

## The Prime Minister and the News Media: Political Communication as a Leadership Resource

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THE news media plays a central role in constructing and shaping public assessments of government. This is why, eager to secure favourable, supportive media coverage, government deploys a variety of political communications strategies to project a positive image. Sometimes these strategies succeed, sometimes they do not. This fact has long been well attested to both by commentators and by practitioners. In addition, however, while government uses the news media to secure collective benefits for itself, certain actors within government seek to use the news media to secure individual benefits for themselves. Political communications, often deployed to advantage the government, can therefore be used to advantage the prime minister rather than just the administration or party they lead.

The prime minister has long been the centre of political attention (Gladstone and Disraeli were not part of the political crowd, nor were Lloyd George or Churchill) but modern mediatised politics considerably exacerbate age-old processes of personalisation. An interest in political celebrity, backed up by an ever more prevalent interest in process journalism, magnifies the modern prime minister, placing him or her centre stage in key political processes. Nowhere is this best illustrated than by the propensity to report government actions as being the result of Tony Blair's own decisions. This can operate to the prime minister's acute disadvantage, but it is something that can be turned to the prime minister's advantage. By dominating government-centric political communications—and thereby influencing the news agenda—the prime minister can reinforce his or her ability to agenda set within government, something at which Blair—and those who work for him—have for the most part excelled since 1997. This has helped fuel suggestions that Blair is a 'president', no longer a prime minister, and the contestable notion of presidentialisation owes much to media-led personalisation which inflates the premier by 'marginalizing other political actors to the periphery of public attention'.<sup>1</sup>

Politicians have long sought to manage and manipulate, threaten and appease broadcast, broadsheet and tabloid outlets. They have eagerly cultivated and/or attacked journalists whenever it has been possible to do so. Since time immemorial, politicians have sought—with only ever

partial, intermittent or temporary success—to control the news media. This is, however, only one aim of any media strategy. Tony Blair knows that, provided he can deliver the public goods his party wants, principally electoral popularity, government office and policy success, modern mediatised politics can help enhance prime ministerial power. Being projected in the media as leading a well-regarded government, boasting high and favourable poll ratings, being personally popular and associated with policy success all contribute to the making of a successful prime minister. Alternatively, being projected as being a failure, not up to the job, out of touch and unpopular will inevitably help undermine any incumbent.

Obviously, to enjoy supportive media attention in good times, the prime minister has to endure negative attention in bad times. Being spun centre stage means the prime minister is better placed to accept friendly bouquets, but it also means he or she is liable to be hit by hostile brickbats. This is why the news media, always an indispensable tool in conducting politics, is simultaneously a resource and obstacle, a friend and an enemy. In the final analysis, while the prime minister's power is never just dependent on his or her media profile, a supportive media profile will help further strengthen an already strong prime minister just as a critical profile will certainly further undermine a weak prime minister. This is why, aware he is the source and subject of so much political news, Blair has striven to build up a powerful Downing Street media management apparatus that is charged with reinforcing the centrality of the prime minister and his office within the nominally collegial British executive.

### *Managing the government's message*

News management strategies, part and parcel of Labour's promotion of Blair, have helped fetishize the prime minister, reflecting the fact that leaders are increasingly the personification of their parties. The media seeks to both report and review the actions of prime ministers, but prime ministers want only to be favourably reported, not critically reviewed. Because government and the media both construct political news against the background of events, they share a wary and adversarial symbiotic relationship. All political actors seek to manage their news profile as a matter of course. The prime minister's strategists scramble to secure positive coverage to accentuate his or her appeal, endlessly challenging the media's right to interpret events, seeking to manage both the presentation and reception of the government's message. This is why communication needs are institutionalised into government's day-to-day activity.

To this end, the Downing Street press secretary has been a significant part of the prime ministerial toolbox for the past forty years. Holders of the post, most notably Bernard Ingham under Mrs Thatcher, Joe Haines under Harold Wilson and Alastair Campbell under Blair, have formed a key part of the government's 'strategic community'. 'Spin' has

long played a part in projecting the government's 'public face'. While the Blair government did not invent spin, it has expanded existing strategies. In building on Margaret Thatcher's legacy Blair had two objectives: first, to favourably shape media coverage of the government; second, and as importantly, to keep the government and its supporters on message while defining what that message is.

Central government has been gradually revamped to provide the prime minister with a de facto executive office, a prime ministerial department in all but name. Blair has made numerous changes to the structure of Downing Street and the Cabinet Office, which has been accompanied by several personnel changes. Under the rubric of the Communications and Strategy Directorate we currently find the Downing Street Press Office; the Media Monitoring Unit, which surveys the news for the prime minister; the Strategic Communications Unit, which coordinates announcements across government; and the Research and Information Unit. Inevitably, discussion of the Labour government and the news media engages with the Alastair Campbell phenomenon. Between 1994 and 2003, Campbell, the former political editor of the *Daily Mirror* and the *Today* newspaper, was Blair's key media strategist. Together with Peter Mandelson, he helped make New Labour, rebranding the party and successfully marketing its leader, placing news media management at the centre of Labour's electoral strategy. Campbell, the key Downing Street official after the 1997 general election, was much more than a prime ministerial press secretary. His position at the heart of Whitehall signified the centrality of political communications within the New Labour project. As a partisan Blair cheerleader Campbell saw his job not as representing the thinking of the prime minister, but as advocating it, both within and without government. He rejected the idea that his role should be as a conduit between prime minister and media.<sup>2</sup>

Seymour Ure describes the Downing Street press secretary as the prime minister's spokesperson, adviser on media relations and coordinator of government information.<sup>3</sup> Campbell was in addition Blair's *confidant*, policy adviser, political strategist and ad hoc government manager. Being Blair's trusted and close personal confidant was the most important of his roles. Given the reach he exerted across Whitehall, many described him as the 'real deputy prime minister' but Campbell himself claimed to be only 'an extension of Tony' (*The Guardian*, 8 March 2004). In that capacity, however, he was a more influential figure than the vast majority of cabinet ministers and all junior ministers. While having no power other than that of a prime ministerial emissary or representative, Campbell saw his job not as making policy, but as 'selling Tony'.<sup>4</sup> Within Downing Street his relationship with the prime minister was such that he seemingly engaged with Blair as an equal. In managing the presentation of the government's message he dutifully helped fashion that message on Blair's behalf.

Inevitably, however, Campbell became a public performer and politician in his own right, something that made him a lightning rod for media attack and led to his leaving the government in August 2003. A spin doctor outlives his or her usefulness when they become the story, and Campbell enjoyed a media profile far higher than all cabinet ministers save Gordon Brown. At the time of his departure few people believed the messenger or his message. His outspoken public attacks on the BBC during the furore over whether the intelligence reports on Saddam's Iraq were 'sexed up' or not was the final catalyst leading to his resignation. Campbell's replacement, the experienced Labour Party press officer David Hill, was given far less political purchase than his famous predecessor, lacking, for example, the formal power to direct civil servants or the ability to treat with Blair as an equal.

Campbell's departure, however, did not mean the end of spin. Whatever its failings, spin is here to stay in however attenuated a form. Indeed, Campbell's 2005 return to the Labour fold to help run the party's election campaign (and his on-going private advice to Blair) meant he never really ever went away. The media machine he presided over, while now enveloped in a certain shadow under Hill, nonetheless remains very much in place. Despite widespread criticism of Labour's media operation, however, the 2003 Phillis report, which was convened by Downing Street to suggest improvements to government communications, had recommended that the Downing Street—Cabinet Office centre be given full control over Government Communications. A new Permanent Secretary for Government Communications based in the Cabinet Office, the former Conservative adviser, Howell James, was appointed in 2004. A Downing Street official spokesman is deputy to James, with control over the prime minister's office. Although the Phillis report was critical of spin, the purpose of the changes proposed in its wake will be to further centralise government communications, principally by attaching government communications to the development of policy in Number 10. It will involve it in day-to-day thinking on communications issues at the centre, expand its influence on departmental communications activities, and coordinate all communication resources.

Howell and Hill, both gentler, quieter managers of government sources of news, do not have the clout of a Campbell. Campbell may have left Downing Street under a cloud, damned by his detractors for his 'control freak' politics, but most of his techniques remain in place, perhaps more suitably refined. Campbell more often than not attacked and bullied journalists, but Hill and the deputy he inherited from Campbell, Godric Smith, have been more likely to treat more kindly with them. It is very doubtful that future prime ministers will try to significantly remake the communications model bequeathed them by Blair. They may, however, try to disguise it, perhaps by prioritising the message, not the messenger. Gordon Brown, Blair's likely successor short of

a general election, is himself an assiduous news manager. The public use of the prime minister's speeches and statements, supplemented by sourced and unsourced briefings by Downing Street and/or unnamed, authoritative 'supporters', 'friends' 'senior aides' or 'spokespersons', will therefore long remain the stock in trade of central government communications. Such statements, sourced or not, will remain the primary basis for information about the thinking and opinions of the prime minister.

### *Limiting media autonomy*

Most politicians consider the media a necessary evil. In office many, even Bill Clinton, a people person par excellence, become news media phobic. President Clinton avoided the news media when possible, considering journalists as 'largely nitpickers, naysayers, political handicappers with little interest in the substance. They thrived on building themselves up by knocking him down'.<sup>5</sup> Even as he worked the media, Blair, one can imagine, has often felt the same even if he accepts that media criticism comes with the prime ministerial 'territory'. The media provides citizens with positive information and critical comment about government. The government welcomes one, but not the other. Politicians try to use the media to win support for their policies knowing that an 'increasingly opinionated mass media [has] somehow become the arbiter of political success and the distiller of conventional wisdom'.<sup>6</sup> The Labour government's perception of the media's importance was illustrated in a leaked March 2002 memorandum from Blair's then foreign policy adviser, David Manning. The memorandum reported Manning's belief that Blair had to 'manage a press, Parliament and a public opinion that was very different than anything in the [United] States' (*The Daily Telegraph*, 18 September 2004): The order in which these factors are listed is certainly noteworthy.

The relationship between the parliamentary lobby and the government's media managers, the engine room of much political news making, is the interface where political and media worlds collide. This relationship, inevitably an adversarial one, has become increasingly antagonistic. The ferocity of public criticism has recently been demonstrated in regard to government policy in Iraq, public sector reform and public spats involving prime ministerial and ministerial conduct. This challenges Bob Franklin's 1994 assertions that the lobby 'has been appropriated by government as a conduit for information' or that all parliamentary correspondents have 'metamorphosed from an active and critical observer of political affairs into a passive purveyor of government messages'.<sup>7</sup> Reportage has persistently destabilised the government, not least when it helped prompt the resignations of individual ministers such as Peter Mandelson (twice), David Blunkett (twice), Ron Davies, Stephen Byers, Beverly Hughes, Geoffrey Robinson—as well as Campbell's own departure.

Contra Franklin, it is the news media's critical reportage of the government which spurs Labour's strategic political communications community to intervene in the making of news. Obviously, so ceaselessly do news organisations pursue their right to report and comment, news cannot be controlled in a liberal democracy. It can, however, sometimes be managed by government, even if the autonomy of the media can only ever be temporarily restricted in some way, never wholly eroded.

Prime ministers might want to be reported but, being the subject of news stories shaped by journalists (as well as by events), they find themselves analysed. Such reportage often reflects the media predilection to be negative rather than positive, to evaluate as well as factually describe, and to often prioritise a study of process over substance. To combat this phenomenon, government persistently intervenes to get news organisations to report events as government would like it reported. It combines the role of 'hard cop' (organising the message, bullying journalists, attacking critics, selective leaking, rapid rebuttal) and 'soft cop' (wooing and winning over proprietors, cultivating supportive and friendly journalists, accommodating the partisan preferences of selected news outlets). Labour's approach echoes that of the Clinton White House, which had a 'carefully honed media strategy—alternatively seducing, misleading, and sometimes intimidating the press'.<sup>8</sup> Campbell's clear preference for intimidation was obvious, as was his contempt for a number of reporters and organisations.

Government criticisms of the news media, whether merited or not, can have a considerable impact. Of course, complaining about coverage, questioning reportage after the event, are an indication of failure, demonstrating the government has not been able to make its agreed line stick. The government places its trust in media management strategies other than robustness. These include public 'above the line' methods (structured, timed official announcements; coherent, on line messages; and public interviews, speeches and events) and private 'below the line' methods (spinning, leaking, briefing and kite flying). In both cases the government is trying to drive the news agenda, create a good news narrative or destroy a bad one, pre-empting or firebreaking unfavourable stories, while encouraging or fuelling favourable ones. Sometimes these succeed, other times these do not. Of these methods, spin, creating a mood or a buzz through information and opinion, is simultaneously the most public and private means of attempted news management. It is, of course, often demand led. A former Downing Street press officer, Lance Price, claims he found himself 'spending more time politely declining to spin our stories than actually doing it. Spin ... would have dried up long ago if there were a single journalist alive capable of saying "no thank you, I'll wait for the official announcement"' (*Independent on Sunday*, 31 August 2003).

More often than not, such is the news media's relentless pursuit of news, government finds itself reacting to an agenda not of its own

making<sup>9</sup>. Nonetheless, using the media to set the agenda proved a spectacular success for Labour in opposition during 1994–97. It has sometimes worked in government. In opposition, parties are judged by their stated intention and word, not by results or actions. The making of New Labour following Blair's elevation to the leadership was a classic example of marketing a party through the media. On occasion, most notably the January 1997 briefing that the Labour government would not raise income tax and would keep to Conservative spending limits for the first two years of the upcoming parliament, Labour not only captured news headlines but also stole the political agenda. In government after 1997 Labour made most of its policy initiatives, trumpeting its record on health, education and crime, and assiduously promoting itself by constant briefing and press releases. As it did, spin became a considerable Labour art form. So much so, however, its use became considered a counterproductive obsession, not least by many private critics within government. By 2000, Labour's association with spin had itself become a news story, something generating a considerable amount of hostile media coverage and playing some part in the general erosion of trust between politicians and the media.

It is hard to conclude that Labour's management of the media brought sustained advantage after 1997. Control freakery—as well as the creation of media favourites—has fostered a set of antagonistic relationship between Labour's news handlers and elements of the media. Labour's management of election news has often been the cause of such friction. Following the 2005 election, Adam Boulton, Sky News Political Editor, claimed it had been 'extremely unpleasant to experience the arrogance, the mendacity of Labour's handling of the press' and said party apparachiks had behaved like 'real little turds' (*The Guardian*, 9 May 2005). The fact is, then, however effective his political advice on wider electoral matters, Campbell's news management techniques often neither won friends nor influenced them. He did not, despite his many talents, secure Blair a consistently good press beyond the prime minister's extended 'honeymoon' after 1997. Howard Kurtz, the media correspondent for the *Washington Post*, shrewdly assessed the weakness of the Clinton administration's media strategy:

When it worked, the coordinated strategy of peddling a single line to the press, of browbeating some reporters and courting others, was stunningly effective. Damage could be contained, scandal minimised, bad news relegated to the fringes of the media world. But each time an administration did that, each time it beat back the negative publicity with shifting explanations and document dumps and manufactured announcements designed to change the subject, it paid a price. The journalists were more sceptical the next time round, less willing to give the Clinton spin team the benefit of the doubt.<sup>10</sup>

The same can be said of Labour's approach. Creating a positive narrative will only ever take politicians so far. The problem is that journalists

see themselves as an indispensable fourth estate, one obliged to unpack ‘spin’ and expose government ‘untruths’. As such they increasingly look beyond the government’s appraisal of a story to find the actual story as they themselves see it. Such stories have ranged across all governmental responsibilities: from accounts of intra-governmental spats between Blair and his chancellor, Gordon Brown, through the failure to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the problems associated with public service delivery, to more trivial gossip mongering such as Cherie Blair’s alleged association with a conman. As a result, then, while the Labour government’s efforts to vigorously intervene in the news cycle has at times served it well, it has also served it badly. Government-sponsored abuse of journalists often only encourages journalistic abuse. Indeed, as Andrew Marr notes, Labour’s ‘[c]entral control and manipulation created, within a few years, some of the worse press coverage any government in modern times has suffered’.<sup>11</sup>

The success and empowerment of government—and of its prime minister—will owe much to how the government and prime minister are represented in the news media. According to Tony Blair, life in government is a ‘constant barrage of attacks’ (*The Observer*, 6 March 2005). Spin is seen—rightly or wrongly—as a weapon with which the government and the prime minister can fend off such attacks. Consistent headlines like ‘Blair Triumphs’ have the potential to advantage the prime minister, while headlines such as ‘Blair Fails’ do not. Government tries—if often in vain—to encourage the first set of headlines but it invariably steels itself to read or hear the second.

### *Reinforcing prime ministerial authority*

The prime minister, a parliamentary chief executive by virtue of leading a partisan majority within the House of Commons, invariably heads a single party government, elected under plurality rule, which is usually able to dominate a reactive legislature. The institutional imperatives that arise provide the prime minister with the opportunity to be a powerful figure. Prime ministers have the power of patronage, which is reinforced by (and reinforces) their institutional centrality, legitimate authority and public prestige. This confers the ability to lead the government and the opportunities to create or alter the preferences of other intra-governmental actors and institutions. Government in Britain is rarely collective but oscillates between the semi-monocratic (prime ministerial-led, not prime ministerial) and the oligarchic (inner cabinet-led). This does not mean that there are no limits to prime ministerial power. There are, of course, considerable limits. Government may never be wholly collegial, but neither is it ever monocratic. Prime ministerial power is a movable feast. Such power inevitably waxes and wanes because it is qualified by a variety of factors both exogenous and endogenous to government. It is contingent, not finite.



The news media provides politicians with the means to contact all sorts of audiences, among them political commentators, opinion mongers and the public. It also allows them to communicate with each other. Politicians have variable access to the media. Some are reported more than others. Prime ministers are obviously more reported than most and, unsurprisingly, their aim is to turn this to their own advantage. Political communications thereby offer an already strong prime minister an additional means of expanding his or her intra-governmental power. Being able to influence the news agenda through the use of authoritative, self-referential communication helps extend the prime minister's ability to lead their government. It strengthens their institutional ability to lead ministers and set down policy through control of the Cabinet and Cabinet Committee system. Used wisely, then, government-centric political communications help strengthen the prime minister's institutional prerogatives by setting the government's agenda and so further circumvent the very real collegial constraints of parliamentary government.

Prime ministerial public speeches and media briefings are a key part of the process of persuasion involved in intra-governmental deliberations. Using the media to indicate his intentions is one of Blair's favoured means of policy agenda setting. First, when necessary (but not always), he enters into private negotiations with relevant senior governmental figures, most notably Brown in domestic policy matters. Second, he delivers a series of public speeches and statements outlining his intentions. Third, his office issues media briefings, both on and off the record, usually trailing upcoming public speeches or reinforcing them. This has the effect, because news media outlets rely on government sources for much of their information, of centering the prime minister in the government's side of the news-making process, something which invariably helps enhance his or her influence over ministerial colleagues.

This is why Blair has used his office as a 'bully pulpit' in which support is sought by explaining what policy the government intends to pursue and why. This was perhaps seen at its starkest in the preparation for the intervention in Iraq in 2002–03 when intelligence briefings were published and press-released in order used to garner support for the ousting of Saddam from both the public and backbench Labour MPs. Blair's policy preferences, among them marketising the public services, using public private partnerships to modernise, say, the NHS, forwarding the respect agenda and fighting the war on terrorism, has been similarly established by means of authoritative public and private statements. This approach reflects—and reinforces—the ongoing 'hollowing out' of the political party, which has seen the leadership's policy preferences, not those of the wider membership, become the party's preferences. The party manifesto, the marketing of the party, and the election campaign are all fashioned by the leadership, with the leader as prime minister or

would-be prime minister playing a central role. Of course, all leaders must carry sufficient of their parliamentary party—and a base within the wider party—with them. The prime minister tries to agenda set through the news media to ensure he or she is empowered—rather than being constrained—by the party mechanism within Whitehall and Westminster.

While other parts of Whitehall have some semi-independent relationship with the parliamentary lobby, most notably the Treasury under Gordon Brown, the Downing Street press office is the formal point of contact with the news media. Each departmental press office is shadowed by a Downing Street press officer and, in regard to important announcements, its formal media strategy is managed by the centre. Downing Street provides government ministers with a daily message, a set of answers to anticipated questions, thus trying to further impose its own agenda. Obviously, if everybody is 'on-message' then the politician(s) determining that 'message' will be empowered as a result. To control and frame the flow of government information, Downing Street constructs the government's 'line' ministers (and backbench MPs) are expected to follow. Daily lobby briefings and off the record briefings spin government-centric information in Downing Street's chosen direction. Transcripts of lobby briefings are circulated to ministers' private offices indicating the line taken. Downing Street chooses who is put up on what programme by nominating (or more usually not nominating) government spokespersons, taking particular care with outlets such as the *Today Programme*, the *World at One*, *Channel Four News* and *Newsnight*.

Controlling the agenda requires Downing Street to impose a central policy line. For instance, when the then Leader of the House, Peter Hain, circulated an advance copy of a speech calling for high earners to pay more tax to help the less well-off, he was slapped down publicly. Blair and Brown have stuck to their pledge not to increase direct taxation. This is not unusual. Prime ministers invariably use the news media to tell ministers to 'back off' when they publicly threaten to step out of line. Robin Cook, when Foreign Secretary, was instructed by Downing Street to delete favourable references to Euro entry in a Commons speech moments before the remarks were to be delivered by him. Unfortunately, the press release of the speech, containing the original text had already been distributed by the Foreign Office press office, which secured considerable publicity for the censured passages. Other examples of similar behaviour abound.

In imposing a central policy line, prime ministers and their staff use the media to try to instil discipline within government. This usually takes the form of undermining could-be critics through unfriendly briefings. Downing Street is the expert at such 'infighting by media' and the prime minister's press secretary and their staff are masters of the art. The prime minister is often kept at a considerable remove from such briefings. Mrs Thatcher's staff used the media to brief against ministers,

most famously during Whitehall infighting over Westland helicopters in 1985–86, and Jim Callaghan once famously observed that his leaking was merely a form of briefing denied other ministers. Downing Street regularly uses private briefings to attack or sideline uppity ministers and to deter others in order to defend and advance the prime minister's preferences. Out of favour ministers, most notably David Clark, briefly Minister for the Cabinet Office, had their political demise privately announced by the Downing Street Press Office long before their actual departure from government. Mo Mowlem, one time Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, fell from favour with Downing Street and found herself the subject of a whispering campaign many attributed to sources within government. Andrew Smith, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, widely tipped for the axe in an imminent cabinet reshuffle, resigned from government. It was widely reported, despite Downing Street denials, that he had jumped before he was pushed. Other examples abound. As an angry Clare Short, once Blair's Secretary of State for International Development, claims 'under New Labour this is the way in which people are managed. Everything is perfectly pleasant in person; the ticking off is done via the media. People are undermined through it and puffed up through it, but everything is completely deniable and no one has to take responsibility' (*The Guardian*, 9 September 2004).

Such activities are not, however, a Blairite innovation. Michael Heseltine recorded that a number of Thatcher's ministers were 'broken by the Downing Street machine. I had observed the techniques of character assassination: the drip, drip of carefully planned, unattributable stories that were fed into the public domain, as colleagues had been marked as somehow "semi-detached" or not one of us'.<sup>12</sup> Ian Gilmour, John Biffen and Francis Pym, to mention but three, knew from media coverage they would be dropped from government long before the axe actually fell. Harold Wilson frequently made known his displeasure with ministers, as did John Major. Using the media to pull individuals into line by briefing against them (and thereby deter others from stepping out of line) is not only a considerable intra-governmental prime ministerial resource, but also a long established one.

Should, then, a prime minister be feted by the media, be reported as an indispensable asset to the government, he or she will be more powerful within government than if they are considered a liability. Of course, while securing positive, supportive media coverage can be a considerable personal power resource for any prime minister, the very opposite will apply in regard to negative, critical coverage. The news media can both advantage or disadvantage any political actor. Spin, despite its prime ministerial advantages, also brings with it certain disadvantages. As mentioned above, its association with duplicity and dishonesty often makes it an unreliable weapon. The particular disadvantage of the overuse or misuse of spin was demonstrated by the difficulties Blair experienced

over the intervention in Iraq. Not only did the prime minister oversell (or misconstrue) his case, as the furore over the missing weapons of mass destruction demonstrated, but his office then mounted an extremely aggressive campaign against the media with the BBC as its primary target. This ultimately backfired, however, and significantly damaged the standing of the government and of the prime minister, who was personally blamed for the crisis that ensued.

Downing Street, while able to spin successfully, is often guilty of over-spin, reselling the same policy or showing its hand too early. For instance, the governmental spat that arose from the 2004 appointment of Alan Milburn as election supremo owed much to Blair first rehearsing the cabinet reshuffle in the media which alerted intra-governmental opponents—specifically Gordon Brown. While Brown would have made a public fuss whatever the manner in which the appointment was announced, the decision to trail the story in the media served only to extend the story across several news cycles. In addition, to advertise something is often to tie the prime minister's hands because not following through afterwards will invariably be interpreted as a sign of weakness. Clearly, even when wanting to do the opposite, a misuse or an over-reliance on spin can damage the government and weaken the prime minister. This is the downside to media management. Leading by media offers the prime minister a useful resource, but it brings with it certain dangers. If government becomes obsessed with packaging and marketing its message, it can mistake the messenger for the messenger, the promotional word for the policy deed. Blair—and hence Labour—has certainly suffered from this. Spin taken to the extreme will always undermine trust in government and the prime minister. Yet, whatever its dangers media communications strategies set out the prime minister's preference in public. They make it difficult, if not impossible, for ministers and loyal, supportive backbench MPs to challenge it. Because it is hoped that government-sourced news will entrench the prime minister's position, it is hard to envisage prime ministers dispensing with spin as an additional means to help outline and shape the policy of their government.

### *Contesting prime ministerial authority*

Seymour Ure suggests that whenever the prime minister 'communicates he does so very largely on his own terms'.<sup>13</sup> This is, however, unlikely to be the case all of the time. Having to react to a news agenda that is not of the prime minister's own making is probably the more common occurrence. At key moments, government is far more reactive than proactive. More significantly, given that contemporary government remains formally collegial, the prime minister does not have total control of the government's public face. Crucially, he or she cannot wholly control access to the media (determining who speaks to whom and when) nor the flow of information (placing it on or off the record). Other senior ministers seek informal and covert access to the media, so

leaking and briefing is not only confined to prime ministers and their cohorts. Indeed, just as prime ministers use the media to communicate to other actors within government, other ministers can use it to communicate to the prime minister, to each other, and to publicise themselves and promote their own interests.

The media is therefore often utilised as a two way 'bulletin board' or 'message centre' through which senior ministers communicate with each other, often trying to frame the political agenda in their favour. Not all ministers are always on message. Some can engage in 'freelance spinning', promoting themselves and their own policy preferences, thus encroaching on Downing Street media privileges. Blair might insist that all ministerial 'major interviews and media appearances, both print and broadcast, should be agreed with the No 10 Press Office before any commitments are entered into'<sup>14</sup> but he will never succeed fully. For some ministers (and, increasingly, their aides) are only too willing to express their private opinions by briefing journalists off the record. The traditional notion of collective cabinet government may have been undermined of late but there remain figures who enjoy some autonomy, usually senior ministers with a political base of their own. Depending on their relationship with others and the ministerial resources at their disposal they can exercise some check and balance on the prime minister's power.

The hierarchy of government is reflected in media coverage. Brown's opinions are accorded greater coverage than, say, those of Geoff Hoon, the Leader of the House. Ministers deemed up and coming are better reported than those considered to be on their way down and out. It is well known that Blair has had to accommodate Brown. Although Brown would have been beaten for the leadership had he stood against Blair in 1994, he ensured he was given an active role in the formation of domestic policy. The preponderance of the 'TeeB-GBees'—the disagreements between the two men as played out in the media—has been 'the biggest and longest running story of the New Labour years, overshadowing ministerial resignations, popular revolts over fuel costs or hunting, and even foreign wars'.<sup>15</sup>

Differences between Blair and Brown have embraced both high and low politics, from Euro entry to Brown's membership of Labour's National Executive Committee, health spending to junior appointments in government. Divisions between the two have also occasionally encroached upon Blair's cabinet appointments, helping stymie efforts to bring Peter Mandelson back into government in 2004. It also prompted considerable disagreement over the appointment of Alan Milburn, a key Blair ally, to head up Labour's re-election effort in September 2004, until he was sidelined when Brown was prevailed upon to fully participate in the Labour election campaign in April 2005. Of course, the principle issue dividing them is that Brown has long been Blair's most credible heir apparent.<sup>16</sup> The Chancellor's ambition, combined with the

clout he enjoys within government, means he has been eager to reinforce his autonomy. To indicate his importance, Brown has sought an authoritative media profile, one that demonstrates his elevation above ministerial colleagues and boosts his standing with the prime minister. Having learnt the lesson of his earlier career on the Labour front bench when he would deliver a soundbite at the drop of a hat, Brown is careful to avoid overexposure. Although he rarely gives interviews, his staff still assiduously promotes him, more often through private briefings rather than by public statements, guarding his perceived prerogatives and helping him maintain his standing within government.

The relationship between prime minister and chancellor is often underpinned by a mutual non-aggression pact, but that does not always prevent divisions, which are only exacerbated by the media. On one memorable occasion, a Downing Street source, widely assumed to be either Alastair Campbell or Blair himself, described Brown as having 'psychological flaws'. The comment was not made directly to Brown, but indirectly by a private briefing to the *Observer* columnist Andrew Rawnsley. Intra-government differences on Britain's entry into the European single currency were fought out in private and public between a strongly 'enter soon' Blair and a 'not yet' Brown. As chancellor, Brown, a self-confessed European currency 'realist', has had considerable purchase over the government's monetary policy. Skirmishes over the Euro were played out in code in the news media, most notably in October 1997, February 1999, July 2001 and June 2003.

Infighting-by-media is a common ailment afflicting all governments, which often prevents ministers from speaking with one voice. Off-the-record comments about the dispatch of government business regularly find their way into the headlines. Both Harold Wilson and John Major were exasperated when cabinet deliberations were routinely leaked to the media. Unsurprisingly, such infighting is more in evidence if the government is unpopular and the prime minister weak, than if the government is popular and the prime minister strong. On such occasions aspiring prime ministers find themselves jostling for position. Of course, freelance agenda setting remains the prerogative only of senior political figures. It does not apply to all members of the cabinet and never applies to junior ministers. Once key figures such as Blair and Brown operate in tandem, the government line, agreed in private and set out in public, usually becomes the line. Other ministers, aware that they step beyond this line at their peril, have to fall into that line.

Leaks and briefings, whatever their source, can damage the prime minister. For instance, Blair's spring 2004 decision to hold a referendum on the European constitution was leaked before Downing Street was ready to announce it, the cabinet had discussed it, and leading ministers had been squared. This precipitous briefing served only to undercut the prime minister's authority, making him look reactive rather than proactive. In undertaking such a U-turn it appeared Blair was following

a trend rather than setting it. He was also severely embarrassed, particularly when pro-European Cabinet ministers, who opposed the idea of a referendum anyway, made their anger known at not being consulted. Blair felt that the premature leaking helped bounce him into a decision he came later to regret, but could not then repudiate. In the event, to Blair's private relief, the need for such a referendum on the proposed constitution was obviated by the decisions of the French and Dutch to reject it.

The leaking of intra-governmental differences by individuals seeking a private advantage is endemic in all governments. Not only do politicians of all ranks try to generate media stories to win the support of the viewer or reader, but they also spin stories for their own purposes. They use such stories to communicate with each other and with their own intra-governmental objectives in mind. Prime ministers are no exception, ever willing to use the news agenda as a bulletin board indicating their political intentions and policy preferences, demonstrating which of their colleagues are up, down or in the loop or out the loop. The trouble is, however, other senior politicians try to utilise the news media in like fashion.

Finally, if the media is indeed a message board, then it is not a neutral one. It invariably spins the stories it spun. By this means it often creates the story, probing for divisions between ministers, prompted by an interest in process, the means by which governmental actors go about their business, something that is easier to write about than policy disagreements. Witness the endless (and usually incorrect) speculation that precedes an upcoming government reshuffle. A private political disagreement will be inevitably ratcheted up in importance when it becomes a public disagreement amplified by media reportage. Such reportage, which all too often fans the flames of intra-governmental differences, encourages some politicians' propensity to leak and brief. It further prises open any semi-private crack that divides ministers on grounds of policy or politics. As senior ministers jockey for position the media spotlight invariably fuels divisions, particularly when it is the principal means by which politicians send messages to their colleagues and when they do so in full sight of the public and informed commentators.

### *The prime ministerial mediatised image and its impacts*

The relationship between the politician and the journalist is mutually reinforcing. It sees each assuming the role of supplicant depending on the event in play. Politicians need to be reported and journalists need stories to report. In reporting and reviewing the prime minister the media help project their image, but this image is constructed and contested, by the prime minister, their party, their opponents and by the public at large, as well as by the media itself. The news media—comprising a segmented set of actors; broadcast, broadsheet and tabloid outlets; partisan and non-partisan journalists—plays a key role in the presentation of this image. It does not, however, wholly invent or manufacture this image, but it might perhaps amplify or—at worst—embroider it.

Obviously, the prime minister's public standing influences their media-tised image, which in turn can alter the prime minister's public standing. Knowing that how they are perceived is vital to any incumbent's success means that communications—and marketing—strategies are an integral part of Number 10's methods of governing.

The centrality of the prime minister in the political process is reinforced by the centrality of the news media in the practice of politics. He or she is much more than first among equals in terms of media coverage and is given greater weight than other members of the government. While politicians use the media for the advantage of their party, they also use it for their private benefit, particularly in raising their own profile, demonstrating their utility to potential supporters within the party and wider public. The prime minister uses the media—when it is possible—to project a favourable image as well as to reinforce their institutional prerogatives. Both aspirations are present in the 'public prime ministership'. Here, Foley's notion of 'leadership stretch'—the 'projection of leaders into arenas and contexts where they stretch away from party and organisation anchorages'<sup>17</sup>—is not only encouraged by changes in party organisation and in the use of permanent campaign strategies but also by media forms of reportage. Indeed leaders use the media to further 'stretch' themselves away from their parties. If, as Foley rightly suggests, '[p]olitical parties are permanently enthralled with the projected utility and leverage of their actual or potential leaders'<sup>18</sup> then this is because leaders use whatever means at hand to encourage such enthrallment, including permanently projecting themselves—and their policy preferences—through the media.

There is, inevitably, an analytical problem in assessing media effects on the prime minister's standing. Does media reportage make a prime minister strong or weak, good or bad? Or is a strong or weak, good or bad prime minister simply reflected in a news media's portrait? A media image can reflect a political reality, but it also reinforces and amplifies that reality. By portraying a government as effective or ineffective, the news media can help make a government popular or unpopular. Yet, whatever its intended or unintended impact, media reportage cannot by itself make the strong prime minister weak, nor the weak prime minister strong. No spin doctor could have successfully sold John Major as being a strong, authoritative prime minister during the 1992 parliament. The media can, however, make the strong prime minister stronger, or the weak prime minister weaker, something which can make all the difference. This is why trying to spin the prime minister centre stage is considered not so much an optional strategy as a political necessity. Prime ministers can sometimes be spun centre stage, other times not. Still, managing the message, characterised by the continuous attempts of government to accentuate the positive and downplay the negative, remains not only the government's collective purpose but also the principal objective of prime ministerial-centric political communications.



Is the media then a leadership resource? Yes, but it is only one resource amongst many. It is of little use, however, should the prime minister lack more pertinent resources including personal skill and ability; association with actual or anticipated political success, public popularity; and a high standing in their party.<sup>19</sup> The stark reality is that while media image can help boost a prime minister's public standing, that public standing will inevitably trump that media image. The public makes up its own minds. The prime minister's image, as impacted by wider political processes, ultimately reflects their authority and influence. Numerous factors impinge upon the prime minister's authority, among them other politicians, electoral opinion and the pressure of events, not to mention the ever present harsh glare of the news media spotlight. Prime ministers are ultimately dependent upon what environmental contexts, the institutional, political and socio-economic realities that bear upon them, allow them to do. Should these environmental contexts run against them this will inevitably be reflected in their media profile, and such contexts may well be amplified by that profile. In the final analysis even the most fabled spin doctor cannot make an unpopular prime minister popular or a weak prime minister significantly stronger.

- 1 M. Foley, *The British Presidency*, Manchester University Press, 2000, p. 293.
- 2 P. Osborne and S. Walters, *Alastair Campbell*, Aurum Press, 2004; L. Price, *The Spin Doctor's Diary: Inside Number 10 with New Labour*, Hodder and Stoughton, 2005.
- 3 C. Seymour Ure, *Prime Ministers and the Media*, Basil Blackwell, 2003, p. 125.
- 4 A. Seldon, *Blair*, The Free Press, 2004, p. 311.
- 5 H. Kurtz, *Spin Cycle: How the White House and the Media Manipulate the News*, Touchstone Books, 1998, p. 25.
- 6 *Ibid*, p. xx.
- 7 B. Franklin, *Packaging Politics: Political Communications in Britain's Media Democracy*, Edward Arnold, 1994, p. 87.
- 8 Kurtz, op. cit., p. xii.
- 9 For numerous illustrations see Price, op. cit.
- 10 *Ibid*, p. 301.
- 11 A. Marr, *My Trade: A Short History of British Journalism*, Macmillan, 2004.
- 12 M. Heseltine, *Life In The Jungle*, Coronet Books, 2000, p. 332.
- 13 Seymour Ure, op. cit., p. 84.
- 14 The Cabinet Office, *Ministerial Conduct*, HMSO, 2001, p. 8.
- 15 Marr, op. cit., p. 163.
- 16 Key sources which demonstrate the instances of media driven differences include Seldon, op. cit.; R. Peston, *Brown's Britain*, Short Books, 2005; T. Bower, *Gordon Brown*, Harper Collins, 2004; A. Rawnsley, *Servants of the People: The Inside Story of New Labour*, Penguin Books, 2001; D. Macintyre, *Mandelson and the Making of New Labour*, Harper Collins, 2000; P. Routledge, *Gordon Brown: The Biography*, Pocket Books, 1998.
- 17 Foley, *The British Presidency*, op. cit., p. 231.
- 18 *Ibid*, p. 356.
- 19 R. Heffernan, 'Prime Ministerial Predominance? Core Executive Politics in the UK', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 5(3), 2003, pp. 347-72.