

# Blair: Lessons From Leveson (Part One)

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Blair at Leveson

One of the great myths of British political history is that Tony Blair's New Labour invented spin: the obsessive attempt by politicians to manipulate media coverage by controlling the message.

I've just been reading Dominic Sandbrook's 'Seasons In The Sun' which reminded me of just how obsessed Harold Wilson was by the newspapers. In the second 1974 election he and his cabinet were convinced that the Mail had a major scandal that would blow their chances out of the water. There was never any sense of what it might be (although Harold had enough odd friends and vicious colleagues to have provided fuel for at least an imbroglio worthy of a hostile front page or two.)

So there were plenty of drinks and meals with journalists by Harold as well as his press chief Joe Haines as they sought to head off damaging stories – as well as planting a few of their own

in the never-ending internecine warfare of Labour politics in that period.

Thatcher was also a brilliant media performer although she left most of the media management to Bernard Ingham. John Major struggled to get on terms with the media at all but that was because his was a fatally weak administration facing a hostile onslaught from his own euro-sceptics and a euro-sceptic press.

Much of Blair's evidence to Leveson will repeat what he said in his excellent [feral beast speech](#) [spoilt only by its timing and that silly phrase]. Which can be summed up with his phrase at Leveson: "it's not the closeness, it's the imbalance". If the papers are powerful then you have to be intimate with them to get your message across. You must deploy a mixture of cunning (spin) and charm (flying around the world to speak at their meetings). That, Blair argues, at least gives you a chance to deal with the relentless barrage of partial reporting and hysterical comment.

It raises the question why this radical prime minister never considered more fundamental reform. Let's assume he didn't act because of his commitment to press freedom. So it must have been that he was too cowed to consider revamping the PCC or acting on media plurality. As he put it, it would have been a 'huge distraction' for a Labour government with plenty of other issues on its plate.

So perhaps the interesting part of Blair at Leveson is not his 'invention of spin' but Cameron's failure to learn the lessons of history. He has copied the Master's obsession with massaging the message and also the cozying up with the press and a complete lack of interest in media reform. Until now.

It has taken the heir of Blair – perhaps accidentally, and certainly not enthusiastically – to have initiated the process through Leveson whereby Blair's burden is now being considered, if not lifted.

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