



Labour in
Communications

Labs in
Comm

Lessons from a Landslide



25



Foreword by Alastair Campbell

When you reflect on the outcome of the last eleven general elections from a Labour perspective, you get a sense of the scale of the task facing Keir Starmer. Lost, lost, lost, lost, Blair, Blair, Blair, lost, lost, lost, lost. Compare and contrast the Tory Party. Apart from the three Opposition leaders seen off by Tony Blair - William Hague, Iain Duncan-Smith and Michael Howard - only one Tory leader in history, Austen Chamberlain, did not become Prime Minister. Post the Blair-Brown era, David Cameron, Theresa May and Boris Johnson have joined the historic trend.

I say this not merely to underline the scale of Tony Blair's achievement in winning three full terms for Labour, considerable though it was, but to emphasise how hard it is to win power from the left of centre in our country.

Also, whereas Tony inherited a party already moving in the right direction under Neil Kinnock and John Smith, and was immediately up against a Tory government that was tired, divided and mired in sleaze (albeit nothing on the scale of current Tory corruption) Keir Starmer took over after the electoral disaster of 2019. Heartland seats across the North and Midlands were lost, and he was facing a Tory Party and leader - if Boris Johnson survives - willing to do and say literally anything to cling to power.

Starmer's efforts to change public perceptions of the party, combined with Johnson's ineptitude to tackle the big issues facing Britain, have combined to ensure at least that the Labour Party can get a fair hearing again at the next election. The extent to which voters return to the party, however, or support it for the first time, has yet to be determined. The current government is so bad, their failures and incompetences, misdeeds and lies so epic, it is hard not to think Labour should be far further ahead. It shows yet again how hard it is to win from Opposition when the government can often set the agenda, and with a media generally so biased in their favour.

Labour need to fight every day not thinking they ought to win because the government is so awful, but seeing every day as an opportunity to put over a positive message about the alternative that can replace them. Yes, attack hard on all the government's failings. Yes, expose the reality of an unfair policy agenda which is further dividing Britain and impoverishing those who are already struggling. Yes, focus on Johnson's character and the damage it is doing to our values as a nation and our standing in the world.

But above all show the difference a Labour government can make. Labour, their MPs keep telling me, have lots of policies, but the public don't know what they are. You can't blame the public for that. And though the media is a massive barrier, you can't blame them either. Labour have to communicate relentlessly the difference they would make. The different policies. The different values. The different approach to what public life is all about.

When I became Tony Blair's Press Secretary in 1994, we understood that poll leads and anger with the government would not automatically translate into lasting support for Labour. We needed to move faster and harder to show that we had learned the painful lessons of those four defeats.

In Opposition, you have limited opportunities to set the agenda. The creation of New Labour, the new constitution, the new approach to policy and the new ways of campaigning and communicating were the signals to the electorate that we had changed the party in order to change the country. On May 1st 1997, Tony led the Labour Party to its greatest ever majority, ending eighteen years of Conservative government. Yet the real battle had been fought day in day out in the three years previous when we used every hour and every opportunity we had to convince the public that we were not only up for the challenge but that we had a credible thought through programme and, most importantly, their interests at heart. In the face of a hostile media, we had to

persuade people who hadn't voted for us in a generation that we could be trusted again.

While the electoral and technological landscape may have changed dramatically in the past 25 years, many of the principles that underpinned our victory still endure. Indeed in the face of populism, polarisation and post truth politics as represented by Johnson and as fuelled by social media, I believe they are more relevant and needed than ever. As Tides of History and Labour in Communications revisit our strategy and seek to emphasise some of the principles we adopted in 1997 for the different world of 2022 let me emphasise – this is not about "a return to New Labour," for the world has changed so much. It is about today's Labour Party finding the policy solutions to the very different challenges of today and making sure every single member of the public has a clear sense of what they are and how they relate to their lives. Especially in opposition there is no policy without campaigns. And no campaigns without policy.

I honestly believe that if the Tories get another term, after this wasted decade of austerity, Brexit and Johnson in Number 10, the country's future is parlous to say the least. That tells me Labour can win. Because they have to. There is no other alternative on the horizon. How that alternative is communicated to the general public every day between now and when a general election comes will be central to whether Keir Starmer can add his name to the all too short list of Labour leaders who make it to Number 10.

It is hard.

But it can be done.

Alastair Campbell is a renowned writer, communicator and strategist. He is best known for his roles serving former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair – which included time as Spokesperson, Press Secretary and Director of Communications and Strategy.

Recommendations

1. **Neutralise your opponent's attack line** — Starmer's success will rest upon whether he can neutralise the inevitable criticism that the party is still part of the "London Remainer elite" that has damaged the party since the Brexit referendum.
2. **Making Labour the patriotic party of Britain again** — Starmer's task over the next few years is to move beyond the flags and demonstrate to the British public why Labour values are British values on a more consistent and impactful basis.
3. **Reflect the mood of the press** — Starmer needs to engage with the right-wing press more actively. This should focus on the decline of the Conservative Party — tapping into a wider feeling about the deterioration of standards in public life.
4. **Simplicity and consistency of message and style** — While a simple slogan is just one part of a wider programme for government, the evidence is that it works as much as it did 25 years ago.
5. **Address the Hung Parliament question** — Rather than go into an election with the idea that the party would enter a coalition with the SNP, the party should outline their position repeatedly and reframe the focus toward getting the Tories out of government.
6. **Offer a new approach to politics** — By 2024, single issues such as party-gate will have long faded from view, however, the theme of Johnson's leadership, and the consequences of his governance, will remain. Over the next few years, Labour's task is to turn that narrative into a powerful policy platform that meets the challenges of today rather than those of 25 years ago.

Introduction



Being a leader of the opposition is often thought the toughest job in British politics. While Prime Ministers decide, opposition leaders can't even advise. The task facing Keir Starmer over the next three years is perhaps the most unenviable for any Labour leader since 1935. The disaster of 2019 means that the party needs to win over 120 new seats to govern with a majority. A political realignment, the like of which we have not seen since 1997, is now required to end the party's wilderness years.

As Alastair Campbell argues in his foreword to this work, the task facing the Labour Party is hard, but it can be done. In the early 1990s, as Labour suffered four consecutive defeats in a row, many believed that the party would not survive into the 21st century. Commentators such as Professor Anthony King talked about his fears of a "one-party state" emerging, while others wrote about "Labour's Last Chance".

By the 1997 election, however, Anthony King was writing about "one of the greatest reversals of political fortune in the history of any democratic country.^[1]". As he memorably put it, the result itself was like "an asteroid hitting the planet and destroying practically all life on Earth". The scale of the victory – reducing the Conservative Party to its lowest percentage share since 1832 – showed that there are no unwritten rules of politics that suggest that Labour cannot win elections.

Nowhere was Labour's transformation more evident than in the party's communication strategy. As Alastair has argued out in his foreword to this retrospective, there can be no return to the politics of the 1990s and to the creation of New Labour, but some of the guiding principles of winning over the electorate still endure.

^[1] King, A, 1997. *Why Labour Won?* in: *Britain at the Polls*. (New Jersey: Chatham House Publishers. 1997) p177

Neutralise your opponent's attack line

The death of John Smith in May 1994 came as a profound shock to the Labour Party. After fifteen years in the wilderness, Smith had positioned Labour as a credible alternative government in waiting and had built up a commanding 20pt poll lead. Most importantly, the polling emphasised how the voters believed he had the experience and capability to govern the country. Blair, by contrast, was open to being portrayed as a political lightweight. The critics were already preparing the attack lines and speculating whether he was tough enough for the top job. "Where is the Beef in Bambi?" asked the *Daily Mail*. ^[1]

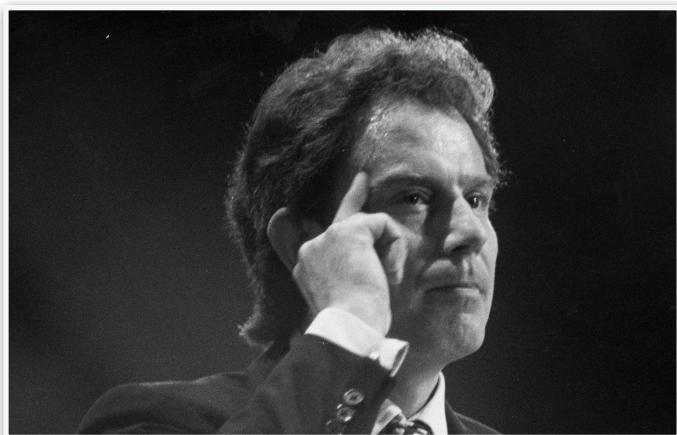
In a world where the shadow of Margaret Thatcher still loomed large, strength and the perception of strength became Blair's focus for the opposition years. It was, as he later admitted, his aim to show that Labour wasn't "going to be kicked around in the way Neil (Kinnock) and his team had been." ^[2] In the run-up to 1997, the public understanding of who he was and what he stood for came through a series of "bold" signals that the party had changed. When Blair admitted that he was going to revise Clause IV in 1994, Alastair Campbell was seduced by the "sheer boldness" of a change that would show the public that Blair "was someone who wasn't going to mess around". ^[3] Similarly, when Blair was offered the opportunity to speak at Rupert Murdoch's NewsCorp Conference in 1995, Campbell urged Blair to accept it, for the "boldness of it". ^[4]

These moves were symbols of change, with much of the hard work being done by Neil Kinnock in the 1980s. But they signalled that Blair could make big decisions that might make him unpopular. The Bambi nickname failed to stick, and the Tories adopted a more confusing message centred around Blair as a political chameleon who had stolen their policies. Less than a year into the job, even his critics in the *Daily Mail* were forced to admit that Blair was "the most formidable Labour leader in 30 years, a ruthless politician who knows how to go for the jugular". ^[5]

In terms of leadership, Keir Starmer is arguably in a much stronger position than Blair, having held a top job as the Director of Public Prosecutions. Yet, at the same time, the Conservatives will look to use

that job as a symbol of Labour being out of touch with "ordinary" voters in the so-called Red Wall. Johnson has already shown that the "Islington Lawyer" attack will underpin his strategy in this regard.

Starmer's success will rest upon whether he can neutralise the inevitable criticism that the party is still part of the "London Remainer elite" that has damaged the party since the referendum. Starmer's attempts to talk about his humble origins as the son of a toolmaker have struggled to cut through, as a recent New Statesman poll showed. Only 5% of voters believe him to be working class, which is only 1% higher than their view of Johnson. ^[6] His background should be irrelevant to the voters, but he must show that the party has come to terms with the 2016 Brexit referendum. To neutralise it, Labour must have a substantial, and well understood, post-Brexit offer to the towns that voted Leave.



^[1] Massie, Allan. "Where is the beef in Bambi?" *Daily Mail*, May 17, 1994, 8. Daily Mail Historical Archive (accessed April 23, 2022). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1860877224/DMHA?u=sussex&sid=bookmark-DMHA&xid=771f6cc2>

^[2] Blair, T *Reflections with Peter Hennessy* BBC Radio 4 (2017). Accessed via: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b0902l3q> 26mins

^[3] Gould, P., *The Unfinished Revolution* (London: Abacus, 2011) p210

^[4] Campbell, A., *The Alastair Campbell Diaries: Vol 1.* (London: Arrow 2010 Sunday, June 4th 1995)

^[5] "Cynical Blair goes for the kill." *Daily Mail*, February 25, 1995, 8-9. Daily Mail Historical Archive (accessed April 23, 2022). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1860953998/DMHA?u=sussex&sid=bookmark-DMHA&xid=be0fe0d6>

^[6] <https://www.newstatesman.com/society/2022/04/is-marcus-rashford-working-class-the-answer-depends-on-your-age>

Make Labour the patriotic party of Britain again

At the 1992 general election, the Conservatives built their campaign around the idea that Labour would undermine Britain's institutions. "The United Kingdom is in danger," Major told one rally. "Wake up, my fellow countrymen. Wake up now before it is too late". In 1997, the Tories reached for the same playbook, arguing that New Labour was a threat to British values because of their attitude to Europe. An election poster entitled "New Labour, Euro Danger" with a lion and a blood-red tear dripping from its eye was heavily pushed. But it failed to connect with the voters for the first time in a generation.

Part of this was because New Labour had developed a patriotism of its own. On the pages of *the Sun* newspaper, Blair argued that "Patriotism is not about waving a flag" but "wanting what is best for your country and your fellow countrymen, of finding new ways of upholding these traditions". On a range of issues, from crime to education to health and the economy, New Labour successfully argued that the Conservative ideology was holding the country back.

As the 1997 election approached, the party grew more comfortable using traditional Tory symbols to communicate the change. In addition to reworking the Union Jack into its election posters, the party used Fitz, the bulldog, to symbolise the "sleeping giant" that was Britain in the mid-90s. Blair argued that it was a symbol of a "Tory Britain that was complacent". The *Daily Mail* claimed the bulldog had been "kidnapped" and "hijacked" by Labour. But having neutralised the threat of inexperience, New Labour could use their youth and ideas to project change. "Labour has the energy and the drive to rouse the Bulldog to its former glory".

The revival of the Union Jack was not without controversy within the party. By then, a backbencher, Tony Benn, the veteran left-winger, said that being at Labour conference in the

1990s was like being at a National Front rally: "It was everything I feared, and it made me absolutely sick".

Since he became the leader in 2019, Starmer has used several opportunities to speak in front of the Union Jack. The leaked strategy document advised Labour to make "use of the [union] flag, veterans [and] dressing smartly" as part of a rebranding to help it win back the trust of disillusioned voters. But as other political commentators have argued, there was a "clunkiness" to sitting behind a Union Jack for a speech. ^[1]There was little explanation behind the shift in direction and a consistent story about where Labour has gone wrong on patriotism over the past decade.



Starmer's task over the next few years is to move beyond the flags and demonstrate to the British public why Labour values are British values on a more consistent and impactful basis. Over the next few years, Labour's task will be to detach Johnson from Tory traditions, to show how he is not in the tradition of Churchill, Macmillan, or Thatcher as he thinks he is. From Rory Stewart and Nick Boles to John Major and Dominic Cummings, Conservative figures have begun to mirror Labour's arguments. Starmer will have an opportunity to tap into the disillusionment in Conservative Britain by highlighting how Johnson has tarnished Britain's global reputation.

^[1] <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/how-to-save-keir-starmers-flagging-labour-leadership-coronavirus-polls>

Reflect the mood of the press

New Labour wanted to escape the restrictions of traditionally Labour-supporting papers - the Mirror and the Guardian - and find support elsewhere, particularly from Rupert Murdoch's papers. While much focus has since centred around the Sun finally backing the party on the eve of the campaign, the party had been tapping into wider tabloid discontent with the Conservative Government throughout the 1990s to create a narrative about the decline of Britain.

Labour's much-heralded "windfall tax" on utility companies came from planting stories about "fat cats" who had gotten rich off privatisation profits. Likewise, the rise in crime and the perceived breakdown in law and order were skillfully portrayed as a consequence of Thatcher's policies and a contrast to the idea that they were tough on crime. So too, on the controversial issue of welfare, Labour mirrored tabloid anger about the rising welfare bills by arguing that it was a sign of economic mismanagement. "A large social security budget", Blair argued ", is not a sign of socialist success, but a necessary consequence of economic failure". [1]

The idea of a crisis of Conservatism, which is beginning to develop in the media, can build into a more substantial argument about Labour's call for change. Narrating the crisis of Conservatism, just as Thatcher managed to narrate the crisis of the Winter of Discontent, will be central to the election of the next Labour Government. The recent defection of Bury South's Christian Wakeford signals that some Conservatives are worried about the next election. But if Labour is to really capitalise on it, it will need to create a media narrative about the decline of the Conservative Party that taps into a wider feeling about the deterioration of standards in public life.



[1] Bell, Christopher, and John Deans. "Blair to sacrifice 'sacred cow' of welfare." *Daily Mail*, July 14, 1994, 12. *Daily Mail Historical Archive* (accessed April 26, 2022). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1860669698/DMHA?u=sussex&sid=bookmark-DMHA&xid=80b0aec8>

Simplicity and consistency of message and style

The symbols of "boldness", aimed at creating a narrative in the media, were underpinned by the disciplined media operation from Labour HQ. After seeing how well the Democrats in the US had neutralised attacks against them, Philip Gould urged the party to develop a "rapid rebuttal unit", which could match the power of the Conservative Research Department and the traditional Tory-supporting media. The central plank of this was the investment in Excalibur, dubbed "the most powerful weapon in Labour's general election armoury", as it enabled party workers to instantly rebut claims and accusations from the government.

A huge investment in new technologies enabled the party to create a huge database of all Labour politicians' recent speeches, statements and policy documents. The investment was seen as a sign that the party was serious about winning, so it was linked to its overall image. "We are proud of it; it says a lot about the Labour Party - it is tough, it is professional, and it is going to work," Blair said about Excalibur at the centre's opening.

The Labour in Communications report *Fit for the Future* has acknowledged that the party needs to adopt a more simplified message to cut through with the voters. While a simple slogan is just one part of a wider programme for government, the evidence is that it works as much as it did 25 years ago. In 2019, despite heavy criticism of his campaign, Boris Johnson won around the basic mantra of "Get Brexit Done", which fed into the overall sense of what his government was going to be about. Labour has adopted various lines, from "one rule for them" to "on your side" to

"Britain deserves better" to "It's coming home" to campaign in various elections. Once the policy framework has been established, however, it must find a slogan that reflects the party's approach and the overall mood of the times.



Address the Hung Parliament question

Labour was heavily criticised in 1997 for running a "safety-first" media campaign. As Roy Jenkins put it, Blair's task was "like a man carrying a priceless Ming vase across a highly polished floor". Those organising around New Labour had good reason to be cautious. Memories of the defeat in 1992 shaped how the "modernisers" built the New Labour project.

In 1992, Labour had entered the race as bookmakers' favourites to win and had opened up a seven-point lead with a week to go. Fearing that a Labour Government was imminent, Fleet Street cranked up the pressure. *The Sun* rolled out Nightmare on Kinnock Street again and warned that page 3 would not survive a Kinnock premiership. In the broadsheets, the *Daily Telegraph* called for "much more" negative campaigning "to warn of the consequences of a Labour win". And with Labour ahead, questions turned to the mechanics of a Hung Parliament — whether Kinnock could keep the union together and deal with the Liberal Democrats on proportional representation.

Those questions, by 1997, had been "bomb proofed" in the intervening years, with Blair deferring the devolution question to a referendum and signalling that he would work with the Lib Dems to get the Tories out. However, Labour's clear lead meant that it was less susceptible to attack. Starmer will have no such luxury as he enters the next election, with a Hung Parliament likely to dominate every aspect of the campaign.

If Labour enters as favourites, the "question of trust" on Starmer's deals with the SNP and the Lib Dems will become the dominant political narrative, just as they did for Ed Miliband in 2015 when there was a dramatic late swing in the Southwest against Labour. Labour must have a consistent message to deal with the inevitable attacks; otherwise, it will be susceptible to claims

that a Starmer minority administration will work with the SNP and the Lib Dems to reverse Brexit.

One way would be to neutralise the Brexit threat by, as pointed out earlier, making a bolder and clearer offer to Brexit voters on Levelling Up that leaves the voters in no doubt that we will not rejoin the EU anytime soon. And rather than go into an election with the idea that the party would enter a coalition with the SNP, the party should rule it out repeatedly. Starmer could evoke memories of 1979 when the "Tartan Tories" ushered in the Thatcher era as a reminder of the consequences of voting down a minority Labour Government.



Offer a new approach to politics



As Alastair Campbell has argued in his foreword to the retrospective, this piece is not about returning to the New Labour years. Whilst it is important to understand the principles of the 1997 election campaign, perhaps the most important lesson to be drawn is that New Labour was offering a different style of politics than what had come before it.

Successful oppositions tap into the appetite for change and take the agenda for the future as their own. In 1979, Margaret Thatcher skillfully tapped into industrial discontent to make a broader argument about the decline of Britain. In the 1990s, New Labour created their own narrative based on dissatisfaction with the sleaze and the decay of the public realm to argue for a more progressive and fair country.

By 2024, Labour will be able to pitch Keir Starmer as an antidote to the chaos of the Johnson years as the true defender of British values. From decaying public services to the cost-of-living crisis, the state of the realm will open the electorate up to change as it did in 1997.

Starmer's Labour Party has an opportunity to create a new narrative and a new style of politics around the settlement of the post-Brexit, post-Covid era. Starmer's most impactful performances have come when he has articulated how the sacrifices made in Covid symbolise a wider story about the spirit of Britain, an experience which has united the country together. There is a story about what Britons have gone through in this period, and Labour must make it central to their arguments for change.

By 2024, single issues such as party-gate will have long faded from view, however, the theme of Johnson's leadership, and the consequences of his governance, will remain. Over the next few years, Labour's task is to turn that narrative into a powerful policy platform that meets the challenges of today rather than those of 25 years ago.

About Labour in Communications

We're Labour's fastest-growing professional network of supporters working in the communications, media and public affairs industry.

We provide a social environment for like-minded people to meet and discuss political issues, share perspectives, raise concerns, consult on ideas and serve as a platform to publish writing.

Our network cares very deeply about the traditions of the Labour movement—equal worth of all, with no one cast aside; fairness and justice within strong communities. We believe in a society where we do not simply pursue our own individual aims, but where we all—including business—hold many aims in common and work together to achieve them.

We hope that our network, and many others like us, can be a small help with fresh perspective, organising power, and a supportive hand to those who share the interests of making a better Britain.

"When we started Labour in Communications, we were determined to help build a Labour Party which is ready to tackle the challenges of our time. We're proud of what we've achieved in 15 months: welcoming almost 2500 members, hosting over 40 events with Shadow Ministers, mentoring 20 people from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds, and providing communications support to 20 CLPs, as well as to some of Labour's front-bench."



Nabhan Malik and Peter Turay | Co-Founders, Labour in Communications

About Anthony Broxton

Anthony Broxton is a cultural and political historian, best known for his writing on Labour history and rugby league. With over 35,000 followers on social media through the Tides of History project, he has written regularly for national publications such as *The Times*, *The I*, *The Critic* and *Prospect*.

"I am delighted to be able to work with Labour in Communications and Alastair Campbell on this retrospective. While it is important not to indulge in the pure nostalgia of the 1997 campaign, there are clear principles that can be applied to any political communications campaign. Just as in 1997, Starmer's task is to win over millions of Conservative voters who have turned away from the party in recent years. By projecting Labour as the party for all of Britain, they stand a good chance of ending the Conservatives decade in office."



Anthony Broxton, Creator of Tides of History



**Labour in
Communications**