

# Brand Leaders: Clinton, Blair and the Limitations of the Permanent Campaign

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The 'permanent campaign' is said to have reached its apogee in the incumbent communications strategies of Bill Clinton and Tony Blair. However, their assiduous courting of public opinion from within office has been used to explain both the high approval ratings of these leaders and their unpopularity for long periods of their incumbency. This apparent paradox suggests that the permanent campaign model is too blunt an instrument to usefully describe or evaluate incumbent communications. Its assumption of continuity between election campaigning and office-holding fails to explain how the strategic terrain changes once a challenger takes office. The concepts of branding and relationship marketing can be used to highlight the difference between gaining support in the one-off transaction of an election and retaining voter loyalty in a post-'purchase' setting. The success of Blair and Clinton in establishing a relationship with voters from within office can be assessed using six attributes of successful brands: simplicity; uniqueness; reassurance; aspiration; values; and credibility. As incumbents, facing challenges in shifting strategic and institutional environments, Blair and Clinton developed messages that were simple and appealed to voter aspirations. Voters remained sceptical about the extent to which these leaders embodied values and delivered on their promises.

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Institutional differences between the political systems of the United States and United Kingdom make them an unnatural pairing for many types of comparative analysis. However, the cross-pollination of political consultants and partisan positioning ('third way', 'compassionate conservatism'), a shared fascination with opinion polls and a news media characterised by 'infotainment', has encouraged observers of political communications to identify common themes (Ingram and Lees-Marshment, 2002; Nimmo, 1999, p. 73; Wilson, 2000). The assumption of a shared experience of a 'permanent campaign', exemplified by President Bill Clinton (1993–2001) and Prime Minister Tony Blair (1997– ), brought UK and US politicians, academics, journalists and consultants to London for a conference on that theme in November 2002.<sup>1</sup> However the assumption of continuity between office seeking and office-holding in the permanent campaign approach fails to account for the distinctive strategic environment of governing. This article draws on the examples of Blair and Clinton to argue for a more nuanced understanding of incumbent communication strategies than that offered by the notion of a permanent campaign.

## The Permanent Campaign

The origin of the term 'permanent campaign' is attributed both to Patrick Caddell, Jimmy Carter's pollster, and to a 1980 book of that name by Sidney Blumenthal (Blumenthal, 1982; Bowman, 2000, p. 62). It captured a sense that there was no

stark distinction between campaigning and governing given that the personnel, tactics and tools of the election campaign followed the successful candidate into office (Blumenthal, 1982). The permanent campaign concept involves more than a recognition that politicians start gearing up for re-election well before the official campaign begins. It is a claim that campaigning is 'nonstop' (Hecló, 2000, p. 17) and 'total' (Nimmo, 1990, p. 84). Government is 'seamless' with campaigning (Jones, 2000, p. 209). In the permanent campaign, 'the process of campaigning and the process of governing have lost their distinctiveness' (Ornstein and Mann, 2000, p. 219).

The topography of the permanent campaign shifts between authors, but all share Hecló's assumption that it is a 'process seeking to manipulate sources of public approval to engage in the act of governing itself' (Hecló, 2000, p. 17). Common features include a prominent role for campaign consultants in government (Johnson, 2001; Tenpas, 2000; Greenberg, 2002); the use of polling as a strategic device to steer policy-making and presentation (O'Shaughnessy, 1990, p. 193; Jacobs and Shapiro, 1995, p. 192; Scammell, 1996, p. 127; Bowman, 2000, p. 70); a pre-occupation with fund-raising for the next election (Corrado, 2000); a media fascination with the 'horse race' aspects of political life (Hess, 2000, p. 49); and high-stakes posturing over every issue, with public support becoming a bargaining chip between politicians, parties and interest groups (Hecló, 2000, p. 21; Hess, 2000, p. 43; Kernell, 1997).

Much of the literature tracing the development of the permanent campaign has a US-focus. Academics and journalists have noted the growth of a campaigning style of government, some going back to the 'rhetorical presidency' of Woodrow Wilson or the fireside chats of Franklin Roosevelt (Tulis, 1987; Neustadt, 2002); others to the use of polls and consultants by Kennedy and Nixon (Hecló, 2000, p. 3; Tenpas, 2000, p. 124); and others to the Reagan era of a 'produced president' with a 'line of the day' (O'Shaughnessy, 1990, p. 11–12; Butler and Collins, 1999, p. 67). Similar trends have also been noted in the UK, with the features of a permanent campaign – a prominent role for consultants and opinion polls, media focus on governing as a campaign spectacle and a campaign-oriented interest group sector – usually attributed to the period since Thatcher took office (Cockerell, Hennessy and Walker, 1984; Scammell, 1996, p. 127; Franklin, 1994).

The premierships of Tony Blair and Bill Clinton have occasioned the most intense claims that we inhabit an era of the permanent campaign (Nimmo, 1999, p. 74; Newman, 1994; Jones, 2000, p. 197; Butler and Kavanagh, 2001, p. 22). Clinton's eight years have been described as 'a presidency based on a perpetual campaign to obtain the public's support and fed by public opinion polls, focus groups and public relations memos' (Edwards, 2000, p. 27). The transition from campaigning to governing was 'never made' by Clinton (Wilson, 2000, p. 258). Similar claims have been put forward about the New Labour government elected in 1997 under the leadership of Tony Blair. Blair's claim on his first day in office: 'We campaigned as New Labour, we will govern as New Labour', was seen by commentators as a signal that campaigning would flow seamlessly into governing (White and de Chernatony, 2002, p. 49; Rawnsley, 2000a, p. 15). The use of campaign personnel and tools such as the 'message' and the 'grid' in government served to highlight

the continuity (Nimmo, 1999, p. 74; Franklin, 2004, p. 91; Scammell, 2001, p. 524).

Labelling Clinton and Blair as permanent campaigners assumes that these leaders were engaged in an ongoing process to woo public opinion. Yet if this was the case, it is important to also explain why their success in doing so was mixed. As Figure 1 shows, Clinton’s net approval rating hovered at 10 percent or less for his first three years in office, after which it started to climb. Blair’s net rating stood at 50 percent after 6 months in office, but fell sharply from that point, rallying only for the election year of 2001. Their perpetual campaigning approach itself – with its ‘spin’ and u-turns – is seen as a contributory factor in these periods of public disaffection (Jones, 2000, p. 212; Reich, 1997, p. 264; Butler and Kavanagh, 2001, pp. 26–7; Gould, 2000a). The process of campaigning as an incumbent to *retain* popular support, as opposed to winning support as an office-seeker, needs to be more carefully dissected.

There is no direct causal link between leadership action and the poll ratings of incumbents since a premier’s approval ratings are shaped by events beyond his control (Mueller, 1970, p. 34; Ostrom and Smith, 1985; Jones, 1994, p. 117). However, the ways in which he responds to events and interprets them for the public do play an important role in public evaluations (Neustadt, 1990, pp. 83–90; Ostrom and Smith, 1985, p. 356; Mueller, 1970, p. 34). High approval ratings are themselves a source of political capital for leaders, influencing their capacity to

**Figure 1: Job Approval Scores for Blair and Clinton**

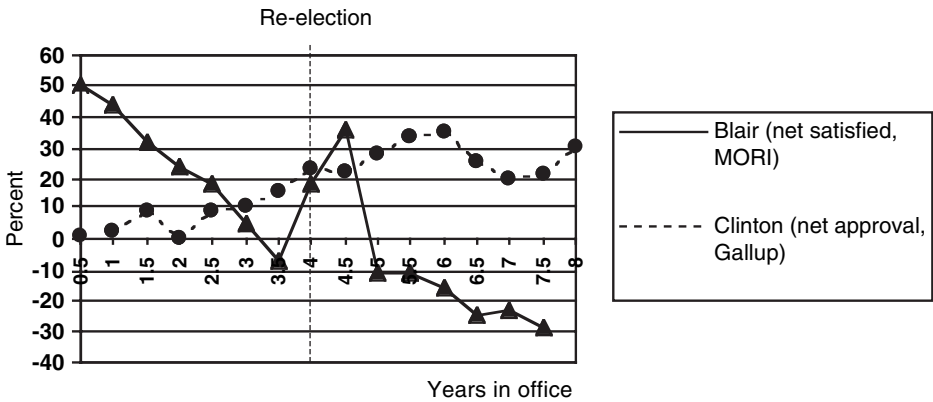


Figure 1 shows net approval and satisfaction ratings for Clinton and Blair respectively at 6 monthly intervals during their incumbency. Figures for Clinton are taken from the Gallup Organisation (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/content/default.aspx?ci=1723&andpg=2>); figures for Blair are taken from MORI (<http://www.mori.com/polls/trends/satisfac.shtml>). Net scores are devised by subtracting the percentage disapproving/dissatisfied from the percentage disapproving/dissatisfied. Net scores are used because they reflect levels of disapproval/dissatisfaction in the overall rating. The four year figure for Blair is from June 2001, since no poll was conducted during May. The seven and a half year figure for Blair is derived from September 2004 as the November figure was not available. Since the Gallup and MORI methodologies are not identical, the Clinton and Blair figures are not numerically comparable. Rather the figure indicates the pattern of change over time in the net approval/satisfaction ratings of these leaders.

shape events and win media endorsement, factors which further shore up their popularity (Neustadt, 1990, p. 73; Maltese, 1994, p. 4; Ostrom and Smith, 1985, pp. 335, 357). The extent to which polls shape as well as reflect political behaviour is evident from authorised and unauthorised accounts of the Clinton and Blair premierships (Morris, 1997, pp. 84–5; Clinton, 2004, pp. 462, 468, 485; Gould, 2000b; Rawnsley, 2000a). Not everything that these leaders did was poll-driven – neither Clinton’s championing of NAFTA nor Blair’s Iraq policy can be explained by opinion polls – but both engaged in activities which were specifically designed to raise their approval scores. Their variable success in winning popular approval can be better understood by considering the strategic environment of incumbency.

### Incumbency as Relationship Marketing

Drawing on commercial marketing analogies, an election can be seen as the moment of sale: the point of choice, where voters employ the knowledge they have about a candidate or party and make their choice. The strategic imperative changes once in power. Rather than convincing the electorate to trust it, a governing party or office-holder must reassure supporters that they have chosen well and can be confident that the administration will deliver. Such a strategy, of course, is undertaken in the hope that voters will make the same choice again in the future, but it is primarily aimed at consolidating rather than increasing market share. In this way, it has parallels with the efforts of a company to ensure post-purchase satisfaction, using marketing not to win over new customers but to reassure a recent purchaser. Such a strategy is defensive, protecting the customer base and keeping the product at the ‘front of the mind’ of the consumer (Egan, 1999, pp. 498, 502). According to De Chernatony and McDonald, in cases where such reassurance is given, ‘The consumer would be proud of his purchase and praise its attributes to his peer group. With a high level of satisfaction, the consumer would look favourably at this company’s brands in any future purchase’ (De Chernatony and McDonald, 2000, p. 71).

Post-purchase reassurance is particularly important in certain buying scenarios: ‘When consumers are involved in a brand purchase but perceive little brand differentiation or lack the ability to judge between competing brands, the advertising should reduce post-purchase dissonance through providing reassurance after the purchase’ (De Chernatony and McDonald, 2000, p. 74). The scenario of a consumer choosing between similar products with limited information has analogies with elections, in which the high costs of acquiring information compared to the likely pay-offs act as a disincentive for voters to become politically informed (Downs, 1957, pp. 98, 259). Studies have suggested that voters rely on cognitive shortcuts as a substitute for detailed information (Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968; Neuman *et al.*, 1992, p. 15; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998, p. 5). These shortcuts are developed on the basis of impressionistic perceptions of candidate and party, justified by *post hoc* rationalisations (Lazarsfeld *et al.*, 1968, p. xi; Just *et al.*, 1996, p. 20). In a political terrain of declining party membership and voter dealignment, successful candidates cannot assume that these positive impressions will keep their winning voter coalitions together until the next election (Whiteley and Seyd, 2002; Putnam, Pharr and Dalton, 2000, pp. 17–18). The strategic imperative for a

government is to build enduring relationships with their winning coalition of voters, ensuring that the bundle of impressions that led voters to elect it is reinforced from within office.

There are parallels between this process of political relationship building and the commercial relationship marketing model. Relationship marketing is part of a 'new paradigm' of commercial marketing that emphasises sustained interaction between producer and consumer rather than a one-off transaction (Grönroos, 1994; Aijo, 1996, p. 11; Coviello *et al.*, 2002, p. 34). By using the insights of relationship marketing, it is possible to sidestep some of the disanalogies attached to comparisons of political and commercial transactions. Lock and Harris (1996) for example, highlight the collective, one-off and winner-takes-all nature of political transactions, which make them unlike any commercial equivalent. There are greater similarities between the commercial and political sectors in the intangible aspects of relationship-building. Political marketing approaches have tended to be transaction-oriented, despite intensifying calls for political science to take notice of relationship marketing approaches (Henneberg, 2004, p. 9; O'Shaughnessy, 2002, p. 213; Collins and Butler, 2002, p. 4).

Relationship marketing incorporates a range of tangible services including after-sales maintenance and loyalty schemes, but a key aspect is the intangible process of brand promotion (O'Shaughnessy, 2002, p. 213). This aspect of relationship marketing has clear parallels with the political process, which relies heavily on the intangible aspects of party and candidate appeal, their 'image' or 'reputation' (Harrop, 1990; Scammell, 1999; O'Shaughnessy and Henneberg, 2002, p. xi; O'Shaughnessy, 1990, pp. 11–12). There have been few efforts, however, to apply branding theory to political intangibles, beyond the recognition that parties need a good brand image (Harris and Lock, 2001, p. 945; O'Shaughnessy, 2002, p. 214; Smith, 2001, pp. 990–1; White and de Chernatony, 2002, p. 47). Branding is a useful political concept because an effective brand combines three elements – internal values, external presentation and consumer perception (Barwise *et al.*, 2000, p. 75) – whereas alternative terms such as reputation and image are less encompassing. Reputation is a blend of internal values and consumer perception, but gives little insight into external presentation. Image is a combination of external presentation and consumer perception, but does not have a values component. These alternative terms evoke the axiomatic claims that parties or candidates seek a positive image and a good reputation. Branding is a more robust concept because the elements of effective branding can be distilled from commercial literature and utilised in political analysis. Branding is relevant to election campaigning, but is particularly helpful in understanding efforts to sustain relationships and maintain loyalty during the period between elections.

Commercial branding literature identifies six attributes of successful brands. First, brands act as simplifiers, reducing consumer dependence on detailed product information and facilitating choice (Duckworth, 1991, p. 65; McDonald *et al.*, 2001, p. 340; Ind, 1991). Effective brands present 'a few high quality pieces of information' and avoid 'bombarding consumers with large quantities of information and ironically causing confusion' (De Chernatony and McDonald, 2000, p. 67). Second, successful brands are unique, clearly differentiated from competitors. As King

points out, 'A product can be copied by a competitor; a brand is unique' (King, 1984, p. iii). Between two similar products, it is the brand not the tangible product features that will be the crucial distinction. Advertising strategist Joel Levy argues that tangible product differences are short-lived: 'in marketing now ... the differences aren't really about performance; they are about the personality and the attributes of the brand' (Levy, 2001).

Third, brands minimise consumer perception of risk (De Chernatony and McDonald, 2000, p. 44). An effective brand is reassuring, a guarantee of standardisation and replicability. Feldwick notes that the reassurance given by a brand is one of the explanations for people's willingness to pay more for branded goods than non-branded (Feldwick, 1991, p. 24). Fourth, brands are aspirational, evoking a particular vision of the 'good life' and holding out the promise of personal enhancement based on a set of values (Van Ham, 2001, p. 2; Mitchell, 2001, p. 29). Beyond the 'functional value' of products, successful brands offer an emotional link to a desired way of life (White and de Chernatony, 2002, p. 47; Ind, 1991).

Fifth, brands symbolise the internal values of the product or company, providing clear and consistent reasons why consumers should buy that product rather than another (Marzano, 2000, p. 58). A coherent set of 'brand values' ensures that the brand is more than the sum of its product attributes. Brands communicate the values that underpin the company's approach to product development, be it 'safety and reliability' (Volvo), 'a drivers' car' (BMW), or 'quality engineering' (Mercedes) (Levy, 2001). Finally, successful brands are perceived as credible, delivering on their brand promises. As Grönroos, puts it, 'Fulfilling promises that have been given is equally important as a means of achieving customer satisfaction, retention of the customer base, and long-term profitability' (Grönroos, 1994, p. 355). Chris Powell, from the advertising agency BMP DDP, notes: 'People will always believe their experience over the hype. So ... if you tried to market your brand without making the quality of the product superior, you would fall on your face' (Powell, 2000).

Together these elements of a brand create a relationship of trust between producer and consumer, and shape the buyer's experience of using the product. They are all subjective, existing only to the extent that they are perceived to do so by the consumer (Gordon, 1991, p. 36). As a result the success of branding can only be evaluated through market research and future purchasing patterns. In this sense there are clear parallels with assessments of the success of political incumbents.

## **The Clinton and Blair Brands**

Having identified six criteria for effective brand promotion, it is possible to assess the extent to which the Clinton administrations and the Blair-led Labour governments succeeded as brands. The discussion below considers how far these administrations and governments developed relationships with voters through presenting simple and reassuring messages, effectively differentiated themselves from opponents, established a value basis for their claims, built aspirational appeals and delivered on their promises. Both Clinton and Blair are at the apex of large communication machines that serve the executive branch of government. Focus



here is on the peak institutions of strategic communications, those in the White House and 10 Downing Street, on the assumption that this is where communications strategy and tactics for the leaders were shaped.

To evaluate Blair and Clinton against branding criteria does not require that the leaders self-consciously saw what they were doing in such terms. In the case of Blair there is evidence that his advisers did use such language. In the summer of 2000, a memo from polling consultant Philip Gould to Blair described New Labour as a 'brand name' that had become 'badly contaminated', and called on the party leadership to 'reinvent the New Labour brand' (Gould, 2000a). He was citing a longer memo from the head of the Strategic Communications Unit, Peter Hyman, which argued: 'The character of a government matters. Our brand values have been weakened' (Hyman, 2000). These memos suggest that in the UK at least, key advisors did see government communications strategy as an exercise in branding.

### *Simple*

Whilst the organisational density and policy complexity of governing does not lend itself to simplicity both Blair and Clinton sought to promote clear, simple messages to the public. Both leaders retained campaign consultants who undertook polling and advised on 'message': short, memorable phrases that symbolised the policies and values of the government (Hyman, 2002; Greenberg, 2002; Gould, 1998; Morris, 1997). Daily message meetings for communications staff were held in the White House (Maltese, 1994, p. 234); in Downing Street message meetings were held every Monday morning, with the prime minister in attendance (Gould, 2000c).

The messages that Blair sought to promote during his first term of office were simple in form, such as 'opportunity for all' and 'investment and reform' (Hyman, 2002). Gould suggests that the Blair strategy of simplification drew on advice from the Clinton administrations. In a memo to Blair (later leaked to *The Times* newspaper), Gould recounts a conversation with White House political director, Doug Sosnik: 'Sosnik says what we all know – that until you agree the dozen or so words that sum it all up, you can't really progress at all' (Gould, 2000b). Consultants worked with Clinton to develop messages during his first months in government. A memo from consultants Begala, Carville, Greenberg and Grunwald soon after the inauguration laid out the essence of what it called the Clinton 'story': 'government failed us, betrayed our people and our values' (Woodward, 1995, p. 119). Dick Morris, Clinton's key consultant from 1994 to 1996, talks of his efforts to 'reduce our position to a thirty-second rationale' (Morris, 1997, p. 94).

The success of Blair and Clinton in projecting simple messages varied. The first Blair-led government was initially successful in its message promotion as sympathetic media, unused to such careful steering from government communicators, reported its messages to the public (Scammell, 2001, p. 513). By 2000, however, long out of its honeymoon period, the government was clearly struggling to rebut media and opposition allegations of 'spin' (Scammell, 2001, p. 516; Butler and Kavanagh, 2001, pp. 26–7). Rentoul notes: 'the single word "spin" had become, by the middle of 2000, the most devastating weapon against the government'

(Rentoul, 2001, p. 398). As the credibility problems discussed below set in, simple messages were increasingly seen as manipulative rather than informative.

The first two years of the Clinton presidency were characterised by confused messages despite efforts at clarity (Clinton, 2004, p. 467). Administration attempts to focus on the economic plan and health care were hampered by media attention on gays in the military and executive appointments (Shafer, 2000, p. 30). The Clinton health care plan when presented to Congress was 1,364 pages long, and defied easy summary, leaving it vulnerable to well-funded attacks (Clinton, 2004, pp. 594–5). Clinton's success in achieving congressional ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) won him little public commendation (Peterson, 2000, p. 162). Gould relates the message problems of the first years of the Clinton administration:

Sosnik described the early communications strategy as 'feeding the press', essentially the continuation of the successful techniques of the election campaign into government where they no longer worked ... Despite the fact that the Government was doing a lot, no pattern was building up and no one could make sense of what the Administration was doing. (Gould, 2000a)

It was in Clinton's response to the strategic challenge of divided government after November 1994 that he began to project his messages effectively. He did so largely through defining himself by what he was against: a strategy of brand differentiation, discussed below.

### *Unique*

Blair and Clinton were most effective when they were able to raise the spectre of an extremist opposition and unreconstructed elements within their own parties. Blair in government continued his opposition tactic of picking fights with his party to display his 'new Labour' credentials, for example describing 'old Labour' as one of the forces of conservatism holding the country back (White, 1999). To distinguish his government from the Conservatives, Blair used what he called a series of 'dividing lines' (Gould, 2000c). He told Labour MPs in 1998, 'We must highlight the clear dividing lines between the Conservatives' backward-looking approach and Labour's agenda of combining a high level of social justice with a modern, competitive economy' (Grice, 1998). In Parliament, in 2000, he used the same language of dividing lines, telling Conservative leader William Hague 'the dividing line at the election is now clear between a party willing to invest in our public services and £16 billion of cuts under you' (quoted in Mason, 2000).

Clinton differentiated himself from congressional leaders of both parties. Campaigning as a 'New' Democrat in 1992, his brand drew heavily on personal credentials rather than party identification (Walker, 1997, p. 333). After the Democrats lost control of Congress in November 1994, Clinton began to cut links between his own success and his party's in the 1996 elections (Campbell, 2000, pp. 52, 61). With Dick Morris he developed the strategy of 'triangulation', 'a third position, not just in between the old positions of the two parties but above them



as well' (Morris, 1997, p. 80). On tax cuts after the 1994 mid-term elections, for example, Morris describes how Clinton developed a 'triangulated' position: 'The Democrats say, "No tax cuts". The Republicans say, "Tax cuts for everyone". We say, "Tax cuts if you are going to college or raising children or buying a first home or saving for retirement"' (Morris, 1997, p. 80).

The Third Way approach developed by Blair and Clinton was quintessential differentiation. Blair, in a 1998 pamphlet, described the Third Way as distinguishing his government from the 'old left' and 'new right' (Blair, 1998a). Clinton, in his 1998 State of the Union speech, argued, 'We have moved past the sterile debate of those who say government is the enemy and those who say government is the answer. My fellow Americans, we have found a Third Way' (Klein, 2002, p. 17). Both leaders consistently based their popular appeal on a rejection of traditional party constraints.

### *Reassuring*

Post-purchase reassurance aims to let voters know that they have made the right choice, and to minimise a sense of risk. The Clinton and Blair communication strategies were based on reassuring their winning coalitions of voters, particularly the middle class supporters who had not historically voted for Labour or the Democrats. Both Clinton and Blair made explicit appeals to the middle class. Clinton announced a Middle Class Bill of Rights in 1993, incorporating tax cuts and help with college tuition fees (Clinton, 2004, p. 638). Blair stressed the virtues of the middle class as he saw it: 'A middle class characterised by greater tolerance of difference, greater ambition to succeed, greater opportunities to earn a decent living' (Blair, 1999). Messages were targeted at the concerns of these voters, with a combination of 'tough anti-crime measures, cutting government waste, welfare to work provisions and competent economic management' (Ingram and Lees-Marshment, 2002, p. 48).

In his first two years, Clinton failed to provide the reassurance required. Having campaigned as a social conservative, he was seen to govern as a social liberal and punished for this in the 1994 midterms (Shafer, 2000, p. 30). U-turns on reform of the Internal Revenue Service, welfare and gays in the military undermined his credibility (Rockman, 2000, p. 208). Clinton's poll ratings began to rise when he moved to a position of emphasising small scale concerns that resonated with the worries of ordinary voters: 'discipline in the schools, longer hospital stays for new mothers, violence shown on television, reading deficiencies, deadbeat dads, teenage smoking' (Jones, 2000, pp. 185–6). In signing the 1996 National Welfare Reform Act, Clinton underscored his conservative credentials (Edwards, 2000, p. 44; O'Connor, 2002, p. 403).

Blair effectively neutralized voters' fears of a return to Labour's strike-ridden past (White and de Chernatony, 2002, p. 48). His policies on taxation, welfare to work and asylum seekers were designed to reassure voters they were safe from the perceived excesses of previous Labour governments. However, Labour's 'safety first' strategy clashed with high public expectations after May 1997. As Blair consultant Philip Gould describes:

In retrospect, the essential strategy of the election was reassurance, offering the reassurance that we were not old Labour, that we could be trusted, vote for us and we will not scare you. In reality, our election strategy of reassurance was destroyed by the considerations and expectations that flowed from the massive election win, and the sense of hope and optimism which has been the great curse of the government. (Gould, 2000c)

Paradoxically, therefore, Blair's reassurance strategy calmed voters' worries about 'old' Labour but raised expectations about what the 'new' variant of Labour would deliver, leading to problems with credibility.

### *Aspirational*

Newman argues: 'marketing has at its roots the ability to convince consumers or voters that a product or presidential candidate will help to make their American dream come true' (Newman, 1999, p. 278). Aspiration was something that Blair and Clinton understood. Both leaders recognised that it was where people wanted to be rather than where they were that defined attitudes towards government. They sought to distance themselves from their party's core constituencies of the poor and marginalised and to appeal to voters with social and economic aspirations (Seyd, 1998; Gould, 1998, p. 122; Quirk and Cunio, 2000, p. 224; Clinton, 2004, p. 463). Both leaders developed a language of 'opportunity' to appeal to the upwardly mobile, abandoning proposals for punitive taxes on high income earners (Gould, 1998, p. 289; Morris, 1997, p. 82).

There was a strongly empathetic strand to Blair and Clinton's appeals to aspiration voters. Both leaders emphasised the needs of 'hard-working families'. Clinton talked of rewarding those who 'work hard and play by the rules' (Clinton and Gore, 1992, p. 164). Blair borrowed the phrase for his 2002 Labour Party conference speech in which he spoke of prioritising 'hard-working families who play by the rules' (Blair, 2002). Jones notes Clinton's tendency to 'personalise' issues by talking about his own family and experiences (Jones, 2000, p. 185). Blair also endeavoured to present himself as a normal 'family man' to indicate empathy with key supporters (Blair, 2004; Fairclough, 2000, p. 97). Both leaders, however, struggled to present a common touch from within office. Polls from Clinton's second term show that the percentage of respondents who stated that he was not a president who 'cares about the needs of people like you' ranged from a minimum of 32 to a maximum of 41 percent (Gallup, 2004). MORI polling showed that whereas only 6 percent of respondents considered Blair out of touch with ordinary people in 1997, the figure had risen to 36 percent by 2001 (Smith, 2001, p. 993).

### *Value-based*

The fourth strategic component of branding is the promotion of authentic brand values. Both Clinton and Blair favoured the language of values in their external communications. Morris describes how Clinton developed a 'values agenda' during 1995, articulating 'an agenda of positive values' to rebut the 'negative' Republican values agenda (Morris, 1997, p. 208). Clinton's core values were 'opportunity,

community, responsibility' (Greenberg, 2002). In a leaked memo to Blair, Gould calls for the Labour government to learn from Clinton's team:

They build out from themes and values. They didn't start with policy initiatives and try and add message, they started with themes and values and fitted the policy announcements around them. They used: opportunity, community and responsibility, and everything on the grid followed from that (Gould, 2000b).

Blair was similarly attached to the language of values. Fairclough compares written documents and speeches from Labour in the 1970s with those since 1997, and finds that 'values' crops up 64 times in recent works compared with only 19 times in the earlier body of works. Whereas a third of the references in the earlier documents were to the economic sense of value, all references in the newer material are to values in the moral sense – 'decent values', 'democratic values', 'enduring values', 'shared values' (Fairclough, 2000, pp. 47–8). Blair's values echoed those of Clinton. In a pamphlet written in 1998, he argued: 'Our mission is to promote and reconcile the four values which are essential to a just society which maximises the freedom and potential of all our people – equal worth, opportunity for all, responsibility and community' (Blair, 1998a, quoted in Fairclough, 2000, p. 70).

Despite their language of values, both Clinton and Blair were vulnerable to attacks that they were all style and no substance, lacking ideological roots. Competent promotion of the party brand externally, through rigid news management and enforcement of message discipline, was perceived to be a substitute for ideological depth. Klein reports that Clinton's tactical retreats, for example on the BTU (British Thermal Unit) tax, left him with the reputation of being a weak President: 'The notion that Clinton had no "core values" was becoming a Beltway cliché' (Klein, 2002, p. 55). Clinton's rating as a president that 'shares your values' was hit by the Lewinsky scandal, falling below 40 percent from January 1998 (Gallup, 2004).

Blair suffered from the perception that he was willing to jump on every bandwagon. In a leaked memo in summer 2000 he called for 'two or three eye catching initiatives ... Something tough, with immediate bite ... This should be done soon and I, personally, should be associated with it' (Blair, 2000). Reflecting on the leaked memo, Rawnsley commented, 'nothing has done more damage to the Prime Minister than the impression that he seeks only to please' (Rawnsley, 2000b). In the absence of a clear ideological anchor, New Labour failed, as Thompson puts it 'to construct a coherent and credible story about what it is doing and why it is doing it' (Thompson, 2000, p. 3). The government's own recognition of this came in Gould's comments that the New Labour 'brand' was 'badly contaminated ... undermined by a combination of spin, lack of conviction and apparent lack of integrity' (Gould, 2000a,c). By 2000, 43 percent of respondents in a MORI poll reported that Labour promised anything to win votes, up from 25 percent in 1997 (Smith, 2001, p. 994).

In part this struggle to affirm core values resulted from tensions between aspects of their brand promotion strategies. In keeping messages simple and defensively reassuring, these leaders failed to project bold value systems. As one Labour adviser

put it in a memo, the government lacked 'radical conviction' (Hyman, 2000). The risk aversion of these leaders in their domestic policies left them unprepared to present a clear ideological agenda beyond the defensive ambiguity of the third way.

### *Credible*

The key evaluation for the Blair and Clinton brands is the extent to which they were seen as credible by delivering on their promises. Blair's polling and strategy adviser Philip Gould highlights the importance of voter perception as a measure of success: 'Delivery is not enough. You have to communicate what you are doing, why you are doing it, and where you are going' (Gould, 2000b). Both Clinton and Blair sought to manage perceptions by making specific, targeted policy commitments at election time and concentrating on communicating delivery of those commitments once in office. Clinton faced greater institutional and political constraints than Blair in implementing his preferred legislative agenda. Patterson cites data from the Centre for Media and Public Affairs which shows that two-thirds of the press coverage of Clinton's first six months in office was negative, and that the most persistent claim was that he had reneged on his domestic policy commitments (Patterson, 1994, p. 243). Morris quotes Clinton's frustration in response to a poll in October 1994 showing that voters did not believe his claims to have achieved a smaller budget deficit, more jobs and rising exports (Morris, 1997, p. 11).

Clinton and Morris worked together to promote 'bite-size' achievements that voters would find plausible. Under Morris' guidance, Clinton emphasised smaller domestic programmes such as public school uniforms, the V-chip and college tuition fees (Tenpas, 2000, p. 117). He increasingly promoted policy areas that required action at local level rather than federal intervention (Campbell, 2000, p. 62). After major policy pronouncements such as his annual State of the Union speeches, Clinton would embark on 'campaign-style travel to boost the prospects of enactment', a practice he continued up to leaving office (Jones, 2000, p. 207). With Dick Morris, Clinton worked to 'redefine the job of president in such a way that he was uniquely qualified to fill it' (Morris, 1997, p. 40; quoted in Jones, 2000, p. 186).

Similarly in the UK, Labour's 1997 platform included five 'key pledges', circulated on credit-card sized handouts. The pledges made specific and quantifiable promises, such as class sizes of less than 30 for 5–7 year olds. In office these pledges became the focus of policy (Dobson, 2002). New mechanisms were established to communicate the government's achievements, such as 'annual reports'. Blair said: 'The annual report is about holding the government to account, about charting our progress against the clear promises we made' (Blair, 1998b). These reports, condemned by critics as 'public relations at best, and at worst as pure propaganda at public expense' (Scammell, 2001, p. 524), exemplified the efforts of the government to establish its achievements in the minds of voters (Ingram and Lees-Marshment, 2002, p. 53).

Like Clinton, Labour struggled to overcome voter cynicism about delivery. By the fuel crisis of mid-2000:

The [New Labour] brand was discredited by internal disputes within the party, and a perceived inability on the part of government to take control of current issues. Where the brand once stood for modernity, integrity and competence, it now seemed to represent elitism, spin and drift. (White and de Chernatony, 2002, p. 50)

According to Rob Alexander from TBWA, the Labour party's advertising agency, research in 2000 showed that 'the issue was ... the perceived lack of delivery, with the media fuelling attitudes saying [the government] hadn't done anything, they're as bad as the last lot' (Alexander, 2002). Like Clinton, Labour developed a new approach in response to these findings, running an advertising campaign that thanked voters for improvements in education, health care, crime and the economy. Alexander explains that this was the only way government could communicate delivery without it being rejected as 'lies' or 'spin'. In the 'thank you' campaign, 'the achievements of the government are the achievements of the people who voted for them' (Alexander, 2002).

Clinton's rising approval ratings over time and Blair's falling scores suggest that Clinton was more successful in convincing voters that he was delivering on his promises. In the institutional setting of divided government, Clinton was able to position himself as a moderate facing up to an extremist Republican majority in Congress (Quirk and Cunion, 2000, p. 209). With a three-figure Labour majority in Parliament, Blair could not exploit such tensions. The Blair experience of declining approval ratings over time fits the classic downward trajectory of leadership ratings, attributed by Mueller to the combined displeasure of a 'coalition of the minorities' (Mueller, 1970, p. 20). Clinton bucked this trend. Institutional constraints put a limit on what he was capable of as president, and voters appeared to respond well to his scaled down version of the presidency. Blair on the other hand struggled to project a message of delivery which would match voter expectations. MORI's 'delivery index' measured public expectations from June 2001 to March 2004, and found that on average for this period only 37 percent of respondents believed Labour's policies would improve public services (Mortimore and Gill, 2004).

## Government as a Brand

As incumbents, Clinton and Blair sought to sustain their relationships with their winning coalitions of voters through projecting aspects of leadership which are analogous to branding. Both leaders strived to develop simple, reassuring and credible messages, which distinguished them from their opponents and resonated with the aspirations and values of voters. These premiers were particularly effective at differentiation and aspirational appeals but their ability to deliver simple, credible and reassuring messages varied over time. The value dimension was particularly problematic for leaders who much of the time looked too eager to please.

A style of politics in which poll-watching leaders engage in brand promotion raises normative concerns. Some aspects of branding have positive elements: the simplification of messages is not intrinsically damaging to political discourse, nor is an

emphasis on credible delivery. A leadership more cognizant of and responsive to public opinion can be seen as more accountable and democratic (Harrop, 1990, p. 290; Scammell, 1995, pp. 17–18; Lees-Marshment, 2001, p. 225). However there are aspects of branded government that raise concerns. The emphasis on defensiveness and reassurance makes it a style of politics defined by its enemies and lacking ideological roots. Wilson argues, for example, that Clinton appeared to have no more fundamental goal than political survival (Wilson, 2000, pp. 292–3). Branded politics stifles the difficult choices that might fragment voter coalitions. Public policy becomes highly responsive to uninformed swing voters – ‘the people who are liberal on social security and [healthcare], conservative on taxes, eager for simplistic solutions on crime and welfare, and happy to postpone dealing with problems’ (Quirk and Cunion, 2000, p. 225).

A parallel yet paradoxical limitation of branded government is that it fosters a politics of confrontation and differentiation, rather than negotiation and compromise. Whilst voters are carefully wooed, rival institutions and candidates are caricatured and demonised to ensure differentiation (Ornstein and Mann, 2000, p. 225; Kernell, 1997, pp. 3–4). In the UK system, such an approach is not necessarily incompatible with delivery, given the capacity for a prime minister with a large majority to push through policy. In the US, however, it is impossible for the president to achieve policy outcomes without collaboration. As Tenpas puts it, ‘the war-room mentality ignores fundamental aspects of the legislative process that require deliberation, policy knowledge, compromise and negotiation’ (Tenpas, 2000, p. 124).

A third limitation of political branding is its effect on intra-party relationships. In the UK, Lilleker and Negrine blame political disengagement on the stifling of political innovation at local level and the imposition of coordinated messages from the centre (Lilleker and Negrine, 2003). Criticising the handling of the leadership selection in Wales and London, Freedland commented:

Number 10 officials insist that Labour is a “brand” and they cannot let just anybody go into the marketplace with that precious label – especially if they are selling a different product ... Labour is not a brand. It is a political party and, in a diverse, multi-nation country like ours, that means different things in different places. (Freedland, 1999)

In the US, conversely, the branding of an incumbent candidate may weaken the institutional power of parties still further by selling the candidate on his distance from the messy reality of intra-party debate (Groeling, forthcoming). The branding of political leaders appeals to and intensifies media interest in the leader whilst weakening the collective aspects of political decision-making.

## Conclusion

A permanent campaign model of incumbent communications is flawed in its assumption that the transition from campaigning to governing is seamless. The role of incumbent differs from that of office-seeker, since voters have made their ‘purchase’ and a repeat sale is years away. The challenge for an incumbent is to provide post-purchase reassurance, and maintain their winning coalition of voters until the



next opportunity for a sale. In this way campaigning from within government is analogous to relationship marketing, a new paradigm in commercial marketing, which rejects the transaction orientation of older approaches. Like a politician, companies use relationship marketing to maintain the loyalty of consumers between sales, reassuring them that they have chosen well and highlighting positive brand attributes. Relationship marketing and branding provide an insight into the strategic challenge facing incumbent politicians as they endeavour to maintain their support base between elections.

Clinton and Blair attempted to promote the six attributes of successful brands: simplicity, uniqueness, reassurance, aspiration, values and credibility. Their ability to convey these attributes varied throughout their time in office as public expectations and broader institutional configurations changed. Overall they were most successful at promoting uniqueness and aspiration. For most of his presidency, Clinton had an advantage over Blair in the promotion of reassurance and credibility as voters reduced their expectations of the presidency in a period of divided government. Both leaders were vulnerable to attacks on their lack of authentic brand values, a central flaw of their defensive style of politics. The empirical plausibility of a branding model for understanding incumbent communications should not mask its normative limitations. The emollient and polarising aspects of a strategy of incumbent brand promotion make for an attenuated model of political leadership.

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