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Politics and public relations – should they hang together?

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I argue that it is hard to distinguish between public relations and much of modern politics in the UK and that an important part of this conflation is a thoroughly bad thing. The working styles and job contents of spin doctor, lobbyist, event manager, corporate re-branding, special adviser and politician are merging, and making the distinctions of former, less presentationally conscious times harder to grasp. The merging has been given the mightiest of shoves by the behaviour of New Labour and has been much encouraged by the Mountfield Report (1998) on government communications.¹

My thesis of merger is hardly an original one and its negative consequences have been warned against by Franklin (2004), Gaber (2000) and Jones (1999, 2002) at least. But I want to elaborate it in a particular way: firstly to re-assert a clear divide between the two functions of policy making and presentation, and secondly to regret the excessive influence of promotional culture (Wernick 1991) over politics. I'm going to now approach the academic pulpit (apologies) and say that reducing the influence of promotional culture is important for the health of a liberal democracy. That culture and its communicative expression in public relations squeezes out the complicated, conditional, hesitant and other-orientated tones and themes in our public discourse. This squeezing out is a bad thing for it reduces the babble of our democratic conversations and substitutes the blandness of a script.

(Some of this might be familiar with Australian colleagues for I am told [by Anne Surma of Murdoch University] that there has been a small uproar recently about amounts spent by the Australian government on advertising, the latest example being the media campaign it ran to flag changes to the legislation on workplace reform. It was felt by many that, rather than *informing* citizens about the *detail* of changes to the legislation, the government *promoted/advertised* them as ‘good’ for all of us.)

Popular culture has noted this merging of the political and PR, and has made us laugh at the foul mouthed politicians in the recent BBC television comedy *The Thick of It*. I do not think I heard that creep of a minister, Hugh Abbott, talk policy except in the context of a defensive or offensive spin operation. Hardly surprising given that this elected official is always in thrall to that foul mouthed and splenetic bully Malcolm Tucker, who is a sound-alike, if not look-alike, enforcer in the style of Alastair Campbell. And worse still, Hugh Abbott, appears in thrall to a trio of departmental officials (Glen, the special adviser; Ollie, another adviser, and Terri, the chief departmental press officer) who regard policy ideas as press release ‘stuff’ to spin their minister out of presentational disasters.

Keep these images in your mind, and see how dominant the public relations mode has become in politics. Now think back some 25 years to the *Yes Minister* television series. There the focus was not presentation but the battle of wits between faux naïve minister Jim Hacker and guileful, Jesuitical permanent secretary Sir Humphrey. Note that both were attended to by the respectful tyro of a private secretary. The press

were no more than a distance threat on the Whitehall horizon. I think, therefore, that John Lloyd was correct to write (4.2.06, p. 10) in the *Financial Times* magazine that ‘In recent years, politics has come under the sway of image consultancies, public relations . . .’.²

Let’s now leave popular culture and turn to government structures. The history of special advisers to UK ministers since the 1960s, when they were introduced in significant numbers, illustrates the merging of politics and PR. Blick³ (2004) shows that their policy advice and implementation roles were primary under the 1964-70 Labour governments but that this primacy has declined under Conservative and Labour governments since 1990. He chronicles (pp. 266-7) their increasing numbers which by 2002 had half (40) of them doing PR for ministers all the time or part of it.⁴ Another sign of merging and conflation is how special advisers, lobbyists in public affairs firms, and politicians move around jobs: the core work is familiar at the three locations.⁵

The contemporary cultural dominance of marketing and PR with their primary emphasis on self-interested display and exchange is a systemic reason for the conflation. How naturally in this culture a Labour Party publication for its members can attribute to a Prime Minister the words ‘We have a good story to tell. We have got to get out and sell it’.⁶ Another reason is the judgement by the Labour Party leadership since 1983 that it had to cultivate better relations with a largely hostile, pro-Conservative UK press. The consequences were the professionalisation of the party’s communications; and the leadership, MPs, apparatchiks and activists dropping their often ambiguous, if not hostile, attitude towards the media. The party careers of Peter Mandelson, Alastair Campbell and Charlie Whelan are symbolic of this change.⁷

While it can be said, very sensibly, that this increased emphasis on PR is a response to the need to maximise electoral support in a media-saturated, competitive, democratic electoral system, it is said much less often that the current emphasis blurs the distinctions between policy makers (elected politicians and senior civil servants), policy explainers (civil service information officers) and policy promoters (special advisers). This blurring between policy and presentation and between elected politician and support staff makes it harder to identify what politicians have decided, and runs the risk of taking power away from them and transferring it to experts in presentation. Look at fictional Hugh Abbott. For real cases, read (Blick, p. xiv) how Clare Short, formerly Secretary of State for International Development, implied the case for separation when she told a House of Commons committee in 2002 that:

*Alastair Campbell [then chief press spokesperson for the government] is responsible for the presentation of government policy, and that soon becomes propaganda and there is a place for that. Once proper decisions have been made, then the government should put forward what it is trying to do as well as it can and communicate with the public, **but the two often conflate**’.*
(emphasis added by Blick).

I am arguing for clear functional space between that proper decision making and government public relations. I’m doing so at a time of the high water mark of PR influence on modern UK politics. Compare today with the start of the PR function in modern government in 1911 when the Liberal government sent presenters around the country to explain the first public welfare benefits. Compare today with civil servants in national and

local government writing in the *Journal of Public Administration* in the 1920s and 30s that PR informed people of their welfare rights in housing and unemployment pay. In personal terms, the high water has raised up Alastair Campbell to be the most influential public relations person in British history. In governance terms, this conflation, this merging, makes PR an integral part of policy making, and not a second order matter of presentation. It leads to allegations that words and evidence about policy are ‘sexed up’ (exaggerated) in order to maximise political support. This is the PR mindset of self-presentation-for-attention-and-advantage inflating the meaning and significance of policy. That mindset was alleged to be working in Campbell during his dealings with intelligence experts over the 2002 September dossier justifying the decision to invade Iraq in 2003.⁸ A year later, the Butler enquiry (2004) investigated the conduct of British intelligence over the war. After the publication of its report, one of the enquiry members said ‘Intelligence and public relations should be kept apart’.⁹

If they are to be separated, there is a lot of PR work to be de-merged; to stop a trend Franklin (2004, pp 5-7) calls ‘this ambition to package politics’¹⁰ and what Deacon and Golding (1994, p. 4) name ‘the public relations state’.

Merging of another sort (between PR as information giving by civil servants and as political advantage by ministerial advisers) is also evident. Blick (pp. 266-7) reports how the PR role of the special adviser is seen as different from that of civil servants in Whitehall press offices. It is the difference between giving factual information and giving political explanation. Special advisers could ‘add that extra dimension – to an extent be the Minister’s voice’.¹¹ These two roles can be distinguished in

a conceptual way but they are too fine to bear the brunt of practice. Indeed Blick's account is, in significant measure, a history of special advisers and permanent civil servants clashing over policy presentation from two competitive stances – those of government as policy implementation, and of government as political competition. The Jo Moore affair exemplifies the negative tensions between the two roles with famous, deathly advice to bury and not explain.¹²

From all this, it is clear, I believe, that the basic motivation in public relations of self-presentation-for-attention-and-advantage is found too much in modern British politics and government. The urgent and constant search for media coverage is a shared mindset. More operationally, from PR and marketing, politics assimilates attitudes and skills such as: research into what electors want through surveys and focus groups; sensitivity about personal appearance (£1,300 on prime ministerial make-up in 2004); being 'on message' (bleepers for all MPs in 1997); event management (party rallies); creating pseudo-events (water blasting the wall free of graffiti)¹³, and constructing new corporate identities (the Cameroons and their public theatre of tieless shirts and bicycling to work). This transfer of skills from mass marketing and corporate PR to politics¹⁴ breaks down into two major components - political marketing and news management, known as 'spin'. I'm not arguing that modern government can work without these persuasive communications. In the UK, there never has been a golden age when politics and persuasion went separate ways, and there never will be. Today modern visible PR (media relations, event management, branding) makes the merger between governing and persuasion manifest (see Franklin 1994 and 2004; Jones 1995, 1997, 1999, 2002; Rees 1992; Scammell 1995) and it has its democratic uses. PR makes connections between political elites and the

mass electorate. McNair (1995, p. 191) puts this well: PR and other political marketing techniques make politics a more attractive ‘mass spectator sport’ to an electorate who are adept at winnowing out manipulation and propaganda from useful information and opinion in political communications. He is also correct (1996, p. 52) when he notes that ‘mass democracy is inevitably *populist* democracy in which appearance and image, as well as policy substance, have a role to play’.

Instead of no PR in government, I am arguing what I think is Short’s case: that the policy making and presentational divide should be re-established in the interests of asserting the primacy of policy over presentation, of the elected official over the appointed one. On a sunny day, I would claim that this leads to better decision making. On a cloudy day, I would just claim that it reverts to the proper constitutional order of elected officials prevailing. Does it also annoy you the way those PR types boss the minister around in *The Thick of It*? I think that we will know that the proper constitutional order is re-established when the Downing St press office is moved as a cost saving to Manchester. Politicians too might welcome the migration. Tony Blair said in 2002 that his first government had overvalued PR (Blick, p. 268), an irony coming from a politician near universally liked or disliked for his presentational skills. I also wonder what the tieless, bicycling Dave Cameron will think if he makes it to Downing St., for he was once a professional PR man? His professional past will be used against him. In a reckless act of stone throwing inside a very big glasshouse, note that New Labour’s deputy prime minister John Prescott has called Cameron a ‘PR man and not a politician’.¹⁵

Cameron's repositioning of the British Conservatives is instantly recognisable to the modern PR person as corporate branding. In terms of my argument, it is inoffensive in its presentational aspects. Indeed more generally, PR is an acceptable promotional means in the democratic competition of electoral positioning and dog fighting. Lloyd (2004, p. x) is graphically correct when he says that the 'ever open maws' of the 'ravenous' media means that ministers need press aides to feed it with 'good' stories, and to limit the damage of 'negative' stories.¹⁶ That is all fine; that is the tumble of a rough old trade. Policy, however, is about ends as well as means: PR is always a means to an end. Politics is parasitical about where it finds its persuasive means but it should be the master activity in relation to policy, with presentation a secondary concern.

The core, therefore, of my case is the re-assertion of the policy/presentational divide. On separating the two functions out.

Mountfield wrote (1997, para. 2) that:

Any government needs modern and effective relations with the media. The effective communication and explanation of policy and decisions should not be an after-thought, but an integral part of a democratic government's duty to govern with consent.

These are carefully crafted words. Who could support communication being an after-thought in today's media-saturated world? Nobody. The argument here is not about making presentation an 'after-thought'. It is about making communication a separate and second thought. Policy decisions should be first; presentation a separate second. Both functions

will often be done by the same person, but the mindsets, and the formal processes should be de-merged.

Politics deals principally in a currency of incommensurable values, goals and behaviours, out of which coherence may or may not be produced. Presentational skills alone will never make for peace and justice in Northern Ireland, Iraq, the Middle East or the poppy fields of southern Afghanistan. Or for adequate dental services provided by the National Health Service. Or for how children get to secondary schools. Right policy is the key driver for good outcomes in our political economy and civil society, and so Clare Short is correct to warn of the dangers of political actors merging policy making and policy presentation in the same, single process. The PR sign does not hang on the door of the policy maker. Take it down.

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¹ Chapter 2, para 14 of Mountfield says ‘The effectiveness of communications depends on . . . integration within a department of the development of policy with its communications’.

² Lloyd added two other influences – expert networks and think tanks.

³ Blick is one of the few academics writing about government to refer to government ‘public relations’ consistently. Most avoid the term and use ‘information’.

⁴ Those doing media relations full time were apparently eight in mid-2002. See Blick, p. 266. There were 31 special advisers in 1974. See Blick, p. 315. An early ‘spin doctor’ before the term was known was John Harris who worked for Roy Jenkins in the late 1960s. See Blick, pp. 110-117.

⁵ These examples are provided by Conor MacGrath. Peter Luff: researcher to Conservative MPs Peter Walker and Edward Heath in late 1970s/early 1980s; then lobbyist at Good Relations and Lowe Bell in late 1980s/early 90s; then Tory MP since 1992. Charles Hendry: special adviser to Conservative MPs John Moore and Tony Newton; then public affairs counsellor at Burson-Marsteller; then Tory MP since 1992. Damien Green: special adviser in 10 Downing Street Policy Unit 92-94; then self-employed public affairs consultant 95-97; then Tory MP for Ashford. David Miliband: parliamentary officer, National Council for Voluntary Organisations 1987-88; head of policy unit for Labour leader and Prime Minister Tony Blair 94-01; MP for South Shields since 2001; Hilary Benn: head of policy and communications for MSF trade union; then special adviser to MP David Blunkett; MP for Leeds Central since 1999; Charles Clarke: chief of staff to Labour leader Kinnock 1983-92; chief executive Quality Public Affairs 1992-97; MP for Norwich South from 1997.

⁶ See *Labour Today*, summer, 2004, p. 9. It is a magazine for members. The words are attributed to Tony Blair.

⁷ Peter Mandelson was Director of Communications for the Party between 1985 and 1992; Alastair Campbell was party press officer for Tony Blair MP from 1994, and then Chief Press Secretary to him as Prime Minister 1997-2003; Charlie Whelan was special adviser and press officer 1997-1999 for Gordon Brown MP, Chancellor of the Exchequer.

⁸ See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3466005.stm> for an account of the dossier’s construction. P. 2 reports that ‘Downing Street media chief Alastair Campbell tells JIC chairman John Scarlett (intelligence officer) that the “may” in the main text wording of (45 minutes warning of a missile attack) claim is “weaker than the summary”’. A day later ‘Mr Scarlett tells Mr Campbell the language on the claim in the main text has been “tightened”’.

⁹ See p. 3 of <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3466005.stm>. Enquiry member Field Marshall Lord Inge is quoted to this effect.

¹⁰ Franklin reports (p. 16) that between 1997-9, the New Labour government issued 20,000 press releases, ‘an 80 per cent increase on the output of the Major government’ (Cohen, 1999b, p. 15). See Cohen, N. (1999) ‘An Explosion of Puffery’, *New Statesman*, November 29, pp. 14-15.

¹¹ The official giving this explanation in Blick was Mike Granatt, Head of Profession of the then Government Information and Communication Service, now the Government Communications Network. The quotation is his.

¹² Jo Moore was special adviser to Stephen Byers MP, Secretary of State for Transport, in 2001. Very soon after the Twin Tower terrorist attacks on September 11, she sent an email to the Head of Information in the department saying 'It's now a very good day to get out anything we want to bury'. She later resigned.

¹³ See Boorstin (1961) *The Image, or What happened to the American Dream*, Ch. one for their origins: he involves journalists and politicians in their development as well as PR people.

¹⁴ One title for this skills transfer into politics is 'Machiavellian Marketing', a movement tracked by Harris and Lock (1996). See also Harris *et al* (1999).

¹⁵ Reported by BBC Radio4 news, 11.2.06 at 8am.

¹⁶ In a study of Australian 'media advisers' Richard Phillipps of the University of Sydney, Nepean, noted that media advising 'has gradually evolved as a separate role from that of policy adviser', p. 32, of his unpublished PhD thesis 'Communicating Politics' (2000).