

As election fever hots up, journalists reporting on crime and home affairs are coming under growing pressure and scrutiny. Law and order is one of the three key election issues, along with the economy and education, so all sides are baying for attention while attempting to stamp on any bad publicity and perceived bias. This, combined with a Home Secretary obsessed with publicity, and an equally high profile shadow in Jack Straw, means that journalists covering the patch are now in constant fear of damage to their ear

Scoops and spins

Jason Bennetto throws new light on the plight of the crime correspondent.

drums. The contest between Michael Howard and Jack Straw - be it on sentencing, guns, knives, prisons, or young offenders - has become a bloody and at times absurd battle.

Mr Howard is in one way a godsend for journalists by providing at least one new or recycled policy each week, as well as lots of confrontations with 'soft lefties' like High Court Judges and probation officers, and numerous challenges in the European courts.

As well as the usual Home Office press releases, morning briefings, official launches and Parliamentary announcements there is a raft of more subtle techniques. Stories are leaked (often to the Sunday newspapers) a week before an announcement. They can be trailed at the Tory Party conference followed up with a consultation paper, preliminary findings, a draft bill and the final bill. Home affairs correspondents have lost count of the number of times they have re-reported what is basically the same story, but with a small twist. A good current example of this is the Stalking Bill.

A new spin

Another tactic is the use of the political lobby correspondents. If

Mr Howard's team believe an initiative is rather past its 'sell by date' and the specialists have grown weary of reporting it, they give an old story a new spin. In addition Mr Howard and his advisers are not averse to ringing up journalists in an attempt to 'clarify' or 'assist' a leading article or story, particularly an unfavourable one. For example, in August 1996 Mr Howard took time out on a Saturday to telephone every Sunday newspaper, during the fiasco that resulted in more than 500 prisoners being released from jail early in order to discuss what editorial line they might be taking. Similarly, Mr Howard rang the Times newspaper to discuss a negative editorial leader on ID cards. On this occasion the paper stood its ground.

Glimpsing power

Labour are not immune to the art of spin doctoring and will also ring round in an attempt to influence editorial content. In response to Mr Howard's conveyor belt of ideas and policies Jack Straw has come up with his own selection of 'get tough' initiatives such as curfews for youngsters and banning knives.

Since 'New Labour' looks increasingly likely to form the next government their ideas now matter. In the past a press release from Labour or speech by the then Shadow Home Secretary Tony Blair, would often be swiftly filed in the waste bin marked 'inconsequential'

One example of how the possibility of power is going to heads of some Labour members was recently experienced by one of my colleagues who received a stropky phone call the day after he failed to credit or quote the Labour Party in one of his stories. He was told "we're going to be in power within 28 weeks. This won't be forgotten." His considered response was to shout "don't threaten me" down the phone and hang up.

Legislating by numbers

It is highly questionable whether the growing tendency of thrashing out policies on the pages of newspapers makes good law. A recent example of how bad legislation can evolve because of party politics is

exemplified in the current debate about knives. Egged on by Labour's taunts and spurious newspaper campaigns Mr Howard went back on expert's considered opinion that combat knives could not be outlawed and instead introduced sweeping new police stop and search powers as well as a ban on the promotion of 'Rambo' style blades. The fact that neither of these measures will prevent people obtaining combat knives and that those weapons are only used in a tiny fraction of stabbings was seemingly ignored.

Helping with enquiries

A recent phenomenon is the growth of the use of the media by chief constables and senior police officers. The realisation by the police that newspapers, television and radio can be incredibly effective crime fighting and crook catching tools has resulted in a Jekyll & Hyde situation. On one hand vast amounts of information and background details are now available to try and get the police message across. But the payoff is that police chiefs know they hold a powerful tool - information. If someone writes or broadcasts a negative, damaging or inaccurate article they have the power to be 'less helpful' in future.

The police will rarely deliberately give poor information to someone who has offended them. They do not have to be that crude. Withholding the extra, vital details or the chance of an interview, can be enough. The best way to ensure police co-operation, even grudging, is to be as straightforward as possible and make sure the facts are correct.

The media are of course part of the problem. Journalists have an insatiable appetite for stories and exclusives, while being constantly fearful of being scooped by their rivals. Yet ignoring pressures from interested parties and sifting through issues to present as accurate a picture as possible remains one of the most important aspects of the job.

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