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## **Selling socialism: the marketing of the 'very old' British Labour Party**

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**'Selling Socialism':  
the Marketing of the 'Very Old' British Labour Party**

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***Introduction.***

The present incarnation of Britain's leading social democratic party as 'New' Labour underlines the relevance and importance of marketing to politics. Management discourse now permeates the modern electoral process. During the 1990s leader Tony Blair aided by key acolytes such as Philip Gould and Peter Mandelson used marketing techniques and thinking to recreate a brand identity in keeping with their cautious programme for government. In doing so they followed on from their previous work on behalf of Blair's predecessor, Neil Kinnock. During the Kinnock era the party had undergone a fundamental change akin to a business evolving from a sales to a marketing driven strategic approach. Key contemporary accounts of Labour have tended to reinforce the politicians' emphasis on the novelty and radical departure involved in their respective projects of organisational reform (Hughes and Wintour, 1990; Gould, 1998). This, however, is to ignore the role and work played by marketing techniques, personnel and thinking in earlier incarnations of what has often been portrayed as a traditional, conservative organisation.

Based on extensive historical research and drawing on a voluminous amount of documentary analysis, this paper seeks to assess how and when marketing thinking and techniques first began to gain currency within the British Labour Party during the inter-war period. Hitherto accounts have concentrated on the post-1945 period and a series of developments related to the main parties' reaction to the combined impact of mass television and more pervasive forms of advertising. If this equates to when British parties began to 'sell' themselves, comparatively little has been said of the earlier, inter-war period of evolution. This 'production' or, to use a more appropriate political term, 'propaganda' era witnessed politicians' first attempts to cope with mass communication and near universal suffrage (Wring, 1996). Furthermore Labour, then a relatively new electoral force, was seeking to capitalise on social change and challenge the established party system. Attention now turns to how some in the organisation attempted to do this with recourse to rudimentary marketing concepts and practices.

***'Branding' the Party: the Development of Image Politics.***

The enlargement of the electorate in 1918 helped awaken politicians to the campaigning possibilities presented by mass communications' technology. Hitherto, electioneering had been largely conceived of in terms of canvassing, leafleting and platform oratory. Though these activities remained an important aspect of campaigns, party strategists began to evaluate opportunities offered them by more novel means of propaganda in the form of film, broadcasting and professional advertisements. The launch of these types of campaign initiatives did not prove to be easy and were dogged by problems, most commonly in the shape of bureaucratic inertia, internal rivalries or simply inadequate finance.

Labour formed its first Press and Publicity Department in October 1917 as part of a wholesale organisational review which coincided with the introduction of a revised party constitution (Hollins, 1981, p.146). An important initiative, this new section attempted to put the party's case through either a largely hostile, privately owned print media and later a nominally independent state broadcasting service. It soon became apparent to organisers that Labour would need to engage the electorate directly. Most strategists argued the party ought to capitalise on the good will of its activist base. A minority of organisers, however, began to assess alternative methods. Inspired by the arguments of thinkers such as Graham Wallas, these strategists began to argue the notion of an informed electorate was problematic and that the best means of persuasion lay in the emerging forms of mass communication. As Wallas put it, these 'image' based appeals would work most effectively when they called 'up as many and as strong emotions as possible' (Wallas, 1948, p.84). Such a sentiment found favour with many Labour veterans of the campaign trail including Philip Snowden who argued propagandists ought to develop themes which would resonate with, as he put it, 'very matter-of-fact people' rather than the 'higher intellectual' (*Labour Organiser*, no.23, 1922).

Image conscious appeals did, in a sense, form a part of early Labour appeals. Symbols, banners and other insignia played a role in promoting the public profile of those trades unions and socialist societies responsible for launching the party in 1906 (Gorman, 1985).

Furthermore, commenting fifty years later, the then Conservative Chairman Lord Woolton praised the party's founders for what he believed to be their inspirational choice of name:

'The word "Conservative" was certainly not a political asset when compared with the Socialist word "Labour". The man who first called the Socialist Party the "Labour Party" was a political genius, for indeed the word "Labour" implied the party that would look after the best interests of "Labour".' (Beattie, 1970, p.504)

If the name 'Labour' was the first of several attempts to develop a 'brand' identity, the party saw the need to further expand on its use of symbols and 'image' management. In 1924 the leadership devised a competition, inviting supporters to design a logo to replace the working 'polo mint' like motif which had previously appeared on party literature. Launched that year, the winning submission took the form of the torch, shovel and quill symbol which adorned the gateway of party headquarters in Walworth Road until 1995 when it was replaced by a gold painted replica of the current rose logo (*Labour Organiser* no.42, 1924).

The new logo was popularised within the organisation through its sale in badge form for a shilling. Another piece minted and merchandised by the party suggests Labour organisers appreciated the potential influence and symbolic use of 'presidential' imagery. The badge in question, depicting Labour leader Ramsay MacDonald (*Labour Organiser* no.92, 1929), bore out an observation of Jennings in his study of this period: 'the image is not devised only out of policy: it is in large measure produced by personality' (Jennings, 1960, p.288). The leader himself made what was perhaps a prophetic move in 1925 by announcing a competition to find a more modern replacement for the traditional party anthem, Jim Connell's socialist anthem 'The Red Flag'. Launched in conjunction with the sympathetic *Daily Herald* newspaper, the contest fielded 300 entries. But, in spite of this stiff opposition, Connell's song remained the party's (Gorman, 1985, p.142). By contrast, MacDonald dramatically defected from Labour whilst still leader a few years later.

### ***The Development of Political Advertising.***

In his 1925 book *Studying Advertising*, Sir Charles Higham asserted that 'the Labour Party since its inception has used advertising' (Tunstall, 1964, p.166). It was probably a remark made in respect of the party designers' many visually arresting posters. The 1906 election saw the appearance of 'Hope for Labour', the new organisation's first 'classic' poster. In the following elections of 1910 the party commissioned quality artists such as Gerald Spenser Pryse to produce visual masterpieces like the arresting anti-House of Lords' design 'Labour Clears the Way' depicting workers storming parliament (Gorman, 1985, p.166). No doubt encouraged by contributions to the agents' journal like 'Every poster should be an electoral howitzer' (*Labour Organiser* no.18,1922), Labour used the skills of Pryse and others to launch and sustain a poster distribution scheme during the 1920s (Hollins, 1981, p.163). More classics followed, notably the stark and striking 'Greet the Dawn: Give Labour it's Chance' design which formed the backdrop to the party's 1923 election campaign.

Having used designers and artists for some time, Labour did eventually consider hiring a professional advertising firm prior to the 1935 election but abandoned the idea on grounds of cost (Hollins, 1981, p.168). Given this campaign proved to be one of the most expensive in political history, it would seem financial concerns were not the sole reason behind Labour's reticence to hire professional help. Central headquarters contained elements hostile to the idea of using commercial expertise on the grounds they believed them to be advocates of unethical and crude tools of persuasion.

If some Labour strategists were unhappy about using advertising agencies, the Conservatives' not to mention others' activities made them think about modernising their propaganda material. This was not least in part due to the fact that, during the 1920s, advertising grew into an industry worth around £100 million per year. Unsurprisingly non-commercial organisations began to assess the potential application of what Gordon Hosking called the 'science' of 'social advertising' (*Labour Organiser* no.44, 1924).

Despite their misgivings, certain Labour strategists were amongst those keen to explore the new professional publicity methods, arguing there were many parallels between the work of a party and an advertising agency (*Labour Organiser* no.28, 1923; *Labour Organiser* no.73,1927). This contention found support in a timely piece by George Horwill on 'The Psychology of Political Advertising'. Whilst conceding that these methods could be used to cultivate 'primitive emotions', Horwill believed organisers would be well served if they understood the nature of commercial publicity work. He wrote: 'The advertising side of elections, directly or indirectly, constitutes nine-tenths of an election organisation (and consists of) methods used to influence the emotions and intelligence of electors' (*Labour Organiser* no.43, 1924). Another agent argued that limited finances should be no barrier to the development of an effective promotion when he wrote that the new methods were: 'An art we must understand and learn to apply... (A)dvertisement value is a subtle and almost immeasurable thing. It is certainly not intrinsic to its cost' (*Labour Organiser* no.178,1936). One organiser even suggested the merchandising of 'Bovril' offered an ideal role model for effective party promotions (*Labour Organiser* no.175, 1936).

One senior Labour politician did engage the services of professional advertising executives. Having overseen the re-organisation of the London County Council publicity machine, leader Herbert Morrison came to develop a close working relationship with several business people sympathetic to Labour. In planning his party's campaign for re-election in 1937, the leader recruited a team of professional advisers from amongst his contacts prepared to advise him on a voluntary basis. Their efforts concentrated on promoting the key issues of housing, education and the leader. These themes which were distilled into arresting posters featuring Morrison alongside children and against a backdrop of newly built LCC flats above legends such as 'Labour Puts Human Happiness First', 'Labour Gets Things Done' and 'Let Labour Finish the Job' (Donoghue and Jones, 1972, pp.209-11). The election result helped vindicate the innovative Morrison campaign plan, the party winning an improved 51% share of the vote and thereby increasing the Labour majority on the LCC. The marketing press of the day, as represented by trade journal *Advertising Monthly*, praised the Labour strategy

claiming it had even 'set the standard' for commercial operatives (*Labour Organiser* no.193, 1937). -

***Reel Images: The Development of Screen Propaganda.***

The early decades of the Twentieth Century witnessed the rapid development of the film industry in Britain. Up until this period political propaganda had hitherto been thought of in largely print terms, so it was perhaps of some surprise when the main parties began to investigate the potential of cinema as a vehicle for campaigns. Towards the end of the First World War the Labour Party began to receive offers of support from sympathisers involved with film projects: one volunteer, a Mr Greenwood, alerted headquarters to the availability of his 'daylight cinema van' (Hollins, 1981, p.184). In 1919 the party appointed a body of inquiry to look into the possible uses of the new medium (Jones, 1987, p.139). Reporting in 1920 Committee Chair Sidney Webb concluded by arguing that the party should organise showings of films such as *Les Miserables* and take note of innovative schemes being pioneered by an American labour union in Seattle and the Scottish Miners' Federation nearer to home (Hollins, 1981, p.186).

Despite Webb's enthusiasm for the medium, the perennial concern over poor organisational finances proved to be a major disincentive to the party's further investment in film. In addition an influential body of opinion believed resources could be better targeted strengthening popular and relatively cheap grassroots' activities in the form of performing drama and music groups (Jones, 1987, p.140). That said there were several initiatives designed to further understanding of the medium. These included the ILP Masses Stage and Film Guild (Jones, 1987, p.142), Daisy and Raymond Postgate's Socialist Film Council (*Labour Organiser* no.160, 1934) and individual producers like Rudolph Messel (*Labour Organiser* no.166, 1935). Activist interest in film was reflected in the decision of one local party branch in Nottingham to produce *Love and Labour*, very much a period piece about a young man finding socialism and a sweetheart on a day trip to Southend (*Labour Organiser* no.162, 1934). However it was probably the work of the Socialist Film Council, particularly its liaisons

with party publicity chief WW Henderson, which helped renew Labour interest in film propaganda (Jones, 1987, p.143).

During the 1929, 1931 and 1935 general elections Labour film propaganda was conspicuous by its absence. In contrast the deployment of cinema vans by the Conservatives and their National government allies proved to be a popular and innovative electioneering device (Hollins,1981). By devoting resources to film, the Conservatives were able to by-pass the major newsreel producers whose fear of the British Board of Film Censors meant they failed to provide meaningful political coverage (Hogekamp, 1986). The cinema vans project impressed others, including some in the Labour movement who resolved to form the Workers' Film Association in the late 1930s. War in Spain and then in Europe put paid to the Association's potential role as a vehicle for the dissemination of propaganda on the domestic front at least.

Writing in 1935 on the impact of 'Film and Television', one party commentator recognised that: '(these media) have entered into political propaganda... A new and devastating form of propaganda is with us' (*Labour Organiser*, no.166, 1935). Aside from its contents, the article is of additional significance for it marks the earliest recognition in *Labour Organiser* of the potential political importance of television, then a fledgling 'small screen' alternative to cinematic newsreels. At that time few could have predicted that it would radically reconfigure British politics in the space of a single generation.

### ***The 'Psychology' of the Electorate: the Pioneers of Political Market Research.***

One of the most significant debates during the inter-war period concerned the ways in which Labour strategists sought to overcome an apparent lack of reliable electoral feedback. Having questioned their own ability to understand public opinion, several party organisers sought to incorporate more precise 'scientific methods' into organisational procedure. Organisers, notably prominent party strategist Harold Croft, also started to discuss electioneering in this way. Hence the increasing reference to concepts such as the prevailing

'psychological appeal' (*Labour Organiser* no.30, 1923), the need to understand the 'political psychology of the moment' (*Labour Organiser* no.36, 1923) and thus hit the electorate's 'human chord' (*Labour Organiser* no.71, 1927). The 'scientific' form of electoral analysis found adherents willing to put it into practice. Writing after the 1931 debacle, Woolwich agent W. Barefoot called on his party to undertake a thorough reappraisal of campaigning:

'...mass psychology must be scientifically studied. Sentiment is not unworthy. Labour's job is to make it a Socialist sentiment. Our opponents have made a study of mass psychology and play it on the lowest plane. Labour must win mass support on the highest plane... Labour's task is to evolve a technique of mass attack on the capitalist system, which can be understood by the elector who never heard of Karl Marx... We want the substance of Socialism to be understood. The meticulous wording of resolutions after much cogitation at Annual Conference cuts no ice. It is mere shadow-hunting.' (*Labour Organiser* no.126, 1931)

Perhaps the most interesting evidence of the new 'scientific' view of politics came with publication of the highly original *Labour Organiser* series 'The Psychology of Political Parties'. The first article warned of the need to outdo prime minister Lloyd George in his ability as 'a past master of the psychology of the British people'. The piece continued: 'Once we understand these psychological appeals and the hold they give on this or that strata of society we can understand better the lines upon which political policy, strategy, warfare, organisation and propaganda may best proceed' (*Labour Organiser* no.22, 1922). A fellow commentator alluded to basic positioning theory when he urged fellow organisers to consider structuring appeals so as to reap electoral award through the winning over of non-aligned voters or 'outsiders' (*Labour Organiser* no.81, 1928). Emphasising the market analogy, another contributor introduced the concepts of electoral 'swing' and the 'barometer' of public opinion (*Labour Organiser* no.108, 1930).

The most important evidence that inter-war Labour organisers had some rudimentary conception of 'market research' came in December 1922 with the publication of an article by Sidney Webb, the leading intellectual little remembered for his important strategic work.

Webb's piece, entitled 'What is Stratified Electioneering', forms the earliest known attempt to segment the electorate. In it he wrote: 'It has occurred to me, in watching the process of combined propaganda and advertising that we call electioneering, that one refinement of which it is capable is a certain amount of stratification' (*Labour Organiser* no.25,1922). Observing that mass democracy was 'characteristically grey', Webb argued Labour should consider targeting the constituent elements because, as he put it:

'Every elector has his own "colour", if we could only discover it. He differs in character and circumstances, temperament and vocation, religion and recreation- and in a thousand other ways from his fellow men. At present we tend to address them all in the same way, with the result of achieving everywhere a certain amount of "misfit".'

The 'colours', or 'strata' as Webb called them, could be placed in several categories, most obviously occupational classifications like liberal professional, shopkeeper, insurance agent and others.

Sidney Webb's call for stratified electioneering struck a chord with an influential group of party agents. The article itself earned the rare honour of a reprint in *Labour Organiser* within a decade of its first appearance. In organisational terms, the most significant endorsement came from party secretary Arthur Henderson in the election year of 1929 (*Labour Organiser* no.89, 1929). The official party campaign guide *The Conduct of Elections*, first published in 1931, also gave prominence to Webb's analysis (McHenry, 1938, p.99). Author Harold Croft formulated his own set of strata designed to segment the electorate. Adopting what could be conceived of as 'psychographic' criteria, Croft chose to subdivide voters according to the categories of 'reliable', 'sympathisers', 'hesitants', 'opponents' and 'inert'(Croft,1945,p.4). Using a typology based on standard demographic rather psychographic variables, another agent advocated the need for organisers to make their publicity more appealing to the less discerning or non-partisan amongst the target segments of weak Conservatives, Liberals, workmen, women and certain religious observers (*Labour Organiser* no.54, 1925).

Several strategists were keen to court the support of non-traditional supporters. In particular Labour organisers' interest in the middle-class vote predates the major debates concerning social change and the relevance of the party that took place in the late 1950s and 1960s and more recently in the 1980s. As early as 1922, agent Frank Smith was urging colleagues to be weary of appearing to 'slag off non-manual working-class people' (*Labour Organiser* no.29, 1923). Writing the following year Herbert Morrison posed the question 'Can Labour win London without the Middle-classes?' In answering in the negative, Morrison encouraged organisers to go on the offensive and attempt to gain the confidence and votes of what he called 'brainworkers' (*Labour Organiser* no.34, 1923). Similarly, as at least one organiser noted, many professionals were not innately Conservative, not least the teachers vulnerable to attacks from right-wing newspapers such as the Daily Mail which were critical of so-called 'progressive education policies' (*Labour Organiser* no.50, 1925).

### ***Conclusions.***

This paper has examined the historical role of marketing within the British electoral process. Furthermore it has been demonstrated how even 'very old' Labour, and organisation traditionally regarded as being the most resistant to change, contained influential people keen to experiment with new campaign techniques and ideas. For them, image became a concern in addition to the issues. To this end there were elementary moves to 'brand' the party such as the launch of the first generic logo in the mid-1920s.

The burgeoning medium of commercial advertising also attracted some organisers' interest. In a celebrated campaign, London Labour leader Herbert Morrison co-opted a team of professional consultants to help produce an ultimately successful campaign effort. By a quirk of fate Morrison's grandson, Peter Mandelson, would do the same for the national party fifty (not to mention sixty) years on. Other organisers attempted to use psychological terminology to better understand the 'science' of public opinion. The celebrated scholar and intellectual Sidney Webb devised a scheme akin to basic market segmentation to help fellow strategists to identify potential groups of target voters. In a related development, influential party figures

were writing of the need to appeal to non-traditional supporters amongst the middle-class electorate.

The pioneering efforts of Morrison, Webb and a host of other less well known party strategists help showcase the innovative and engaging way that British parties adapted marketing techniques and concepts in responding to the twin challenges of a mass electorate and mass communications after the First World War. Furthermore it is also important to appreciate that, far from being late developers, electoral strategists became keen to devise, adapt and use marketing related concepts and practices in the advancement of their own campaign objectives. Even Labour, an organisation that has widely been perceived to be antagonistic to managerial theories and techniques, showed itself willing and able to adapt. Significantly this was decades before the rebranding of the party as 'New'.

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