

# British political issue



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Assess the impact of the media on the course and outcomes of a contemporary British political issue. You should choose one of the issues covered in the course. The Media, and its Influence on the Fortunes of Political Leaders

In a pluralist democracy, the media can have a very powerful effect upon politics, so powerful in some instances that it can shape outcomes of important political issues.

Leadership of a party, therefore, is a precarious position to be in, owing to the persistent and pervasive influence of newspapers, television, radio and the internet. Events surrounding Iain Duncan Smith's reign as leader of the Conservatives illustrate the extent of this influence. Since the demise of spectrum scarcity in 1946, British politicians have been continually scrutinised by the media through television, newspapers and more recently the internet.

Milton's 17th century concept of the 'freedom of the press' has allowed independence from government manipulation and the ability to talk more honestly and freely about politicians. However, the impartiality of the information depends on the fair-mindedness of journalists and the editorial policy. In the first half of the 20th century, people used to attend political rallies where they heard the great politicians of the day. At smaller rallies other political voices could also be heard. Radio brought these debates into people's houses.

With the advent of television came a completely new dimension. Not only the voice of politicians were heard but their personalities were exposed too. It was not enough to be an able politician with excellent policies but Political

figures had to be 'good on the box', in a sense 'actors'. Kennedy and Nixon's presidential duel in 1960 first exemplified the importance of image and style; Kennedy was clean-shaven, and had a clear charismatic phraseology.

Nixon looked pale, unshaven and disorientated. His poor performance contributed to his election defeat. One could say that politics has become that of a 'spectacle', staged to the minutest detail in order to attract and persuade voters. Technology has increased the immediacy and potential of the media, with 24-hour television channels and internet sites allowing faster dissemination of news. Localised party election meetings have been replaced by intricately crafted media events where 'self-image' and 'sound bites' are vital for capturing the snapshot interest of the quite often-preoccupied British public.

Party politics have subsequently been diluted and reduced to simple slogans that can be expressed in the shrinking time available in the evening news. After the 'iron lady' left Downing Street in 1991, the Conservatives have struggled to regain both the image and the charisma of Margaret Thatcher. Her successor John Major was subject to the form of media scrutiny still affecting the Conservative Party today. In 1997, the normally.

Tory biased Sun had this headline during the build up to the general election -'The Sun Backs Blair'(The Sun, 1997); although this swing in favour of Labour arose because of anticipation and previous disappointment rather than political preference. In 2001, Duncan Smith was elected after the failure of William Hague to revive the Conservative Party and improve their chances in the general election.

The opportunistic media criticised Thatcher's radical poll and fuel tax policies in the 1980's and left the Conservatives with a rather burdensome shadow looming over them. Refusal to forget Thatcher's legacy has meant that tabloid papers have continued to apply lowbred anti-Conservative personalisation - increasing trivialisation and some elements of contempt towards Conservative MP's.

John Major, William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and more recently Michael Howard have all been victims of personalisation; attributed to them chiefly by tabloids. John Major was the 'grey man'- the avuncular shadow of Margaret Thatcher's former self, William Hague was the 'high school debater', Iain Duncan Smith was 'the old-soldier', and Michael Howard is the 'dracula' type according to Anne Widdecombe -the Shadow Home Secretary.

Perhaps the main reason for the prevailing criticism is the inability to equate the archetypal figure of Tony Blair. His TVpersonality, combined with his great technical ability as an extempore speaker make him unrivalled. Up until Iain Duncan Smith was unseated, a number of allegations were made about his conduct within office. He was alleged to have misused the parliamentary secretarial allowance by paying his wife.

However, many believed him to be on his way out of office anyway, and that the claims were inconsequential to the security of his position. This is perhaps, exemplifies an attempt to frame Smith. Budge's framing theory emphasises the way in which the media can influence politics and the way in which people see and understand it. Fast-forward syndrome is a common occurrence in modern politics due to the fast, free flowing information that is

available world-wide. Issues change throughout the course of time, affected by crucial events, which can eventually be laid to rest when new information is discovered.

An example of this is the perpetual real time coverage of the Iraq war. Newspapers said Conservative prospects were 'promising' under Howard's leadership, when only hours ago under Smith, they had been 'beyond repair'. Optimism however can be premature in politics, as Iain Duncan Smith can testify. When he triumphed over Ken Clarke in September 2001, the media claimed he was the man to resurrect the Tories' and compete with Labour; Baroness Thatcher called him a "fine young man with exceptional potential"(Thatcher, 2001). Unfortunately for the Tories, September 11th distracted attention away from Duncan Smith's introductory campaign.

Scotland on Sunday also revealed precautionary optimism by saying: "Any democrat, regardless of political hue, should welcome the rebuilding of the parliamentary opposition into an incisive and effective team."(Scotland on Sunday, 2003)A few months down the line, he was criticised from all quarters including by members and ex-members of the party like Anne Widdecombe, Michael Heseltine and Crispin Blunt.

Blunt resigned because he believed that Smith was a "handicap" to the party; Blunt of course was unaware that his comment would lead to a bombardment of insults in his direction -even from Duncan Smith critics. Thatcher concluded by lamenting the ineptitude of Smith calling him "the worst leader in the history of the Conservative Party"(Thatcher, 2003).

Broadsheets and tabloids emphasised the remark, which would mark the end of Smith's reign as leader.

A substantial amount of newspaper coverage in the past three months was aimed at the Conservative Party, its ministerial fallouts and declining popularity. Duncan Smith questioned party loyalty and urged MP's to "unite or die". After the 'overacted' performance of Smith at the Conservative Party Conference in October 2003, even right of centre broadsheets like the Daily Telegraph started denouncing him, predicting his resignation "within weeks" (Riddell, 2003).

It was: "the most desperate day in the history of the Conservative Party" (Riddle, 2003). One of the papers to retain its loyalty was The Sun who criticised the 'backstabbing' Tories for squandering time and urged them to continue denouncing the government. Left wing opposition has arisen in the form of tabloids such as the Daily Mirror, who sloganised the Conservative Party's cabinet reduction strategy -which gives double the department responsibility to some of the members.

The Mirror branded them "The Dirty dozen". The Mirror's main concern was that some MP's were given the responsibility of two departments instead of one, indicating perhaps less emphasis on important issues like Health and Education. Rupert Murdoch's media ownership could have had an impact on the Conservative leadership. Owning The Sun, The Times, The News of the World and the Sunday Times -as well as 35.4 percent of BskyB, means that he is extremely powerful.

He was a staunch Tory supporter in the 80's and 90's and has shifted his opinion of the leaders recently until the recent appointment of Michael Howard. Murdoch's position was cautious, but nevertheless significant in terms of media influence. " We will have to see how the Tory front bench looks," Murdoch told BBC television on Friday.

Although he was anti Euro, Murdoch at times backed Blair's Government, exemplifying the alternating ideological influences of media moguls over issues like party leadership. Failure to project his authority in the Commons was one of Smith's natural downfalls and perhaps undermines the argument that the media were responsible for his dismissal.

In comparison with new leader Michael Howard, he did not have the ability to " alter his delivery while changing the mood of the house" (Fraser Nelson, 2003). Nelson also points out the striking differences in the chamber atmosphere; Smith would encourage a few mumbled utterances from his backbenchers, whereas Howard managed to gain a rumbustuous approval in his duel with Blair Prime Ministers Question Time.

Michael Howard has already claimed BBC approval for his debating skills in the chamber; for example, his fight against excessive business beaurocracy and taxes, his clash with Blair over the conduct of Children's Minister Margaret HodgeA recent Guardian poll suggested that the Conservatives still lagged behind Labour on 38%(The Guardian, 2003).

The alternating and sometimes contradictory multiplicity of 'facts' displayed by left and right wing papers will no doubt have an effect on their loyal readership. However because these statistics only represent part of our

democratic society and could be manipulated, the public's attitude to the leadership of the Conservative Party could be misdirected.

Instead of polls representing the public's attitude -'Reinforcement Theory'(Budge, 1998)- they might shape it into the image presented by the media rather than by theirs -'Agenda Setting Theory'(Budge, 1998). People's opinions are changeable. Human beings think and act in crowds as well as individually, and if newspapers give the impression that most people have a particular viewpoint their willingness to have a more open mind can be affected.

If a political party then makes mistakes and gains a reputation, not only will it find it difficult to detach itself from the previous deficiencies, but also it will inevitably be further damaged with the growth of investigative journalism. The issue of Iain Duncan Smith's leadership downfall therefore was not solely influenced by the media, but was a result of perennial antagonism against an ailing party.

The initial optimism of Michael Howard's leadership could diminish when he gets involved in policy confrontation, and the media continue with their routine cynicism -which can influence the public's opinion on party leadership.

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