

# Maximum coverage: New Labour and the media

New Labour's relationship with the media has been the most sophisticated of any government to date, but slickness in shaping public opinion has been at the expense of promoting public enlightenment, writes **Jon Silverman**.

On one level, nothing has changed. New Labour's media gene, which functioned with unerring efficiency from the mid-1990s onwards, is as prominent in the party's DNA as ever it was. The fabled 'news grid', which coordinates departmental announcements across Whitehall to maximise media coverage, is still in operation. The tetchy phone calls to editors in response to unflattering stories are as frequent, if not as scatological, as in the Alastair Campbell era.

But the hacks who once delighted in being spoonfed tales of Tory sleaze and incompetence now take equal pleasure in biting the hand of the feeder. As Geoff Mulgan, Number Ten's erstwhile director of strategy, put it in a valedictory address in 2004: "journalists who used to dine with politicians now dine on them". On that the media and Whitehall can agree. But whereas Mulgan lays the blame on the press, particularly newspapers, for a haemorrhaging of trust in government, the perception on this side of the barricade is more nuanced. In criminal justice, ministers have reacted to media stories and campaigns with ill-thought through initiatives and at the same time colluded with the media in cranking up a state of fear about public protection, whether from paedophiles or terrorists.

## Collaboration

Indeed, public protection is a good place to start an audit. When Jack Straw entered the Home Office in 1997, he regarded two law and order issues as paramount. How to sort out the mess which fraudulently called itself a 'system' of youth justice. And how to win back many of those traditional working-class voters in Labour-held areas who had given up on the party because their daily lives were blighted by anti-social behaviour. Everything else came a poor third and New Labour's policies for protecting the public from dangerous offenders who had been released into the community after serving prison terms could have been scrawled on the back of a postage stamp without disturbing the perforation. It was a media-led furore over the cases of notorious paedophiles such as Sidney Cooke and Robert Oliver that forced ministers to frame legislation in 2000 which created the network of multi-agency public protection panels. So, on this issue, the media has been ahead of government in reflecting public

anxiety – though that doesn't make the sanctimonious bullying of papers like the *News of the World* any the more palatable.

By 2006, the MAPPA structure looked anything but robust and the media pounced on evidence of dangerous offenders left unmonitored and embarrassing flaws in the decision-making of the Parole Board. Paradoxically, the baying for blood by the newshounds worked in the government's favour. It enabled the Home Secretary, like a master illusionist, to unveil yet another eye-catching package of punitive measures, thus diverting the audience's attention from the basic problem, which is that New Labour has failed disastrously to tackle the appalling reoffending rate. To present longer sentences and more prison places as an escape from the morass into which the Home Office has been sucked in 2007 is desperate short-termism of the most blatant kind, which explains why it has been embraced so enthusiastically by John Reid, the Conservative Opposition and the biggest selling newspapers. Launching a hunt for the Home Secretary's brain, as the *Sun* did memorably in January, would have served a purpose, if it had been intended to highlight ten years of spectacular under achievement in addressing the causes of reoffending. But the suspicion lingers that it was merely a flashy way of discrediting John Reid as a putative prime ministerial challenger to Gordon Brown.

This story of collaboration between government and sections of the media, at the expense of public enlightenment, is especially evident in what many will see as the defining policy arena of the Blair era – the re-definition of civil liberty to mean the protection of the community from the suspect individual rather than the protection of the individual from the state. Whether the threat is asylum seekers, terrorists or identity fraudsters, the screeching of the *Daily Mail*, chorusmaster of the doom-mongers, has reverberated through the corridors of the Home Office and Number Ten. The answering call has been a flood of measures – to make asylum harder to get, to cut back on legal aid, to give the police more powers, to circumvent the courts in favour of summary justice, to persuade judges to pass indeterminate sentences – which, at the time, frequently get approving headlines but fail to tackle any underlying problems. And the disturbing fact is that the public, softened up by the



Julie Grogan photo

*It enabled the Home Secretary, like a master illusionist, to unveil yet another eye-catching package of punitive measures, thus diverting the audience's attention from the basic problem...*

newspapers they read and news bulletins they hear and watch, appear to approve of this assault on human rights, especially when justified by the 'war on terror'.

Particularly pernicious has been the gratuitous linkage of asylum seeking with criminality and terrorism and the general conflation of asylum and immigration in many newspaper headlines. The government might say that this is not its responsibility but, in the periodic brouhahas over the failure to deport foreign-born criminals or make control orders work effectively, there are precious few examples of ministers pointing out that neither Britain's immigration nor asylum policies are to blame. No wonder the independent race monitor on immigration, Mary Coussey, has expressed concern about the "negative and hostile tone" of public discussion on immigration and asylum and reminded the government of its "important role in encouraging a more objective and well-informed discussion on immigration". The fact that a 2006 MORI poll found that readers of the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* believed immigrants accounted for about 20% of the UK population, when the true figure is 7%, is surely of concern.

But what about the views of readers of women's magazines or the watchers of TV's *Richard & Judy Programme*, or the consumers of podcasts and weblogs? What about that burgeoning media world beyond the old-fashioned prejudices of what used to be called Fleet Street? What about the loosening grip on public affection of the major broadcasters? With the example of the Huffington Post in the US and other alternative platforms to inspire it, the Home Office has woken up to the fact – perhaps rather late in the day – that the Internet, not to

mention the ethnic minority press and 'narrow-casting', offer boundless opportunities to reach beyond traditional channels of communication. A new specialist media team has been created in the press office to send the message out into this semi-virgin territory and the next election could be the proving ground of its impact.

By then, of course, Tony Blair will be long gone, leaving behind only a distant echo of his iconic pledge to be "tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime". The press's verdict on New Labour will probably be that he was neither.

*Jon Silverman is a journalist and criminal justice analyst.*

## References

Osborne P. & Walters S. (2004) *Inside Blair's Bunker*.

Mulgan G. (2004) *Lecture at London School of Economics*.

LSE/Nat. Centre for Social Research (2007) *Research for the Annual British Social Attitudes Survey*.

Coussey M. (2005) *Annual Report of the Independent Race Monitor*. London: Home Office. <http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/6353/aboutus/independantracemonitor.pdf>