

The political is personal

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I have two of the great contemporary political analysts on my advisory board. They are from what we used to call 'both sides' of the political divide. Of course, these days there isn't much of a divide as both main parties fight over the central ground. In a recent POLIS meeting they were both noting how British politics has become a form of celebrity interactive entertainment along the lines of *Big Brother*.

My Labour insider said that strategists within Millbank HQ talk not of Labour against the Conservatives but of Brown versus Cameron. They do not debate policies but personalities. My Conservative-supporting advisor pointed out how in a recent (lost) by-election the Tory literature referred, not to the candidate, but to something called "David Cameron's Conservative party". This is a bit like "John Lennon's Beatles" or "Wayne Rooney's Manchester United". It is a deliberate strategy to push forward a popular individual in stead of a less popular institution. Cameron has not left our TV screens since the summer as the new Tory media chief Andy Coulson has sought to sear Cameron's image in to our eyeballs. It used to be that the Conservative Treasury spokesman would lead the charge over the banking crisis but instead George Osborne appears to have left it to Dave. "Never mind Tory history or policies," they seem to be saying, "look at this nice young man". But does it work and does it matter?

The fact that politics is very centrist at the moment isn't a bad thing in itself. Nor do I have a problem with defining politics by character and leadership. (Although I think the attacks on Ming Campbell for not being young were deeply offensive and stupid.) But we should be aware that we are creating a culture of celebrity. Not just in entertainment but in politics. The challenge for our politicians – and for our media – is to combine the tactics of that kind of personal presentation with policy depth. So far, 'plain' Gordon Brown appears more successful at suggesting some sort of authenticity than David Cameron. The anti-spin spin is winning.

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