in political communication. The fragmentation of mainstream media audiences encouraged Tony Blair to invest more time in reaching out to viewers of light entertainment rather than current affairs programming. The Prime Minister's pre-election appearances on popular television formats may have provoked criticism and cynicism from journalists but his strategists calculated this kind of negative publicity was of marginal importance when compared with the potential benefits of reaching millions of less committed voters. Those who succeed Blair may emulate his strategy of appealing to audiences through non-traditional media formats although it is unlikely they will try to imitate his sometimes ostentatious style of self-presentation.

Besides developing attention seeking media strategies those leading the parties into the coming election will no doubt be taking particular

interest in the rapidly developing technologies for voter profiling that have enabled the targeting of better refined messages at crucial segments of the population. Such communications look set to become ever more sophisticated with the continuing growth of digital media. This and the seeking out of the more reluctant voter in particular have been further encouraged by the parties' desire to more consciously regionalise their campaigning by placing greater emphasis on local electioneering and publicity initiatives. It is, however, a moot point as to whether the rival initiatives will have (or indeed have had) any impact beyond cancelling out the influence of one another's efforts. More fundamentally it remains to be seen whether the major party campaigns will encourage or alienate voter participation in what is set to be the most closely contested election for a generation.

Notes

1. This observation was made by Stephen Phillips, a Conservative campaign official, Electoral Commission seminar, Leeds, May 2005.
2. Channel 4's *Dispatches* journalist Jenny Kleeman worked undercover as a press officer for Labour during the election campaign and made a film broadcast on 23rd May 2005 suggesting 'astroturfing' and similarly misleading techniques (such as planting reader letters in local newspapers) were integral to the party's regionally based campaigning.
3. A comprehensive analysis of the formal interview between a professional journalist and politician has suggested the format often results in a rather defensive, glib exchange between participants (Bull, 2003). This phenomenon has encouraged the growth of public access formats during Elections.

References

Alexander, D. (2002) 'Dealing with Voter Disaffection: Politics with a purpose', *Renewal*, 10:1.

Bell, T. (1982) 'The Conservatives Advertising Campaign', in Worcester, R. & Harrop, M. (eds), *Political Communications: the British General Election of 1979*. London: George Allen & Unwin.

Bull, P. (2003) *The Microanalysis of Political Communication: Claptrap and Ambiguity*. London: Routledge.

Corry, D. & Stoker, G. (2002) *New Localism: Refashioning the Centre–Local relationship*. London: New Local Government Network.

Day, B. (1982) 'The Politics of Communication or the Communication of Politics', in Worcester, R. & Harrop, M. (eds), *Political Communications: the British General Election of 1979*. London: George Allen & Unwin.