Strange fascination: image in music and politics Part Two
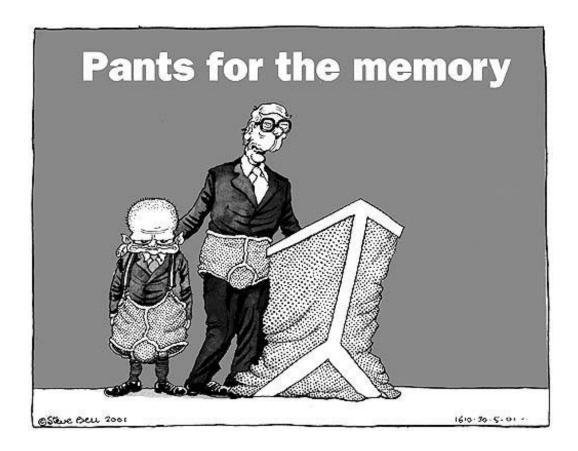
This is part two of an essay by, LSE Media PhD student Ruth Garland that explores the links between our experience of images and political communication. With democracy suffering a crisis of confidence she questions the relationship between images and political meaning through the ages. In the first part she explored the political significance of David Bowie's images and their relationship with his audience. In this part she moves the argument onto British party politics

The careless and self-seeking use of image, which we see frequently in political publicity, invites exclusion, although not always intentionally. This photo caught during campaigning for the 2005 election, came as a relief to the average Labour voter. Perhaps, they reasoned, the gossip about Brown and Blair being sworn enemies was really just malicious gossip.

The origin of the photo, and its self-serving nature as part of his feud with Brown, is revealed in Blair's 2010 autobiography, *The Journey,* where he writes: "ice creams with Gordon on the campaign trail, 2 May 2005. I insisted on getting a flake". Yet, just over a year later, he was saying goodbye at his last Labour Party conference as leader after months of alleged "dirty tricks" from the Brown camp.

Consider the Steve Bell cartoon of May 1997, published in the Guardian, which showed in full colour the disappearance of John Major's flaming underpants beneath the Thames. This image spoke directly to Guardian readers familiar with Bell's lexicon of the grey man with grey underpants, the morning after Major's defeat by Tony Blair.

Pants for the memory

Political cartoons like this are funny and thought-provoking. They invoke a commonality of feeling and thinking. Ridicule attempts to undermine public image and reveal the human underneath, making a connection between a distant political class and the mass public. As a largely excluded audience, we try to close the gap by laughing at them – reducing them to comic characters – but without any real point of connection that just serves to widen the gap between them and us.

The decline in voter turnout and trust in the political class are well-documented in both Europe and North America. Party leaders have a heavy responsibility, since, as evidence shows, the public see party leaders as "a mechanism they use to make fast and frugal judgements about governments" (Whiteley 2013). It's also been shown that citizens appear to speak a different language to politicians when it comes to judging their behaviour. Out and out corruption is not the issue. Voters want politicians to give a straight answer and not make empty promises (Allen & Birch 2013). Mis-communication it seems, key to public disengagement.

In British politics, we increasingly see a networked elite of politicians, journalists and their intermediaries, performing a ritual dance on the political stage, behaving according to their own distinctive codes and taking an interest in the electorate only at election time. The 2012 Leveson Inquiry caught politicians and the press in an unhealthy clinch, while we, the public, watched from the side-lines. At its most extreme, we heard how, when David Cameron was deciding whether or not to appoint Andy Coulson as his Director of Communications, he asked Rebekah Brooks: "Tell me, is he a good person? What do you think of him?"

This snap of David Cameron asleep on a four poster bed with his red box was mistakenly uploaded earlier this year on Instagram by Emily Sheffield, Samantha Cameron's step sister.

cameron in bed

It shows the bride, Alice Sheffield, with David Cameron in the background. This is one illustration of why David Cameron chose tabloid news editor Andy Coulson to be his Director of Communications.

Simons (2003) has talked about how, on the way up, political elites deploy cultural capital to maintain their difference from the mass, and yet, have to be seen to divest themselves of it to achieve popular appeal. More than most perhaps, Cameron needed to strip back some of the social advantages that enabled him to become the youngest British Prime Minister in 200 years, to make himself acceptable to the voters.

As Andy Coulson told Leveson: "I felt it was important to show his authentic life away from work" as opponents were "working hard to convince the public that he spent his private moments lounging around a mansion, in top hat and tails, sipping champagne and nibbling on caviar. That was an important myth to dispel."

So what does this all add up to? There is a profound disconnect between the political class and the public that is wide, and getting wider to the extent that different languages are spoken. Subliminal factors identified in images or candid shots can magnify an impression of disconnection while attempting to do the opposite. Politicians need to ask themselves whether democratic politics either in the UK or Europe generally, has access to the voters' imagination? Are young people engaged? Can politics establish the kind of connection through identity formation that Bowie established in 1972?

Let's end on a positive note. This shows the UK Youth Parliament meeting in the House of Commons on November 15 2013 for this year's Parliament Week, an initiative delivered by the House of Commons, with the support of the House of Lords. This is one of several attempts by Parliament and local government to engage young people in democracy. Does the ruling political class want a deeper form of engagement or are they happy with a world in which they, and their friends, make the decisions?

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