

Gatekeeping in politics: enoch powell



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British Political Communication: Enoch Powell's Inflammatory Gatekeeping

In July 1855 a four vessel fleet of the British Royal Navy attacked Russian batteries in the Baltic Sea (Schroeder 1972). The conflict, a part of the Crimean War, pitted 200 foot long wooden ships with 20 cannon gun decks against castle-like fortifications in a war of empires led by kings. One hundred years later the world was locked in an international debate over economic ideals; so called right-leaning free market capitalism versus left-leaning socialism. In this conflict the empires wielded nuclear missiles capable of flying hundreds of miles to kill hundreds of thousands of civilians. In that short period many parts of the world experienced an industrialization of society. Crowd-sourcing of labor, technological advances in materials and mechanization, and the liberalization of finance produced a very quick shift in the lives of the common person. Prior to the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries generations of the same family could live very similar lifestyles. As the 20th century advanced children were experiencing radically different social and economic forces than their parents. As populations rose and cities grew different parts of society organized and formed representative elements for their special interests. The intentions of the group became sources of power as institutions grew and monetized those intentions. One of the primary tools used by those institutions, even in their early beginnings, became a funneling of information known as “ gatekeeping.”

First termed by Lewin (1943), gatekeeping refers to the process of filtering information by focusing on one small percentage of the information in order to steer public opinion. His analysis of gatekeeping focused on information as

a channel of communication that was affected by bottlenecking gates. At these gates specific parts of the channel would be choked and only a small percentage of the information would be able to pass through. Lewin (1943) highlighted the power inherent in controlling those gates. His model for this approach to communication theory was rather small; the dietary control a mother or a father has over a family's dinner menu (Lewin 1943). The scalability, however, applies to broad social structures. Every member of a social structure is affected by some sort of information channel. That information influences an individual's preferences, decisions, thoughts, and actions. Control over the specific pieces of that information, then, correlates to a form of power over the preferences, decisions, thoughts, and actions of individuals within the social structure.

Gatekeeping as it applies to communication theory has largely referred to mass media sources, a common player in information management. Shoemaker, Eichholz, Eunyi, and Wrigley (2001) define gatekeeping as a process that culls down billions of messages into the hundreds of messages that make it to an individual. It is, thus, an organizational mechanism and seemingly inevitable. Soroka (2012) showed why gatekeeping is inevitable by listing the primary reasons this phenomenon exists: organizational level factors, story level factors, and industry or professional factors. A major news outlet can act as an example to explain these factors. At the organizational level there will be administrative personnel with specific motivations, procedural constraints that are defined by the over-arching mission of the organization, and of course cost and time constraints (Soroka 2012). At the story level, factors like geographic proximity to the story, visual features of

the story, intellectual capacity of the story, and social aspects of the story define the makeup of the audience. At the industry or professional level there are specific values and norms of practice that are followed by individuals who feel a duty to the industry or the profession (Soroka 2012). With so many characteristics at play it is inevitable that discrepancies in the flow of information will be felt.

The inevitability of gatekeeping lends itself to a look at the use of information for political gain. Just as discrepancy in the flow of information is inevitable, gatekeeping in politics is equally inevitable. If every voter was able to express their personal preference within a regulatory system there would be an overload of subjectivity. Politicians use that fact to their advantage. By focusing on only one or two topics a person or an organization can focus the public on an objective “ reality” that caters to the individual’s general political view. In doing this the political goals of the politician or the political organization are met.

March and Olsen (1984), in their study on organization in political systems, attempted to explain political communication in a world of ever-increasing access to, and volume of information. They highlighted the common portrayal of politics as a reflection of society, or as the “ aggregate consequences of individual behavior (March, and Olsen 1984).” Their “ new institutionalist” theory of political organization emphasized the relative autonomy of political institutions, the historical considerations for inefficient information management, and the importance of symbolic action in political endeavors (March, and Olsen 1984). Gatekeeping makes use of each of these three points. With autonomy comes subjective control, inefficient

information management has the advantage of slowing down opposing propaganda, and symbolic action can emphasize a few important pieces of information while ignoring all others.

The global social and economic trends of the late twentieth century are good platforms for looking at the utility of gatekeeping in politics. As alluded to in the opening paragraph of this essay, much of the world experienced a significant lifestyle change in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As the Industrial Revolution mechanized major world powers, countries like England experienced a liberalization of social standards. Sexual promiscuity, alternative forms of music, drug use, and agnosticism opposed a World War II generation that largely identified with a conservative morality. In England this social liberalization formed as a response to the first half of the twentieth century that saw a consistent loss of economic growth. During most of the nineteenth century England ruled the world economy, maintaining an empire that spanned the globe and led innovations in machinery, steam power, banking, and trade. By 1900 industrialization had spread throughout Europe and North America, decreasing the hold on the world economy England seemed to have (Murphy 1973). World War I caused a significant economic downturn, and the Great Depression followed, continuing a stagnation that wouldn't lift until the end of World War II. The next few decades would be characterized by economic extremes with GDP growth jumping and falling as England recovered material losses from the war. The "high water" mark for England's economy during this time came during the early and mid 1960s (Murphy 1973). Industry had remained a consistent producer for the country following the world wars, and as

traditional markets changed and war-torn countries were rebuilt, Britain capitalized (Murphy 1973).

On the heels of each economic upswing were the two primary political parties in the British parliament: the Conservative party and the Labour party (McLean 2001). While the Labour party made personal gains in the immediate aftermath of WWII, pushing nationalistic sentiment, it largely failed at maintaining political control over the British government. From 1951 to 1964 the Labour party experienced three consecutive general election losses (McLean 2001). In this same period the country experienced significant GDP growth, a revival of finance, and the continued influence of industry (Murphy 1973). The Conservatives lauded their own governance, and unsurprisingly took credit for the temporary status quo.

The Labour party finally won a general election in 1964, placing Harold Wilson as Prime Minister (McLean 2001). Wilson was in stark contrast to the Conservative party member Harold Macmillan who sat as Prime Minister from 1957 to 1963 (McLean 2001). Macmillan embodied the right wing principles of the Conservative party, principles that embraced free market economies, social conservatism, and isolation. Wilson embodied the Labour party's more liberal standards of nationalism and state sponsored welfare. As the economy bounced up and down the sentiments and actions of the two parties moved towards the extremity of their political philosophies (McLean 2001). Conservatives became more conservative. Labour party members became more nationalistic and liberal. This growing move to extremism came to a front on April 20, 1968 with Enoch Powell's famous " Rivers of Blood" speech.

Powell (1969), a Conservative party member, gave the speech in front of General Meeting of the West Midlands Area Conservative Political Centre, and lost a prominent cabinet position as a result. The speech became known as one of the most inflammatory speeches in British Parliamentary history, and focused on the increasing trend of immigration into the United Kingdom. Powell (1969) argued against the annual influx of 50, 000 immigrants, stating the indigenous population was being “ made strangers in our own country.” He brought up conversations with working class countrymen who felt the increased level of competition for shelter, work, and food first hand. He stated that the majority of the immigrants had no intention of fully assimilating, and he made statements like “ this does not mean that the immigrant and his descendants should be elevated into a privileged or special class, or that the citizen should be denied his right to discriminate in the management of his own affairs (Powell 1969).”

The actual subject matter of the speech isn't as important as the reaction it produced. Powell was booted from the Shadow Cabinet, a form of check and balance to the primary cabinet. Labour party members called for arrests, newspaper headlines screamed, and Conservative backers went on strikes. Powell's inflammatory words caused an inflammatory reaction, a direct result of gatekeeping. Powell, an individual actor in a large political organization, focused on one aspect of the public debate to push his personal political agenda. By focusing on the derogatory effects of immigration he was able to focus his constituents' emotion on one small aspect of the country's economy. Instead of looking at both sides of the immigration debate he announced only one bias, a bias that would cater to future votes. He focused

on the annual immigration numbers without mentioning emigration statistics, and he used examples of the common working man as a victim of immigration without using examples of immigrants successfully assimilating into British culture.

The sentiment expressed by Powell in the “ Rivers of Blood” speech frames a shared trait of right wing conservative politicians in wealthy nations during the twentieth century: prejudice as a form of isolation. The speech pitted parliament in a debate over social welfare and personal responsibility, but more to the point the speech lifted Powell’s notoriety overnight. Despite his firing from the Shadow Cabinet, Powell continued on with a very successful career in politics, and many sources credit his speech as the turning point that won the 1970 general election for the Conservative party. This style of inflammatory communication is a common trend in organizations and institutions that represent a collective group. In this example we see one agent communicating one idea, in the midst of a wealth of issues. He didn’t select one piece of information to simplify a complex problem, he selected one piece of information to focus emotional responses in a way that would directly benefit him. On that day, during that speech, he was in control of the stream of information to the public. Just as mass media outlets function with corporate interests, and governments censor, so too did Enoch Powell use gatekeeping as a tool to benefit his interests.

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