

POLITICS IN A MASS-MEDIA SOCIETY

JONATHAN BARTLEY



Jonathan Bartley is director of the theological think tank Ekklesia, www.ekkleisia.co.uk.

ATTEMPTS BY POLITICAL LEADERS TO SHAPE PUBLIC OPINION CAN BE SEEN, IN PART AT LEAST, AS AN INEVITABLE RESULT OF ANY DEVELOPING DEMOCRACY.

Back in the days of rotten boroughs, wealth and the right contacts could secure a seat in the House of Commons, regardless of what the public thought of the candidate, or, indeed, the party they represented.

Cynics might suggest that nothing much has changed. A few hundred people from each political party in any given constituency will usually select their candidate. If it is one of the many “safe” constituencies in the country, then the candidate of the party holding the seat can be almost entirely confident of being returned to Westminster, regardless of what they say or do. There are also observable links between those who give large sums to political parties and those who find themselves appointed to the House of Lords. However, the most hardened sceptic must admit that even tens of millions of pounds in election expenditure cannot prevent defeat when public opinion turns against a party as a whole. Voters are quite capable of expressing their feelings through the ballot box in no uncertain terms – as evidenced in the electoral backlash against the Conservatives in the general election.

PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND TRUST

In a modern democracy, winning the public argument is essential if any political party and programme is to succeed, at least in the long term. At a time when such debates take place in the forums of radio, television and newspaper rather than the town square, appeals for public backing are expected, and political leaders make no secret of their need for public support. Tony Blair, for example, has repeatedly stated his intention of winning the public argument, whether it is over war with Iraq, the Euro or reform of the public services. However, the way in which politicians go about gaining the hearts and minds of the public has become the focus of ever increasing scrutiny.

Rated somewhere around the level of estate agents, politicians consistently find themselves bringing up the rear when it comes to opinion polls about who the general population trust. Falling voter turnouts, increasing public protest and general disinterest from large parts of the public are taken as signs that generally many people feel our politicians are not conducting themselves in the way that they should.

There are indeed good grounds for suspicion. My own encounter with the dubious tactics employed by many in political leadership came during the several years I

spent working in Parliament. In particular, I found myself working for the then Prime Minister, John Major, as part of his campaign team in the 1995 Conservative Party leadership election against John Redwood. It was here that I first came across the tactics used on a daily basis by the party machines in dealing with the news media.

Every morning John Major’s campaign team would issue internal briefings. These documents were designed to equip their side with the necessary ammunition to deal with media enquiries, and ensure that everyone was singing from the same political hymn sheet. The documents with such titles as “Lines to Take on Redwood” contained detailed points that supportive MPs and others were supposed to use to undermine our opponent’s campaign – and bolster the Prime Minister’s. They were little more than propaganda and their absurdity was highlighted by one briefing that began with the words; “There is nothing of substance from John Redwood today.” This was a document written before midday, and long before John Redwood had even made any statements that could be judged to be of substance or otherwise!

Outside of politics, the whole thing is seen for what it is – ridiculous in the extreme – but for those engaged in the real politic, those who are actively involved in political parties, it is a very serious and extremely important part of the political process. The party or group is there to win an argument against their opponents. Deliberating upon, deciding and then delivering a message is an integral part of this battle, even when truth is a casualty.

The extent to which this kind of approach is institutionalised in British politics should not be underestimated. At the very heart of Parliament, situated not far from Central Lobby, are the party Whips’ offices. There, MPs can find a wide array of briefs for the debates that are coming up in the House of Commons. But rather than reasoned arguments, they contain instead a series of carefully constructed points to provide political ammunition with which to undermine the arguments of opponents. Facts are distorted, figures misrepresented and a case created that will support a party’s particular perspective.

The goal of public discourse is often less about debating and exploring the best course of action, and more about winning an argument. But when truth is not presented in a balanced and qualified way, and when only one side of a case is ever made, it is no wonder that public

It seems that one-sided presentations of the truth have become an accepted and justified fact of political life.

confidence in those we have elected to govern wisely and carefully is lost – a story that only gives one perspective, although true, is not “the whole truth and nothing but the truth”. But this is a fact that consistently escapes the political classes, as Lord Hutton made clear in the findings of his inquiry into the now infamous dossier on Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction, produced in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq.

Lord Hutton was charged with looking at whether the dossier had in any way been “sexed up” by Downing Street. As he noted, there were two meanings that could be applied to the phrase “sexing up”. On the one hand, it could mean that the dossier was embellished with items of intelligence known or believed to be false or unreliable. The government was cleared of this charge. On the other hand, it could mean that whilst the intelligence contained in the dossier was believed to be reliable, the document was commissioned and drafted by 10 Downing Street in such a way as to make the case against Saddam Hussein as strong as the intelligence contained in it permitted. The government freely admitted that it had done the latter but, according to the Hutton Report, it was little cause for concern.

One-sided presentations of the truth have become an accepted and justified fact of political life. Usually, such an approach to public opinion would have attracted little public interest. Perhaps it was only because the implications and consequences of the dossier were so great, that truth-telling received so much attention. But if the document had contained an honest and balanced assessment of Iraq’s weapons capabilities with acknowledgement of the possible gaps and flaws in the information it contained, a very different course of action may have resulted.

To their credit, not all politicians were happy with such a one-sided approach to truth-telling and found it a grave matter. For example, at the time the dossier was produced, Robin Cook and Clare Short both accused the government of not presenting the whole picture and the Prime Minister in particular of a “series of half truths, exaggerations, reassurances that weren’t the case”.

ARE WE RIGHT TO EXPECT MORE FROM OUR POLITICAL LEADERS?

When it comes to the story of God’s unfolding plans, much of the advice given to the people of God is quite the opposite of what might be expected. We are called to pray for political leaders, to challenge them and to obey them when they do not contradict God’s

character, but it is hard to find any biblical story that suggests that trust in political rulers is something to be encouraged. Rather than exhortations to put our faith in them, trust in political leaders and trust in God are almost presented as alternatives in the biblical narratives. For example, the writers of the Psalms repeatedly point to the mistake of trusting in the strength of the state; Samuel warns Israel when she wants to choose a king to be like the nations around her, that the king will not live up to expectations – successive prophets of the Hebrew scriptures follow in this theme; and the Gospels portray political leaders in a pretty bad light.

This suggests that campaigns to promote trust in our elected representatives, which are run by certain Christian groups and organisations, may emerge from a Christendom mindset – which sees the role of the Church as supporting and protecting the institutions of society and state instead of challenging and calling them to account – rather than any biblical rationale.

Such initiatives may even be part of the problem. The current disillusionment with politicians has a great deal to do with the unrealistic expectations that are placed upon them through the mass media – expectations that can come close to idolatry. The state has frequently been looked to for solutions to solve societal problems, which are frankly beyond its control. Very few governments have the ability to wave a magic wand and make everything better in a way that the population at large would like. But politicians, in the context of public discourse, have responded to expectations in the hope of maintaining or gaining public support and made promises that in reality they were never going to be able to keep. The result is more distrust and people continue to be disappointed and disillusioned, and so the cycle continues.

What then is to be done? Clues for a good way forward can perhaps be found in the stories from the biblical canon that suggest a vital role for the prophet.

The business of the prophet was truth-telling. Whilst being realistic and recognising the limitations of government, the prophet also called the king to account, reported and critiqued the actions of political leaders and the effects that their actions were having on any population. In so doing, the prophet provided an important check to the powers that be.

In many respects, the model of the prophet provides a good benchmark against which to measure how the

► media operates in relation to the political system. Journalists and public commentators, like the good prophets, can be at their best when exposing and drawing attention to corruption in a government, the devastating effects of a given policy on the most vulnerable, or where an administration is not telling the whole truth. However, a bad prophet was one who massaged the king's ego by telling him what he was doing was right, or one whose aim was to bolster his own position and prestige, by being economical with the truth. Similarly, the media can be at its worst when journalists are themselves economical with the facts, create stories for their own sakes, careers, personal gain and prestige, or just to sell more papers, or get more viewers and listeners.

Expectations expressed by and reflected through the mass media are clearly a contributing factor to the decline of trust. Journalists and commentators are quite capable of discrediting our elected leaders, placing unrealistic burdens on their shoulders and undermining any confidence that we might otherwise have had in them. Like a bad prophet, or a bad ruler, the media is quite capable of distorting the truth, only telling one side of a story, or creating a story out of nothing.

Although perhaps well intentioned, the *Daily Mirror's* publication of pictures showing the alleged abuse of Iraqi prisoners by British troops is an example of how the media can be used to distort the facts.

A healthy democracy has important roles for both prophet and king, mass media and government. The context may be new, but the principles are old. The effectiveness of both sides will depend on their ability to be real, honest and tell it how it is. In a mass-media society this is certainly both a challenge and an opportunity. However, the restoration of trust is not, perhaps, what we should be aiming for. Rather, the goal must be truth.

Perhaps the last word should go to Jesus who in that most political of contexts before Pilate made the simple but profound claim: "Everyone on the side of truth listens to me" (Jn 18.37). ■