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The Labour Party and the Media 1983-1997

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The Labour Party and the Media 1983-1997

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of

Sheffield Hallam University

for the degree of Master of History by Research

September 2018

Abstract

As a former journalist and current journalism lecturer, I regularly encounter one overriding theme relating to my former profession - the political bias of UK newspapers. Since 1979, British newspapers as a whole have been overwhelmingly anti-Labour apart from the golden era of Tony Blair's three general election triumphs. It was my aim to look at how Labour transformed its position with the press from a low point in 1983, when it was backed by only one of the main daily papers, to 1997 when it was supported by four, including the biggest seller, *The Sun*.

To make sense of the many issues involved a framework was used consisting of four key factors necessary for a successful media strategy. This framework was applied to the general elections of 1983, 1987, 1992 and 1997. The changes were analysed alongside the debate that surrounded these changes.

The existing narrative argues that the media strategy was transformed during this period. Press operations were re-organised, professionalised and new tactics were introduced. These changes played a major part in the electoral success of 1997.

Underpinning this transformation was a belief that media support was vital to success. Modernisers say policy was changed to meet the demands of the electorate and was consistent with New Labour ideology. The fact that it found support in the media was down to good strategy. Traditionalists argue policy was changed to meet the demands of the media.

Undoubtedly, there were many positive aspects to developments in the media strategy. However, some senior New Labour figures now accept that serious mistakes were made. They have also added weight to the view that the media was allowed too much direct influence on the formulation of Labour Party policy.

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Introduction

In the summer of 1996 I was a TV producer for the BBC's Breakfast News programme, based opposite the House of Commons at Millbank. Late one afternoon I was due to interview somebody from the Labour Party. The interview would be recorded and last only a few minutes. It would then be passed to one of the political reporters to use in their TV package. As part of the piece, the reporter would choose one of the answers - preferably lasting around 15-20 seconds. A soundbite. I had done many of these types of interviews before and the format was straightforward. Get the interviewee talking, have a couple of key questions, listen out for anything particularly newsworthy and get a succinct answer of reasonable length. Crucially, give the reporter some choice. Make sure there were a couple of alternative answers for them to choose from. This would provide an element of journalistic freedom to do the story we thought was important to our viewers.

Peter Mandelson arrived and I tried to engage him in conversation as we checked the sound levels. He remained stony faced. The interview began with a general question and he delivered a perfect sound bite. About 20 seconds long without the slightest pause, making it difficult to cut down in the edit. I asked another question and got exactly the same answer. A third question - a few words were moved around but it was essentially the same answer. The process was repeated for questions four and five. I complained. Mandelson gave me a stare as if to say: "Take it or leave it." I took it. Should I have highlighted the fact he had simply offered up one answer? Too self-indulgent, I thought. The viewers weren't interested in the minutiae of political journalism. So there it was: the answer Mandelson wanted to give, the line he wanted to spin. New Labour's communications strategy in operation: well organised, setting the agenda, getting across a simple pre-arranged message in a format suitable for the pre-eminent media of the age - TV. Less than a year later, Labour would go on to win a crushing general election victory and return to power after 18 years in opposition.

Contrast that situation with 1983 and the most inept general election media campaign in Labour's post war history. Tabloid newspapers sold over ten million

copies a day and retained a huge influence on setting the political agenda. They were scathing of Michael Foot's leadership of the Labour Party. *The Sun* - selling nearly four million copies a day - was vicious. This profile was typical: "On TV, we see the vision of an amiable old buffer, his jacket buttoned too tight, his grey hair falling lankly."¹ This was just one manifestation of a shambolic general election campaign and a dire media strategy.

Of course, efficient media strategies do not lead directly to election success but they help. 1983 to 1997 saw much more than a change in Labour's dealings with the media - it was a transformation. How and why this happened is the focus of this dissertation. There were major changes in Labour's relationships with the media, which were almost non-existent for some of this period and extremely close in the latter part. This relationship included dramatic changes in a number of areas: what tactics the party used to get its message across; what that message was and who was delivering it.

The next chapter outlines the approach and the methodology to be used. To give structure to the various disparate elements I will use a framework which includes four key factors that need to be understood to implement a successful media strategy. They are: *the message*; *the messenger*; *the media context* and *the methods*. This framework will be used throughout the dissertation to highlight why a certain strategy failed or succeeded. Next is the literature review giving a broad outline of the work already undertaken on this subject, followed by an outline of the primary sources used. The chapters which follow are broken down into a narrative analysis of the general elections of 1983, 1987, 1992 and 1997. The conclusion summarises the findings and addresses the themes which emerged from the analysis.

¹ David Butler / Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1983* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1984), p. 207.

Approach and Methodology

This dissertation will examine how the Labour Party dealt with the media between 1983 and 1997. It is not an examination of how the media dealt with Labour, although that is relevant insofar as it allows us to assess the impact of Labour's media strategies. The subject of the anti-Labour bias in the press has been analysed extensively by others and it will be referred to throughout. The focus here is on how and why the party changed its media strategy and with what consequences. For my purposes, the media is UK national newspapers and the two main TV channels, BBC1 and ITV. The impact of 24 hour news remained limited in this period and will be referred to only briefly.

Judging the success of a media strategy is difficult. Electoral success is one indicator. But the three elections being discussed in detail here throw up some interesting issues. 1992 is often seen as a good campaign for Labour, despite defeat at the hands of John Major. Tony Blair's campaign in 1997 is almost universally lauded as a brilliant campaign and yet is deemed by some commentators to have been the start of a breakdown in media relations, with detrimental long term consequences for the party.² A more useful definition of success would be the positive and widespread coverage of issues the party sought to highlight. There are many variables associated with this, however, not least the definitions of "positive and widespread" and whether the issues the party chose to highlight were the issues that would gain them electoral advantage.

A balance needs to be struck between present-mindedness and historicism. Present-mindedness has been useful because the outcome of the 2017 general election has helped in defining what a successful media campaign actually is. Success certainly needs to be judged from where the party starts a campaign. It also highlights the importance of what type of media is being used. Writing this 18 months ago would have been a different experience to today. Following Jeremy Corbyn's election as Labour leader, many commentators predicted a merciless press attack once the general election campaign began.

² Nicholas Jones, *Sultans of Spin* (London: Orion Books, 2000), p.13.

Nick Cohen of *The Observer* was one of many writers on this theme: "The Tories have gone easy on Corbyn and his comrades...in an election they would tear them to pieces."³ Others found comparisons to Michael Foot too difficult to resist.⁴ The widespread assumption was that vilification in the media would be followed by annihilation at the polls. This would have played into the narrative of Labour modernisers who view the heyday of "New" Labour as a golden age for its media strategy. But Corbyn's press campaign was not the disaster that was predicted. This was partly down to the new media context, with the influence of newspapers continuing to decline and the increasing significance and effective use by Labour of social media. TV was also well used, with Corbyn attracting huge crowds around the country giving broadcasters strong pictures and the basis of a good story. In addition, perhaps with the assumption that the result was a foregone conclusion, the traditional Tory press felt able to criticise Theresa May's sometimes lacklustre campaign.

Analysis should not be rooted in the past. As Black and MacRaild put it: "...we must strike a balance between judging the past by our own standards and entirely standing the past in its own frozen compartment of history."⁵ They go on to explain that a historicist approach risks downplaying continuities; the present minded stance can overplay continuities. We might see this in the roles of individuals such as Peter Mandelson and Alistair Campbell. Historically, Mandelson may be seen as the architect of a new way of dealing with the media for Labour, certainly judging by the acres of news coverage he generated. But looking from a modern perspective one can see certain similarities with previous press secretaries such as Joe Haines. Conversely, Alistair Campbell's role is often compared with that of Sir Bernard Ingham, Margaret Thatcher's press secretary. But viewed historically, there are clear differences. Ingham's was an aggressive but essentially traditional role. Campbell was far closer to his boss with unprecedented access and influence. Andrew Marr describes him as Blair's

³ Nick Cohen, *The Observer*, March 19th 2017. Accessed at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/mar/19/jeremy-corbyn-labour-threat-party-election-support>

⁴ Polly Toynbee, *The Guardian*, April 19th 2017. Accessed at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/19/general-election-labour-annihilation-jeremy-corbyn>

⁵ Jeremy Black / Donald MacRaild *Studying History* (London: Palgrave, 2017), p.15.

right hand man."⁶ Undoubtedly, this was linked to the increasing importance that was attached to the media by the New Labour leadership.

The analysis will draw on a vast array of secondary literature and primary sources. This material covers not just the main issue itself - how the Labour Party dealt with the media - but also related subjects such as the Labour Party, its organisation and ideology. There is also a wide range of historical material related to general election campaigns, political communications, and the psychology of communications. Whilst this material is plentiful it has rarely been brought together to look closely at how the Labour Party dealt with the media. In addition, information from three primary sources will inform the analysis. TV news bulletins, newspaper archives and statements submitted to the Leveson Inquiry and published in 2012. A detailed literature review follows in the next chapter.

A framework containing four key factors will be used to help determine the success of a media campaign. These factors cannot be viewed in isolation but are connected to - and will influence - each other. The first is the *message*. What message does the party want to get across? Success in promoting the message is perhaps the single most important outcome of a media strategy. The message can be defined as a specific policy or a general policy, with the focus on how the party did this during the general election campaigns of this period. There is a limit with this approach as the idea of the "permanent campaign"⁷ began to emerge during this period. This idea says success at the polls is achieved over a much longer period of time rather than just the month or so of a general election campaign. Nevertheless, the campaign period remains relevant because the parties place huge emphasis on it and the point is to keep the message consistent, no matter what the period of time. Usually, most political messages being transmitted through the media need to be clear, simple and coherent. Many factors affect what the message might be but it is essentially the result of party political discussion and the production of policy

⁶ Andrew Marr, How Blair Put the Media in a Spin *BBC News Online* (May 10th 2007). Accessed at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6638231.stm

⁷ Jay Blumler / Dennis Kavanagh, The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features, in *Political Communication*, volume 16 issue 3 (1999), pp. 209-230.

and - at the times of a general election - a manifesto.

The crucial issue for strategists is to judge how the media will respond to those messages. If the response is likely to be positive, success in the campaign overall is more likely. If the response is likely to be negative, does the message itself need changing or can other factors be altered? Even a clear and consistent message communicated through a sympathetic media is no guarantee of electoral success. This could be because of a whole range of factors but one may be that the electorate just do not like the message. What is clear is that over this period the message changed dramatically. The left wing manifesto of Foot's party was changed and moved to the right in both 1987 and 1992. Further dramatic changes took place for the 1997 manifesto.

The second factor is the *messenger* - who is trying to get the message across? How did they try to convey the message and how successful were they? It will be vital to examine the importance of a leader's talents in trying to sell a political message and their willingness to deal with the media. The theme across the period is a general improvement, admittedly from a low point with Michael Foot. He was seen as both unwilling and unable to engage with the new TV age and led a party still suspicious of the media and reluctant to engage with it. Furthermore, when he did engage there were disastrous consequences due to his appearance and his poor understanding of the demands of television. Neil Kinnock showed greater willingness to understand and engage with broadcasters and presided over more successful campaigns in 1987 and 1992. But he remained suspicious of the press, especially the tabloid press, and suffered greatly at their hands. Tony Blair is often regarded as a brilliant political communicator. He recognised the importance of the media and developed twin strategies to deal with both broadcasters and the press. He was televisual and understood how to deliver a political message in a clear, concise soundbite. He was personally persuasive and appealed to Fleet Street newspaper editors. There is little doubt that in the 1997 campaign he was a highly effective messenger.

The third factor is about understanding the *media context* of the time, the significance of different parts of the media and their style and political outlook.

There is little doubt that Labour faced serious hostility from the press in the general elections of 1983, 1987 and 1992. In 1983 only the *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Mirror* backed Labour and there was remarkably little change before 1997. *The Guardian* switched from the Alliance in 1983 to Labour in 1987 and 1992, when the *Financial Times* also backed the Party. The overwhelming majority of newspaper readership supported the Conservatives and certainly for the 1983, 1987 and 1992 general elections that support was strident and viciously anti-Labour. The big switch came with the 1997 campaign and the changing allegiance of *The Sun* and the *News of the World*, two newspapers with huge readerships. Context also refers to the tone of the coverage and that changed significantly in 1997, even amongst the most strident of Tory newspapers, the *Daily Mail*.

The anti-Labour tone in the 1980s was a reflection of the political culture of the time. Free market economics were in the ascendancy, particularly in Britain and in America following the election of President Reagan. In Britain, Margaret Thatcher provided the tough, high profile figure the tabloids loved - a figure who in 1982 had led Britain to success in a war that proved popular with the British public. Kelvin Mackenzie at *The Sun* and Sir David English at the *Daily Mail* were two combative newspaper editors who appeared to reflect the early 1980s stereotype of a union bashing, free market, "loadsamoney" culture.

The issue of the importance of newspapers and television will be a recurring theme throughout this period. Undoubtedly, the relative influence of newspapers declined over this period. During the 1980s it became something of a cliché to say that each election had become a "television election" but there is little doubt that television gradually grew in importance. To what extent Labour recognised this change and how successfully they dealt with it is one of the issues addressed below. Did they also recognise that, despite declining sales, newspapers often retained a disproportionate influence in setting the political agenda that many broadcasters would follow?

The fourth pillar of my framework looks at the *methods* used to try and get Labour's message across in the media. The Labour Party which won the general election of 1997 was, in organisational and operational terms, radically

different to the party which lost in 1983. Certainly, it had transformed in terms of policy but also in the methods it used in its political campaigning. The 1983 election was a disaster for Labour but also a low point in its media strategy. For many commentators there are few words that could adequately describe the abject nature of the campaign. From Foot's reluctance and inability to engage with the media to the in-fighting and lack of strategy, future party officials would hold it up as a template for how not to deal with the media. In stark contrast, the Conservative campaign appeared to be smooth, efficient and effective.

After 1983, there followed a period of radical change in methods. There was a general acceptance that many of the new campaigning methods were not just successful but were crucial in taking the party into power in 1997. By 1985, all campaigning and communications had been brought together as one entity but it was the arrival of Peter Mandelson that instilled discipline and focus. Greater use was made of outside experts and focus groups and opinion polls became central to the party's campaigning. Other new concepts were introduced, aimed at influencing what the media reported. Firstly, this took the form of developing the idea of "agenda setting". This involved staging political events that provided good pictures for TV, making them more likely to appear on TV bulletins. Secondly, to deal with stories that were already in the media and were detrimental to the party, came the notion of rapid rebuttal. Party officials would challenge journalists' stories and attempt to get stories changed so they were more favourable. This has generated a huge amount of debate, with journalists claiming they were bullied and, on some occasions, lied to. These tactics improved Labour's media strategy beyond doubt but were pursued with increasing aggression, especially after Blair's general election victory.

In summary, my approach will involve a thorough analysis of the literature available on this subject. Additionally, I will examine key primary sources including relevant statements from the Leveson Inquiry of 2012 and national newspaper archives. I will also look at some material from the BBC TV and radio archives. This information will be brought together to analyse Labour's media strategies at the 1987, 1992 and 1997 general elections using the

framework I have described with its four key factors: the message, the messengers, the media context and the methods.

Literature Review

The literature relevant to this topic covers a variety of subject areas. It includes histories of the Party itself, the media, political communication, and psychology. Much of this material focuses on how the media treated the Labour Party, rather than my concern with how Labour tried to deal with the media. Nevertheless, this material provides a good secondary source grounding and highlights relevant themes. Some of the best material on the crucial developments following Tony Blair's election as party leader was produced quickly and informed the debate at the time. In this sense, it can be viewed as primary source material. Other primary sources include newspaper and TV archives and books from those directly involved. In addition, a number of the key individuals submitted statements relevant to this topic to the Leveson Inquiry in 2012.

Laura Beers highlights some of the successes of the party's media campaigns in the interwar period. She suggests the period overall should be judged as a success for Labour's media relations. "The party's ability to compete successfully in the new arena of mass media politics played a crucial role in its political recovery after 1931 and its landslide victory fourteen years later."⁸ Themes which arose in the 1980s are identified by Beers as existing in the 1920s such as the lessons to be learned from the Conservative Party's successful dealings with the media and the reluctance of the left to engage with new methods of political communication. A complicated picture emerges but there is plenty of evidence to show that the Labour Party was aware of the media climate and engaged with it to promote its political ends through a sophisticated media strategy.

Franklin argues Labour continued to engage with the media in the post war period, especially with the emergence of television. Tony Benn's 1953 report: "*The Labour Party and Broadcasting*" highlights the potential advantages for the party and Franklin credits the party with inventing the daily party press conference in 1959.⁹ Ironically, the party came close to abandoning it

⁸ Laura Beers, *Your Britain: The Media and the Making of the Labour Party* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 202.

⁹ Bob Franklin, *Packaging Politics* (London: Hodder Headline PLC, 1994), p.132.

less than 30 years later out of frustration with the partisan nature of the press. There was a certain ideological consistency with Labour targeting the broadcasters who were deemed to be less biased than the press given the stricter broadcasting rules, especially at general elections. However, this relationship came under greater scrutiny as the left gained more influence in the 1960s and 70s. This time the ideological argument was that compliance with broadcasters led to an Americanisation of political campaigning, with an emphasis on personalities and not policies.¹⁰

The political and economic context of the relationship between the press and the Labour Party is discussed by James Thomas.¹¹ He describes a clash between a pro-capitalist press and a socialist political party, a clash he says is one of the chief features of politics in the 20th century. Of course, capitalist publications sometimes supported Labour, although they were capitalist in the broadest sense of operating in a free market to make a profit. Equally, Labour could be described as socialist only in the very broadest of terms. The *Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Mirror* have been consistent supporters of Labour in this period. *The Guardian*, *The Observer*, *The Independent*, *Financial Times* and most famously *The Sun* have all supported Labour at various points.

Nevertheless, the general elections of 1983, 1987 and 1992 saw vehement and overwhelming opposition from the press and it was not until 1997 that the majority of newspaper readership backed the Party. Thomas points out in the post war period some newspapers often shifted with the changing political climate. The *Daily Mail's* editor in 1963 was the Labour supporting Mike Randall. Whilst this did not necessarily translate into support for Labour it often led to a less partisan approach. At the 1964 general election with the *Daily Express* circulation at its peak of 4.2 million, it dismayed many Conservative politicians with its "lively but impartial coverage."¹² The gulf widened again from 1979, as Labour moved to the left and the popular press rallied behind the right wing Conservative Party, a position that was to remain until 1997. Following

¹⁰ Eric Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1979*, (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 54.

¹¹ James Thomas, *Popular Newspapers, The Labour Party and British Politics* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2015).

¹² *Ibid.* p. 49.

Margaret Thatcher's departure and the struggles of the Major government, the popular press became less aligned to the Tories and demonstrated another change of direction. Labour's new youthful telegenic leader had moved his party to the centre ground, so much so the ideological clash between Labour and the press barely registered. Indeed, just as in the 1960s, the editor of the *Daily Mail* fell short of supporting Labour but did alter the tone of his paper's coverage with many positive comments about the Labour leader.

General election histories have been invaluable to this work. Butler and Kavanagh offer some useful insights into the 1983 and the 1992 campaigns with chapters on the press and broadcasting.¹³ The issue of the importance of television is discussed here with Martin Harrison commenting: "In a sense, every election is now a 'television election' but never in quite the same way."¹⁴ However, 1983 did mark the introduction of four TV channels rather than three and news coverage was widespread and focussed on the leaders, a "staging post" to an uncertain future about TV and political communication, as Harrison puts it.¹⁵

There are also many newspaper and magazine articles about specific Labour Party general election campaigns in publications such as the *New Statesman* and volumes of *Parliamentary Affairs*. Authors including Sebastian Berry challenge the narrative of the modernisers who argued the Labour campaigns of 1987 and 1992 were well run and election defeat was down to poor policy. Writing about the 1992 campaign in particular, Berry questions whether it was the success that many Labour politicians and commentators deemed it to be. He points to errors such as the row over the "Jennifer's Ear" party political broadcast and suggests the Sheffield rally was an own goal. He also highlights Labour's failure to set the agenda during the final week of the campaign.¹⁶

¹³ Butler / Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1983*.
David Butler / Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1992* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1992).

¹⁴ Butler / Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1983*, p.147.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 174.

¹⁶ Sebastian Berry, Party Strategy and the Media: The Failure of Labour's 1992 Election Campaign, in *Parliamentary Affairs*, volume 45 issue 4 (1992), pp. 565-581.

Eric Shaw's two Labour Party histories have been important to this work.¹⁷ He offers some fascinating detail about the changes to the party during the 1980s and early 90s. He accepts some of the critical analysis that followed the general election campaigns of 1987 and 1992 but questions the radical policy developments that followed those defeats. He argues the new strategy of moving the party to the centre ground was based on incorrect interpretation of polling and focus group data used by the Party. He also questions the reliance on television as the main means of communication. Shaw's argument is that TV news, although on the surface fairer to Labour, was of limited value to the Party. The big issues, such as the economy, could not be discussed to Labour's advantage within the context of short TV soundbites. Shaw also claims TV's commitment to balance and fairness rested on the use of experts deemed to be independent but who were often from the middle class establishment and conservative in outlook. Published before Tony Blair became Prime Minister, this work could be viewed as valuable primary source material.

Shaw and others such as David McKie also say changing policy to suit the tabloids was just not necessary, certainly by 1997. "In the light of the 1997 result," said McKie, "one has to suspect that New Labour could have got away with a much more resolute and challenging attitude to the Murdoch press."¹⁸ McKie focuses in particular on *The Sun*. Whilst he understood the almost desperate attempts by Labour to woo Murdoch, he emphasises just how much Murdoch was ready to reciprocate. The paper was thoroughly disillusioned with the Major government and high interest rates were hurting News Corporation finances. In addition, Labour had a huge lead in the polls well before the election campaign began and when *The Sun* declared for Blair. These views pre-suppose there was a fundamental change in the nature of the Party but others challenge this assertion. Steven Fielding argues the Blair Labour Party was less distinctive than many assume and much of the rhetoric has been taken at face value.¹⁹ New Labour, he suggests, was not particularly new and the

¹⁷ Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1979*.

Eric Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell Publisher Ltd, 1996).

¹⁸ David McKie, in Crewe, I. / Gosschalk, B. / Bartle, J., (eds.), *Why Labour Won the General Election of 1997* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998), pp. 115-130.

¹⁹ Steven Fielding, *The Labour Party Continuity and Change in the Making of "New" Labour*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

roots of some of its key features go back beyond 1994 or even 1979. Harris also highlights the continuities and the links between New Labour and Anthony Crosland's *Future of Socialism*, even suggesting Ramsay MacDonald would find New Labour a congenial spiritual home.²⁰ There is some evidence to support these arguments - the continuing commitment to equality, for example, but these debates do not relate directly to this thesis. I am concerned with changes to the media strategy in particular rather than to policy and the party in general. Questions about how radically the media strategy changed are relevant. Also, the period in question goes beyond that of Tony Blair and clearly some of the changes in media strategy were evident in the early years of Neil Kinnock's leadership.

Another major area of literature is political communication. Ralph Negrine argues since the Second World War political communication has been transformed.²¹ He gives two key examples to support his case: the professionalisation of communications and the use of television as a means of communication. Negrine says in some ways the changes seen in my period of study could be viewed as the natural response to election defeat and the use of the latest technology. But he argues the changes went beyond that and became a transformation. He justifies the use of the word because "the skills that are currently in use are different - qualitatively - from what they were in the past."²² Many of these skills were introduced in the period between 1985 and 1995 so are directly relevant to this study. In addition, the growth in importance of TV and its tendency to personalise campaigning meant the issue of leadership (the *messengers*) was increasingly important. Negrine says politics is "conditioned" by the major media of the day.²³

The role of television is highlighted in detail by Blumler and Kavanagh.²⁴ They identify three ages of political communication. Age 1 runs to the mid-1960s and

²⁰ Jose Harris, Labour's Political and Social Thought, in Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane, Nick Tiratsoo (eds.), *Labour's First Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) pp.

²¹ Ralph Negrine, *Transformation in Political Communication*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p.1.

²² Negrine, *Transformation in Political Communication*, p.195.

²³ *Ibid.* p. 43.

²⁴ Blumler / Kavanagh, in *Political Communication*, volume 16 issue 3, pp. 209-230.

is characterised as the "golden age of parties."²⁵ Political parties reflected the cleavages in society and many voters related to politics through long standing party allegiances. Political communication was subordinate to these strong and stable political identifications and beliefs. That did not mean, of course, that slight changes in allegiance and the vagaries of the first past the post system could not have dramatic effects on a general election result. As Robert Pearce states, the 1951 general election victory for the Conservatives by 26 seats was the "only election in modern British history where the runner up in terms of votes gained an actual majority of seats in the House of Commons." ²⁶

Age 2 goes from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, an age where strong party loyalties were being loosened. But it also affected media relations as television became the dominant medium of political communication. Television reached more people and regulation of broadcasters created a more balanced approach to politics than newspapers. TV news formats demanded a simplification of the political message and its visual nature tended to personalise politics. This partly influenced my decision to make one of the factors in my framework *the messenger/s*.

The "third phase" was still emerging at the time of the authors' writing. However, it did highlight a number of possible changes which I have brought together under the "methods" section of the framework. Broadly speaking, Blumler and Kavanagh highlight the growing importance of television as it began to emerge as a multi-platform medium with a growing number of channels. This, they say, increased the reliance on marketing and communications experts as parties embarked on what has been termed "permanent campaigning". By this point, Blumler and Kavanagh argue that at the early stages of their decision making politicians now had to ask themselves: "How will it play in the media?" ²⁷

Primary source material comes from some of the key players in the development of Labour's media strategy. They include MPs, spin doctors,

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Robert Pearce, The 1950 and 1951 General Elections in Britain, in *History Review*, issue 60, (2008). Accessed online: <https://www.historytoday.com/robert-pearce/1950-and-1951-general-elections-britain>

²⁷ Blumler / Kavanagh, in *Political Communication*, volume 16 issue 3, pp. 209-230.

pollsters and marketing executives. The key primary work is from one of the architects of the whole New Labour project, Philip Gould.²⁸ He offers a detailed and strategic analysis of Labour's relationship with the media. He was clear that nothing short of a revolution in organisation, strategy and policy would save the party after 1983. For him, the only problem for Labour in the 1980s and early 1990s was that it did not move quickly enough in all of these areas. He claims the 1987 campaign was lost because: "We had not changed far enough, fast enough. The engine had been polished but it was still a Victorian relic."²⁹ Tony Blair describes the organisation and implementation of the '87 campaign as stunning but the message was wrong.³⁰ Of course Gould was involved in the campaign so it should not be a surprise that he would admire his own work. Blair was equally gushing about Gould, a close friend.

Other key figures wrote extensively at the time, including Peter Mandelson and Alistair Campbell. In various newspaper articles and books they broadly follow the Gould analysis on how the party should change. There is remarkably little disagreement amongst the main players, at least pre 1997, as to how the media campaign was - and should have been - run. Their analysis can be explained using the framework outlined in the previous chapter. They sought to change the media context by gaining the support of the press; they changed the message so it was more appealing to the press and used an effective messenger in Tony Blair; and the methods they used were tried, trusted and efficient.

Several journalists have written in detail about the era. One of the key critics of the party's media tactics under Blair was former BBC correspondent Nick Jones.³¹ Jones says the relationship between Downing Street and News International was unique for a number of reasons. Alistair Campbell's role as Blair's press secretary was unlike anything that had gone before. He was a gifted former tabloid journalist with close contacts in the tabloid world and he enjoyed unprecedented freedom to speak to the Prime Minister and to speak for

²⁸ Philip Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution: How New Labour Changed British Politics Forever* (London: Abacus, 2011).

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 79.

³⁰ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. xvi.

³¹ Jones, *Sultans of Spin*.

the Prime Minister. He was also dealing with Rupert Murdoch - a newspaper proprietor with unrivalled power. Murdoch's News International published *The Times*, *Sunday Times*, *The Sun* and *News of the World*, with a market share that far outstripped anything that had gone before. Jones's insights are limited for this work, however, as they concentrate on the period after 1997.

Other journalists have also written about the importance Blair placed on media relations. Former BBC Political Editor Andrew Marr describes the Blair government as the most media obsessed in modern times and while initially successful "it became a kind of grubby, smeared opaque and distorting glass between Blair at his best and the rest of the country - just the opposite of the effective communication it had promised to be a dozen years before."³²

Lance Price offers an insight from both sides, having been a BBC political reporter before joining Labour's media team. He makes two broad comments about the relationship between Blair and Murdoch. He says the following is a close approximation of the words used by someone who had accompanied Blair to address senior News Corporation staff in Australia in 1995. "If Murdoch was left to pursue his business interests in peace he would give Labour a fair wind."³³ He also states that as a BBC journalist pre-1997 he was aware that all talk of restricting media ownership suddenly ceased. A substantial amount of Price's work adds weight to the argument that the media was able to directly influence Labour Party policy.

More primary material is available in statements given to the hearings of the *Leveson Inquiry: Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press*, which began on July 13th 2011. Though largely an inquiry into the press and phone hacking, module 3 of the inquiry specifically looked at the relationship between the press and politicians. There were a number of highly relevant witnesses called and I have chosen to focus on the following (the dates evidence was submitted are in brackets): Lord Mandelson (May 21st 2012); Rupert Murdoch (April 26th, July 9th, July 23rd 2012); Tony Blair (28th May 2012); Lance Price (July 9th 2012); Alistair Campbell (November 30th 2011, May 14th 2012) and Andrew Neil (July 9th

³² Marr, *BBC News Online*.

³³ Lane Price, *Where Power Lies* (London: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd, 2010), p.333.

2012). These statements were accessed online via the National Archives website. They were published after the witness either appeared in person and gave oral evidence or submitted a statement which was taken as read.

The final report was published in November 2012. As its main focus was on media ethics, a lot of the material submitted by witnesses was overlooked. Much of it failed to make the final summary and, subsequently, was ignored by the press. The unedited statements provide an insight into the relationships between the government and media. There are some frank comments from Tony Blair and Peter Mandelson, two men who always choose their words very carefully. It amounts to an admission that they allowed the media to have a direct influence on the formation of policy and strategy just prior to the 1997 general election. The statements from Lance Price and Andrew Neil continue in a similar vein. These primary source statements need to be viewed in context. They were given in 2012, with the benefit of hindsight and perhaps with a few old scores to settle. This is particularly relevant to the comments by Neil. He had effectively been sacked by Murdoch 18 years earlier with relations further soured by Neil's frank description of their relationship in a book published two years later.³⁴ This type of history can be limited. Some of the statements were written by the individuals themselves in response to questions by the inquiry. Respondents had the chance to reply as they wished and this could often lead to evasive answers which were sometimes not followed up. Other statements were written and "taken as read" by Lord Leveson. In some cases, the statements were written up from the oral hearings of the inquiry. As Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli explained, oral history tells us "not what people did but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did."³⁵ Nevertheless, the statements provide a valuable insight and offer perhaps a more honest view of events 15-20 years later and away from the heat of battle.

Various news archives have also provided information for this dissertation. On August 10th 2017 BBC Radio 4 broadcast an hour long interview with Tony Blair

³⁴ Andrew Neil, *Full Disclosure* (London: Macmillan, 1996).

³⁵ Alessandro Portelli, Peculiarities in Oral History, in *History Workshop Journal* volume 12 issue 1 (1981), p.96-107.

by the historian Peter Hennessy. In it, Blair gives some fascinating insights into how he dealt with the media and suggests he may have credited it with too much influence. The full interview remains available online in the BBC Radio 4 archive.³⁶ Archives featuring the BBC 6 and 9 O'clock News have also been accessed to analyse examples of what could be termed news management or agenda setting by Labour. By cross referencing news agendas of the TV news with editions of the *The Times* and *Daily Mail* we can see that there is some evidence to suggest that the broadcasters were following the political agenda set by newspapers.

A broad narrative emerges from a review of the literature but it also highlights where this dissertation might make a contribution. There is very little to dispute the claims that post 1983 Labour's media relations needed a major overhaul. Changes in organisation and tactics brought in over the next few years leading up to the 1987 election appear to have been widely welcomed and effective. Defeat at that election was not unexpected and Neil Kinnock continued the process towards the 1992 election. Serious debate begins to emerge here about the necessity and effectiveness of the major shifts of policy to the centre ground. This debate reaches a peak after the '92 defeat, with the party at a crossroads under the leadership of John Smith. Events then continue at an astonishing pace with the sudden death of Smith and the election of Tony Blair as party leader. Organisation and the methods used to deal with the media were overhauled still further. But the biggest changes during this period were in terms of policy.

Success at the polls has acted as vindication for the modernisers' media strategy between 1983 and 1997. Though controversial at the time, the changes in organisation, tactics, policy and relations with the right wing press have been viewed as necessary to regain power. The existing literature broadly reflects that view. However, the primary sources I have used suggest a growing body of qualitative evidence that serious mistakes were made. Shaw offers an in depth critique of some of the media tactics and the need for drastic policy changes. Comments from Blair and Mandelson to the Leveson Inquiry suggest they now

³⁶ Tony Blair, Reflections With Peter Hennessy *BBC Radio 4* (2017). Accessed via: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0902l3q>

accept they over-estimated the power of the press and allowed it too much influence over policy. This is supported by the statements from Lance Price and Andrew Neil. The following chapters will use all this material to form a narrative analysis based on the general elections of 1983, 1987, 1992 and 1997.

Throughout the discussion, the framework for understanding a media campaign - *the message, the messenger, the methods and the media context* - will be applied. The basis of a new analysis emerges, where the media was deemed to be so important it was able to directly influence strategy and policy.

Chapter 1

Donkey Jackets and the Longest Suicide Note in History:

Labour, the Media and the 1983 General Election.

By any measure, the 1983 general election was a disaster for Labour. It clearly performed badly, securing 209 seats with 27.6% of the vote and leaving Margaret Thatcher with a 144 seat majority. It was the party's worst performance since 1918 and in terms of share of the vote only just beat the Liberal/SDP alliance. Why the party suffered such a defeat is a complex combination of factors and is not the main focus of this work. It is clear the media strategy had not worked well and the campaign had suffered as a result. According to a MORI poll during the campaign, 46% of respondents had a worse opinion of Labour than at the start.³⁷ Butler and Kavanagh state: "It is difficult to think of any campaign fought by a major party since the war that was more inept than Labour's in 1983."³⁸ This chapter will examine why the media strategy failed so badly. My period of research begins in 1983 so there will be no detailed examination of the run up to this election, rather this chapter will be used to provide the basis for a more in depth analysis of the campaigns of 1987, 1992 and 1997. In 1983, there were weaknesses in all four areas of the framework. The *messenger*, Michael Foot, was unable and unwilling to engage with the modern media landscape. Even then, his job was made harder because the *methods* for dealing with the media were highly disorganised, if they existed at all. Finally, the left wing *message* the party hoped to put across was guaranteed a bad reception in the hostile right wing *media context*.

The *messenger*, Michael Foot, was clearly a key factor in why the media strategy failed so badly. Criticism of his dealings with the media was widespread and largely justified. Bob Franklin describes Foot as a leader whose considerable skills for political rhetoric had been learned at factory gate meetings. "By the 1980s, the process of packaging politics had reduced distinguished politicians to the status of curious anachronisms."³⁹ Furthermore, he could not or would not adapt to the growing TV age. As Franklin points out,

³⁷ Butler / Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1983*, p. 275.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 274.

³⁹ Franklin, *Packaging Politics*, p. 10.

politicians seemed reluctant to devote two hours to rallying a room full of the party faithful when they believed that a twenty second clip on television would prove electorally more effective in converting the doubters.⁴⁰ Unfortunately for Foot, his forte was spending two hours rallying the faithful with powerful oratory and not reducing his message to a single 20 second sound bite. He was a man out of time, according to Franklin. "The political skills which were once so crucial for devastating opponents in Parliament...were redundant in an age of political communication via broadcast media," he states.⁴¹

In the Tory supporting press his appearance was ridiculed. Aged 69 with unkempt grey hair and thick glasses he could often be seen walking with a stick wearing a donkey jacket. *The Sun* asked in 1983: "Do You Seriously Want this Old Man to Run Britain?"⁴² John Gaffney describes Foot as a commanding presence at party conference and public demonstrations but a weak performer on television.⁴³ Foot's Labour colleague, Austin Mitchell, a former TV presenter, said: "He was hopeless in the personal interview style of the 1980s, peering short sightedly around, with a tendency to interrupt which alienated viewers, coupled with a willingness to follow lines set by the interviewer instead of seizing the initiative, obscuring issues instead of speaking simply."⁴⁴

Gaffney suggests this was a prelude to "celebrity politics" and a wider cultural questioning of the role and status of intellectuals. But he also questions the inadequacy of a strategy that allowed media criticism of Foot to go unchallenged.⁴⁵ For much of the media he was a ban-the-bomber, scruffily attired at the Cenotaph who disrespected the war dead. Where was the counter attack portraying a patriotic, non-pacifist who attended the Cenotaph - not in a donkey jacket - but in an overcoat from Harrod's? Others have highlighted some of the positive aspects that emerged during the early 1980s, admittedly from a new young left that Foot did not particularly represent. Rohan McWilliam says

⁴⁰ Franklin, *Packaging Politics*, p.11.

⁴¹ Ibid. pp.10-11.

⁴² Butler / Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1983*, p. 207.

⁴³ John Gaffney, *Leadership and the Labour Party: Narrative and Performance* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), p. 48.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid. p.49.

the 1980s were, in fact, a creative period for the left. "It's true that the right won the economic argument in the 1980s. But what's also true is that the left won the social and cultural argument. Its emphasis on the rights of minorities and the celebration of difference created a politics of inclusiveness which refashioned the social agenda."⁴⁶

Foot certainly has to take some of the blame for failing to engage with the media but there is little evidence of a media strategy to promote Foot. Indeed, the only evidence of managing Foot's leadership appears to be for negative reasons - by promoting more of a team approach to the media. This is flawed because, firstly, in a TV age the focus will naturally fall on the leader and, secondly, the divisions within the party leadership meant there was not much of a "team" to promote. This situation certainly mattered - but to what extent? Despite the contrasting portrayals of Foot and Thatcher in the media, a Gallup/BBC poll suggested policies were more important. According to the survey, when voters preferred the policies of one party but the leaders of another, they split 5:1 in favour of the policy.⁴⁷ A survey of this nature is open to the criticism that respondents offer the answer they believe shows them in the best light. They may tell a questioner that policy is more important than personality when, in reality, they are being swayed by the portrayal of an individual in the media.

The *message* to be communicated was undoubtedly left wing. When it resulted in election defeat, critics of the leadership within the party said it proved the message was wrong. Supporters of the leadership said the message was right but the communication of it was wrong. For Foot in 1983, there was truth in both of these assessments. The right of the party claimed Labour's message was as anachronistic as its leader. The manifesto was out of touch with the electorate and represented the end of "Labour's long death march" which had begun in 1970, according to Gould.⁴⁸ It was certainly ambitious and unashamedly from the left. It proposed a massive programme of renationalisation, withdrawal from

⁴⁶ Rohan McWilliam, Labour in the 1980s: Not the Disaster We Once Thought, *The Conversation* (2017). Accessed at: <https://theconversation.com/labour-in-the-1980s-not-the-disaster-we-once-thought-89250>

⁴⁷ Butler / Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1983*, p.292.

⁴⁸ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 33.

the EEC and a non-nuclear defence policy. Some of the policies appeared to be popular with the public, particularly the aim of reducing unemployment, but this was often undermined by the belief that another policy - leaving the EEC - would make unemployment worse.

Whatever the policies, they were certainly not communicated effectively. Political communication usually requires a simple clear message conveyed by party spokespeople with consistency, confidence and clarity. But with so much disagreement in 1983 that was always going to be difficult. The issue was highlighted in a memo by the party's research department prior to the election: "There is a real need for Party spokesmen at all levels to have confidence in the policies they were trying to project...only if we have that confidence can we hope to convince a deeply sceptical electorate."⁴⁹ They failed miserably. The years of Labour disunity were described by Denis Healey as creating "a highly unfavourable public image based on disunity, extremism and crankiness and a general unfitness to govern."⁵⁰

The level of disunity is surprising. There were signs that the left was beginning to lose influence in the party and in 1982 the NEC shifted to the right. By the time of the election, the two groups charged with drawing up the manifesto - the shadow cabinet and the NEC - both had right wing majorities. So why did the party produce a manifesto that was described by MP Gerald Kaufman as the longest suicide note in history? Eric Shaw suggests an answer.⁵¹ The meeting to approve the manifesto was the shortest of its kind ever. A left wing manifesto largely based on a document from the previous year was nodded through by a right wing leadership. Shaw says this may have been a deliberate move by the right. Opinion polls suggested the ship was about to sink so it may as well sink with a red flag tied to its mast. That would certainly explain the resounding lack of enthusiasm and unity in promoting the manifesto and it certainly achieved its goal. Shaw says: "...the fact that Labour was trounced on a left wing manifesto

⁴⁹Butler / Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1983*, p. 63.

⁵⁰Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p. 91.

⁵¹Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1945*.

did much to engrave upon its mind the view that it could never win on a left wing platform."⁵²

Media context is another factor in my framework that was highly unfavourable to Labour in 1983. Support for the Party at the time of the general election was restricted to the *Daily Mirror and Sunday Mirror* but it was the nature of the coverage from the rest of the tabloid press that was most striking. According to Thomas, coverage showed a marked polarisation in 1983.⁵³ Quality papers demonstrated a deeper level of sophistication and analysis than before, but: "the tabloids treated their readers to a diet of unadulterated propaganda throughout the news columns."⁵⁴ According to the former *Sun* journalist Chris Horrie, on one campaign event Michael Foot was attending, freelance photographers were told by the newsdesk: "no pictures of Foot unless falling over, shot or talking to militants."⁵⁵

A sea change against Labour had been identified by Callaghan at the 1979 general election. Around 70% of newspapers supported the Conservatives and coverage was marked by an intense hostility. This was an intensity that was to grow over the coming years. By 1983, Margaret Thatcher, though controversial, inspired in her supporters an almost evangelical loyalty and two of them, Sir David English and Kelvin Mackenzie, edited the multi-million selling *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* respectively. They represented a brash political culture on the rise on both sides of the Atlantic. A right wing press and a left wing party resulted in Labour's worst press coverage for over 50 years at the 1983 general election.

One dramatic story appeared in the *Daily Mail* on May 16th which predicted in its headline: "35,000 JOBS LOST IF FOOT WINS." This was the story of a "leading official" at car makers Nissan saying the company would scrap plans for a new plant if Labour - committed to leaving the Common Market - were elected. The story continued the following day with the Industry Secretary Patrick Jenkin backing the claims, although he was hardly an impartial source. It

⁵² Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1945*, p.167.

⁵³ Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 87.

⁵⁵ Chris Horrie / Peter Chippendale, *Stick It Up Your Punter* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2005), p.140.

is interesting to note the official statement from Nissan ran on page two saying the election of a Labour government "would not substantially affect" their plans. Thomas offers this in isolation as an example of the naked bias of the story.⁵⁶ But the statement goes on to say company plans would not be affected because: "On the best information we have so far, it is difficult to see Britain pulling out of the Common Market." In other words, Nissan didn't think their plans would be affected by Labour for the simple reason they didn't believe Labour would implement its own policy. Surprisingly, the *Daily Mail* did not appear to pursue the key point with the company - what if Labour *did* fulfil its manifesto pledge? Whilst this rather undermines this example of media bias, the Press Council did rule that the original article was likely to mislead readers. Thomas is right to point out that much of the damage had already been done as the story was picked up by television news.⁵⁷ The story featured at least twice on BBC national news, with one piece on the main 9 O'clock News bulletin on May 16th 1983. All three major parties were included in the report which did nothing to dispel fears that a huge number of jobs were at risk.⁵⁸

The media context was being affected by the growing importance of television, although the tabloids still retained huge influence. Presenter John Tusa's comment on BBC *Newsnight* that this had been "a television election, for good or ill"⁵⁹, may have been something of a cliché but TV produced its largest ever volume of general election output. Its influence was certainly growing. Blumler and Kavanagh say at this point television was in the second of three distinct phases of political communication.⁶⁰ They describe an era of loosening party loyalties together with the growing importance of TV as a medium of political communication. The result was four broad transitions. Voters were now less exposed to party propaganda and one sided political debate: this was gradually being replaced by legally enforced fairness and impartiality on TV news bulletins and other programmes. Television also reached more people - and reached those who were traditionally less exposed to political messages. This,

⁵⁶ Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p. 7.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ *BBC 9 O'clock News* May 16th 1983. Accessed via BBC Library Services.

⁵⁹ Butler / Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1983*, p. 147.

⁶⁰ Blumler / Kavanagh, in *Political Communication*, pp. 209-230.

Blumler and Kavanagh argue, undermined long term influences on political outlook and "started to give way to more short term ones, such as current news events, government's immediate successes and failures, and their opponents' lines of attack."⁶¹ TV news had an effect on the timing of political events. They had to be staged to give enough time for broadcasters to film and edit them and get them ready for broadcast. The language of politics also had to change with the creation of the "soundbite". Messages had to be short, simple and easy to understand on first hearing. If answers were long and complicated the viewer switched off. Finally, in a visual medium, politics becomes personalised. The party is represented on television in a very personal way, by its leader.

The *methods* of communication had to be changed to deal with this new environment. As we have seen, Labour largely failed in this area at the 1983 general election. There were some within Labour who understood the influence of the media and realised TV was becoming more important. Unfortunately, Michael Foot was not amongst them. Roy Hattersley called the campaign a "shambles" during the campaign itself and lambasted Foot for failing to communicate in the television age.⁶² The Party not only failed to understand the importance of these changes, it also had an ideological aversion to them. Many on the left regarded television as the creator of a shallow US presidential style of campaigning. But this attitude was not always prevalent with Labour. In the 1960s Labour showed some enthusiasm for new communication techniques and attempted to use them in its relations with the media. As Shaw states: "Wilson grasped the importance of television which he exploited in a masterly fashion."⁶³ But by the early 1980s the party had swung to the left and campaigning which appeared to trivialise politics was shunned in favour of more traditional methods. In this vein, there was a series of mass demonstrations and marches addressed by Foot and other senior party officials over issues such as jobs and some of these events attracted large crowds. However, given the media context, it is hardly surprising they failed to attract much positive coverage in the press. There were also grassroots campaigns involving public meetings, leafleting, door step canvassing and local campaigns over issues

⁶¹ Blumler / Kavanagh, in *Political Communication*, pp. 209-230.

⁶² Butler / Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1983*, p. 275.

⁶³ Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1979*, p. 53.

such as hospital closures. As the party became sidetracked with more in fighting even these methods became less and less effective.

"Shambles" "mayhem" and "disaster" were some of the words used by critics to describe the methods used in dealing with the media in the 1983 general election campaign. Gould listed example after example.⁶⁴ Michael Foot's driver would wander into strategy meetings if he felt like it; Roy Hattersley told Foot he wasn't communicating for the TV age - Foot told him it was too late to change; the press office was in mayhem, according to Peter Mandelson; election broadcasts were a disaster, according to Patricia Hewitt.⁶⁵ Nick Grant was appointed Labour's first Head of Press, Publicity and Advertising just a few months before the election - a telling factor in itself. The very structure of the party "guaranteed a chaotic communications strategy for the election later that year," according to Franklin.⁶⁶ Grant's department was underfunded, faced indifference and sometimes hostility from party members and approval for all decisions had to come from the party's 40-strong campaign committee.

It is difficult to exaggerate how poor Labour's media strategy was in 1983. The leader was not adept at dealing with the traditional media, never mind the new kid on the block - television. Foot was unable and unwilling to engage with broadcasters. The idea that he might develop a media "image" would not be entertained just at a time when the image of a leader on television was becoming increasingly important. In terms of the message the party was trying to get across, it was certainly left wing and ambitious. Many of the policies, such as nuclear disarmament, were simply not popular with the public and were also unlikely to gain a fair hearing in the press. Some policies were popular but the communication of these messages was hampered because the party was disunited and a majority of those charged with communicating the manifesto did not believe in it. As a result, messages were confused and contradictory. The media context of 1983 meant even a united party would have struggled to get its message across. An overwhelmingly anti-Labour media staunchly behind Margaret Thatcher was ruthless in its coverage. Finally, the party did not have

⁶⁴ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p.43.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Franklin, *Packaging Politics*, p. 132.

the organisational skills, staffing and strategies to promote its message. The only positive outcome of the 1983 general election result was to kick start a transformation in all of these areas.

Chapter Two

Militants and Loonies:

Labour, the Media and the 1987 General Election.

The Labour Party which fought the 1987 general election was very different to the one which fought and lost so badly in 1983. This was most notable in terms of the message and the methods. There is little doubt the changes to Labour's policies were hugely significant. The new message was promoted through a media strategy transformed in terms of organisation and tactics. It was also delivered by a leadership more united and more willing and able to deal with the media in general and television in particular. What had not changed was the fiercely anti-Labour media context of the still highly significant newspaper industry. This chapter will examine the fundamental changes to the organisation and implementation of the media strategy in 1987. This was a campaign that some modernisers described as setting the template for all future Labour Party campaigns. At the same time, it was these modernisers who argued that policy changes, although significant, had not gone far enough.

Changing the *message* occurred despite Kinnock coming to the leadership with a reputation as a left winger. However, he had broken with the Bennite left by supporting Healey for the deputy leadership in 1981. He viewed moving policy to the centre ground as essential after the 1983 general election and was amenable to the use of pollsters and marketing experts in that process. Progress was slow as Kinnock became embroiled in internal battles with the Militant Tendency and the miners' strike. But from late 1985, the policies deemed to have cost Labour the election - leaving Europe, unilateralism and the Tories privatisations and council house sales - were being scrutinised. The anti-EEC stance was quickly dropped, as was opposition to council house sales. A compromise was reached on the ownership of the privatised British Telecom and British Gas. Private shares would be converted into special new securities, allowing Labour to argue these utilities had been returned to the public sector.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ *Labour Party General Election Manifesto (1987)*. Accessed at: <http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1987/1987-labour-manifesto.shtml>

Equally, it left them open to the Conservative charge that millions of new shareholders' investments were being put at risk.

The issue of unilateralism was the trickiest of all to reassess. Kinnock had been a life-long unilateralist but was increasingly convinced by the researchers and pollsters that it was unpopular with voters. As late as 1986, research suggested that the policy was disliked by the vast majority of the electorate. By then, as even Kinnock's belief in the policy began to falter, it was deemed too late and too risky to the leadership for it to be changed. According to *The Guardian*,⁶⁸ Kinnock told his shadow cabinet at a two day strategy session in 1985 that the commitment to unilateralism had to be beyond question to allow him room to manoeuvre on other policy issues. The paper reported that the Party's aim was to keep defence a low profile issue at the election - a hope that was crushed by the Tories. Defence was ruthlessly exploited during the campaign and was cited as one of the key reasons why lapsed Labour voters didn't return to the fold. One enduring campaign poster showed a soldier with his hands in the air and the caption: "Labour's policy on arms."⁶⁹

Two other areas where policy changes were more muted is in the areas of tax and industrial relations. The party's manifesto on spending was radically different to 1983 but this did not stop Tory supporting newspapers from exploiting the issue. Labour said its programme of investment would cost £6bn immediately. There would be increases in pensions and child benefit paid for by reversing some of the government's tax cuts, introducing a wealth tax and borrowing around £3bn. Attacks quickly followed. Treasury ministers suggested the real figure was closer to £35bn. The *Daily Mail* took up a theme that Labour's tax proposals in its manifesto lacked detail leading to headlines about "Labour's secret tax plan"⁷⁰ arguing there were secret proposals to raise national insurance.

Labour had initially pledged to repeal all the anti-trade union laws of the Thatcher government. But now Labour's increasing use of opinion poll research

⁶⁸ *The Guardian*, October 14th 1985, p.3.

⁶⁹ *Conservative Party Archive*. Accessed at: <https://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/cpa>

⁷⁰ *Daily Mail*, May 22nd 1987, p.1

was delivering several uncomfortable messages. This one was pretty stark - the new laws were supported by the majority of the population and any repeal would be seen as capitulation to the union "barons". On the other hand, Kinnock couldn't risk a battle with the unions that he might lose and hand a gift to the Tories, who would be able to argue this was proof that the unions ran Labour. A compromise was reached resulting in most of the laws being repealed but ballots on strike action and elections for a union's executive would remain. These changes were too subtle to alter the overall picture but trade union power didn't seem to be a key issue in the election. In fact, *Daily Mail* columnist Frank Chapple wrote less than two weeks before polling day: "The best news about the election so far is that we haven't heard very much about the trade unions."⁷¹

The most significant changes to Labour's media strategy after the 1983 defeat were the *methods*. Just as policy changes took some time to implement, so did new methods for dealing with the media. However, when changes came they proved to be groundbreaking for British politics. Peter Mandelson replaced Nick Grant as Director of Communications. The fact that Mandelson was a former television producer illustrated perhaps the single most important development in the party's media strategy for the '87 campaign - the importance of television news. Gould says this strategy had been identified the previous year and it would involve memorable pictures and stories featuring the leader and a select group of shadow cabinet members. It would be tightly organised and recognise the need to update stories in the news cycle. This was the concept that stories could be challenged and turned to your advantage by feeding journalists a constant diet of updated or brand new information and pictures. Gould recognised its importance:

You must always seek to gain and keep momentum or it will pass immediately to your opponent. Gaining momentum means dominating the news agenda, entering the news cycle at the earliest possible time and repeatedly re-entering it with stories

⁷¹ *Daily Mail*, May 28th 1987, p.7.

and initiatives so that subsequent news coverage is set on your terms.⁷²

One of the key media strategy techniques associated with TV was known as agenda setting. This was a bid by the parties to try to influence and control the TV news agenda, rather than leaving it to the tabloid press to do so. The daily news agenda was often set by newspapers because national daily newspapers were published early in the morning. This set a tone of breaking news and a challenge to other news outlets to respond. When I was in TV newsrooms locally and nationally in the 1990s and 2000s, it was an open secret and the subject of dark humour that the first newspaper the senior journalists would look at would be the *Daily Mail*. It is obvious to all journalists that one source of news is other news outlets. This is especially important to TV journalists because gathering TV in the 1980s was complicated. Finding, filming and editing stories takes time and journalists are under pressure to fill their bulletins. Consequently, TV journalists look to the press for a head start. The Labour press team aimed to step in and provide that head start by finding stories and organising the filming.

Mandelson and Patricia Hewitt had decided that June 4th 1987 would be a day of campaigning devoted to the health service, traditionally one of Labour's strong policy areas. A few years earlier, the media strategy may have involved the leader giving a rather dull speech in drab surroundings, hardly the most riveting of TV news stories. Mandelson in particular realised more preparation was needed if health was to run in the media - and particularly on television.

The day before the health initiative, a filming and photo opportunity was arranged for the press involving Kinnock talking to nurses coming off duty at St Thomas's Hospital in London. When Labour launched its health campaign 24 hours later, TV reporters already had some relevant pictures in the can. In addition, reporters were also provided with details of a young boy called Mark Burgess, who had been waiting many months for a heart operation. Words *and* pictures provided by the Labour Party; a simple and effective tactic, as Patricia Hewitt explained:

⁷² Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 289.

We basically said, what is going to matter in this election campaign is television, and what's going to matter on television is the pictures, and we said, right, for each day there will be a theme and the pictures will be tied to the theme. And it was really simple, but nobody had ever done it.⁷³

The detailed planning shows an impressive understanding of how TV news works. With strict campaigning events for each day, broadcasters often found it difficult to set the agenda because the pictures they had told a different story. As Hewitt said: "In 87, what we did was catch the media completely unprepared and it was only about halfway through the election that they suddenly found out that whatever they asked Neil about, the pictures were always the pictures we wanted."⁷⁴ The piece that ran on BBC 9 O'clock News ⁷⁵ did indeed feature pictures of Mark Burgess filmed at his home and included details of his story. There was an extra piece of good publicity for Labour as, in her response, Margaret Thatcher admitted to using private medicine because she wanted to go to the hospital she wanted when she wanted, remarks that were deemed highly insensitive by Kinnock and David Owen. But agenda setting on TV did not necessarily transfer to the tabloid press. The *Daily Mail's* response the following day was "Kinnock puts sick heart boy in front line of votes fight." ⁷⁶ The story implied using Mark Burgess as a case study in the story was exploitative. The story was written in a straight news style but the insinuation in the headline is clear.

This was just one new tactic amongst a whole range of innovations. A root and branch re-organisation began with media operations now being organised separately to the party structure. There was a vast expansion in the use of outside experts from the worlds of PR, polling and market research, brought together under the grouping of the Shadow Communications Agency. Again, this was separate to the party structure thus avoiding direct interference from MPs who were unhappy with the new direction of the party and might want to question the SCA's findings. Changes to presentation, the wording of

⁷³ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 65.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ *BBC 9 O'Clock News*, June 4th 1987.

⁷⁶ *Daily Mail*, June 5th 1987, p. 8.

campaigns, organisation and planning all brought a new air of professionalism to the Labour campaign. There is evidence that this had at least some effect on improving the party's image as generally being unfit to govern. Gould described the early success of a social policy campaign.⁷⁷ Originally titled "Freedom and Fairness," Gould insisted on ditching the political language favoured by Kinnock and used instead consumer language. It was renamed "Labour: Putting People First." The same principles were used in the re-branding of the party itself. The red rose first appeared at the 1986 party conference and was generally well received.

In stark contrast to 1983, the 1987 media campaign was holistic. Even policies that were deemed by the opinion polls to be unpopular were analysed and aggressively promoted. Joe Napolitan was an American political consultant who worked with Labour in the mid-1980s and was one of several analysts who highlighted the problems with the defence policy. In a memo to Kinnock he advocated going on the offensive with the argument that the Tories were running down conventional forces and "putting all their eggs in a nuclear basket."⁷⁸ Although the campaign ultimately failed, Labour put forward a forceful argument that Britain would be safer by switching from nuclear to conventional weapons.

This period of organisational and tactical change from 1983-1987 is crucial to Negrine's analysis.⁷⁹ He argues there had been a transformation in political communications since 1945. He uses "transformation" as change that goes beyond the response to the political and technological situations of the time. When political parties lose elections they automatically try to find out why. The failure to get their message across is often cited as a cause and that leads to an examination of a party's relationship with the media. Thus, we see attempts by politicians to engage with the new media of the day, be it radio, television or the internet. But it is the nature of television that has perhaps had the greatest influence leading Negrine to note: "..one could perhaps see it as transforming

⁷⁷ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 56.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* p. 67.

⁷⁹ Negrine, *Transformation in Political Communication*.

the nature of political communication."⁸⁰ I have highlighted some examples above showing how this change is transformative, as Negrine defies it as using skills that are qualitatively different to what went before. Certainly, television changed the way politicians looked and behaved. It also changed the way a party had to deal with the TV media and that meant new techniques such as agenda setting, as outlined above by Hewitt.

The Party's new *messenger* - Neil Kinnock - was a vast improvement on his predecessor. He was more willing to engage with the media and at least make an attempt to use television. This new relationship didn't get off to the best of starts. The official announcement of Kinnock's leadership victory was to be made at the 1983 party conference in Brighton. Officials arranged for Kinnock and his wife Glenys to be filmed walking along the seafront and Kinnock took it upon himself to take his wife on to the beach and to the water's edge. As waves came crashing in, Kinnock tumbled into the water, leaving journalists rubbing their hands at the story they'd just landed. Matters slowly improved. His image was smartened up with dark suits and white shirts and a new short haircut, some suggested this was to make his hair look less like that of miners' leader Arthur Scargill.⁸¹

Four years before, it was inconceivable that Labour would have wanted the focus of the TV lens on Michael Foot. He would not have welcomed it and it is doubtful there would have been a strategy in place to deal with it. Gould welcomed any strategy that would see the campaign as Kinnock against Thatcher. "If we were going to fight a negative campaign, I thought we needed at least one positive, which had to be Neil Kinnock. Presenting Labour in a positive light will be difficult, presenting Kinnock in a positive light much less so."⁸² At this stage, Gould suggests, Kinnock was modernising quicker than the party itself, leading him to say that Labour looked better but it had not become better. "Although the planning was extensive, the foundations were built on

⁸⁰ Negrine, *Transformation in Political Communication*, p. 43.

⁸¹ Franklin, *Packaging Politics*, p.150.

⁸² Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 69.

sand," he said.⁸³ The culmination of this was a remarkable party political broadcast which was to become known as "Kinnock: The Movie." It was a personal depiction of the Labour leader and his wife, Glenys, and finished not with the word 'Labour' but 'Kinnock.' According to Gould, his ratings went up 16% overnight.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, Kinnock was a mixed TV performer and prone to the occasional gaffe. He was a man passionate about words and undeniably a great orator but, like Foot before him, he found the 20 second soundbite a difficult task. When interviewed by David Frost, Kinnock gave the impression that Labour's response to an invasion by a foreign power would be civil resistance. Or, as David Owen put it: "He wants Dad's Army back."⁸⁵

Dealing with television was one thing - the tabloid press was another. In this sense, Labour was limited in what it could do to change the *media context*. Certainly, the tactics and emphasis on TV news had some effect but the tabloids still remained influential in terms of circulation and agenda setting. Kinnock's relationship with Fleet Street remained deeply troubled. Hostilities began almost as soon as Kinnock was elected. There were smears against him and his wife⁸⁶ and the situation became so dire that his press secretary Patricia Hewitt considered abandoning the daily press conference as "they allow the newspaper journalists to set the agenda and we know where they stand."⁸⁷ Following on from the miners' strike and the battles with Militant, were stories about Labour's "loony left", some with more substance than others. The Party's "image" was attacked by the press on several fronts. There were the actions of the prominent left wingers who were running local councils, such as Ken Livingstone at the GLC. They pursued equal rights policies that may seem progressive today⁸⁸ but were often portrayed as a waste of taxpayers money by the tabloids. In the run up to the 1987 general election the *Daily Mail* ran a steady stream of "loony left" stories. They included one headlined "Gay Rights

⁸³ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p.66.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p.76.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* p.76.

⁸⁶ Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p. 92.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p. 94.

⁸⁸ Rohan McWilliam, in *The Conversation* (2017).

Championed on Leaked List"⁸⁹ which found one motion out of 101 submitted to the London Labour Party supported the promotion of "positive images" of lesbians and gay men. Another grimly warned of the threat to human life itself because of "the gay revolution encouraged in the classroom by loony left councils."⁹⁰ The dire warning came from local government minister Dr Rhodes Boyson who criticised the idea of positive images of homosexuals "as if they were equivalent forms of life."⁹¹

Labour's links with the trade unions were also criticised by the press. The tabloids argued this was a party controlled by union leaders, which included in their eyes unsavoury individuals such as Arthur Scargill. Despite gross exaggeration, Labour's formal links to the Trade Union movement proved to be consistently unpopular with the electorate, although its significance is debatable. Lumped together with the "loony left" tag, it was this constant diet of negative stories that had the greatest influence on voters, according to Andrew Neil.⁹² He said the news and feature pages were far more important in shaping political attitudes than the clearly partisan but rarely read opinion pages.

If, day in, day out, in a relentless and sustained manner, you consistently and constantly demean one political leader while praising and promoting his/her rival, then over time you can sway your readership by the drip, drip, drip of negative coverage.⁹³

One particularly acrimonious episode with the press concerned a trip to the US by Kinnock in March 1987. Some had advised Kinnock not to go as the thorny issue of Labour's unilateral defence policy was never likely to go down well. After the trip Kinnock described a convivial meeting where President Reagan had accepted Labour's policies. This was contradicted by reports allegedly from the President's spokesman Marlin Fitzwater that the meeting had been short

⁸⁹ *Daily Mail*, June 9th 1987, p.9

⁹⁰ *Daily Mail*, May 9th 1987, p.2.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Andrew Neil, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry* (July 9th 2012). Accessed via: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140122144956/http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/evidence/>

⁹³ *Ibid.*

and Reagan had warned Labour's policies would put NATO at risk. This gave the tabloids a double hit and they didn't hold back. The *Daily Mail* headline was "The Revenge of Reagan" and the sub heading "President blasts Kinnock over defence policy"⁹⁴ Inside, the paper raised its suspicions over the differing accounts of the meeting from Kinnock and Fitzwater. Fitzwater's use of the phrase "polite and business-like" was translated for the *Mail* by an American journalist. Apparently this meant Kinnock's team had been spoken to "like they were Russians." Alistair Campbell was on the trip, reporting for the *Daily Mirror* and described the reporting of his colleagues as a conspiracy. "Once Neil Kinnock became leader, the bias of the press was something I wrote about from time to time," he told the Leveson Inquiry. "Mrs Thatcher's Number 10, The Reagan White House and the UK press conspired to trash Mr Kinnock."⁹⁵

The Conservatives were re-elected with another huge majority in 1987 but Labour's media strategy had shown massive improvement. According to the framework, three of the four key factors had improved, admittedly from a very low base. Perhaps the biggest strides were taken in the methods that were employed to deal with the media. Organisation and efficiency had been improved and provided a template for all future Labour Party general election strategies. One of the main architects, Philip Gould, described tight organisation and discipline with a focus on television. "This is how the 1987 election was fought and it is essentially how Labour has fought every national election since."⁹⁶ Shaw agreed with much of the analysis of the election, describing a "professional and skilfully executed campaign which, with its mastery of modern communication techniques and the cohesion and discipline it displayed, impressed media commentators and did much to restore the Party's battered morale."⁹⁷

Compared to 1983, Labour's message had been well articulated by its chief messenger - Kinnock. It also got a better reception from the public. Kinnock,

⁹⁴ *Daily Mail*, March 28th 1987, p.1.

⁹⁵ Alistair Campbell, statement to *Leveson Inquiry*, 14th May 2012. Accessed via: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140122144956/http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/evidence/>

⁹⁶ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 64.

⁹⁷ Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1979*, p.179.

although not a natural TV performer, had adapted to the age but, according to pollsters, his approval ratings still remained problematic. There had been big shifts in policy to the centre ground but brutal attacks by the media remained, particularly on Labour's economic, tax, and defence policies. For the modernisers, policy had not been shifted far enough especially on the economy and Blair certainly saw this as a serious weakness. "One of the most common fallacies in politics is that you can have great communications and lousy policy and win. You can't," he said. "The 1987 election was a classic of this genre."⁹⁸

Finally, the media context is the one element of the framework that showed little change and continued to damage Labour. True, the presentation of Kinnock for TV and the methods used to deal with TV journalists had vastly improved from four years before. There was evidence that the TV news agenda could be influenced by a well organised visual event. But the tabloid press remained powerful and hostile. Thomas suggests the 1987 election marked "the peak of sustained press hostility towards Labour."⁹⁹ Even so, it was to remain a thorn in Labour's side at the next general election.

⁹⁸ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. xvi.

⁹⁹ Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p.97.

Chapter Three

A Nightmare on Kinnock Street:

Labour, the Media and the 1992 General Election.

Many in Labour thought it beyond the party to win in 1987, given the position they were coming from. Whilst the three per cent increase in the share of the vote to 31 per cent was a disappointment most believed the downward spiral had been halted and the foundations were being laid for one last push to take them over the line and into power. The media strategy for the 1992 campaign bore many similarities to the successful campaign five years previously and this chapter will look at them in detail. The media context remained extremely hostile and the methods used to deal with the media were broadly the same. However, there were some subtle differences in these areas. Press coverage altered slightly and key figures were missing from the organisation of the media operation. The role of the messenger, Neil Kinnock, will also be analysed as will the changes to the message through continued policy reviews.

Election defeats are analysed in detail by the losing party and 1987 was no exception. A major review of the party's *message* began almost immediately. The prevailing argument in the party in terms of policy was to continue the shift to the centre ground in the belief that this would appeal to more voters. A whole range of areas were re-examined and resulted in what Shaw called "The abandonment of Keynesian Social Democracy." He puts it very simply and accurately. "The driving force behind programmatic renewal in the Labour Party since 1987 has been the search for votes." ¹⁰⁰

On the big issue of the economy, the National Institute for Economic and Social Research said that by 1990 the differences between Labour and the Conservatives were "narrower now than they have been for about twenty years." ¹⁰¹ The party went in to the 1992 election with fairly modest proposals on the economy. There was to be an increase in pensions and child benefits

¹⁰⁰ Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1945*, p. 181

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* p. 185.

funded by higher taxes on the richest 20 per cent of tax payers. The shadow chancellor's mantra was that "we can't spend what we haven't earned."¹⁰²

These changes were possible because of Kinnock's tightening grip on the National Executive Committee and strategic moves to reduce its influence anyway. Shaw explains that although the Policy Review was jointly directed by the NEC and the Shadow Cabinet the front bench was very much the senior partner. By the end of 1989, he said, Kinnock was able to overturn policy on even the most controversial issues.¹⁰³ Nowhere was this more obvious than in the last remaining truly controversial policy within the party - unilateralism. Kinnock was increasingly of the view that Labour could not win with it still in the manifesto and was prepared to put his leadership on the line to force it through.¹⁰⁴ The 1992 manifesto was clear: "Labour Will Retain Britain's Nuclear Capability". This change would have caused a party rebellion just a couple of years earlier but the new policy went through with remarkably little public disagreement.

Another policy deemed to have cost Labour votes in 1987 was nationalisation. Gradually, the list of companies to be returned to public ownership became smaller and smaller until it was a list no more. By 1990 it was one word - water - and two years later even this had been reduced to a desire for public *control*, rather than ownership. It appeared that political ideology had not only been changed but the very idea of being ideological was outdated and undesirable. As Kinnock told the *Observer*, "the question is what an industry does, not who owns it. Ownership is a matter for the ideologists."¹⁰⁵

Ideology had become something of a dirty word by the late 1980s. As Kinnock implies above, ideology in the Labour Party suggested the rigid dogma of the left, unwilling to change and adapt. For the modernisers, ideology had to be abandoned and replaced by flexibility to deal with the new political realities. There is certainly something in Shaw's claim that the driving force behind these policy changes was the desire for votes but the changes have their own

¹⁰² *The Guardian*, Oct 2nd 1989, p.4

¹⁰³ Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1945*, p. 191.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* p.188.

¹⁰⁵ *The Observer*, October 7th 1989.

coherent narrative, indeed their own ideological basis. Shaw¹⁰⁶ says the modernisers believed the problem for Labour was that it had failed to adapt to the changes in society. It was still essentially a party for the 1960s where there were tightly knit occupational and residential communities, union membership and class consciousness was high and there was a natural affinity for collectivist ideals. The party had failed to recognise this society no longer existed. Economic and technological developments had seen to that and the political upheavals that followed had been successfully exploited by the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher. This had created an individualistic society mistrustful of governments which "waste" money, where individuals should be trusted to spend more of their own money instead of having it taken away in taxes. The modernisers were keen to show they were in touch with voters with "evidence" from opinion polls and focus groups. Philip Gould used a whole range of data throughout his time advising Labour. The most important presentation to the party was in 1985.¹⁰⁷ There was a "fault line", he said, between what Labour had become and what the electorate wanted. On one side there was Labour's nationalisation, unilateralism and tax increases. On the other was the electorate buying shares, council houses and revelling in Britain's born again military might. Defeat in 1987 re-enforced the modernisers' belief that the transformation in policy had to be completed. To do that, Old Labour policies had to be ditched and then the electorate had to be convinced they were gone for good.

Modernisers had a curious argument for changing Labour policies. They argued voters did not like current policies and the proof was in general election results and a huge amount of polling data. But voters were looking at those policies through the prism of a biased media so how could policies be judged fairly? Shaw offers a critique of this thinking.¹⁰⁸ He says party strategists pursuing modernisation held a major source of power by being in control of gathering and, more importantly, interpreting opinion research findings. This was done via

¹⁰⁶ Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1945*, pp.196-198.

¹⁰⁷ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p.51.

¹⁰⁸ Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1945*, pp.175-183.

the Shadow Communications Agency which ran separately to the party structure. Consequently, there was very little challenge to the interpretation of this data. For example, in April 1988, the SCA presented findings which said: "Respondents thought Labour would increase taxes for everybody, with the result that the rich would be driven abroad, ordinary people would be worse off and there would be no incentive to work."¹⁰⁹ Statements like this, says Shaw, were accepted as the truth rather than being challenged. He also says it assumes the responses given for not voting Labour were the full explanation for their actions. "Rather as if a psychologist accepted, without further analysis, as a satisfactory explanation of the behaviour of their subjects, the reasons offered by the subjects themselves."¹¹⁰ In addition, the reasons offered by respondents were taken to be an accurate reflection of what the Labour Party actually represented. "No attempt appears to have been made by strategists to explore why Labour was portrayed as a party of minorities and other poorly regarded groups - and why, indeed, this so aggravated people," he added. Shaw also highlights another shortcoming, the assumption that opinions were based only on the impact of relatively recent events. So, for example, those who thought Labour untrustworthy in the mid 1980s must be basing their views on events such as the Winter of Discontent. Shaw argues the picture is much more long term. Finally, Shaw challenges the idea from strategists that voters believed the party to be one of extremists sympathetic to minority groups because that's *exactly what it was*. He highlights research depicting the demonisation of certain groups in the media - groups that just so happened to be associated with Labour such as immigrants, social security recipients and trade union "militants." This antagonised voters not because Labour had policies unduly sympathetic to them but because they associated these groups with the negative characteristics bestowed on them by the media. The left seemed reluctant to engage in the policy debate with their own polls and market research, probably for a number of reasons. They were divided and

¹⁰⁹ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 117.

¹¹⁰ Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1979*, p.176.

disorganised and had an ideological suspicion of pollsters and market researchers. Dennis Skinner typified the left's response following a market research presentation in 1987. "Another load of bloody rubbish," he snarled.¹¹¹

The *messenger* for the 1992 general election was still Neil Kinnock, although there was more of an emphasis on a team approach. At his best, Kinnock was an accomplished media performer. Articulate and passionate, he often came across as a political leader with a common touch. But he was also prone to verbosity and the occasional blunder. The 1992 campaign saw an attempt to move away from a personal approach to a team approach. Those deemed to be telegenic and capable of delivering the 20 second soundbite for TV, such as Blair, Brown, John Smith and Robin Cook, played a bigger role in the campaign. But television's tendency to personalise general election campaigns meant it had little effect and press coverage portrayed the election as a battle between three men: John Major, Neil Kinnock and Paddy Ashdown.

Sebastian Berry¹¹² is surprised at just how much Kinnock was shielded from the press when it could be argued his experience may have proved vital against an unknown quantity like John Major. Following the media attacks in 1987, it was understandable campaign managers wanted to shield him but Berry says they opted for a "safety-first" campaign.¹¹³ Philip Gould also describes a party leader isolated and remote from the campaign. He hardly saw Kinnock in the six months before the campaign started and describes him as "a man trapped in a glass prison."¹¹⁴ Gould is unsure whether this was down to Kinnock himself or his advisers but remains ambivalent about the consequences. He describes a plan for the campaign when Kinnock would cut loose and become his real self but argues it didn't work because Kinnock had changed - older, wiser and different.¹¹⁵ In the end, Gould says, the electorate could not warm to him. "I couldn't imagine Neil Kinnock in Downing Street. Nor could the electorate."¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 82.

¹¹² Berry, in *Parliamentary Affairs*, pp. 565-581.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 143.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 142.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 148.

The 1992 *media context* for Labour showed some limited signs of change. Newspaper circulations continued to decline but they were still huge. *The Sun* sold 3.5 million copies per day and the *Daily Mirror* 2.9 million. That should not disguise the fact that the other four biggest selling daily tabloids with a combined daily readership of 4.5 million all supported the Conservatives. Their influence on setting the news agenda remained key and they were often as partisan and as vicious as they were five years earlier. The *Daily Mail* ran 45 articles¹¹⁷ criticising the party's tax plans in the five weeks leading up to the general election. Headlines included "If You Make It They'll Take it" ; "Mr Rising Price" and "We've 17 days to save the country."¹¹⁸ These stories were spread throughout the news and features sections where they have their biggest impact, rather than in the little read editorial columns.

There were, however, some subtle changes. Although, there were many examples of personal and vitriolic anti-Labour reporting Berry argues the predicted negative and dirty tabloid campaign largely failed to materialise.¹¹⁹ Thomas suggests¹²⁰ a number of reasons for this, foremost being the absence of Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher and Rupert Murdoch were ideological soulmates and without her as leader connections between the Conservatives and News International became weaker. It was not just that she was no longer leader it was the nature of her removal that angered some editors and proprietors. An atmosphere seemed to emerge that the current Conservative leadership deserved punishment for dumping her. Criticism of John Major appeared in normally loyal newspapers. Kelvin MacKenzie would come to loathe him.

Other reasons cited by Thomas for the slightly muted press coverage was the relatively poor campaign from the Tories and the tightly controlled and largely gaffe-free Labour campaign. Indeed, remove *The Sun*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*, from the equation and the treatment of Labour from the press was more sympathetic than 1987. The party received the surprise endorsement of the *Financial Times* and also four of the nine national Sunday newspapers. The

¹¹⁷ *Daily Mail*, March 1st - April 9th 1992.

¹¹⁸ *Daily Mail* March 17th, 23rd, 24th 1992.

¹¹⁹ Berry, in *Parliamentary Affairs*, pp. 565-581.

¹²⁰ Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, pp. 132-137.

support of the FT was significant and something of a coup, given its standing in the financial world and the fact that a readership consisting of higher social groups was being urged to vote Labour. However, its daily circulation of a modest 290,000 hardly changed the overall picture in terms of readership of the Tory supporting press.

Attempts were made by Labour to try and improve media relations. Charles Clarke describes relationships with the tabloids as being frozen following the 1987 campaign. This was due not only to the battering delivered by the tabloids but also the fallout from the trade union dispute at News International's new headquarters in Wapping. The breaking of the print unions had led to widespread picket line violence and many Labour MPs refused to speak to NI journalists. Clarke organised a meeting with *Sun* executives at Wapping in January 1992 to try and foster some sort of relationship. "We had four hours at Wapping - me, Kelvin and a whole group of others going through things - and to his credit Kelvin never leaked it. And I told Neil the next day and he was furious that I had done it."¹²¹ Although the story wasn't leaked there appeared to be little improvement in relations. Political journalist Nick Jones argues the meeting may even have been counter productive:

Notwithstanding the fact that Labour's first, faltering entreaties to the Murdoch press had been rebuffed and might be considered nothing more than an historical footnote, they were a key moment in the unfolding narrative. By signalling pre-1992 that they were already desperate to come to terms with the *Sun's* unassailability, Kinnock's inner circle had bolstered the bravado of its editor Kelvin MacKenzie, as evidenced by the paper's subsequent vilification of Kinnock throughout the 1992 campaign.¹²²

¹²¹ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p.108.

¹²² *Nick Jones Archive and Blog*, 23rd August 2012. Accessed at: <http://www.nicholasjones.org.uk/articles/categories/leveson-inquiry/231>

The Sun ended its coverage on election day with the headline: "If Kinnock wins today will the last person to leave Britain please turn out the lights." This was followed shortly after by a headline boasting: "It's the *Sun* wot won it!"

In his written statement to the Leveson Inquiry in 2012, Andrew Neil¹²³ says during his career the treatment of Kinnock by News International was the seminal development in relations between politicians and the media. He says the partisan nature of the British press reached its zenith in the ideologically charged 1980s. "All leading politicians found themselves incurring the wrath of this partisan media; but none more so than Neil Kinnock - and his most virulent tormentors were the News International tabloids," he said. He argues the day to day vilification of Kinnock throughout the campaign certainly had some effect on the outcome, even if "It's the Sun wot won it !" was too bold a statement. He said the country had fallen out of love with the Tories under John Major but voters could not bring themselves to support a Kinnock-led Labour Party. It was these doubts that were encouraged by tabloid coverage:

I believe the Tory-inclined press - and especially the Murdoch Sun (read by millions of the C1/C2 swing voters Labour needed to win) - did have an influence in denying Labour victory. As polling day approached, voters were having second thoughts about Neil Kinnock. The Sun encouraged these doubts. It did not have the power to change their minds; but it could nudge them in a direction they were already inclined to travel.¹²⁴

Just as some Conservatives and the press were quick to boast of their role in the Tories' election victory others were keen to play down their influence, suggesting Labour was looking for someone else to blame rather than itself. Sir David English at the *Daily Mail* said: "The fact of the matter is that it was Labour's policies that helped swing the election to the Tories."¹²⁵ Others used the argument that their papers do not have such an influence over their readers. How much influence the tabloids had is not for discussion here. Indeed, James

¹²³ Neil, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, May 8th 2012.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *The Independent*, 14th April 1992.

Thomas said in some ways the peak of tabloid hostility to Labour was in 1987.¹²⁶ What is important is recognising that Labour thought the tabloid press was influential and their attempts to gain some control and influence largely failed.

Labour's media campaign did not reach the heights of 1987. Some of the *methods* backfired and there was some organisational disruption. In 1992 the tabloids continued to be a declining part of the media landscape and generally hostile to Labour. The Party continued its strategic move to rely on television to get its message across. Tactics it had adopted in 1987 were deployed again. Setting the TV agenda was the key aim of the party's daily press conferences and this meant organising more "pseudo events" and photo calls to make sure the TV reporters had decent moving pictures to go with their stories. As part of Labour's environment campaign, MP Ann Taylor was pictured on the banks of the River Don in South Yorkshire beside a river turned orange due to industrial pollution. These pictures and an interview with Ann Taylor featured in a BBC 6 O'clock News story about pollution levels rising because of regulations being relaxed in the run up to privatisation.¹²⁷

Controlling the media agenda is difficult and in contrast to 1987, the press and broadcasters were becoming more aware of media manipulation. It backfired spectacularly for Labour over the "Jennifer's Ear" party political broadcast. The film used actors to tell the real life story of a little girl waiting for NHS treatment, as opposed to another girl whose parents could afford to pay for private treatment. Perhaps because the broadcast used actors, journalists began digging around to find the "real" Jennifer. The issue of NHS waiting lists quickly began to unravel for Labour, as the real life characters emerged and various conflicting stories surfaced. There were claims Jennifer's waiting time was not caused by NHS cutbacks, her father and grandfather allegedly expressed outrage at the broadcast and confirmed themselves as Conservative supporters. In an attempt to bring attention back to the main issue, Labour published a dossier of ten other NHS waiting list cases. Again this was seized

¹²⁶ Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p. 97.

¹²⁷ *BBC Six O'Clock News*, February 27th 1989.

upon by the media and within hours four had asked for their names to be withdrawn after being inundated by media attention. There were also claims that journalists had been given at least one ex-directory telephone number. As the row rumbled on, it undermined Labour's claims to be trustworthy and fit for government. There were disputes about who said what and when and an aura of disorganisation surrounded the Labour media team.

A major Labour Party rally was planned in Sheffield for the final week before polling day. It was designed to enthuse the troops and lift spirits for a final campaigning push. Critics are correct to say it came across as over-confident, glitzy and Americanised. Something not helped by Kinnock's over enthusiasm and cringeworthy shouts of "we're alright..." from the vast stage. The timing of the rally also rather suggested that Labour's campaign was drawing to a close, just as John Major's was stepping up for the final few days.

In his criticism of the 1992 campaign, Berry highlights the final week, which featured the Sheffield rally and a focus on proportional representation. "For all the emphasis placed by the Labour Party on the importance of effective media relations, it is extraordinary that the final week strategy agreed by the campaign management team proved so woefully inadequate."¹²⁸ PR emerged as a key issue as polls close to election day suggested the most likely outcome was a hung parliament. Labour had promised a referendum on PR, a relatively minor policy issue. Senior campaign managers were prepared for its emergence in the final week of the campaign because a Charter 88 "Democracy Day" was being held. But the real damage was done when Kinnock refused to say if he supported PR during a TV interview featuring the other party leaders. Once again, this developed into an issue not about policy but about fitness to govern. Gould makes the astonishing confession: "He (Kinnock) hadn't worked out what he would say if asked."¹²⁹

Gould dismisses these criticisms.¹³⁰ He argues that the Sheffield Rally had little effect saying "it was barely on the news and was hardly noticed". This is

¹²⁸ Berry, in *Parliamentary Affairs*, pp. 565-581.

¹²⁹ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p.147.

¹³⁰ *Ibid* pp144-147.

incorrect, it featured prominently on the BBC's 9 O'clock News that evening with a report lasting over three minutes - a substantial duration for a television news package.¹³¹ It looked extraordinary in several respects. The concept is bold by British standards - resembling an American political convention. Undoubtedly it is triumphalist, with shots of Kinnock arriving by helicopter and members of the shadow cabinet introduced on stage as the crowds applaud wildly. As Berry points out,¹³² it implied the Labour campaign was coming to an end with one week to go. A week seen by many as John Major's best of the campaign.

On "Jennifer's Ear" Gould claims it to be one of the most effective and successful party election broadcasts ever shown. "The chaos around it was caused by organisational confusion and a communications breakdown for which I alone was not responsible."¹³³ The ensuing row actually boosted Labour's poll ratings, according to Gould. Berry says it shifted focus from one of Labour's strong issues - health - to one of its weakest - competency.¹³⁴ In a similar vein, Gould dismisses the effect of the PR debacle despite Mandelson and Gordon Brown believing it cost the party dear. Gould said there is little evidence it caused significant damage to the party, although it was not an ideal way to end the campaign.¹³⁵

Television had become central to the new Labour leadership's media strategy. It was modern, influential and, crucially, it was deemed to be fairer to Labour because of the legally enforced impartiality laws. However, this strategy has been challenged by Shaw.¹³⁶ He argues the reliance on television by Labour was misplaced for a number of reasons. Firstly, he suggests, it shows an inadequate grasp of the way voters received incoming information. Labour's modernisers relied on the idea that a message is either accepted or rejected by an audience according to the degree of affinity it has with existing dispositions. This thinking, according to Shaw, was outdated at that time with most cognitive

¹³¹ *BBC 9 O'clock News*, April 1st 1992.

¹³² Berry, in *Parliamentary Affairs*, pp. 565-581.

¹³³ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p.126.

¹³⁴ Berry, in *Parliamentary Affairs*, pp. 565-581.

¹³⁵ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p.144.

¹³⁶ Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1979*, pp. 169-170.

psychology suggesting the process was much more complicated. This raised serious doubts about Labour's preferred "advertising mode" of message delivery and its reliance on agenda setting (keeping the news agenda on issues favourable to you rather than your opponents). The advertising mode was equivalent to the "peripheral route to persuasion" described by Petty and Cacioppo.¹³⁷ This suggests voters are persuaded by the style and presentation of a message, hence Labour's obsession with presentation and soundbites. "This approach," according to Shaw, "can be effective but..it was inappropriate for Labour."¹³⁸ This was because it was best suited to relatively straightforward matters and even then were less likely to result in long term behavioural change. Soundbites, according to Shaw, "rendered them an inadequate vehicle for the exposition of an argument."¹³⁹

Shaw's second criticism of the reliance on TV surrounded the issue of agenda setting. As described earlier, this refers to trying to control the news agenda but it also advises against raising issues deemed to be the strong suits of the political opposition. Its rationale was based on the idea of cognitive dissonance - the idea that attitudes are difficult to change because of the psychological discomfort triggered by exposure to conflicting arguments. This left key areas of policy - such as the economy - to be fought over on the Conservatives own terms. Labour merely argued it wouldn't change the market economy but would manage it better. Better to close down these issues and try to concentrate on those that are seen as Labour's strong points, such as health. Shaw contends that if Labour had so desired they could have challenged the Conservatives on the economy by using a system called "framing," described as an attempt at persuasion not by changing one's attitude to a particular situation but by changing one's perception of the situation to which one is responding.¹⁴⁰ This was successfully done by the Conservatives over their handling of unemployment and economic downturns. In short, they managed to persuade voters they weren't to blame for these particular issues. Shaw examined Labour's failed attempts to persuade voters over the economy in 1992. The

¹³⁷ Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1979*, pp. 182

¹³⁸ Ibid. p. 181

¹³⁹ Ibid. p. 183

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. p.183.

economic team of Brown, Beckett and John Smith were good on television and had a host of moderate (and pre-tested) policies. But they did not convince voters because there was no attempt to re-frame the debate about the failures of the market economy. New Labour supporters said the failure on the economy at the 1992 election was because of a lack of enthusiasm for private enterprise. Shaw argues the failure was due to the choice being between who could manage capitalism better. If it is about the best management of capitalism, he argues, voters will choose the party that is the most enthusiastic supporter of it and the party that represents those who are keen participants in it - business.¹⁴¹

Shaw's third criticism of the use of TV by Labour concerns what he regards as an in built bias against the Party. TV's aim for balance often relies on the use of experts to explain complicated matters and offer context in broadcast friendly soundbites. But, says Shaw, these experts tended to be individuals from industrial firms, trade associations and financial institutions often supportive of the kinds of policies favoured by the Conservatives. Moreover, they were deemed to be "experts" by journalists who, according to Shaw, represented broadly conservative broadcasting hierarchies.¹⁴² Increasingly, any economic analysis tended to come from City economists and financial executives who were generally more right-wing than the alternatives in academia or the trade unions. Indeed, a *Guardian* poll cited by Peter Goulding in *The Guardian* on the 4th of April 1992 showed 90% were Conservative in their political sympathies.

Errors occurred because of a lack of the tightly controlled organisation which had been so prominent in the 1987 campaign. The fact that these mistakes happened when Peter Mandelson and Patricia Hewett were no longer involved is no coincidence. Hewitt left for the Institute of Public Policy Research following disagreements with chief of staff Charles Clarke. Mandelson left to pursue his ambitions to become an MP. But his departure was long and protracted and led to damaging splits in the party organisation. The new Director of Communications was John Underwood but he resigned shortly after, leaving his replacement, David Hill, with less than a year to prepare for a general election.

¹⁴¹ Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1979*, p.188.

¹⁴² *Ibid.* p.170.

"Open warfare had been declared for the past year and where nothing was in place for the campaign," said Gould.¹⁴³ This also led to further criticism within the party about the role of the Shadow Communications Agency. It had been set up by Mandelson in 1986, with responsibility for all of Labour's communications strategy. It was separate to the rest of the party organisation and there were grumblings about its direct access to the leader, its lack of accountability and its dominance of the campaign. When that campaign failed to deliver electoral success, criticism became more vocal and more public. *The Guardian's* political editor Michael White reported that in the days after the defeat the knives were out for the SCA.¹⁴⁴ He said MPs like John Prescott were determined to reclaim control and White also reported complaints from Mandelson allies like Jim Parish, the party's senior campaigns officer, that the SCA had staged a "wholesale takeover of the campaign."¹⁴⁵

Labour's *methods* for dealing with the media also took on some subtle but important changes in 1992. A number of tactics were brought together and became known as spin doctoring. Mandelson was the master. His tactics in the late 1980s were described in *The Independent* newspaper: "He wheedles journalists, cajoles them, takes them into his confidence, spurns them, adapts his tone to theirs. Then if they fail to present the party his way, he bullies, pesters and harries them."¹⁴⁶ In other words, Mandelson and others would spend time with individual journalists putting the party's side of the story and if that is not how it appeared in print or on air, complaints would follow. Mandelson chose to focus his efforts on the more Labour friendly broadsheets such as *The Guardian* and *The Independent* believing that the broadsheets were more influential in setting the TV news agenda than the tabloids. Mandelson left the campaign in 1990 to pursue his political ambitions but the tactics were in place. Complaints to the press would be swift and vociferous. If the complaint was not about what a journalist had done it would be to contradict a particular line from the other parties and attempt to move the news agenda back on to Labour territory. This became known as rapid rebuttal. The new

¹⁴³ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p.103.

¹⁴⁴ *The Guardian*, 18th June 1992, p.7.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *The Independent*, July 1st 1989.

tactics soon became the subject of complaints, with accusations of bullying. These claims, according to commentators such as former BBC journalists Andrew Marr and Nicholas Jones, would damage Labour in the long run. Marr states: "As relations deteriorated between the media and Number 10, spin began to look less like a brilliantly clever and successful way of governing a liberal democracy, and more like a terrible mistake."¹⁴⁷ For Labour in opposition, however, the tactics were successful and some of the less aggressive media management such as agenda setting and rapid rebuttal have become standard practice.

Jones was berated on many occasions by Campbell and Mandelson.¹⁴⁸ He recalls one incident when he was the subject of complaints from Labour's press team for a story in 1991 which actually concerned a smear *against* Neil Kinnock.¹⁴⁹ *The Sun* had run a story trying to associate Kinnock with a millionaire businessman at the centre of a fraud investigation. *The Sun's* political editor Trevor Kavanagh told Jones that one of the paper's reporters had phoned the Fraud Squad to get information. Jones spotted a scoop. Here was confirmation that *Sun* reporters could phone police officers directly to get stories at a time when the Metropolitan Police was trying to crack down on leaks. Labour's Jack Cunningham demanded an inquiry - as Jones reported. But then Labour's press team had a change of heart and tried to kill the story. Despite it being an attempt to smear Kinnock, they wanted it out of the media to prevent any link between Kinnock and a potentially criminal businessman. They feared Jones's continued pursuit of the story was damaging. Press officers called the newsroom with threats of complaints to the BBC's Director General. Jones' story was now "not news" and instead he should have been reporting Kinnock's speech on health.

Whilst the result of the 1987 election was to be expected, the 1992 result was bitterly disappointing for Labour. For all the organisational changes and policy battles, the party's share of the vote went up by only 3.6 per cent. In terms of

¹⁴⁷ Marr, *BBC News Online* (May 10th 2007).

¹⁴⁸ Jones, *Sultans of Spin*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁹ *Nick Jones Archive and Blog*, 23rd August 2012.

the media campaign, it was not on a par with 1987 although many commentators felt Labour had had the best of the campaign. The message had been changed considerably but seemingly with little effect. Shaw's criticism that policy changes were being based on wrongly interpreted evidence is convincing but cannot be seen in isolation. The media context had improved slightly but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the press was so hostile any Labour policy would have been criticised. Labour's economic plans came under fire, despite the highly respected *Financial Times* giving them a cautious welcome. Tax and spending again remained the main election battleground and Labour suffered.

The messenger was a more tightly controlled Neil Kinnock with a greater role for some of his more telegenic spokespeople. This did little to deflect the spotlight and the personal attacks in the media appeared at regular intervals. Some of the methods which had worked well in 1987 were used again successfully but there were signs journalists were becoming increasingly resentful of being manipulated and in some cases harassed or bullied. Some tactics in the media campaign did backfire and it is unlikely such mistakes would have been made if Mandelson and Hewitt had been directly involved.

Neil Kinnock resigned immediately after the defeat. What could broadly be termed "modernisation" had been tried for two general elections in a row and Labour had lost both. There were two differing conclusions. Either the modernisation project was abandoned in favour of another approach, or it was accelerated for one final push. The results of the past two general elections had yielded modest gains but in terms of media strategy the improvements had been greater. The methods had been transformed and the messenger greatly improved. The message had been radically changed but with little effect and the media context was still frustratingly hostile. After the 1992 general election the party was at a crossroads.

Chapter Four

A Tory Press to a Tony Press:

Labour, the media and the 1997 General Election.

Defeat at the 1992 election was a surprise to some in Labour but a crushing disappointment for all. It left the party with a serious dilemma over its future direction. Had "modernisation" failed, as the traditionalists argued? Or had it not gone far enough, as the modernisers argued? In terms of Labour dealing with the media there was a great deal of praise for its strategy. Some argued that the party had once again lost the election but won the campaign, despite some errors in the final weeks. This chapter will highlight both the continuities and change between 1992 and 1997. The organisation of the party's media strategy and the methods used remained broadly the same. The message and the tone of that message changed drastically as policy continued its rightward shift. The messenger was also new. Tony Blair was a politician for the television age, both in terms of looks and presentation of policy. These three factors together created the most radical change of all - the transformation of the media context. Newspaper hostility was finally tamed with the change from a "Tory press to a Tony press."¹⁵⁰

After Kinnock's resignation, the election of John Smith as leader was seen as a victory for the traditionalists and frustration for modernisers. Smith had said: "If radical change involves the Labour Party subverting its principles and aborting its mission, then I'm conservative in that very narrow sense."¹⁵¹ Gould's response was: "I knew my project wouldn't get very far with him."¹⁵² But then on May 12th 1994 Labour suffered a political and emotional shock - John Smith died and the party was looking for another leader. The modernisers were guaranteed to triumph. The only serious candidate from the left was Bryan Gould and he had fallen out with Smith and returned to his native New Zealand. That left Tony Blair and Gordon Brown as the favourites and after Brown agreed

¹⁵⁰ Franklin, *Packaging Politics*, p. 142.

¹⁵¹ Jon Sopel, *Tony Blair: The Moderniser*, (London: Bantam Books, 1995), p. 135.

¹⁵² Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p.156.

to stand aside Blair took 57 per cent of the vote in the leadership election, which also included John Prescott and Margaret Beckett. The momentum was now with the modernisers. They had a clear strategy for dealing with the media. As far as they were concerned, the media had an important role in determining the outcome of the general election. As a result, those making changes to the party between 1994 and 1997 had this question in mind: "How will it be viewed by the media?" That included changes in policy; the presentation of the new leader; the tactics that were to be used in dealing with the media; and an all-out campaign to either "neutralise" the hostile press, as Alistair Campbell put it,¹⁵³ or to gain its support.

Building new relations with the media became one of the key aims of the new leadership. It was an ambitious attempt to change the *media context*, born of an almost obsessive desire to make sure the party did not suffer the same fate at the hands of the press as Neil Kinnock. It is difficult to underestimate just how much the role of the media had affected the new leadership. The BBC's former political editor Andrew Marr was sympathetic to their predicament. "Blair, Brown, Mandelson and Campbell had watched Neil Kinnock being torn to shreds by hostile journalism, abetted by a pretty ruthless Number 10 operation in the Thatcher era, and had resolved 'this will never happen to us again.'¹⁵⁴ The former BBC political correspondent Nicholas Jones has written extensively about spin under the New Labour governments. "Labour had been left with no alternative but to come to terms with the inherent danger for any future leader of the destructive force of *The Sun's* political reporting."¹⁵⁵

At the forefront of this drive were Blair himself and his press secretary Alistair Campbell. Both were eager to build relationships, particularly with the Murdoch press because - quite simply - they thought it would help them win the election. Blair believed the press to be important in influencing voters and driving the agenda of the broadcasters. Campbell agreed and was equally driven. "More often than not," said Jones, "his benchmark in deciding what to do next has

¹⁵³ Campbell, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry* May 14th, 2012.

¹⁵⁴ Marr, *BBC News Online*, May 10th 2007.

¹⁵⁵ *Nick Jones Archive and Blog*, 2012.

been the attitude adopted by *The Sun*.¹⁵⁶ The new leadership's belief in the power of the media is hard to exaggerate and is perhaps not surprising after the 1992 result. Hugo Young writing in *The Guardian* shortly after Blair became Prime Minister recalled an interview he had done with the Labour leader just before election day when it was clear he was going to win. "Nobody, he (Blair) vigorously insisted, should underestimate the matchless importance to his victory of the endorsement he received on the first day of the campaign from *The Sun* newspaper."¹⁵⁷ Former Sunday Times editor Andrew Neil told the Leveson Inquiry that it was difficult to judge just what an effect papers like *The Sun* had on the result:

Whatever the reality, the more significant fact is this: it is what many Labour politicians and strategists, especially those coalescing around Mr Blair's New Labour Project, believed. Never again, they concluded, should Labour be so much on the wrong end of a hostile press. It was time, the Blairites believed, to see if the Labour lamb could really lie down with the Murdoch lion - and not be eaten.¹⁵⁸

For media relations to change so dramatically they had to be two sided and it soon became clear that Murdoch was open to persuasion. *The Sun* in particular was becoming increasingly disillusioned with the Major government but it was a feeling that was shared throughout Conservative-supporting Fleet Street. There were a number of interlinked factors that created a press that was open to changing its political allegiances during the mid-1990s. There was a personal dislike of John Major and a desire to "punish" the party for ditching their favourite, Margaret Thatcher. There was also a degree of boredom with a Conservative government that appeared to be running out of steam. One problem for John Major was that he was not Margaret Thatcher, the Prime Minister adored by large sections of the press. Thomas identifies a "snob mob"

¹⁵⁶ Jones, *Sultans of Spin*, p.174.

¹⁵⁷ *The Guardian*, 30th October 1997, p. 21.

¹⁵⁸ Neil, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, May 8th 2012.

of newspaper executives who loathed Major for similar reasons that they loathed Kinnock - he was not one of them.¹⁵⁹ Major had left school at 16, in stark contrast to the Fettes and Oxford-educated Tony Blair. Major, in turn, loathed the press, leaving relations in tatters together with a wider media operation that was ineffective. Not only did this affect the communication of policy but also the poor handling of an astonishing number of "sleaze" allegations that emerged at the beginning of the campaign. This all added to the notion it was time for a change.

I had personally witnessed some of the anger felt at *The Sun* for John Major. I was working in the newsroom on a news reporting shift when Major appeared on the TV screen during a news bulletin. Kelvin Mackenzie stopped to watch and let rip a tirade of abuse that was personal as well as political. McKenzie would argue he was merely articulating the apparent decline in support for the Conservatives which seemed to be reflected amongst newspaper readers. By the end of 1994, half of *Sun* readers were voting Labour and support for the Conservatives had gone down by a third amongst *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* readers. By the time of the 1997 election Stuart Higgins was in the editor's chair at *The Sun* and said if the paper had supported the wrong side it would have been a journalistic and commercial nightmare.¹⁶⁰

Newspaper support was there for the taking but it would need more than disaffection with the boy from Brixton to make it work. Andrew Neil says New Labour was pushing at an open door but there remained one more stumbling block - policy.¹⁶¹ Neil describes the relationship between Murdoch and Margaret Thatcher as one of ideological soulmates. Murdoch was a Thatcherite, rather than a Tory. How a right wing newspaper proprietor could swing so favourably behind a centre-left political party was due to a unique confluence of events, according to Neil. There was the disillusionment with the Tories as previously described. There was also the personal appeal of a young, up and coming politician in Tony Blair who increasingly looked like a winner. Murdoch liked to back winners. The crucial factor tipping the balance was the message being

¹⁵⁹ Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p. 134.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.* p.132.

¹⁶¹ Neil, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 9th July 2012.

brought by Blair - a message that would not disrupt Murdoch's business interests despite a desire among many in the Party to cut Murdoch down to size for the savaging Labour received over the previous decade.

Meetings between Blair and Murdoch began shortly after Blair became leader. According to Murdoch himself, he met Blair as the opposition Labour leader nine times between 1994 and 1997 and most of these were instigated by Blair.¹⁶² The most publicised date of the Blair/Murdoch romance took place on the Hayman Islands in Australia in 1995. Doubts still remained about Blair amongst senior editorial staff at *The Sun* but the proprietor had made his decision. Blair was to be endorsed outright *and* on the first day of the campaign. Perhaps Murdoch too had some reservations. The headline read: "*The Sun* Backs Blair" rather than *The Sun* backs Labour. It illustrated the paper's confidence in the new leader, rather than the Labour Party itself, and reflected the concerns of many senior executives at the paper, including its editor.

The transformation in press support was stunning. With Michael Foot at the helm in 1983, Labour had the support of just two of the 17 national newspapers - *The Daily Mirror* and *Sunday Mirror*. There was little change between 1987 and 1992, although the party gained the support of *The Guardian* for both elections and the *Financial Times* in 1992. By 1997, Labour had the support of 11 out of 19 national newspapers, representing over 62% of newspaper readership. Even those papers continuing to support the Conservatives, showed signs of wavering. On Blair's election as party leader a *Daily Mail* editorial stated: "We have entered a new political era. And John Major has a real fight on his hands."¹⁶³ According to Thomas, any notions of a press "shift to the left" after 1992 were incorrect. Instead the political editor of *The Sun*, Trevor Kavanagh, was nearer the mark: "It's not *The Sun* that's changed. It's the Labour Party. They've moved in our direction and a long way."¹⁶⁴

The media context had been well and truly altered by Labour's enthusiastic pursuit of the Tory press. However, statements to the Leveson Inquiry and from

¹⁶² Rupert Murdoch, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 25th April 2012. Accessed at: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140122144906/http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/>

¹⁶³ *Daily Mail*, 22nd July 1994, p.8.

¹⁶⁴ *The Independent*, March 10th 1997.

BBC archives provide further evidence that senior party figures regret the extent of this pursuit and admit that the media was allowed to directly influence policy. Blair himself now seems to regret how much importance he placed on relations with the tabloids. He told *BBC Radio Four* last year that he probably became too affected by the media attacks on Kinnock and that gave them too much influence over new Labour. He told presenter Peter Hennessy: "I think what we should have been doing is trying to get to a situation where the media were not so empowered and instead what we did was empower them significantly because we played into that theme or that climate that they operated in."¹⁶⁵ Having said that, he remained of the view that the press during Neil Kinnock's time could be incredibly important: "I watched what he went through and could see how incredibly destructive it was cos at that point the media was immensely powerful in its ability to shift opinion and it was so negative on him that it really didn't matter whether if what he said was sensible or not sensible."¹⁶⁶

The courting of the press was largely about courting Rupert Murdoch's News International newspapers and, in particular, *The Sun*. Andrew Neil explained to Leveson why those papers in particular were important.¹⁶⁷ Firstly, *The Sun* was the biggest selling daily newspaper of the time, whose readership was largely made up of working class and lower middle class swing voters. Secondly, to use Neil's own words, those papers were prepared to be "politically promiscuous."¹⁶⁸ The Mirror Group had always been solidly Labour, The Mail and Telegraph groups were likely to stay loyal to the Conservatives, the *Express* was a shadow of its former self. News International was not only powerful, its support was up for grabs. Neil argued the influence of *The Sun* was waning and Blair was pushing at an open door:

It (*The Sun*) needed to back Mr Blair to show it was in touch with its readers much more than Mr Blair needed its backing (though he did not realise that at the time since he was still

¹⁶⁵ Tony Blair, *BBC Radio 4*, (2017).

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Neil, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 9th July 2012.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

obsessed with what had happened to Neil Kinnock). *The Sun* was following the crowd rather than telling it what to think.¹⁶⁹

Nor is this a view just shared in hindsight. *The Guardian* columnist David McKie writing shortly after the 1997 election said Murdoch was so disillusioned with the Major government that he had come to want Blair and some senior Labour politicians thought their courtship was never necessary.¹⁷⁰

The task of winning over the media would, undoubtedly, be much easier if the *message* being delivered was more in tune with the viewpoint of most national newspapers. Policy changes continued from 1994 although much of the ground work on changing policy had been undertaken by Neil Kinnock. Opposition to council house sales had been dropped, re-nationalisation largely abandoned and the policy of unilateralism had also been discarded. Yet the modernisers still felt Kinnock's heart wasn't in it. Gould stated: "Neil Kinnock did not change the Labour Party far enough, fast enough."¹⁷¹ Although, Kinnock was hampered by his early battles with Militant and sidetracked by the miners' strike, Alistair Campbell also believed he remained ideologically ambivalent about change. "I think he knew that there were an awful lot of things in the Labour Party that were wrong, but he also had a sentimental attachment to some of the things that were wrong as well."¹⁷²

Kinnock had already ditched most of Labour's controversial policies. For Blair there were two remaining stumbling blocks. Changing economic policy and then persuading voters the Party really had changed. Much of the Blair influence was about tone and presentation rather than practical policy, although this was no less controversial within the party. He acted quickly to spell out the direction of policy in a number of speeches, which were to lay the foundations of the 1997 manifesto. He began within months of his election by addressing what were seen by modernisers as voter-friendly attitudes that were not associated with

¹⁶⁹ Neil, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 9th July 2012.

¹⁷⁰ Ivor Crewe / Brian Gosschalk, / John Bartle, (eds.) *Why Labour Won the General Election of 1997* (London: Routledge, 1998), p.130.

¹⁷¹ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p.138.

¹⁷² *Ibid.* p. 139.

Labour. He spoke about community and family values and also criticised the party's existing policy of the abolition of selection in education. In terms of image and symbolism, there was little that could rival Clause Four of the Labour Party constitution, which committed the party to the "common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange." This pledge to a huge expansion of the state was more symbolic than aspirational but it was exploited by Labour's opponents. It was, to the modernisers, the classic symbol of Old Labour and a dead weight around the party's neck. Its abolition in 1995 did not have much of an impact on policy but the message it sent out was powerful, particularly to the right wing media.

In the summer of 1996, Labour began drawing up the manifesto and promoting it through a series of simple, clear pledges. The method would then be deployed at the general election itself. According to Gould, four were agreed fairly easily.¹⁷³ They were about limiting class sizes, cutting NHS waiting times, jobs for the young, and fast track punishment for some criminals. A fifth pledge was harder to agree as it was an attempt to deal with the last policy area that the modernisers thought was problematic - taxation. Shadow Chancellor Gordon Brown was toying with the idea of introducing a top level tax rate of 50% but by January 1997 he had been persuaded to change his mind. He announced that neither the basic rate nor the top rate of tax would go up under Labour. Furthermore, a new Labour government would stick to Conservative Party spending plans for the first two years of the next parliament. The fifth pledge was now in place. "No rise in income tax rates, cut VAT on heating to 5% and inflation and interest rates as low as possible."¹⁷⁴ Thomas describes the changes in tax policy as the most influential policy change in terms of media coverage.¹⁷⁵ "The changing substance rather than the image offered the key to explaining Labour's press triumph in 1997."¹⁷⁶ When the tax plans were

¹⁷³ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, pp. 264-267.

¹⁷⁴ *Labour Party General Election Manifesto 1997*. Accessed online at: <http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1997/1997-labour-manifesto.shtml>

¹⁷⁵ Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p. 136.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

announced, Gould said it was an "amazing victory. Labour had done what five years before had seemed impossible: it had beaten the Tories on tax."¹⁷⁷

These policy changes left Labour open to the charge that it was a principle-free party searching for ideas - any ideas - that might make it popular. In addition, any policies adopted had to be popular with the press. To counter these arguments Blair made several attempts in numerous speeches to spell out the ideology of New Labour and these ideas were brought together in two books. The first came from Peter Mandelson in the *Blair Revolution* (1995) and a year later from Philip Gould in the *Unfinished Revolution*. There was a consistent framework to these new ideas. Blair, Mandelson and Gould all argued for a need to recast the old debates between right and left. Arguing that old choices such as nationalisation v privatisation or tax rises v tax cuts were no longer valid, it became known as "the third way." Barriers between old left and new right thinking were to be broken down with new partnerships between government and industry.¹⁷⁸ Critics argued there was no substance to these ideas, that they were so broad and general they could mean anything to anyone. Initially, it appeared to be a commitment to developing a European-style social democracy,¹⁷⁹ others like Shaw were far more critical describing it as the abandonment of Keynesian social democracy.¹⁸⁰ Indeed Shaw is persuasive when he says if there was an ideological framework it was support for the free market with the only justifiable public spending being in the areas of education, training and research and development which directly benefited the economy.¹⁸¹

Mandelson said his attempt to formalise new Labour thinking was aimed at challenging opponents of the "third way" who saw it as value-free electoral expediency, examining the latest poll results and trying to come up with policies that would fit and appeal in particular to Middle England and the press.¹⁸² It was this notion of policy driven by opinion polls that the modernisers were eager to

¹⁷⁷ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 285.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.* p. 232.

¹⁷⁹ Will Hutton, *The State We're In* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 30.

¹⁸⁰ Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1945*, p.201.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.* p. 203.

¹⁸² Peter Mandelson, *The Third Man*, (London: HarperPress, 2011), p. 195.

defend themselves against. Blair, Mandelson, Campbell and Gould were all keen to point out the new policies had substance and were not just good presentation. Describing the 1997 campaign, Alistair Campbell said it was far more than a question of improved communications. "Much more important than what we said to the media was what we did, the overall vision put forward by Tony Blair and his colleagues."¹⁸³ There certainly was a vision but details often remained vague. The economic journalist Will Hutton wrote the best selling book *The State We're In* (1996) shortly after Blair became Labour leader. He initially thought him to be the person who would return the party to centre-left social democracy.¹⁸⁴ Blair often appropriated much of the language of Hutton's central theme in his book, that of the "stakeholder society." This was a society where the economy would no longer be left solely to the free market. Capitalism would remain but there would be a range of stakeholders in the economy so it ran for the benefit of workers and customers as well as shareholders. This would limit the short-termism that Hutton argued afflicted much of the British economy. In Singapore in January 1996 Blair gave what Campbell then described as the party's keynote speech on the economy. "It is what I call a stakeholder economy," Blair told business leaders. "Opportunity is available to all, advancement is through merit and from which no group or class of people is excluded."¹⁸⁵ The generality of much of the speech meant the Conservative's Michael Portillo was able to claim the Tories had already created the stakeholder society by privatising public utilities and creating several million more shareholders.¹⁸⁶ With income tax levels unchanged and a commitment to Conservative spending plans, Hutton would later claim Labour was offering "very much the same economic framework as that established by the right over the past fifteen years."¹⁸⁷ In 2007, he added: "It's true that stakeholder capitalism is a philosophy still in search of a political home."¹⁸⁸

It is difficult to decide how much policy was influenced by this third way ideology and how much it was influenced by the media, partly because the two agendas

¹⁸³ Campbell, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, May 14th 2012.

¹⁸⁴ Hutton, *The State We're In*, p. 30.

¹⁸⁵ *BBC 6 O'Clock News*, January 8th 1996.

¹⁸⁶ *BBC 6 O'Clock News*, January 8th 1996.

¹⁸⁷ Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1945*, p.201.

¹⁸⁸ *The Guardian*, 14th May 2007.

had much in common. Comments to the Leveson Inquiry suggested that the influence the right wing media had on policy was greater than acknowledged at the time. It certainly went beyond changes in tone that Campbell described to Leveson.¹⁸⁹ Tone, for Campbell, would be something like Labour's law and order slogan: tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime. When dealing with papers such as the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun*, the emphasis from Labour would be 'tough on crime.' When dealing with papers such as *The Guardian*, the emphasis would be 'tough on the causes of crime.'

Some of the evidence to Leveson suggests the press had a direct influence on policy. The statements from Andrew Neil and the former BBC political correspondent turned New Labour spin doctor Lance Price are insightful. Neil put it bluntly: "New Labour was prepared to pay a high price in terms of access and influence for the support of the Murdoch papers."¹⁹⁰ Undoubtedly, how much influence Rupert Murdoch had on policy is complicated. News International - along with other companies - were bound to benefit from a Labour Party pursuing what was essentially a free market agenda. Benefits to proprietors like Murdoch, it could be argued, were simply the result of ideological compatibility. Price agreed there were no formal deals but "arrangements" with Murdoch which amounted to direct influence on policy. He told Leveson he had used the following phrase: "If Murdoch was left to pursue his business interests in peace he would give Labour a fair wind." This was a close approximation of the words used by several sources who attended the News Corporation event in Australia in 1995, which Tony Blair attended.¹⁹¹ He added: "I think it is significant that in my three years working for the Blair government I can recall no conversation that contradicted the impression that an arrangement had been made."¹⁹² He describes Murdoch as the "24th member of the cabinet" and no big decision was taken in Number 10 without taking into account the likely reaction of three men: Gordon Brown, John

¹⁸⁹ Campbell, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, May 14th 2012.

¹⁹⁰ Neil, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 9th July 2012.

¹⁹¹ Lance Price, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 9th July 2012. Accessed via: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140122162838/http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/evidence/?witness=lance-price>

¹⁹² Ibid.

Prescott and Rupert Murdoch.¹⁹³ Andrew Neil describes the tight links between the upper echelons of the Murdoch empire and the Labour government as "a vortex of relationships."¹⁹⁴ It was, according to Neil, unprecedented in the history of the press and took place largely behind closed doors and unrecorded in official minutes. He says Blair told him in 1996: "How we treat Rupert Murdoch's media interests when in power will depend on how his newspapers treated the Labour Party in the run up to the election."¹⁹⁵

Murdoch denies any deals with Prime Ministers past or present or any attempts to directly influence policy.¹⁹⁶ He told Leveson meetings were part of his work as a publisher to understand policy and to best serve his readers. Tony Blair was an impressive figure and a personal friend. He never requested the support of News International but "he was a politician and I had no doubt that he would welcome the support of our newspapers."¹⁹⁷ He points out some of the critical coverage his papers gave Labour - once asking whether Blair was the most dangerous man in Britain. There were also Labour policies which adversely affected his business, such as an increased licence fee for the BBC and the establishment of the regulator Ofcom.

Tony Blair articulated similar arguments to Leveson. However, he was much more open and said that writing in 2012 meant he could comment with "greater frankness."¹⁹⁸ So it proved, despite beginning his statement cautiously. He reiterated his hostility to the press and remained convinced of its ability to influence elections. He argued the press remained important because of their deep penetration into British society and they still had a huge influence on setting the news agenda of broadcasters. He also said many of the British papers adopted an aggressive style and were used as political tools by their owners whereby the lines between political comment and news were blurred.

¹⁹³ Lance Price, *The Spin Doctor's Diary*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2006), p. xii

¹⁹⁴ Neil, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 9th July 2012.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Murdoch, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 25th April 2012.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Tony Blair, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 28th May 2012. Accessed via: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140122190638/http://www.levesoninquiry.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Witness-Statement-of-Tony-Blair1.pdf>

"The consequence," he told the Inquiry, "is that any politician who falls out with a section of that media...has a serious and potentially politically life-threatening problem."¹⁹⁹ Nevertheless, Blair accepted he had a close interaction with proprietors but that interaction was inevitable and necessary. He also highlighted a number of areas where government policy worked against the interests of Murdoch's broadcasting interests. These included: preventing the takeover of Manchester United by BSkyB; granting new channels to the BBC; and giving the BBC an increased licence fee.

Blair's frankness to Leveson is revealing. For a man who chooses his words very carefully, this sentence is extraordinary: "As far as the formulation of policy, *we tried very hard* (my emphasis) to keep the line between persuading the media of a policy and allowing them privileged access in formulating it."²⁰⁰ He went on to say there was nothing wrong with briefing the media or interacting with them to understand their readers. "This could influence policy but I don't think that was unhealthy."²⁰¹ This is an acknowledgement that a proprietor could influence policy on the pretext that the proprietor was representing the views of his readers. This is flawed on two levels. It treats the millions of readers as one homogenous block, either in favour or against any particular issue. It is also an attempt to represent the political views of readers whose views in themselves - if they exist at all - have been influenced by the proprietor. Blair went on to say that it could be very hard to adopt a policy when it was likely to be the subject of a media campaign against it. He highlighted the issue of media ownership as an example of this. Between 1994-1997 the party changed its policy on media ownership and Blair says this decision was taken for ideological reasons (foreign ownership should not be regarded differently to British ownership) but also because "it would be fair to say that had we kept that policy, it would have been a problem with the Murdoch press."²⁰²

Andrew Neil argues that Labour in power did nothing to undermine or threaten Murdoch's British media interests, despite a deep desire among many in the Labour party, especially (but not exclusively) on the left, to "cut him down to

¹⁹⁹ Blair, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 28th May 2012.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

size."²⁰³ Neil went on to say demands for a privacy law were put on hold and Murdoch's control of 37% of national newspaper circulation was tolerated. He added: "BSkyB was allowed to grow unhindered and light-touch media regulation became the consensus of the day."²⁰⁴ He then went on to say that Labour paved the way for Murdoch's News Corporation to attempt to buy the 60% of BSkyB that it did not own with the 2003 Communications Act.

This was something Mr Murdoch's people lobbied hard for, with his support, and they had unique and extensive access to the levers of power at the heart of the Blair government to make this lobbying effective. When Mr Murdoch testified before this Inquiry that he had never asked government for anything it gave me cause to wonder if he had forgotten this - or forgotten he was testifying under oath.²⁰⁵

Commenting on media ownership in particular Price added: "As a journalist pre-1997 I was, however, aware that all discussion on limiting cross-media ownership ceased within Labour Party policy circles and that those who supported restrictions believed that this was a direct consequence of the party leadership courting Murdoch."²⁰⁶

Labour's former Director of Communications Peter Mandelson was also remarkably open about the influence of the media and its owners. Both he and Tony Blair were worried about the political implications of Gordon Brown's idea of introducing a new 50p tax rate for those earning more than £100,000 a year. At the Murdoch conference in Australia in 1995, Blair had been pinned against an aircraft door and given the following advice by Australia's Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating: "Under no circumstances ever go into an election saying you will put up income taxes."²⁰⁷ Brown's idea never saw the light of day.

²⁰³ Neil, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 9th July 2012.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Price, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 9th July 2012.

²⁰⁷ Mandelson, *The Third Man*, p. 201.

In answering questions from Leveson, Mandelson discussed media influence on policy. In a carefully worded, yet frank statement Mandelson said:

The media's influence exists but it is not the *major factor* (my italics) in deciding the party's policies. If there is an influence, the media would argue it is an extension of the public's views and interests (rather than the public's views being shaped by the media.) The media certainly have an ability in the way they present a party's policies to shape how these policies are received and seen and that has a bearing on party leaders."²⁰⁸

Mandelson highlighted Europe as a key area where Murdoch may seek to influence policy and potentially clash with the pro-European Tony Blair. Mandelson had deep reservations about the change in tone on Europe, law and order and immigration to ensure the Murdoch press stayed on board. He also suggested it was one factor Blair considered in replacing Robin Cook with the Eurosceptic Jack Straw after the 2001 general election.²⁰⁹ He went on to say there was direct influence from Murdoch on European policy. Prior to the 1997 general election Blair wrote an article in *The Sun* professing his devotion to the pound sterling at a time when party policy was to hold a referendum on joining the single currency. "It is said that at this point Rupert Murdoch finally made up his mind to back New Labour," said Mandelson. "In my view, he would have reached that decision in any case and that the concession on the currency was not necessary."²¹⁰ Mandelson also suggested that the decision not to call a referendum on the Euro in 1998 was partly due to the opposition it would attract from the Murdoch press. Mandelson's startling summary was: "It is improbable that the government would have made any important move on Europe without at least warning News International beforehand."²¹¹ Other commentators agreed with this analysis. Andrew Neil told Leveson that Europe threatened to upset the cosy "Blair-Murdoch love-in" and that the proprietor had "a major influence on government policy."²¹² Further evidence about Murdoch's influence on

²⁰⁸ Mandelson, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 21st May 2012.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Neil, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 9th July 2012.

European policy came from Labour's former deputy leader Roy Hattersley. He told presenter Anthony Howard on the BBC Radio programme *Power and the Press* that *The Sun's* support had come at a price. Blair could have been far more positive about joining the European single currency if he'd not been so fearful of the reaction from Murdoch.²¹³

Price supports much of what Mandelson told Leveson on Europe. In his own statement to Leveson, Price describes taking part in policy discussions with ministers and the likely reaction of the press - particularly News International - was usually a key feature of those discussions. He said a person "close to Tony Blair's thinking" had told him that "we've promised News International we won't make changes to our Europe policy without talking to them."²¹⁴ Responding to the issue of Europe in his Leveson statement, Blair accepts Murdoch had strong views on the issue "as did a raft of other dominant media figures. Most of all so did the public."²¹⁵ He explicitly denies Mandelson's claim that Murdoch prevented him from advocating Britain join the Euro. He says those decisions were political. Ideologically he wanted to join the Euro but he was persuaded otherwise because the economic circumstances were not right.

It is undeniable that Labour's media *methods* for the 1997 election were successful in many ways. Although largely based on the methods that were used in 1992 and 1987, they were ruthlessly deployed with Peter Mandelson back at the helm. In addition, they had been updated and refined. Not only did these tactics help set the agenda they played a much more crucial part in neutralising press hostility. The rapid rebuttal system got a £500,000 investment. Essentially, it was a computer system named Excalibur with a huge capacity to read and store material. Its purpose was to very quickly challenge any statements from the Conservatives to ensure the story became about Labour's response and not the original accusation. This was especially important for TV and the 24 hour news channel Sky News where the need for "a new line" on the story was a constant demand put upon journalists. Journalists

²¹³ Jones, *Sultans of Spin*, p 177.

²¹⁴ Price, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 9th July 2012.

²¹⁵ Blair, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 28th May 2012.

want to keep their story updated to make them look on top of developments in news. If these stories are now being broadcast on the hour, there are greater opportunities for spin doctors to influence the general thrust of a story.

Thomas highlights the effectiveness of the strategy on the issue of tax.²¹⁶ In November 1996, the Conservatives released a dossier suggesting Labour's spending commitments would mean tax rises of £1,200 for every family in the country. The figures, according to the press, had been approved by the head of the civil service. Even before the Tories had officially made their claims, Gordon Brown had already gone on the offensive, accusing the Tories of lying. The party press team had established that the figures had not been approved and, indeed, there was criticism that the civil service had been asked to check the statistics. Shortly after, there was an in depth rebuttal distributed to all journalists accusing the Tories of a further 89 lies.

Agenda setting as defined earlier continued apace but it was one of several tactics that began to get out of control and damage the party. By 1997, many broadcast journalists were wise to these techniques, although it appeared to have little effect on coverage and did not hamper Labour's control over TV pictures. There was also growing criticism of the role of spin doctors, who were becoming much more aggressive in their treatment of journalists. *The Guardian's* Westminster correspondent David Hencke said journalists would be fed stories which had to be reported in a certain way. "Follow something different and the journalist, editor or TV executive will know all about it the next day," he said.²¹⁷ Gould remained dismissive saying any criticism of "spin doctors" was ill-founded,²¹⁸ it was merely an American name given to straight-down-the-line spokespeople for the party. MPs were also growing increasingly concerned, Clare Short referred to Mandelson and Campbell as "Blair's dark men." She told *The Guardian*: "I think the obsession with the media and focus groups is making us look like we want power at any price."²¹⁹

²¹⁶ Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p. 134.

²¹⁷ *The Guardian*, August 8th 1996, p. 6.

²¹⁸ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p. 328.

²¹⁹ *The Guardian*, August 8th 1996, p.1.

Both Blair and Alistair Campbell thought the British press was different to any other in the world because of its influence on the broadcast media. They believed it worked in the following way. The technical and logistical process of gathering TV news is time consuming. That's why agenda setting is possible - providing filming opportunities and case studies is very appealing to hard pressed TV journalists with deadlines to meet. For the same reasons, TV journalists will examine the morning papers for stories that can be quickly followed up. Campbell describes this as the right wing "prism" through which broadcasters viewed the news.²²⁰ As a TV journalist, I would often justify the need for TV coverage because a story "was all over the papers." To try to combat this, the Labour press team developed two tactics. The first was "trailing" key speeches in the morning's papers. If an important policy announcement was due from Labour one morning, it would be battling for the broadcasters' attention with whatever else was in the papers. The battle is easier if one of the stories in the papers IS the speech that is about to be delivered. So, even though the full speech is yet to be delivered, a few titbits can be leaked to the press the night before and appear in the papers on the day of the speech. It is a media management master stroke. The papers will go for it because it's an "exclusive" foretaste of what's to come. The broadcasters would often complain but were not put off because the story was now on the agenda; the logistics meant it was difficult to change at such short notice; and although the story had been published in a newspaper it was still new in broadcast terms.

Campbell describes one story illustrating two of the tactics employed by Labour.²²¹ One was trailing, the other was what some would call blackmail, some might call a "deal." On January 8th 1996, Blair was to give an important speech on the economy to a small gathering of business leaders in Singapore. He was being accompanied by one TV journalist, Jon Sopel from the BBC. However, to make sure the story featured in the morning papers, Campbell tipped off journalists working for *The Guardian* and the *Daily Telegraph* the evening before, providing them with enough quotes to be able to run the story. It duly appeared that morning under the headline "Blair unveils big economic

²²⁰ Campbell, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, May 14th 2012.

²²¹ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p.249.

idea."²²² Sopel was still keen to run the story for BBC TV news but for it to work he needed to film Blair giving the speech. Campbell assured him it could be arranged but with one proviso. Sopel had to give an undertaking there would be no wide shots used in the piece revealing the small scale nature of the gathering. Campbell was so obsessed with detail he did not want to create the impression that Blair was speaking to a small, insignificant number of people. It would make the Labour leader look small and insignificant. The piece ran on the 6 O'clock News with the arrangement in place. In order to edit different parts of the speech together journalists use what are called "cutaways," because a shot is used to cut away from the speaker. At a speech or press conference these are usually shots of the audience or the assembled media. A very wide shot here gives an impression of the size of the event. In this story, the cutaways were tight shots of individuals, giving no sense of scale.²²³

As a political *messenger*, Tony Blair broke new ground. He was young, good looking, with the skill set required to communicate via the media. This involved looking and speaking in a confident, genuine and open way. It involved the ability to summarise often complex political arguments, making them relevant to people and also delivering them in a 20 second soundbite for television. Gould identified a natural oratorical flair as early as 1990.²²⁴ The skills he used in dealing with the media were also deployed in delivering longer, often more complex speeches. He benefitted greatly from the circumstances of the time. Dealing with the media had always been an issue for Prime Ministers but from the 1980s the growing political communications industry meant there was a huge amount of advice on offer. Closely tied to the growing importance of television, there was readily available advice on a whole range of issues from appearance to interview techniques. These opportunities were seized by Blair who was a willing participant and a firm believer in the importance of the media to influence politics. I interviewed Blair for *The Observer* newspaper when he was shadow Home Secretary in 1992. His media skills were apparent then. Questions were answered in a short simple fashion. He spoke clearly and

²²² *The Guardian*, January 8th 1996, p.1.

²²³ *BBC 6 O'Clock News*, January 8th 1996.

²²⁴ Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution*, p.249.

paused as he watched my faltering shorthand take it down. He would repeat the main message he wanted to get across. He was instantly likeable.

Blair had a strong link to national newspapers and how they ran, that link was Alistair Campbell. A national newspaper journalist for many years, he had contacts across the media. He also had unprecedented authority to speak for Blair in off the record briefings and even to write for Blair in the many newspaper articles that appeared under the leader's name. Campbell was also on hand to advise Blair on how to deal with a potentially hostile media. He has always denied policy was influenced by the media but he was more than willing to change the tone of an article to suit a particular paper. This was meeting a newspaper's interests with rhetoric, as he told the Leveson Inquiry.²²⁵ Blair's skill as a messenger was also helped by personal characteristics. Newspaper editors actually liked him, boosted by the fact that many did not like John Major. As stated earlier by Thomas, the "snob mob"²²⁶ liked the Oxford-educated Blair. As one editor put it: "I find Blair so much easier to get along with than Major. I suppose it's a class thing. He's so much more like us, isn't he?"²²⁷

There is little doubt that the media strategy of the 1997 campaign was hugely successful. It is permanently woven into the narrative of why Labour won in 1997 and formed the basis of two general election victories to follow. The four pillars of the framework came together to produce one highly effective campaign. The *messenger* was media savvy and highly skilled in the use of television. This was in stark contrast to the man he was trying to replace. The *message* had been changed beyond recognition so it was acceptable to a mainly right wing press. That resulted in a transformation of the *media context* with a majority of newspapers supporting, if not Labour, then certainly Tony Blair. The *methods* employed to convey the message were modern, well organised and well-funded. They were deployed ruthlessly. This strategy has been held up as a template and other parties have followed, such as the David Cameron-led Conservative Party at the 2010 election.²²⁸ Yet, there are many

²²⁵ Campbell, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, May 14th 2012.

²²⁶ Thomas, *Popular Newspapers*, p. 134.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ Anthony Bingham / Martin Conboy, *Tabloid Century: The Popular Press in Britain, 1896 to the Present* (Oxford: Peter Lang Ltd, 2015), p 93.

critics who say it came at too high a price. Policy changes robbed the Labour Party of its soul, with much of its traditional support left behind. The slick, soundbite style of presentation lacked substance and created politicians who looked and sounded the same. The new ways of managing the media created resentment amongst journalists and ultimately created the impression of a government obsessed with spin. The change in the media context would be short term because the media hadn't changed, Labour had. My conclusion will examine the value of my framework in analysing media strategy. I will then question whether the changes which were implemented were necessary and finally ask if the power of the media was exaggerated leading to an undue influence on policy.

Conclusion

The Labour Party's media strategy from 1983 to 1997 was central to the development of the whole party during this period and to the New Labour project. The changes amounted to a transformation in political communications, as Ralph Negrine identified.²²⁹ My conclusion will look at each of the factors in the framework and summarise the developments during the fourteen year period. I will also evaluate the usefulness of the framework itself. Then I will focus on the key changes and suggest how my work has contributed to the debate in this area of study.

The framework provided structure to the dissertation. Each factor was broad enough to include a number of elements that helped bring coherence to the discussion. It was a manageable framework for a work of this length. The *messenger* referred not just to the party leader but also to other members of the party who were given leading roles in general election campaigns, particularly in 1992. The *methods* brought together organisational and structural changes but also the vital tactical changes which were to serve Labour so well for most of this period. The factor termed *message* was the most interesting area as it dealt with the policies the party wanted to communicate through the media and these changed dramatically. I tried to avoid detailed reference to party political broadcasts but they were relevant in a couple of instances. Finally, the *media context* was a vital factor in the framework but perhaps the most limiting. Labour had to understand the context of the media: who they were supporting, how they operated and which media had the most influence. The media context was used as an indication of the political context of a given period which, in hindsight, was useful but too general. For example, the tabloids' devotion to Margaret Thatcher reflected an element of the electorate but did not fully reflect the divisive nature of her tenure. Perhaps there should have been another factor entitled political context.

Each of the four factors changed substantially during the period in question. The requirements demanded of the *messenger* developed to such an extent that acquiring the skills for dealing with the media became a pre-requisite for being

²²⁹ Negrine, *Transformation in Political Communication*, p.1.

leader. Michael Foot was extremely limited in this area, especially when it came to television. The communication skills he had - speaking in parliament or to large crowds - were becoming less relevant. By his own admission he was unwilling to learn the skills required for the TV age. Defeat in 1983 highlighted the need to improve the media skills of the party leader and Neil Kinnock proved himself to be a capable messenger. At the 1987 general election he was seen by the party's media advisors as a vote winner against an increasingly divisive Margaret Thatcher. His personal appeal was captured in the party election broadcast that became known as Kinnock: The Movie. The tabloids were not persuaded and the abuse Kinnock suffered at the hands of the press was unprecedented and greatly affected the strategists thinking about the leadership role. It was felt that Kinnock had earned the right to lead the party into the next general election but his media performances had been mixed. In 1992, a new strategy was adopted. There was more of a team approach using some of the more telegenic members of the shadow cabinet, including Tony Blair. Some of those close to Kinnock, such as Charles Clarke, deliberately kept him away from the spotlight to try and minimise the vitriol from the media. As Berry states, this was probably an error, given that Kinnock in full flow could have made political headway against the relatively inexperienced John Major.²³⁰ Nevertheless, it is difficult to see what more could have been done to avoid the mauling Kinnock received in the press at the 1992 general election. Charles Clarke's meetings with News International were doomed to failure. There were some signs of change - the *Financial Times* backed Labour and the tabloids were a little less aggressive - but he remained personally unpopular in Fleet Street. As Andrew Neil suggests, if there was one general election where the media influenced the final result, this was it.²³¹ After the death of John Smith, Labour's new leadership took no chances. Tony Blair was elected partly because of his skills as a TV communicator and he also possessed the kind of privileged background that would appeal to most Fleet Street editors. He was young, dynamic and articulate. The ultimate political communicator for the new millennium had been found. On the positive side, this helped to create a party

²³⁰ Berry, in *Parliamentary Affairs*, pp. 565-581.

²³¹ Neil, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, July 9th 2012.

leader who appeared competent, professional and was able to articulate a political message. But there were also negative outcomes. The criticisms that were levelled at Blair remain today - leaders are too slick, they look and sound the same, they never answer the question. In the television age, the focus of politics moved to personalities rather than policy. The success of Donald Trump and Jeremy Corbyn is part of the backlash against the growth of this monochrome, media-savvy politician.

By 1997, the modern template for the *methods* of dealing with the press was in place. Rising from the ashes of the shambolic 1983 campaign, the press operation was re-organised under the control of Peter Mandelson, notably a former television producer. The Shadow Communications Agency was formed to bring together all press strategy, plus information from a variety of polling and market research organisations. For the 1987 general election Mandelson and Patricia Hewitt brought a planning and organisational zeal to Labour's communications and the emphasis was on the importance of television news. The tactic of agenda setting to influence TV news was successfully deployed and would remain a staple of the strategies that followed in 1992 and 1997. Mandelson and Hewitt were not involved in the '92 campaign and it is no coincidence there were several mistakes, such as the Sheffield rally and the focus on PR in the final week. Mandelson was back for 1997 and the latest methods for dealing with the press were ruthlessly deployed. The focus remained on TV and the planning "grid" was deployed to try and set the agenda. Half a million pounds was spent on "Excalibur" the latest technology to help rebut Tory claims about Labour. This rapid rebuttal was supplemented by a new and aggressive treatment of journalists who were challenged on their stories and harassed by Labour's press team, eager to put their side of the story.

Some of these developments were groundbreaking in British politics. There is no doubting the benefits of Labour's re-organisation and the professionalisation of its media operations. Agenda setting and rapid rebuttal remain standard practice in modern political campaigning, although there is some evidence that journalists were resenting stories and pictures being organised for them. For the

most part, they continued to follow the agenda being set by the Party but they were now more willing to challenge the stories they were being fed. The shambles surrounding the "Jennifer's Ear" party political broadcast in 1992 is testament to that. Challenging journalists also remains a legitimate weapon in the press officer's armoury but again some aspects were already out of control by 1997, causing damage in the media. As David Hencke of *The Guardian* wrote, journalists who crossed the spin doctors found themselves out of favour, with no exclusives or leaked reports.²³²

A growing number of MPs were disgruntled by the autonomy of the SCA which had such great influence over the Party's message. The use of focus groups and polling research which drove the message was also being challenged. Clare Short's comments in the previous chapter were not isolated and Shaw's arguments on the subject are convincing.²³³ Much of the focus group data was presented without question. The perceptions that voters had of the party were accepted not as perceptions but as the truth. The leadership believed most of the media was biased and yet the voters' opinions that were shaped by that bias were readily accepted.

On the surface, the *media context* changed dramatically. One daily newspaper backed Labour in 1983, by 1997 the majority of the press backed Labour for the first time in its history. This was the result of a well planned and exhaustive attempt to bring on board media owners. It was one of the main goals of the new leadership and the reason why Alistair Campbell was granted such widespread authority to speak for Tony Blair. The chief focus was on News International for two key reasons. *The Sun* was the most popular daily newspaper in the country and was read by swing voters who were crucial to election victories. Secondly, it was apparent that News International was open to persuasion in a way that papers such as the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* were not. Endorsement by *The Sun* in 1997 was a significant achievement but it was support for Blair personally and the policies which had moved decisively towards the paper's way of thinking. When Blair stood down, support for Labour

²³² *The Guardian*, August 8th 1996 p. 6.

²³³ Shaw, *The Labour Party Since 1979*, p176.

began to melt away. There is little doubt the media was important for Labour but its significance has been exaggerated. Tony Blair admitted as much in his Radio 4 interview with Peter Hennessy when he said Labour had played into the media's hands.²³⁴ It is easy to understand how this happened. Blair, Mandelson, Gould and Campbell had all seen Labour slaughtered in the media and equated it with election defeat. This was especially true after the loss in 1992 and they swore it would never happen again. The leadership knew the tabloids were a declining force but remained convinced they set the TV agenda. Although this had an element of truth, the Party failed to understand the extent to which newspaper proprietors such as Rupert Murdoch were ready to accommodate Labour. As Bingham and Conboy point out, the realignment was not as deep rooted as it first appeared.²³⁵ It was clear in 1997 backing was for Blair, rather than Labour. Newspaper support increased at the 2001 general election but it gradually fell away. By 2009 with Gordon Brown as Labour leader *The Sun* switched back to supporting the Tories.

The other part of the media context that Labour grasped after 1983 was the importance of television. It was a difficult balancing act as TV gradually grew in importance but newspapers remained influential in setting the agenda. Shaw's arguments that Labour relied too much on television are persuasive, particularly for 1987 and 1992. He says the nature of TV news journalism and impartiality renders it a difficult medium in which to advocate complex arguments for change, such as on the economy. When Labour's aim was to run the economy differently this caused difficulties in getting the message across. Impartiality was also questionable, according to Shaw, as many experts used in TV analysis were drawn from the conservative professions of industry and finance. Of course, by 1997 this was much less of an issue when Labour was an enthusiastic supporter of the free market and industry and finance experts were less likely to be critical.

The difference in the *message* from 1983 to 1997 was vast. Re-nationalisation, unilateralism, departure from the common market and tax rises to fund investment had all been ditched. They were replaced by a commitment to a free

²³⁴ Blair, *BBC Radio 4* (2017).

²³⁵ Bingham / Conboy, *Tabloid Century*, p. 92.

market economy within Europe and a specific promise to stick to Conservative spending plans. There were a number of factors that led to this transformation. The Party had lost and lost badly in 1983 so leadership and policy were bound to change. The defeat was so clearly tied to the left that a rightwards shift was inevitable. The message was changed because it was deemed to be unpopular with voters and ideologically at odds with the new leadership. The importance of the media in delivering this message was recognised but the emphasis was on an efficient and well organised approach to media relations rather than the content of the message. When that failed again in 1987 the focus of the media strategy was on the message. There remained an ideological and political underpinning for moving policy further to the right, although it was becoming harder for Labour MPs to swallow and some policies, such as the abandonment of unilateralism, were personally difficult for Kinnock himself. How the message would play out in the media was becoming increasingly important but this still failed to prevent policy being savaged again at the '92 election. The direction the message would take after this defeat became uncertain. Too centrist or not centrist enough? The leadership would decide and under John Smith it looked likely the rightward shift would stop. However, his sudden death saw a dramatic change. The Blair leadership was ideologically and politically committed to further policy transformation and by 1997 what the media thought of these policies was considered to be vitally important.

The changes to Labour Party policy are the most controversial aspects of this period. It is difficult to say just how far policy had to move to the centre ground to gain media support but this is not the central element of this thesis. What is more relevant is the claim by modernisers that policy was being driven by the demands of the electorate and not the demands of the media. There is now more evidence to suggest the media had a greater influence on policy than is widely accepted. Bingham and Conboy say Labour "frequently deferred to it (press power) rather than challenge it"²³⁶ but I would go further. Key figures in New Labour accept that Rupert Murdoch directly influenced policy as revealed in the statements to Leveson. Some of the comments are general. Blair says he

²³⁶ Bingham / Conboy, *Tabloid Century*, p. 93.

"tried very hard" ²³⁷ to keep the press from influencing policy, which implies sometimes he failed. Mandelson says press influence was not the main factor in policy making, which implies it was a minor factor.²³⁸ Other comments are more specific and placed alongside statements from Lance Price and Andrew Neil a convincing narrative emerges. Blair accepts party policy on media ownership was changed between 1994 and 1997 and acknowledges that if it had not been changed it would have been a problem with the Murdoch press.²³⁹ Mandelson says Blair's anti-European articles in *The Sun* prior to the 1997 election amount to a policy concession with the referendum on joining the Euro eventually being dropped.²⁴⁰ This influence began after Tony Blair's election as leader and was part of the obsession with the power of the press. When the political editor of *The Sun* Trevor Kavanagh said it was Labour which had changed, not his paper, he was being disingenuous.²⁴¹ His paper was one of the chief architects of that change. It is clear this was not simply a change of tone described by Campbell, nor an ideological and political response to general election defeats.²⁴²

The overriding theme to Labour's relations with the media between 1983 and 1997 is the growing importance the party placed on the media. In 1983, it was a secondary issue with very little in the way of organisation, planning, tactics or consideration of what the press would make of the manifesto. Some left wing party members did not care, others thought it unimportant. By 1997, this situation had been turned on its head. The media strategy was highly organised, tightly controlled and what the media made of party policy was considered vital to success. Overall, the changes appear to have worked very well. An efficient, well organised and executed media strategy played an important role in three election victories. But there were costs. The media became highly critical of the tactics, as did many party members and voters. More fundamentally, the policy changes driven by the media profoundly altered

²³⁷ Blair, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 28th May 2012.

²³⁸ Mandelson, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 21st May 2012

²³⁹ Blair, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 28th May 2012.

²⁴⁰ Mandelson, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, 21st May 2012.

²⁴¹ *The Independent*, March 10th 1997.

²⁴² Campbell, statement to the *Leveson Inquiry*, May 14th 2012.

the party and the process robbed the party of its soul. If Gould says Labour under Kinnock did not change far enough fast enough perhaps under Blair it changed too far and too fast.

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