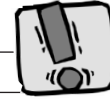


SPIN DOCTORS

LES CONSULTANTS EN COMMUNICATION



FACTSHEET

Margaret Thatcher's rise to power illustrated how crucial media support had become for politicians in the sixties and seventies. Her advisers had realized that politicians were now living in a glasshouse in the eyes of an evermore critical public no longer deferential to established authorities. The iron lady was successfully "sold" to the British media and electorate by skilled public relation officers. In sharp contrast to the Conservative party's enduring electoral good fortune the Labour Party went through eighteen miserable years in which they accumulated defeat upon defeat and suffered negative treatment from the media.

On becoming leader in 1994 Tony Blair knew that if he wanted ever to become Prime Minister and govern for any length of time he had to put a stop to **infighting** among the rival factions of his party and have the media on his side.

The new leader was quick to enlist the help of two Oxbridge educated former communication professionals who knew what makes journalists **tick**.

Peter Mandelson joined Tony Blair's staff in 1994 along with Alistair Campbell. From that date onwards the pair worked ceaselessly to make the Labour Party credible again. They made sure a positive spin (presentation) was always put on the leader's actions. They called to order **freaks** who ventured to criticise publicly the official policy of the party and mercilessly chased out inconsistencies and inaccuracies from the ruling Conservative party's statements. The efforts paid off and Labour won a **landslide** victory in

1997. Once Tony Blair had safely settled down at 10 Downing Street, his spin doctors saw to it that Labour did not relapse into the cacophony which had proved so damaging in the past. A formidable communication machine was set up at Millbank Tower. Ministers were coached to make carefully worded statements and to exploit all opportunities to present Tony Blair's policies in a favourable light. The Party was returned with another landslide victory in 2001.

In spite of those resounding successes the actions of spin doctors were bitterly **resented** not only by the opposition Conservative Party but also by the Labour Party's own **backbenchers** and **grassroots** members. Critics stressed the ambiguous positions of Tony Blair's advisers, pointing out that they were superseding civil servants trained and paid to serve the government in the best interest of the nation whatever the political colour of the party in power. Peter Mandelson was **nicknamed** the prince of darkness.

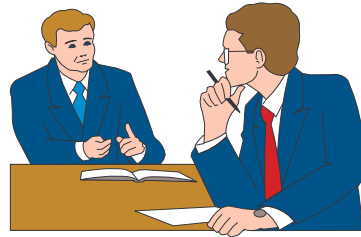
The present high profile of Tony Blair's advisers may be loudly lamented in the press and in everyday conversation, but the presence of spin is now felt in all political parties. It looks as though spin doctors have come to stay.



EXTRACTS FROM TEXTS

Your editorial, “Whitehall’s spin-off”, is right to argue that the trouble with spin doctors is not their number but their role. Civil servants are recruited by independent competitive examination, must be politically neutral and are answerable to their head of department. Spin doctors are **answerable** to no-one but the politician who **appointed** them, and their function is not to work for the **overall** public benefit but solely to keep that politician in power.

The Scotsman



Lord Robin Butler, head of the civil service between 1988 and 1998, “It cannot be right for an independent, neutral civil service that is supposed to be able to work for any government of any political colour to be under the command of party political **hacks** like Alastair Campbell and Jonathan Powell.

The BBC

In the 18th century, the press, with great difficulty, won the right to report on secret debates in the House of Commons and The Times owed much of its success to its parliamentary reports. By 1828, the historian Macaulay was warning MPs that “the gallery in which the reporters sit has become **the fourth estate of the realm**”. But newspapers were still seen as interpreters of the other estates (the two houses of Parliament and the Church) rather than serious actors.

The Independent

Where does the press stand in relation to the democratic system? Studying the changes in Britain’s anatomy since I first looked at it 40 years ago, I’ve been struck by the hugely inflated role of the media: nearly everyone in all institutions is far more dependent on publicity and journalists now than they were before.

The Guardian

On September 11, 2001, Jo Moore, an aide to Stephen Byers, Secretary of State for Transport, sent out an e-mail to officials suggesting that it was “a very good day” to “get out anything we want to bury”. That anybody could use these words, just after the Twin Towers attacks, revealed that a whole political culture had become corrupt.

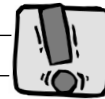
The Scotsman

On the decline of standards in the British Press: in 1974 for every one negative **headlines** in the papers, there were three positive ones; 30 years on, the figure is now 18-1 in favour of the negative.

The Daily Telegraph

Lord Falconer told peers at Question Time that the 70-odd special advisers were a good “interface” between the civil service and ministers. “Many special advisers work for a lower rate than they could get in the market,” he said.

The BBC



In one of his most outspoken Commons attacks, Mr Duncan Smith accused Mr Blair of becoming “a stranger to the truth” and of creating with Mr Campbell a “culture of **deceit and spin**” at the heart of government.

The Daily Mail

Labour was under fresh pressure yesterday to justify its legion of government-funded spin doctors after new figures revealed the pay bill for special advisers had risen to a record high of £5.4 million. The bill is up £300,000 on the previous year and almost double the £2.6 million Labour spent on special advisers in 1997-8, when it first came to power.

The Scotsman

Labour’s spin doctors continue to show their mastery of their craft. Hugh Bayley’s assertion that the Government’s New Deal scheme is a success is their best effort yet. The New Deal is proving a costly failure. In Leeds, 1,006 people were referred by the Employment Service to the council **gateway** scheme but 258 never even **turned up**. Of those that did, 106 never completed the programme.

Newsquest Media Group

The art of **crushing** a rumour story is a fundamental part of Labour Party spin. Ignore the rumour and it often dies. Deny it privately and suspicion is aroused. Ask for an apology, and the rumour is considered fact. Give an interview to the News of the World **dismissing** a rumour as “bizarre” is something of a nuclear option.

The Scotsman

If councillors want facts, they should consult the large number of specialist and experienced council officers. If councillors want spin doctors, they should pay for them out of party funds. But by spending up to £36,000 on personal assistants, the politicians are making it clear where their priorities lie. No matter that the social services budget is so empty that elderly people are left to languish in hospital beds without a home to go to.

Newsquest Media Group

The “Lobby” is the name given to a small group of parliamentary journalists who enjoy privileged access to certain parts of Parliament [...] Lobby journalists are also invited to 10 Downing Street for daily briefings at which ministers and the Prime Minister’s Press Secretary will seek to give journalists an ‘off the record’ spin on the day’s main political events. [...] Critics say the system makes it easier for the government to get away with putting a misleading **slant** on embarrassing stories or to make unfounded attacks on its enemies.

The BBC

Mr Campbell stressed several times his continued admiration for the Prime Minister, saying he was “a decent guy doing a decent job”. He **poured scorn on** some sections of the media, particularly the Daily Mail, which said many times that the Prime Minister was not to be believed. Mr Campbell said: “It is trying to break the link of trust between those we have elected from doing the job they were elected to do.”

The Daily Mail



1. À ceux qui les accusent de manipuler cyniquement l'opinion et d'enterrer les vérités gênantes, les conseillers en communication se bornent à répondre qu'ils expliquent simplement la politique du gouvernement et font en fait un bon travail.
2. Pendant la campagne pour les élections de 1997 les travaillistes se servirent du logiciel Excalibur qui leur donnait des faits et des chiffres pour dénoncer immédiatement les erreurs décelées dans les déclarations de leurs adversaires politiques.
3. Les conseillers de Margaret Thatcher qui l'aidèrent à remporter les élections de 1979 adoptèrent des méthodes de publicité révolutionnaires, mais il leur fallu d'abord empêcher la candidate de dire et de faire des choses qui auraient pu dissuader l'électorat de voter pour elle.
4. Le rôle d'un conseiller en communication est de veiller à ce que l'on parle le moins possible d'un événement tant qu'un moyen de présenter les choses sous un jour positif n'a pas été trouvé. Les cyniques disent que quand tout va bien il faut en attribuer le mérite au gouvernement, quand tout va mal, on accuse les autres.
5. Beaucoup de militants de base du parti travailliste en veulent au gouvernement de dépenser de l'argent du contribuable pour payer des conseillers en communication employés en fait à promouvoir la politique du gouvernement.
6. Les hommes politiques influents apprennent très vite à manipuler les médias à leur propre avantage, ils ne survivraient pas s'ils n'y parvenaient pas.



1. Many backbench Labour MPs would like Tony Blair **to ditch** spin doctors. The influence of Peter Mandelson, who has been **nicknamed** the prince of darkness, is resented by many members of the Labour Party.
2. We have been used to the spin from Millbank for a long time now and it is no wonder that we are always looking for it in everything the government and the Labour party do.
3. Journalists **complain that** spin doctors' interference in public affairs make their job more difficult and less complete than it should be. The latter **retort** that they are only making the government's policies plain and understandable for everybody.
4. There is a widely held view, **dismissed** by Downing Street that some of these advisers wield more power than most MPs. For many political observers the apparent decline of the role of parliament has become a cause for concern.
5. It is hard to escape the feeling that Labour's latest assault on the media is a bit of spin aimed at burying the **row** over Tony Blair's role in the Iraq war.

1. To those who accuse them of cynically manipulating public opinion and burying awkward truths spin doctors answer that they are simply explaining the government's policies and are thus doing a good job.
2. During the campaign for the 1997 election the Labour Party used the Excalibur software which supplied them with facts and figures to expose immediately the inaccuracies in the statements of their political opponents.
3. Margaret Thatcher's advisers who helped her to win the 1979 election adopted revolutionary advertisements methods but they had first to prevent the candidate to do or say things which might have put the electorate off.
4. The role of a spin doctor is to make sure the least is said about an event as long as a positive spin has not been found to put upon it. Cynics say that when everything goes well the credit is put on the government. When things go wrong the blame is put on the others.
5. Many grass-roots members of the labour Party resent the government spending taxpayer money to pay spin doctors who are paid to promote the government's policies.
6. Influential politicians soon learn how to manipulate the media to their own advantage; they would not succeed if they did not manage to do it.

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1. De nombreux députés de base aimeraient que Tony Blair se débarrasse de ses conseillers en communication. L'influence de Peter Mandelson qui a été surnommé « le prince des ténèbres » insupporte de nombreux membre du parti.
 2. Millbank nous a tellement, et depuis si longtemps, habitué aux opérations de communication qu'il est bien naturel que nous nous attendions à en trouver dans tout ce que fait le gouvernement.
 3. Les journalistes se plaignent de ce que les interventions inopportunes des conseillers en communication dans les affaires publiques rendent leur travail plus difficile et moins performant qu'il pourrait l'être.
 4. Une opinion communément répandue veut que certains conseillers aient plus de pouvoir que la plupart des députés, ce que nie Downing Street.
 5. On a du mal à échapper à l'impression que la dernière attaque du parti travailliste contre les médias est une opération de communication destinée à enterrer la controverse sur le rôle de Tony Blair dans la guerre d'Irak.



VOCABULARY

answerable	<i>responsable</i>
appoint (to)	<i>nommer</i>
backbencher	<i>député de base</i>
betrayal	<i>trahison</i>
blunt	<i>direct, franc</i>
committed (to)	<i>attaché à</i>
complain (to)	<i>se plaindre</i>
cope with (to)	<i>faire face à</i>
crush (to)	<i>écraser</i>
deceit and spin	<i>tromperie et boniment</i>
definitely not	<i>certainement pas</i>
deliver	<i>tenir ses promesses</i>
deliver(to)	<i>transmettre</i>
dismiss (to)	<i>rejeter</i>
ditch (to)	<i>renvoyer</i>
foam (to)	<i>écumer de rage</i>
fourth estate of the realm	<i>quatrième pouvoir du royaume</i>
freak	<i>militant excentrique</i>
gateway	<i>voie ouverte</i>
grassroots	<i>de base</i>
grievance	<i>grief</i>
hack	<i>journaloux</i>
headline	<i>gros titre</i>
in all fairness	<i>en toute justice</i>
infighting	<i>querelles intestines</i>
landslide victory	<i>victoire écrasante</i>
liability	<i>handicap</i>
mainstream	<i>courant dominant</i>
means	<i>moyen</i>
nickname (to)	<i>surnommer</i>
no wonder	<i>pas étonnant</i>
noncommittal	<i>évasif</i>
on trial	<i>à l'épreuve</i>
overall	<i>en général</i>
pour scorn on (to)	<i>exprimer son mépris</i>
record	<i>bilan</i>
resent (to)	<i>mal supporter</i>
retort (to)	<i>rétorquer</i>
row	<i>querelle</i>
shambles	<i>désastre</i>
slant	<i>biais</i>
slums	<i>taudis</i>
supersede (to)	<i>remplacer</i>
tick (to make somebody)	<i>motiver quelqu'un</i>
to come out for	<i>se prononcer pour</i>
turn up (to)	<i>se présenter</i>
up in arms	<i>en rébellion</i>
weigh	<i>peser</i>



1974	Margaret Thatcher is successfully “sold” to the Conservative Party by Saatchi and Saatchi Communication Agency and becomes leader of Her Majesty’s Opposition.
1979	After having been efficiently briefed by Saatchi and Saatchi during the electoral campaign, Margaret Thatcher becomes Prime Minister. She chooses Sir Bernard Ingham as her Press Secretary who will work for her as a loyal and efficient communicator throughout her Prime Minister years.
1985	A close friend of Tony Blair, Peter Mandelson, becomes Director of Communication for the Labour Party.
1994	Supported and advised by Peter Mandelson Tony Blair becomes leader of the opposition Labour Party.
1997	The communication skills of Tony Blair’s advisers are rewarded. The Labour Party wins a landslide electoral victory and Tony Blair becomes Prime Minister.
1998	1997-2001 Alistair Campbell joins Peter Mandelson at Millbank Tower the communication centre of the Labour Party.
2001	The action of Peter Mandelson and Alistair Campbell is sometimes criticised in the press and resented within the Labour Party, but Tony Blair and the Labour party win a second landslide electoral victory.
2003	The United States and Britain declare war on Iraq. Spin doctors come in for strong criticisms in the press and the popularity of Tony Blair declines.
2005	In spite of the damage done to Tony Blair by the Iraq war, the Labour Party wins a third electoral victory albeit with a reduced parliamentary majority.



IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION

- Consider the problems Tony Blair was confronted with when he became leader of the Labour party. Large sections of Labour, and backbenchers and grassroots members in particular remained deeply **committed** to traditional socialist values and strategies: maintaining a strong control on the economy in cooperation with the unions, maintaining clause four of the Labour Party which explicitly stipulated that the **means** of production of the country would be nationalised. Tony Blair and his followers, on another hand, thought that Labour's electoral platform was old-fashioned and was becoming an electoral **liability**. A large number of voters, while **definitely not** Conservative party enthusiasts were not prepared to take risks and hesitated to break with a type of government they had known for eighteen years and considered as reasonably safe. Tony Blair opted for the modernisation of his party and came out clearly on the side of a market economy. That meant he had **to cope** both with the resentment of the left of the party which was indignant at a change of course which some considered as something of a **betrayal** while trying to win over a still hesitant moderate electorate.
- Explain why Tony Blair always defended his advisers, bearing in mind that strategically speaking, their action had obviously paid off. Don't forget the elements you can gather in the previous pages.
- Explain why spin doctors are so unpopular. You will have noted as well that Tony Blair's advisers are criticised not only and predictably by Conservative newspapers like The Daily Telegraph and the Daily Mail and weeklies supporting the left of the Labour party like Tribune but also by publications closer to the **mainstream** of the Labour Party, the Independent, The Guardian, and the Mirror. How do you explain that almost general opposition to spin doctors? Consider separately the grievances of the opposition Conservative party and that of the left of the Labour party. Don't forget to consider journalists themselves.
- Consider their **grievances**. Can you find reasons why they should be particularly critical of spin doctors?
- Imagine the arguments of those who think that the left should be thankful for spin doctors for having made the Labour Party credible.
- Put yourself in the shoes of those who fiercely oppose spin doctors, and blame advisers for giving communication priority over substance and turning Labour into a party which has all but forgotten its core principles.
- Express your own opinion on spin doctors. Do you support them, will you share in the anger of the left of the Labour Party? Will you just be content **to weigh** the pros and cons and stay **non-committal**?