Not Big Brand Names but Corner Shops: Marketing Politics to a Disengaged Electorate

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ABSTRACT

Does New Labour's model of a centrally orchestrated and national-centric political communication strategy effectively engage the electorate? Drawing on interviews with those active in politics "on the ground," this paper argues that the centralised party model has become unpopular. Furthermore, as these activists tell us, the model is also causing the electorate to reject the democratic process and become apathetic about the political system. Many in Britain, therefore, look to a more locally focussed model, one that has proved successful for the Liberal Democrat party. This model allows communication to be managed at the local level and for the candidate to interact with the local context. An effectively marketed, locally contextualised strategy allows politics to connect with the electorate and, we would suggest, will become more widespread with the realisation that top-down politics does not engage with voters.

INTRODUCTION

The literature on political communication in Britain, and in particular works which deal with the introduction of political marketing into British politicians' communication strategies, suggest that significant changes have taken place in the way that politicians interact with the electorate. It is argued that a new model for political communication has been introduced as a result of the British Labour Party's attempts to re-establish itself as a credible party of government. During their eighteen years as the parliamentary opposition 1979-1997, the party professionalised its methods of communication. Experts were brought in to redesign the party's image in order that the electorate would find Labour, or "New Labour" as it became, an attractive alternative to the Conservative government (Gould, 1998; see also Bartle & Griffiths, 2001; Lees- Marshment, 2001; Wring, 1999).

The extent to which changes are attributed to the process that occurred within the British Labour party is exemplified by the fact that Bartle and Griffiths (2001) described the modern era of political communication as the Mandelsonian era: such observations are not exclusive to their study. In her review of marketing techniques, Margaret Scammell was ready, even before Labour's landslide victory of 1997, to hail the party as "the new marketing leaders, [with] Peter Mandelson [as] its driving force" (Scammell, 1995: 269).

Peter Mandelson, it would appear, as Labour's Director of Communications during 1985-9, revolutionised the process of political communication and redefined the methods by which politicians, parties and governments interact with the electorate. Mandelson's background in community politics and local government, coupled with his experience with London Weekend Television (for a biography, see MacIntyre, 1999), meant he was well placed to advice the Labour Party on image management. He introduced a number of specialists that would encourage senior Labour politicians to be more aware of their image and communications strategy, while inroducing corporate branding strategies to the party. His work with public relations experts like Philip Gould transformed the party's communication and electoral strategy into what is now almost universally described as professional. Labour's advertising and media events would resemble those practised by businesses marketing themselves as a service provider, moving significantly away from our traditional perception of political parties in Britain.

Paul Richards, an insider in the Mandelsonian school of campaigning, highlights the changes that have taken place within the British Labour Party thus far. He talks of the professional operation at Millbank, with which a "professional, on-message, lively and dynamic" (Richards, 2001: 42) campaign was orchestrated with "clear political messages and themes" (Richards, 2001: 43). Richards admits that local campaigns had to become subsidiaries to the national campaign: "Party headquarters see local candidates and activists as their local representatives, there to do the central campaign planners' bidding" (Richards, 2001: 44). However, from Richards' perspective, this enhances the quality of the local campaign, arguing it does not diminish its responsiveness to the local context. It is the process by which all those who represent the party appear professional–delivering the same messages in a clear and concise way–at all levels of the parties' campaigning and communications operation that is central to the Mandelsonian reforms.

A central dimension is the use of "messages," which are reiterated as advertising slogans by all party members. These are specially designed to appeal to the voter and are developed out of focus group studies and intensive opinion polling. This hasmeant that the party has become increasingly driven by market forces–what is described as adopting a market orientation (Lees-Marshment, 2001). This use of market research, some argue, represents a more democratic basis for formulating political policy than the traditional Burkean view that an MP is "here to represent your interests, not your desires." Jennifer Lees-Marshment, for example, argues that these political marketing techniques: make politics more responsive to voters' demands . . . elites [she claims] are there to represent the people and thus need to be concerned with what they want. (Lees-Marshment, 2001: 225)

The fact that politicians listen to the people, and act upon the issues of most concern, should, in theory, establish a strong bond between the government and the electorate. However, to take this view would be to show a grave misunderstanding of the way in which the Labour Party used opinion polling. The section of British society Labour sought to attract was what Gould referred to as "Labour's lost voters": the aspirant home-owners who want a government to provide a strong stable economy and effective public services. They are described as "Not disadvantaged, not privileged, not quite working-class, not really middle-class–they don't even have a name" (Gould, 1998: 17). In particular, Gould noted, these voters had grown up to support the Conservatives and to reject Labour as out of touch and too extreme (see also Lilleker, 2003). This created a "straw person," a Mr. or Mrs. Average, who did not exist; yet. Party members, and in particular those standing for election or leading campaigns, were expected to make their appeal to this disaggregated voter. In order to rebrand the party and make it attractive to the electorate, control over all aspects of communication passed into the hands of the leadership and their public relations and campaigning experts. The candidate had little space in which to define their agenda or appeal to their own constituency electorate.

The Mandelsonian model, involving a market orientation, clear leadership and control over party communication, was highly successful at the 1997 General Election. The market orientation was argued to be the key element to the success of "New Labour." Lees-Marshment argues that through the process of allowing policy to be shaped by public opinion, so being informed by the market, the party was able to promote its policy as matching the demands of their market: the electorate. The process of gaining intelligence of the market forces and then designing the parties' behaviour and subsequent communication of that behaviour, its policies, style and image "yielded substantial support from the public" (Lees-Marshment, 2001: 195). This leads Lees-Marshment to conclude that: Major political parties seeking to win elections need to become market-oriented. A market-oriented party designs its behaviour to provide voter satisfaction. . . . It does not attempt to change what people think, but to deliver what they need and want. (Lees-Marshment & Lilleker, 2001: 207)

However, the context for Labour's victory was one that saw them pitted against a Conservative Party whose economic competence and professional efficacy had been seriously undermined. The economic collapse following Black Wednesday, 16 September 1992, when Britain was forced to withdraw from the European Exchange Rate Mechanism, and the repeated accusations of sleaze and sexual indiscretions against Conservative MPs, not to mention the media portrayal of Conservative Prime Minister 1992-7 John Major, made the Conservative Party virtually unelectable (Finkelstein, 1998). The Conservative's prospects in the 2001 General Election seemed little better. Labour won a second landslide victory using an identical strategy to that of 1997.

However, there were signs that this victory did not have the same level of electoral support. Almost a third of the electorate chose not to vote, seemingly disenchanted with the whole process of electioneering. Following the 2001 General Election, senior party figures have been forced to reconsider their strategies. Party Chairmen Charles Clarke and David Davies, respectively Labour and Conservative, and Labour Campaign Organiser in 2001, Douglas Alexander, have since considered how to reconnect with the electorate (Alexander, 2002; Ashley, 2002; Wintour, 2002). One answer that

emerges is to "return politics to the people," interviews undertaken with twenty-eight MPs, all elected after the 1997 General Election, fourteen prospective parliamentary candidates who stood in 2001, and party strategists representing all three major British political parties–the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats– reinforce this argument. The majority of MPs and candidates agreed that moves towards a decentralisation of the party communications operation was of greatest importance, particularly for reconnecting with the electorate. This paper maps out an alternative model based on the descriptions provided by a range of campaigners and strategists. These depict a locally contextualised model for determining strategies, messages and campaign issues. Those active in campaigning at the grassroots level stress that modern politicians need to market themselves as public servants, that they offer themselves as effective, highly responsive, local representatives. Such a product, campaigners argue, has the capacity to maximise the votes of the individual, and has the potential to overcome voter apathy and cynicism.

The alternative contrasts sharply with the argument that the Mandelsonian, or market-oriented model can ensure victory. The critique of the model, offered by those working within the British Labour Party, also resolves the problem Labour leaders had in failing to bring the party with them and create a support base for their model. Lees-Marshment hypothesises that: if membership discontent intensifies and translates into non-turnout or votes for the Liberal Democrats . . . Labour's support could collapse like a pack of cards." (Lees-Marshment, 2001: 209) Lees-Marshment fails, however, to recognise that this could be a flaw with the model and so places blame upon implementation. This paper, using empirical data collected through interviews with those campaigning in constituencies, argues it is the New Labour, Mandelsonian, model that has led to the disengagement of the voters from the party and that an alternative model is more applicable when seeking to reconnect politics to the people.

The Mandelsonian Model: A Critique from Within
[It is] vital to reinforce the impression of an innovative party shedding old associations and image. This dimension will continue to be part of our communications strategy–a fresh party, new approach, on the move. As an important basis for this I am looking at our overall "corporate" image– everything that offers a visual impression of the party. (Mandelson, quoted in Gould, 1998: 2)

If a shop looks cheap you expect cheap, unreliable products. It's the same with a party. The Conservatives wanted to appear business-like and professional, that meant producing uniform literature, with uniform logos and offering uniform commitments. You can't have one policy in Northumbria, another for Yorkshire, something for Scotland and Wales and another for London. You either have a coherent policy or your opponents will shoot you out of the water. (Interview, 19/01/02)

The previous two quotes, one on the record from Peter Mandelson, the second from a Conservative Regional Coordinator, illustrate the way that parties have changed in recent years in order to appear a credible party of government. There are two components, firstly, the importance of a dynamic, professional image; secondly, the need to have a coherent message, uniformly delivered at all levels of the party. Clearly such a strategy, implicit to the marketing of nationally and internationally successful franchises, means control is almost completely in the hands of the party's headquarters. It is at the highest level that the party image is discussed and

determined, the messages are developed out of policy committee discussions and, within this closed community, the communications strategy is set. In the case of Labour party candidates, particularly those in key seats where Central Office influence was greatest, they were expected to simply reiterate the messages. One candidate recalled working to the Mandelson edict: "repeat-remind, repeat-remind, repeat-remind." This dominated his campaign: If I couldn't do something everyday of the week that mentioned one of Labour's five key pledges once, adhering to the principle– and it was said to us quite often during 1995, and certainly during 1996 as the election got closer–"When you are absolutely sick to death of repeating the same line over and over again, that is the point at which it is beginning to penetrate the public's consciousness." (Interview, 17/12/01)

The strategy was, as noted, successful in 1997. On the back of the unpopularity of the Conservative government, Labour's unprecedented landslide allowed many to argue that the market-oriented campaign, supported by key message communication, was the key for victory. However, following the 2001 result, some of those interviewed argued that long-term success was far from guaranteed. In the words of one candidate: I saw my job as being quite loyal to the line, but the Labour Party has this image of control and toeing the party line and candidates not having their own mind, and the public are getting sick of that. There is a need, a fine art, of being loyal, but to appearing that you have an independent mind. (Interview, 04/02/02)

More damningly, however: 1997 was very successful. 2001 not as much, but reasonably successful. 2004 or 5, no. They'll fall flat on their face because the voters have wised up now. I've seen this on the doorsteps. . . . "Oh god, bloody New Labour again". . . . If they use the same glossy techniques again it will fail . . . [the voters] don't like the style now, they want the barebones of honest politics . . . trying to get it down to the local level is the key. . . . It was understandable in the run up to 1997 to have some strong discipline . . . but they should have eased off, but they can't. They don't know how to. (Interview, 08/01/02)

Such comments were reiterated by a number of Labour candidates we interviewed. Broadly, the criticisms of the New Labour campaign strategy can be grouped under just a few headings.
▪ The centrally coordinated campaign only targets some abstract average voter. This disenfranchises the majority who do not associate with Mr(s) "Average."
▪ The "obsession" with uniformity means the candidate has little room to manoeuvre, many, therefore, feel that they are unable to effectively relate to the local context.
▪ The candidates should appear as the representative of the constituency first and the party second, which was impossible when expected, by the party, to just reiterate party slogans.

MPs and candidates representing each of the major parties voiced criticisms of the centrally controlled model of party organisation that now dominates British politics. Labour members argued it had become counterproductive, Conservatives claimed it was antithetic to the party's base of autonomous local associations, the Liberal Democrats argued their victories were grounded firmly in grassroots campaigning. From the point of view of Conservative and Liberal Democrat candidates, what is worrying is the party's moves towards greater centralisation. Conservative academics recommended that the party emulate the Mandelson model in

order to reestablish the party as the "natural party of government" (Seldon & Snowdon, 2001: 10). Similarly, the Liberal Democrat strategists have also begun talking of a centralised strategy and developing key campaign messages (Interview, 8/01/02). This push towards centralisation contrasts with the mood on the ground. The majority of candidates offered a much more individual customer-oriented technique for vote maximisation. This entails: break(ing) up the party machine and return(ing) it back down to the local level. Say(ing) "here's your resources, we'll give you the support, the training, the media management techniques, but then let go." (Interview, 06/01/02)

Consensus can be found around these points: What I would suggest is that far less is spent on the national campaign . . . spend significantly more at the local level, and that would do a lot to revive healthy democracy. (Interview, 23/4/02)
Candidates argue that the hub of the campaign should be the constituency, and stress that only through reflecting an in-depth knowledge of the local context can an individual campaign be won. Such moves do not mean breaking up the parties into individual, constituency- based units, or abandoning all attachments to a centrally constructed programme. Strictly speaking, what candidates argued was necessary was "greater room for manoeuvre." Ideally the candidates should still work within the framework of party policy, and should use party logos, centrally produced material and should integrate themselves into the national campaign.
'We are elected on party tickets so we have to work within the party's general framework. But we need more scope to say who we are, what we offer, not just offering ourselves as the local rep for the leader.' (Interview, 4/01/02)

However, they also called for greater scope to relate specifically to local issues, issues which only maverick candidates, a dying breed in the modern parliament, feel able to run with to earn constituency support. The candidates wanted the power to assess what would work and what should be rejected from a shopping list of campaign strategies offered by the Central Office. Thus they sought to run a campaign that was locally focused. That there should be obvious independence from its national counterpart and so, they argued, the electorate would feel more connected to the campaign.
The voters like to feel cared about and so you must be responsive to them. If you just mouth some platitudes the party made up to appeal to some average man in an average street, it's just seen as rhetoric. The people respond best to the bare bones of honest politics. (Interview, 23/5/02)

Honesty and the rejection of hype, rhetoric and spin, they argued, would attract more voters to their cause from among floating voters, and encourage more of those who vote on partisan lines to turnout on Election Day. The arguments put forward by MPs and candidates downplay the notion that an election is won or lost on the national campaign. Indeed, many candidates at the 2001 General Election, both successful and unsuccessful, claimed that local activity mattered and that it could increase the MPs, personal vote by up to 10%. This point is reinforced by recent literature on constituency campaigning (see particularly Denver & Hands, 1997). Although this is difficult to quantify, the fact that such factors motivate campaigners, and that they feel disaffected by their lack of input into policy messages, means that we need to reconsider the viability of the Mandelsonian, market-oriented model. The disengagement from the politics at the 2001 British General Election, and the blame laid at the door of the Mandelsonian model, suggests that the model may be unsuccessful in future General Elections.

The Local Model of Campaigning

Interviews undertaken indicate all MPs and party strategists see the local context as of increasing importance. Michael Rush also notes the importance of constituency work in a recent study of MPs. Surveys conducted in 1994 and 1999 showed the majority of MPs (on average 65%) responding that they represented their constituency first, ahead of nation and party. The majority also stated that constituency casework was the most important part of the job with 80.2% ranking the activity first or second. Rush found the constituency ranked low when asking what influenced an MP's parliamentary voting, but overall found that the constituency had increased in importance among MPs and particular among backbenchers over the past twenty years (Rush, 2001, chapter 8, passim).

The causes for these developments are: firstly, a reduction in the level of access awarded to MPs by the national media, secondly, the recognition that a constituency electorate may offer a greater level of support to an MP who is effective locally, and that this can overcome a voter's loyalty to, or dislike of, a particular party. The communication techniques employed by the modern MP are largely common within corporate advertising, but were also described as practices familiar to campaigners and electoral candidates: firstly, the strategy or objectives, beyond simply winning, that are described as necessary to be met in order to maximise the votes of a candidate; secondly, the knowledge of the market and what techniques will reach the consumers (voters) most successfully; and thirdly, the methods used to advertise the candidate as a product wanted by the electorate.

The Marketing Strategy

Clearly the chief objective of any candidate is to maximise his or her votes among the local electorate. Mainly, the aim is to win the seat; in some cases the strategy can be limited to increasing the local profile of the party, or the candidate as a potential future representative, and to generate organisation and activism. The latter is often espoused by parties who have, at previous elections, been consigned to third place or have been placed a poor second, but who perceive the seat as "developmental"–that it could be won in the future. However, in order to achieve these objectives, a number of other preconditions need to be met. These relate to what candidates see as necessary for a seat to be won within the context of the election.

The most important objective is profile building: establishing name recognition for the candidate among the electorate. However, simply recognising a candidate's name, knowing that the candidate is standing and for which party, is not sufficient in itself, (with the possible exception of safe seats where the candidate is replacing a retiring MP). More often a candidate must also establish an image as someone who would make an effective representative. As one candidate informed us, "Any [challenging] candidate who wants to succeed, two years before, should be getting into the local papers as the local champion" (Interview, 25/03/02). This introduces the notion of marketing to campaigning.

The "product" most candidates attempt to advertise is themselves as effective representatives: hard-working MPs interested in the constituency. According to the majority of MPs that we interviewed, this attitude is the result of a growing perception that only an effective representative can retain the support of a local electorate. This point was made explicitly by one successful candidate in 2001: The image was "here was a candidate that was working hard for the constituency"

. . . we set out a clear structure of how we were going to fight the campaign and what message we wanted to get across. (Interview, 27/11/01)

The marketing strategy in the constituency must develop the image of the candidate as a "local champion," someone who will fight on the side of the constituents on issues that they see as most important. If you can pick out a policy that you can relate to a local story . . . it sounds like you're more concerned with the local issues than national policy. . . . It is important to reflect that you're not just a party person. (Interview, 7/10/01)

This does not mean disavowing party policy, but relating political arguments to the local community. "They need to see me as an individual, not a plant from Central Office, they must believe that I care about the place" (Interview, 14/3/01). Thus the local agenda, not some list of abstracted, centrally developed slogans, must be placed at the heart of the campaign. This tactic will gain local press coverage for the campaign and, importantly, the coverage will demonstrate that the candidate has an interest in the local community and a sound of knowledge of the constituency, the local issues and concerns.

Working the Market
Clearly then, the local context is all-important. However, most candidates recognise that constituencies differ greatly and, therefore, highlight the importance of learning as much about the local context of the campaign as is possible given the time constraints imposed. Here an incumbent clearly has some advantage; however, a complacent sitting MP may squander that advantage so leaving an opportunity for an aggressive, strategically-minded opponent to make an impact.

The most important medium for a candidate to make an impact is the local newspapers. However, candidates recognise that the local newspapers will not provide space for a candidate or MP to publish party political propaganda. The paper is market led, it only runs a campaign that people do, or could, care less about. If you can get involved in that then you're onto a winner. (Interview, 18/2/02)

Becoming involved in campaigns, such as the provision of beds in local hospitals, repairs to street lighting, the closure of local post offices and a plethora of people-oriented issues, helps to gain coverage that establishes a candidate as a local campaigner. This behaviour allows a candidate to "advertise their product":
You've got to know the audience and write or speak for them, so they warm to you, understand you and, ultimately, will vote for you. You can't be party political; that turns them off. You've got to care, and show it. (Interview, 23/4/02)

Candidates interviewed stressed that to connect to the local people, so being able to establish themselves as a product to which constituents would subscribe, means learning about the context of the constituency. This can be achieved by monitoring the local press as a supplement to physical contact with constituents; letters pages and media campaigns were particularly highlighted.
Secondly, when addressing concerns, producing press releases, campaign literature and the candidate's addresses and newsletters, a language must be employed to which the constituents will respond. This can be adjusted according to the particular audience being addressed and by targeting literature at specific communities within a constituency. You've got to know the area, who listens to the radio, who reads the

papers, what will reach most people, how you can reach those who may vote for you. Then you have to work out what will make them read your piece. (Interview, 19/12/01)

Promoting the Product
With a strategy in place and a good working knowledge of the local context, the important task of promotion remains. Clearly the image of the candidate as an effective representative must be enforced in relation to the local context; there is no point, for example, in appearing as an advocate for industry in a constituency dependent upon agriculture or vice versa. The candidate must, therefore, tie himself or herself as closely to the concerns and interests of the constituents as is possible. As one MP noted, "I think it's part of my job to tell people what's going on and raise issues for the local people I represent . . . things that matter" (Interview, 29/4/02). There are two points that need stressing here: firstly, what media is most appropriate for reaching a constituency; and secondly, what activities will be most effective at selling the candidate. Clearly the local media are the only media interested in the activities of a local candidate, but they still only print or broadcast locally focussed stories.

This means candidates and MPs have to respond to the requirements of the local media because, they argue, they represent the most appropriate forum to establish lines of communication with the electorate. Some put this in fairly cynical terms:
I'll tell my local journalist I'm doing something incredible for the people and he'll put it in the paper. If nothing comes of it, it doesn't matter, because no one remembers. . . . They'll just look at it and think, "Ah, he's doing something for me." (Interview, 23/04/02)

Others, however, describe their media activities more in terms of duty: "It's not just a matter of self-interest, though, that comes into it, it's your duty" (Interview, 29/04/02). Throughout our interviews the local newspapers were described as of greatest importance, because of their circulation and of the greater likelihood of them publishing locally inspired or initiated stories. There are still, however, a range of skills that are required to effectively sell a candidate to the electorate. These skills were also highlighted as necessary for an MP when establishing themselves.

These are the skills that are associated with modern media handling: delivering messages clearly and concisely and writing in the language a journalist would use. There are also techniques that are employed to maximise coverage: for example, some PPCs and MPs use digital cameras to provide the media with a photograph. These skills relate to having a good knowledge of how the media works and being fully conversant with modern technology, both of which are increasingly common amongst younger MPs. What is less common across all parliamentarians is the recognition of the importance of media communication.

Among an earlier survey of former MPs, some did voice the opinion that "the media comes to us" (Interview, 17/10/01) and that "If something is said in the House, nine times out of ten the local paper will pick it up anyway" (Interview, 17/9/01). Most MPs accept that this is no longer the case and argue that they must be proactive in pursuing media coverage. It's vital that you use the media to all its potential, and it must be you going out and doing it, not sitting back and thinking they'll come to you, they won't . . . I think, these days, people want to see you active locally; using the press as effectively as you can just helps you demonstrate that. (Interview, 22/5/02)

With that sense of duty and the notion of self-interest comes the need to be a "professional communicator." This is really a matter of how to market oneself, through generating stories relating to political activity, skills that all those MPs we interviewed argued were essential. Communicating using appropriate language and generating stories that will gain coverage, combined with a good knowledge of the media and the constituency, our interviewees explained, are key to promoting yourself as an effective representative. The effect was highlighted by one current MP who won by a narrow margin in 2001:

You must communicate in as effective and professional way as possible. My predecessor worked as hard, for the people and for the region, but he wasn't as effective. He didn't communicate well and . . . that's how I beat him. I showed how much I could do as a candidate and it got to the point that everything he tried to do was already in the press with me having done it. That's the secret to winning. (Interview,9/5/02)

Bucking Trends and Improving the Margins

A longstanding question in election studies has been to what extent local constituency campaigning impacts upon voting patterns. The majority of the MPs and candidates we interviewed argued there was some effect. There is a linear relationship between how much work you do on the ground and how much your presence is locally and how secure you can become. (Interview, 16/5/02)

This was often quantified to anything between 500 and 5,000 votes, but, on the whole, the MPs and candidates argued that a good local performance would only have a marginal effect. However, our interviewees did highlight the dangers of ignoring local issues and concerns. An MP who doesn't appear regularly in his local newspaper is presumed not to be doing very much, whereas an MP who appears frequently in his local newspaper is presumed to be doing quite a lot. (Interview, 23/5/02)

While this appears to place the fortunes of an MP or candidate ultimately upon their ability to generate press coverage, many did stress that the majority of votes were won or lost as a result of the national campaign and the image of the parties in the national media. Nonetheless, they felt that in an era where the voters appeared less attracted by national party campaigns, to borrow Denver and Hands' phrase, "a good local performance" (Denver & Hands, 1997: 317) could pay electoral dividends. This perception was reinforced by one Liberal Democrat candidate:

I think this package of being tremendously, actually, physically busy and a lot of media coverage . . . can pay dividends when it comes to looking for support. (Interview, 14/5/02)

Evidence from previous research supports the view that local campaigning has some effect and that an MPs effectiveness can lead to the acquisition of a personal vote. Cain, Ferejohn and Fiorina's study of the effects of constituency service found that:

1. Members who handle larger number of cases are more positively evaluated by constituents.
2. Members who publicise their casework are marginally more positively evaluated by constituents. (Cain et al., 1987: 137)

Casework provided around 20% extra support for an incumbent, while publicity added a further 15% (Cain et al., 1987: 138). Furthermore, media publicity gave the greatest significance when correlated with constituents' recollections of an MP's activities (Cain et al., 1987: 149-151). Thirty-five percent attributed

a positive "job rating" to MPs who publicised their casework and 25% based their response to "Like something about member" upon their media communications (Cain et al., 1987: 157). These scores outstripped those based on party identification or their position in government. Only those who had met the MP could offer different reasons for expressing a positive evaluation or a high rating for their representative. MPs also recognise the importance of their local activity. One Labour candidate sitting in a traditionally marginal constituency argued:

If your name is there and your photo goes in the paper a lot, people just assume that you're their MP. . . . If you're part of the fixtures and fittings, that can transcend party politics. (Interview, 16/11/01)

A Conservative who marginally avoided losing to a strong Liberal Democrat challenger mirrored such an observation.

I average being in the local newspaper at least once a week. I had a photo in fortnightly. . . .Me getting that local profile tipped the balance. (Interview, 6/1/02)

Denver and Hands also attempted to measure the effects of a strong constituency campaign. Though this was based on the number of volunteers, the level of financial and technological support and whether the seat was targeted, there are firm indications that the strength of the local campaign can affect voting patterns. In 1992 a strong Labour performance gave the party an increase of 5.7% of the vote, while the Liberal Democrats could increase their vote by up to 8.1% through delivering a strong performance. In 2001 a similar survey was carried out. Multiple regression analysis controlling for incumbency, previous share of the vote and national variations found there were still clear benefits from delivering a strong performance. A weak Conservative campaign would, on average, have increased their share of the electorate by 0.6% while a very strong campaign could gain an increase of 2% above the national swing. This is not a huge difference, of course, but nonetheless one well worth having. Weak Labour campaigns, on average, increased the party's share of the electorate by 1.4% while their strongest campaigns increased it by 4.2%. For the Liberal Democrats, the relevant figures are even more impressive: a weak performance earned the candidate 1.9% while a strong, targeted campaign earned a swing of 6.8% (Denver et al., 2001).

The latter figure is most significant to the argument presented in this paper. The Liberal Democrats are famous for "pavement politics" and use a combination of high media presence and personalised mail shots in their target seats. These tactics allow them to double their advertising and, consequently, effectively sell themselves within a constituency. Therefore, it seems that the "effectiveness" of the local communications strategy has an effect upon the vote share. One Conservative candidate agreed, reflecting on how the party could return to being an electoral force. He argued:

Well, I think we've all got to be Liberal Democrats these days . . . I think you've just got to be alert all the time and, yes, be like the Liberals, by which I mean be very local, be as involved as possible in local politics. (Interview, 29/4/02)

These studies of the effect of localised campaigning reinforce an alternative definition of the Mandelsonian "repeat-remind" edict. That unless the MP can constantly appear active, reminding the constituents that they are effectively represented, they run the risk of losing the seat. The combination of two factors,

firstly, that "I don't believe that there is such a thing as a safe seat anymore" (Interview, 22/5/02) and, secondly that "It is critical in terms of retaining one's seat that people know that you are doing things on behalf of that area" (Interview, 16/11/01), have made MPs acutely aware of the requirements of their constituency. The risk in terms of votes may only quantify to 6% of the electorate, but clearly the difference between losing or gaining 6% is sufficient margin by which a seat can be won or lost. Therefore, we argue that this constituency-based, high profile campaigning, undertaken by incumbents and serious challengers, will become more widespread in future General Elections.

Conclusion: Predictions for the Next Election

A recent seminar on how to increase turnout, "Turnout in the 2001 and 2002 Elections: What Can Be Done to Reverse the General Decline? And by Whom?" 18 June 2002, organised jointly by The Constitution Unit and The Electoral Commission, encouraged academics, politicians and journalists to discuss the recent trend of political disengagement. This event highlighted that a section of non-voters in 2001 felt disconnected from politics and who felt that their vote would have little influence on the outcome. This conclusion was based on the fact that in close constituency contests the turnout was at least on a par with the average turnout in 1997. One reason for this is the level of activity that takes place in target seats. The voter is made to feel more important, receives a large amount of literature, is canvassed on the doorstep, by phone, or often both, and is courted by the incumbent and the challengers alike. Media attention, locally and nationally, is also focussed on target constituencies, some being used as barometer seats to predict the overall election result, therefore, the quality of information disseminated and the level of campaigning activity is far higher.

In his closing address to the event, Labour Party Chairman Charles Clarke argued that "parties fail to reach out effectively to the communities of which they are part." However, he offered few concrete proposals for reversing this situation. While he made reference to ongoing discussions, little detail was given of who was taking part and what issues were being considered. Whether the party hierarchies have considered consulting their own grassroots campaigners is unknown, but perhaps it is doubtful given the current obsession with centralism. The candidates and MPs we spoke to, particularly those who would describe themselves as loyal members of the Labour Party, appear to offer a highly viable alternative to the Mandelsonian, market-oriented model. They argue that building strong connections with the local community, marketing oneself as a community leader, and representing the concerns of the constituency electorate is a more effective way of engaging with the voters.

This can, perhaps, be highlighted by introducing two examples. The first is taken from an interview with an MP who sat as a backbencher in the Thatcher government representing a mining community during the 1984-5 Miners Strike. The MP constantly fought against legislation that would restrict the right of the miners to oppose government policy and led a campaign in parliament calling for a rethink on pit closures. Although he recalls that his stance was unpopular, he also stated that "I said I was representing my constituents and that was accepted, I was allowed to remain in the party and no threat was ever made to say I should be kicked out or punished in any way" (Interview, 3/10/01).

This story is sharply contrasted by the case of a Labour MP that was imparted by one of his colleagues. That MP was ordered, by Labour headquarters, to divorce himself from a local campaign that opposed the closure of a local hospital on the grounds that

"it was not government policy to interfere with the running of an independent local health authority" (Interview, 4/01/02).
The MP subsequently lost his seat.

While this example is perhaps extreme, it is indicative of the failure of centralism, uniformity of message and "control freakery," all of which are described as being synonymous with the current model used or emulated by all three major British political parties. Decentralisation may also go some way to solving the current crisis of declining membership, which is facing British political parties. Party members are traditionally responsible for maintaining the local organisation and giving the party a presence within local communities. Local organisations are largely organic and reflect the socioeconomic character of the areas' electorate. However, within the era of corporate branding, the role of such organisations, and their potential to develop from within a community, is vastly diminished. Recent studies suggest this to be a result of participation in party political activity appearing less attractive. This disengagement is also felt among would-be local government representatives and parliamentary candidates. Few enter politics simply for the power and kudos associated with being an MP; instead they describe wishing to have an input into party and governmental policy. The less opportunity they have to shape policy, bearing in mind the first experience they have of politics, on the whole, is through campaigning, the more their enthusiasm for seeking a political career is reduced. They largely abhor the notion of becoming "party drones," who "like speak your weight machines" deliver a predetermined message when a certain button is pressed.

The perception that that is all that is expected of them will naturally reduce the quality of British democratic representatives and could lead to politics developing a purely Downsian character, with candidates seeking political power as an end in itself. This is something which all the political actors we interviewed eschewed most aggressively. They see themselves as entering politics in order to have a positive effect on government and society; it is the fact that they see themselves as pawns within a pseudo-Downsian structure that has led some to become alienated from the party machinery.

The information gained from the interviews, and a number of anecdotal pieces of evidence, suggests that the model disengages both activists and voters. Activists argue that Labour should devolve a greater level of control down to their regional and constituency branches, and that the MP or candidate should be allowed to design a campaign contextualised by the concerns of their local electorate. These techniques, described by them as being highly effective and beneficial in terms of electoral support, allow politics and the people to connect. If such techniques became central to a campaign then turnout may increase once again, the electorate may feel that politics is about the people and not some abstracted average citizen, and democracy may well be revitalised under the auspices of the famous maxim "All Politics is Local."

The political campaigners and communicators who work within the Mandelsonian model feel they are disconnected from the local because they are too connected with the national. They argue the balance needs tipping back towards the local.
They want to retain the professional appearance of communication and campaigning, but they want to appear both professional and local and, despite protestations to the contrary from those who were involved in designing the model (for example, Richards, 2001), they feel that it is impossible within the current model for campaigning and communicating. Therefore, they argue for a redressing of the

national-local balance, claiming that such a move is key to reconnecting politics to the British electorate.

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