

Brown's Media Challenge

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As Tony Blair announces his end date, I want to look forward to the next Premiership. In a special length article let's have a look at how Gordon Brown can deal with the legacy of ten years of media management by New Labour. Can Brown forge a new relationship with the news media that can repair the damaged trust between public, press and politicians?

New Labour and the media: Blair's legacy and Brown's challenge:

It is one of the most majestic ironies of the New Labour years that the administration credited with the invention of spin is now threatened by a tidal wave of media hostility. Can Gordon Brown get his head back above water? New Labour's media strategy has been well-documented. The invites to tabloid editors to have dinner with Tony. The trips to speak to

More...

Murdoch's conferences on the other side of the world. The pagers, the slick party political broadcasts and above all, Alastair Campbell. None of these were entirely new ideas in the world of political PR, but they were adopted by New Labour with a thorough-going systematic enthusiasm. This was a party determined never to re-enter the wilderness of political irrelevance.

Control

The caution and control exercised by new Labour's spin-meisters in the first few years was designed not to frighten the right-wing horses in the City and Fleet Street. With the benefit of hindsight we can now see they possibly went too far. Many journalists were deeply attracted by Mr Blair and sick of the Tories and needed little wooing or cajoling. Natural Tory editors like Peter Stothard and Max Hastings became supporters.

Loathing

But it was too late. New Labour's approach to the media had shifted seismically from the old Labour mix of fear and friction to a deep loathing and arrogant denigration. What could have become a beautiful friendship turned into a bitter and blind relationship. They needed but hated each other. People who worked at Number 10 like Tim Allen and Matthew Taylor rapidly developed a profound dislike and disrespect for journalists. Some journalists like John Lloyd blame this on the media for its overweening power and its political irresponsibility. Others like Mail columnist Peter Obourne blame the New Labour administration for the institutionalisation of deceit. I personally think it was a mutual act of destruction.

Disillusion

Of course, the whole furore over WMDs and Iraq accelerated and deepened the process of shared disillusion. There was, and still is, great misreporting of the whole affair based on the political agenda of individual journalists. But at the core of the whole dossiers saga was a willingness on the part of Labour politicians and their advisors to let the political tail wag the dog of truth. Now a tired and listless media assumes that everything New Labour says is a falsehood: from the Olympics to Casinos to Party Donations, the media conventional wisdom is that the Government is lying.

Poison

The big question is what on earth Gordon Brown can do to cleanse the poison from the system? This is not to say that we want harmony between media and government. Quite the opposite. We need scepticism, investigation and robust criticism of any administration by journalists. But the media should be grown-up enough to accept that government has a right to try to get its message across and that a political party has a right to try every legal trick in

the book to win the argument. When I look at the serried ranks of dozens upon dozens of journalists at the BBC's offices in Westminster, I wonder how the news media can really claim to be so feeble in the face of all those clever government spin doctors. And as Independent columnist Steve Richards argues, the pace and complexity of modern government means that a febrile media can often represent cock up as conspiracy or fallibility as malfeasance.

Gordon's problem

Gordon's problem is that he was steeped in that New Labour history and culture. Brownites such as media consultant Scarlett McGwire claim he is man of integrity who will sweep the corridors of Whitehall clean of spin. Er... hang on a minute. Brown's original press man Charlie Whelan was one of the most ebullient exponents of the craft. He was often cavalier with veracity in the face of political danger. And since then Gordon has never been quick to rein in 'friends of the Chancellor' who briefed endlessly against the PM. Our foremost chronicler of spin, Nick Jones, has described Brown as the greatest leaker of them all. Why should Brown change the habits of the last decade when he gets the top job?

Openness?

Anyway, I detect no natural instinct in the Chancellor for openness or robust dialogue with the media. I am told that in private he is funny, witty and wise, happy to roam intelligently across subjects deep and wide. Well, it doesn't show. Whenever I have been involved with interviews with the Chancellor he has been curt, cheerless and boring. Perhaps that is to do with being in charge of the Treasury and having to live in the shadow of the Great Communicator. Perhaps Gordon chooses to cast himself as the taciturn but trustworthy enigma. So be it, but I think it will fail Brown, Labour and the public.

Cameron

The relationship between the news media and politicians is at critical moment. David Cameron has certainly mastered Blair's trick of disarming the media. But the media has not fallen in love. Despite the odd podcast and appearing without a tie (wow!), he's not really doing anything novel or progressive about media relations. In fact by failing to engage on policy he is actually stripping the current political conversation of any real substance. Brown's opportunity is to forge a new relationship with the media by taking journalists seriously. He dines with people like Sun editor Rebekah Wade which shows that he knows the media matters. No surprise there. But is he prepared to foster a new culture that offers a new deal twixt media and Government? What if he and his government were a bit more straight, a bit more open, a bit more engaged, a bit more prepared to take the tough questions? In return would the media be prepared to scream a little less, to react a little less frantically and to dig a little deeper for facts and debate rather than gossip and 'rows'?

The relationship between the public, the politicians and the media is going to change anyway because of new technology. 24 hour news and the internet have already begun its work of transforming the way that information and debate about our politics is mediated. We have never had so much political information so quickly. There is quality debate at Comment Is Free, engaging information around the clock at Sky or BBC Radio 5 and there is plenty of unconventional alternative views at places like IPTV channel 18doughtystreet or blogger Guido Fawkes. The danger is that we end up with vast acres of digital dross if that is what the politicians want. It is up to them to work with the new media tools as well as the journalists. The potential is there for a revived political culture. Can Gordon contribute?



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