Paper 21

Reconnecting the Prime Minister
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Synopsis

This paper describes our work with the New Labour strategy team in the run-up to the British General Election of 2005. Uniquely this work features the combination of brand analysis with insights from qualitative research applied to political parties and figures. In its application to a national issue it represents an example of the role of consultancy at the highest level that we in the research community strive towards. In writing the paper we hope that others will take inspiration from the use of creative techniques and cross-functional methodologies to tackle the issues arising when brands and their icons are damaged in the eyes of their consumers.

The paper is divided into four parts. The first describes the chronology of events in the project and hopefully gives a sense of the pace at which the work had to be done to be useful to key members of the New Labour team.

The second section describes some of the methods and materials we used in the qualitative work.

The third section highlights some of the thinking that went into constructing our analysis of the problems facing New Labour in the months between January – May 2005 and the recommendations we made to the Prime Minister.

The fourth section discusses the outcomes in terms of speeches and events that followed the line of the strategic analysis up to polling day on the 5th May 2005 and afterwards.

Part One

Chronology: The events in the project

A shrewd member of Tony Blair’s Number 10 staff commented in March 2005: ‘In 1997 Labour won a mandate for two terms. The Conservatives could never have won in 2001. Effectively our mandate has now run out and we are trying to renew it.’ He thought that 2005 would be much harder to win, partly because of Iraq, partly because of the breakdown in relations between Blair and Brown and partly because of the boredom factor. He neglected to mention the decline in popularity of Mr Blair.
Some time earlier in December 2004, Charles Trevail had submitted his thoughts on the New Labour brand and its position in a changing world, which informed a piece in the Financial Times under the title ‘A Dangerous New Brandscape’. Charles made the point that as far as the public were concerned, New Labour had become a ‘high cost, high service’ brand in a premium segment of the market alongside other brands under siege like British Airways and Mercedes. He placed the Conservatives in the growing value for money segment based on their policies at the time (small government, reduced waste, billions saved from the public purse) alongside winning brands in the low cost sector like Tesco, Ryan Air and Toyota.

This piece led to an approach on 10th December 2004 from Shaun Woodward, Labour MP for St Helen’s South, to work with him on a review of the New Labour brand. Several days later, on the 14th Charles met with Shaun, Philip Gould and Sally Morgan at No 10 Downing Street in Sally’s office. After a short preamble Philip said they needed a new perspective on the New Labour brand and were putting together a team to work on it. We were invited to be part of that team from the point of view of branding expertise. Charles suggested that we ran some groups, which Philip agreed, would be a good contribution and starting point.

The groups were organised incredibly efficiently by Philip’s office. Over the next few days, Roy ran 4 groups:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Labour loyals (Voted Labour last time and will do so again)</th>
<th>Undecideds (voted Labour last time but undecided who to vote for in 2005)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group 1: Men</td>
<td>Group 2: Women</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group 3: Men</td>
<td>Group 4 Women</td>
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The first two groups were standard focus groups one and a half hours in length. Realising that we could not reach the depth of insight we needed in this time, we made sure that the second two groups were longer, three hours each to be precise.

We presented the findings from the first stage to a group at No10. It included Shaun, Pat McFadden, Sally Morgan, Philip Gould, Alistair Campbell, Alan Milburn and others.
The bulk of the presentation was feeding back the results of the initial groups, and within this, their focus on Tony Blair. We also began to put the issue into a brand context. We explained how people’s views of brands often depended on the environment they existed in and how people’s wants, needs, concerns were very different today than they were in 1997. We elaborated our evidence of a new climate of insecurity fostered by events like the attack on the World Trade Centre and compounded by a sense of lawlessness and disrespect among our own people. Our hypothesis was that the new labour brand, personified by the leader Tony Blair, had lost its attraction for the British public. Part of the analysis focused on the developments in respondents relationships with Mr Blair personally, and how this was a crucial aspect of the disillusionment that typified those who were no longer likely to vote Labour in the groups.

Figure One: Insecurity Rising
It concluded with an analysis that confirmed much of their thinking, but also added something new. They were intrigued with the idea of how to reconnect Tony Blair with the electorate; clearly they saw this as a key challenge. We had all been very nervous about our presentation and spent a lot of time knocking it around. Frankly we were a bit rushed. That said, Philip Gould was highly complimentary about the work and thanked us for the input. Alistair Campbell sent over a speech he had been working on describing the relationship between TB and the country like a marriage. The seeds of the Reconnection strategy were unfolding. Now the Strategy team needed further substantiation to give them clearer directions on how to go public with the reconnection strategy at the Spring Conference on 11 – 13 February.

In the next week Shaun saw Alan Milburn and they agreed the next steps. Having proved that we could add value to their team it was agreed that we should work on a brief with 3 clear elements with a view to presenting to the Prime Minister:

The elements were:

1. The New Labour Brand
2. Reconnecting TB to the electorate (Philip Gould only really interested in this one)
3. A strategy to deal with the Tories

On 17/18 January, we ran two 3-hour workshops in which we looked at the issues in more detail and from more perspectives. In the earlier sessions people took an hour to get a lot of stuff of their chests before we started to get anywhere. Some of the processes from these key sessions are described in the next section on Materials and Methods.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>‘Undecideds’</th>
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<tr>
<td>(voted Labour last time but undecided who to vote for in 2005)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 5: Men</td>
<td>Group 6: Women</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The groups served again to illustrate the depth of feeling people had about the government. It was clear that this was a multi-layered issue and we worked to flush out the quick wins and more importantly the underlying rationale behind people’s current animosity towards Blair and the Labour Party. Using analysis against our original hypotheses and branding techniques, we developed our original presentation to include a brand model, action points to get the brand
working for the party and an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the Tory brand.

We presented Brand Review 2 in Alan Milburn’s (palatial) office in the Cabinet Office on
Wednesday January 26 to the same group and a few others. This time the presentation was able
to dwell in considerable detail on the ways in which the New Labour brand had become
damaged, with particular focus on the diminishing popularity of Tony Blair. There was a sense of
intense concentration and at the same time relief among the audience in what turned out to be
a two-hour presentation. It appeared that we had provided insights and explanations that could
be turned to good use in the forthcoming weeks. Again we received praise and thanks,
particularly from the deputy head of the Labour Party who called it ‘the most interesting
political presentation I have ever seen!’ This kind of response, while gratifying, testifies to the
need among the strategy team to have a model to help them think about the decline in Mr
Blair’s reputation and what to do about it.

We were asked to stand by to present to the Prime Minister later that same week, on Friday,
when he had returned from the Economic Summit in Davos. The nerves in our team reached a
new high when we considered that much of the presentation contained perspectives that
would not be easy to listen to if you were the focus of the discontent and yours was the
personality being described. How would the PM react? Should we skirt around the issues or
tackle them head on? Alastair and Sally were keen that we should tell the story without editing
or withholding, just as we had told it to them. We remember thinking ‘How did we get ourselves
into this?’

The next morning (Thursday 27th January) we got a call from Rebecca in Philip Gould’s office
saying that the PM wanted to see us that afternoon at 4.30. We were becoming used to the
sudden requests from senior politicians, but losing a day’s preparation time was still unnerving
for our team of Charles, Roy and Ben Hayman. Shaun had just arrived at St Helen’s that morning
for a surgery in his constituency. He jumped back on a plane and headed south to be at the
crucial presentation.

At four we arrived at No 10 and were taken up to the Cabinet Room (where Churchill had
declared war on Germany - we remember hoping that this room would not feel the rumble of
war today!)

As the PM arrived there was a sort of hush. He immediately shook hands and sat down. His
same team were there, but with the addition of Jonathan Powell. He gave us fully 45 minutes to present without an interruption. Our 2nd slide was a quote from a consumer saying ‘you look knackered Mr Blair’. He shrugged as if to say what do you expect! He was able to see the sense of much of the analysis, particularly the discussion of people’s idealisation of him in ’97 turning to a more negative view in 2005. We characterised this broken relationship as much like a damaged love affair for women voters and you will find more discussion of this in the third part of this paper.

We then had a 45-minute discussion, his two concerns being how to deal with the press and how to create a moment of drama around the need to reconnect with the UK electorate. He said he would think about this personally over the weekend (asking Jonathan Powell to make sure he had the time) He also told us how he had thought about the New Labour project as a brand back in 1997 and that Clause 4 was a brand moment that he created. He thanked us for the presentation and said that it was challenging and right (and he said he often heard stuff that was challenging and wrong - rarely challenging and right!).

He shook us by the hand and thanked us again personally by name – throughout the meeting his orientation towards our team had been collaborative, interested and productive. Earlier that same day he had flown back from Switzerland before attending a Holocaust memorial service at Westminster Cathedral, yet he was fully present and engaged in our work; the grasp of detail and level of focus was impressive indeed.

We were all on a high as we walked away from No 10, we felt that we had taken a great risk in presenting such a candid snapshot to the Prime Minister and that our decision to combine in-depth qualitative techniques with the disciplines of brand analysis had taken us to potentially important insights. Alastair Campbell let us know that he talked to Tony that evening and that he was very taken by what he had heard.

Roy and Charles were invited to the Labour Spring Conference in Gateshead to hear Tony Blair launch what became known as the reconnection strategy. It is important to recognise the courage that pursuing this strategy required of the whole New Labour team. Formerly Mr Blair had been receiving advice from respected counsellors to withdraw from the public and appear ‘more presidential’. Given the level of disaffection we picked up, this must have seemed a preferential option to the Prime Minister himself.
Immediately after the Spring Conference, over the next few days the newspapers were full of comments about Blair’s ownership of the difficult phase of his relationship with voters. This was followed by appearances on TV joking with Mr Brown, difficult discussions with live audiences on Channel 5 and, most notably, BBC’s Question Time. Although clearly from time to time the Prime Minister was worried, perplexed and even shocked by these encounters, he did not lose his temper, demolish or humiliate his critics, or leave the room mentally or physically. He endured the trials of reconnecting with people who had a tarnished opinion of him right up until polling day, using local radio phone-ins as a means of reconnecting with the regions.

Several of Mr Blair’s encounters with the general public were felt worthy of mention by Kavanagh and Butler in their book on the 2005 election.

“For Labour, the aim was to rebuild the Prime Minister’s relationship with the British people, no less.”

“The appearances of the Prime Minister were not, however without risk...On Channel 5, the mother of an autistic child told him he was ‘talking rubbish’ about special needs education. Another time a hospital worker asked him whether he would be ‘prepared to wipe somebody’s backside for five pounds an hour’. The most disconcerting TV encounter was with a woman who had pulled out several teeth with pliers because she was unable to find an NHS dentist, showing her gums in evidence.”

“He also encountered Little Ant and Little Dec, two ten-year-old enfants terribles with a regular spot on Ant and Dec’s Saturday Night Take-Away (ITV1)...The interview moved from the cheeky (My dad says you’re mad. Are you mad?) to the crass (If you make an ugly smell, do people pretend not to notice because you is the Prime Minister?)

And did it work? You will see some of the polling results in the four weeks running up to polling days the last section on Outcomes & Conclusions.

Part Two

Research - Materials & Methods

We have spoken elsewhere of our dissatisfaction with much of conventional qualitative methodology (Langmaid & Andrews, 2003, Langmaid 2004). In the New Labour project we faced an enormous challenge that would put our emphasis on creative expression rather than questions and answers to the test. We knew that in the groups we would face a series of
strangers, each with their own particular history and concerns, and that from this cacophony of private and personal opinions we must construct a substantial and evidence-based view of the New Labour brand and feelings about Mr Blair that could represent the country as a whole. How should we go about it?

We decided to combine systemic scaling of the type used in the Promise Index (see Marketing, July 7th 2004) with more expressive techniques. We needed to know for sure whether opinions of Mr Blair were a factor in the disaffection of former Labour voters or if this was an effect of policy issues or mistakes. As always in groups about politics disentangling issues of policy from those of personality would prove important.

In the first four groups we asked respondents to fill in a self-completion questionnaire before the groups started. This questionnaire simply asked them to award scores out of ten to various parties and individuals on the basis of two key attributes: reputation (which we also conceive of as image) and delivery. The charts in Figures 2 and 3 show the results of this scoring.

Figures 2 and 3

The Relationship between reputation (image) and delivery: Labour Loyals versus Undecideds
Comparing the two graphs, one from Loyals and the other from Undecideds, you can immediately see how both New Labour and Blair score lower among the Undecideds and how perceptions of Blair might be key to the Labour vote, representing as he does the lowest point on the Undecided’s graph.

This confirmed for us the importance of developing an analysis of what was broken in people’s relationship with the PM and how to fix it – if that was possible.

It is dangerous to rely too heavily on numerical scores from very small samples in such crucial matters and so we devised another lens through which to look at respondents’ relationships with Mr Blair. Taken from Transactional Analysis, a theory from psychoanalytical thought, where it is known as the ‘OK Corral’ we asked people to look over the three New Labour elections – 1997, 2001 and the current prospective vote in May 2005 – and circle whether they felt OK or not OK about both themselves and Mr Blair at each of these periods. We wanted to be able to separate feelings about Mr Blair from respondents’ general frame of mind over the course of these elections. The results shown in Fig 4 confirm the diminishing reputation of Mr Blair; his perceived OK-ness drops at each point between 97 and now. Clearly this was a key issue and we felt we now had independent evidence of this fall in popularity distinct from the cries of hatred and outrage in papers like the Mail and the Express.
One final piece of scaling work completed our basic fact finding about the general perceptions and attitudes of the groups. In the first groups we asked respondents to generate a set of attributes that were most important in driving their opinions of a political party. Then we asked respondents in later groups to score New Labour against the Conservatives on each of these attributes. Worryingly for New Labour, the Tories outperformed them on all of the attributes that might drive their voting in 2005.
These differences between Labour and the Tories on the consumer-generated attributes (Competence, Leadership, Teamwork, Integrity, In-Touch, Understanding and Interactiveness) formed a disconcerting backdrop to Philip Gould’s take out from his own groups and polling that a groundswell of hostility towards Blair and Labour, particularly among women might severely damage their showing at the polls. This damage could result in people switching allegiance, or equally damaging, not bothering to vote at all.

Thus far, a key finding was emerging showing deterioration in ‘Undecideds’ perception of Mr Blair. To better understand this phenomenon, we needed to put more flesh on these findings to appreciate the dynamics behind these opinions and how we might influence - and hopefully reverse - them.

To do this we turned to expressive techniques and asked people to write a letter to Mr Blair, assuring them that we would place the content of their letters before him (as we did, leaving
them to be read at No 10) and to let him know what they thought and more importantly how they felt. You will see below a summary of the themes emerging from these letters:

**Letters to Blair** – Women Trent Park

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Phrases from Letters</th>
<th>Underlying emotional tone/experience</th>
<th>Desires/wishes/direction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Theme One: You left me** | Abandoned & unimportant | Put us first  
Get back in touch  
Get more involved with us/be more hands on |
| “You should have come home” (Tsunami) | | |
| You should put our people first | | |
| You should have come back | | |
| Your country needed you | | |
| Where were you when the disaster happened? | | |
| All the promises you made that never came to fruition | | |
| **Theme Two: Too big for your boots/celebrity** | His self importance & global lifestyle leaves me feeling inferior, undervalued | Re-order priorities  
Get back to basics  
Get real |
| “A President with Cherie” | | |
| “Glove trotting holiday makers” | | |
| Apply more suntan lotion | | |
| Celebrity hero worship (Bush) | | |
| Leadership not image | | |
| Thought you were a people’s person not a movie star | | |
| **Theme Three: Reflect and change** | Not held in mind  
Uncontained  
Out of control | Think, reflect – are you still the bloke we elected  
or have you moved on to bigger things? |
| Take the time to think | | |
| How foolishly you have been | | |
| You have lost sight of reality, how the person in the street lives | | |

You can see that we are moving to more emotional expression from our starting point of opinion and attribute scaling. We now needed to find a way of exploring these dissatisfactions and turning them around. We were lucky to have with us in the extended groups with women a researcher who is also a practicing psychotherapist, Nicky Forsythe. She suggested and conducted an exercise found in Gestalt psychology called ‘Two Chair work’ that opened the route to our insights.
Two-chair work offers a chance to work with elements of personality that are split-off, hated or disowned and with new or different wished for outcomes. In the groups Nicky set two chairs facing each other about a metre apart. She then asked for a protagonist or volunteer to play the parts both of herself and Mr Blair as she imagined him to be. After some moments of nervous reluctance a volunteer came forward from the group.

Next Nicky briefed the volunteer:

“I want you to imagine that you are in one chair and that Mr Blair is really sitting there in the other chair facing you. Please start to talk to him and let him know what you think and feel. The rest of the group will support and encourage you with suggestions if you need them.”

Slowly the courageous respondent gets started; several seconds in and she is in full flow, getting her disappointment with the PM off her chest:

“I thought you were one of us. A people person. Yet you were more interested in sucking up to people more famous than yourself. To do that you even put our boys’ lives at risk in Iraq even though more than a million people had marched against that war. Why didn’t you listen? Why are you spending so much time away from us? Why didn’t you come home straight away after the Tsunami? How could you stay on holiday when our people were dying?”

The speaker finished to cheers from the group. Then Nicky asked her to move over to Mr Blair’s chair and speak as if she were him, how would he answer, what would he say. She was given a moment or two to adopt his form, expressions and gestures with help from the group. Then she started:

“I’m afraid you’ve only got part of the picture. From where I sit the war in Iraq was crucial to the cause of world peace. But I understand that it’s difficult to see the whole thing for you (boos from the group!). You put me in charge and I must do what I think to be the right thing. I am sure that history will prove us right in the end.”

Next Nicky solicited reactions from the woman playing Blair and from the group. She asked the volunteer to go back to her own chair and describe her feelings on hearing Mr Blair. Then we checked it out with the group as a whole. How accurate was she, had she expressed herself as Blair appropriately? There was great consensus that she had. The group felt patronised and dismissed by his justifications and patronising attitude. Then Nicky asked our Mr Blair to go back to her chair and speak Mr Blair as if he was saying what she really needed to hear:
“I understand your feelings and I realise that there are many who do not agree with me over Iraq. I realised this as I listened to more and more people over the past months. I still believe on balance that we did the right thing, though I have been shocked to appreciate the depth of frustration among those who disagree with me. I solemnly promise to spend more time at home in contact with our own people and to debate these issues more seriously before we launch on such an endeavour again.”

In many ways the differences between the two Blair responses are not that huge, but the first is patronising and justificatory while the second remains open to the expression of disagreement and other points of view. In the view of the women voters in our group this was a crucial difference. They felt heard by the second Blair, not by the first.

At the end of the second Blair a woman from the group, noticing the change in the imaginary Blair’s tone and demeanour could not resist her desire to shout:

“We love you!!”

Much laughter poured forth from the respondents. Something of fundamental value had leaked from the group in their excitement and spontaneity aroused by the Two Chair work and the ‘presence’ of Blair in the room. There was for a second an expression of genuine love, a love that had lost the distorting effect of idealisation and been replaced by disillusionment and disappointment.

To explore this further we constructed a self-completion form for use in the remaining groups. In this form we invited people to describe their favourite Blair moments and their least favourite ones. Here is a sample of the favourites:

“I don’t know why it was so moving but it was. I’m not normally interested in politics but the sight of Tony and Cherie in ’97 with all the cheering crowds…it was so hopeful, so fresh. It was all new for the first time in years!”

“We had a guy who really looked modern: young, fresh, approachable. Not the tired man that he seems today!”

“He was the first party leader that I wouldn’t have minded going to a party with myself. He seemed the kind of person you could have a coffee with and talk about your family, your concerns.”

“At last we’d broken with the fuddy-duddy image – Thatcher, Major, Hague with his silly baseball cap trying to look cool! We had someone who was genuinely modern, progressive and easy to look at and listen to.”
“He just seemed ideal. I remember thinking as I watched him enter Downing Street – where did he come from? He was so unlike what we were used to!”

And least favourite ones:

“Iraq did it for me. I hated him for Iraq. I even went out on the street and marched for the first time in my life. How could we be going to war in peacetime?”

“It was Iraq for me too. But not the Saddam thing. It was the sucking up to Bush that upset me. They were like two Christian soldiers going off to war – except it wasn’t themselves at all but boys like my son. He’s not a soldier thank God but he’s that age. Their righteousness was very upsetting.”

“Everyone says he lied to take us off to war. That is unforgivable in my book.”

“The Tsunami, when our people were in danger. Why on earth didn’t he come back to manage getting them home? Staying away on holiday was callous and selfish.”

“I used to be such an admirer. But then he started ignoring us and home and becoming Bush’s poodle. I felt so ashamed!”

We had our final and important piece of evidence that would help us construct our analysis and recommendations. There appeared to be two almost completely separate Mr Blair’s out there in the public’s consciousness. The one, ideal, almost perfect as a leader and source of hope; the other almost equally mendacious, even wicked as a source of disillusionment and despair. Mr Blair had moved from the ideal to the unforgivable in the public’s mind. There was a Good Tony and a bad Tony.

**Part Three - Thinking & Analysis**

**The Brand Model**

At the same time as the work on Mr Blair was proceeding in the focus groups; the team at Promise were building a new brand model for New Labour and the forthcoming election. We recall in the text at this point Charles’s earlier analysis of the dangerous new Brandscape and show it in Figure 9. We can see in this analysis the potential for the Tories to talk of low tax, smaller government, distrust of Europe that they eschewed in favour of attacking Blair and focusing their energies on immigration and suspicion of the government. This was the initial
perspective with which we approached the New Labour strategy team at the outset of the project. At this point we had done no original research, just focused our thinking on the elements that seemed to be dominating the market place from our general work on branding.

Figure 9:

Creating a Brand Model for New Labour

Promise approached the New Labour brand issue as they would any other large brand. The work explored the changing environment in which the brand existed, the way the brand was communicated and, most importantly, what the brand meant to consumers. It seemed to many in 2005 that the wheels had come off the ‘New Labour project’ – as it was increasingly being called. A ‘project’ - surely not? This was meant to be the government that had transformed the face of British politics. Things had deteriorated since the heady days of 1997.
**Initiating the New Labour brand**

New Labour was built on a sophisticated strategy developed throughout the mid-nineties. It was a project building on an existing brand – Labour – that had broadly speaking, become irrelevant to the public. Our research into the history of the brand showed that the Labour party brand had moved from a Product Oriented party:

“A product Oriented Party argues for what it stands for and believes in. It assumes that voters will realise that its ideas are the right ones and therefore vote for it”

To a Sales-Oriented Party...

“A Sales-oriented party focuses on selling its argument to voters. It retains its pre-determined product design, but recognises that the supporters it desires may not automatically want it. The party employs the latest advertising and communication techniques to persuade voters that it is right”

and finally in the mid-nineties to a Market Oriented Party when it became a ‘New’ brand, driven by frequent and intimate contact with voters, the party’s customers:

“A market oriented party designs its behaviour to provide voter satisfaction. It uses market intelligence to identify voter demands and then designs its product to suit them.”

Lees-Marshment, 2001

In 1995 it was re-launched to tremendous effect. The re-launch was cemented by the abolition of Clause 4, signalling a genuine change in the direction of the party and a new era for the Labour ‘brand’. The brand was personified by the party’s charismatic and ambitious young leader Tony Blair and in 1997 swept to power based on a bedrock of consumer understanding and a seamless communication strategy (see Philip Gould, The Unfinished Revolution).

By 2005 New Labour was a brand under threat. The brand lens through which people viewed the party had become clouded by the Iraq war and constant media attacks on the government. The party, and Blair, had reached a point where everything that they did was being distorted by this negative brand lens. The research categorically demonstrated this. New Labour had a problem with their leader, but so influential was he as an icon of the brand, the party also had a problem that reached the very core of the brand.
Broadly speaking, Promise saw the issue in these terms:

- The New Labour brand – personified by Tony Blair – had stopped listening
- The brand had become far too reliant on the figurehead – despite his failings, without Blair, New Labour seemed lightweight
- The New Labour brand was hollow, many described this as the triumph of spin over substance

This last point was extremely important and illustrated not only the brand issue for New Labour, but also the potential threat of the Conservative party. The groups revealed that more substantial brand ‘equity’ potentially lay with the Tories. They stood for something that many respondents felt was more real, although dated. We asked our groups to work with imagery and metaphor in exploring both the Conservatives and New Labour.

Fig 10.
As referenced earlier in this paper, Competence, Integrity, Teamwork came through as 3 of the most important attributes for a political brand. We saw in the groups that these basic brand attributes had been completely undermined by the perceived inability of the Prime Minister to listen (principally over Iraq), the divisiveness of the media and the in-fighting within the party (Brown vs. Blair).

Dissatisfaction in these core attributes could not be reversed over the 12 week period before the election. However, we realised that the brand did have an opportunity to address issues of integrity and teamwork head-on; essentially to undergo a similar type of catharsis to the one we had proposed for Mr Blair. We recommended a strategy that portrayed the members of the cabinet working as a team; something that was very much lacking for the Tories. This would begin to form the foundations for the bringing the New Labour brand back to life; distinguishing it from the Tories and most importantly galvanising the support of the public.

Creating a brand model

It was important to rebuild. The Lens had been dirtied by Iraq and by the media. It needed to be washed clean and re-focused on what had made the Labour brand so accessible, attractive and important to people in the first place.

We developed a brand model that featured what we believed to be the ‘essence’ of the New Labour brand. Our key concern was that New Labour 1997 had been built on promises. New Labour 2005 was being judged on delivery.

The essence was that, at the centre of it all, New Labour were Progressive Realists. This was a progressive, passionate, friendly party, united under a strong leader. New Labour was a strong, competent product which governed with passion and verve; governed inclusively for the benefit of all.
This positioning would help the party retain some of the excitement and idealism of ’97 but would emphasise that this was an established, knowledgeable, real government. We were at pains to emphasise that this would never be used overtly, but would be bought to life through the way that the party behaved, the policies that it championed and how it communicated all of this to the electorate.

We advised the government to embark on 4 key strategies to bring the brand to life

1) **Show strength in depth**: illustrate party unity, bring others to the fore, create advocates at a local level, allow party spokes-people to illustrate a degree of autonomy – keep them on message (brand model) but show them as competent, representative individuals.

2) **Be seen to deliver**: Reiterate a UK policy focus, accentuate the positive – the economy, keep promises manageable and accountable, create a set of pledges – first 100 days. Don’t be afraid of talking about spending on public services – this brand is about we, not me; fairness and
prosperity for all

3) Communications - Trying to look in touch: Make sure everything is ‘on-brand’, remember progressive realists. Ensure messages are not only engaging but credible. Assess current communications through ‘brand lens’. Make sure you are consistent in your identity – be confident with ‘New Labour’, or it will look like a Labour party project, not a brand

4) Leadership – reconnect through: Behaviour, communication, image – Personify the brand.

The combination of brand analysis and qualitative insights gave us independent sources as we searched for accuracy in understanding the mood of the nation. It was important to be as accurate as we could, neither over nor under emphasising the roles of facts or feelings. There were a number of reasons why this was so:

• the importance of the issues under review, who governs us must be a concern to us all, even with all of our cynicism about politics (see below).

• We had an opportunity to conduct a brand analysis independently in-house and integrate this perspective with the findings of a qualitative enquiry. Both these perspectives had to be aligned with results and stories that were breaking daily on press and TV. Could we make sense of all that was happening?

• We faced the difficulty of presenting interesting yet sometimes unflattering perspectives to the highest authority in the land. Could we hold our form and stick to our guns?

We will now discuss several themes to emerge from the research. The first two concern general thoughts about research methods and the trends in society. The remainder focus very much on the outputs from the research and the brand analysis.

Thinking About Society based on Focus Groups – can it be done?

The use of focus groups to explore and deepen the understanding of results obtained in large-scale polls has become a familiar part of the political scene in the UK. Some have gone so far as to christen this phenomenon ‘government by focus group’. What has not been attempted before
to our knowledge is the use of techniques based on models of the psyche that allow the emotional and irrational forces - to which all of us are subject - to form an integral part of the data from such groups and the thinking about the data that follows the groups themselves.

Understanding things requires theories. In the research part of our practice we subscribe to what is known as the Tavistock model. This model has the unique feature of according equal importance to the systemic and rational drivers of behaviour and to the emotional and irrational impulses that equally strongly influence our thoughts and actions. In the appendix you will find a diagram that shows the aetiology of this model and the sources of this style of thinking.

The practice of this model in the 3-hour setting of an extended group requires us to create exercises that allow as many unconscious motivations as we can invite into the group’s work. This is not always easy, for many of our unconscious urges are not only irrational but also anti-social or sexual in nature, and hence there is a corresponding tendency to keep them out of sight - both of others and ourselves. We have already given some indications of how we went about helping these drives to the surface in our group work through expressive techniques like Two-Chair work and the Favourite and Least Favourite Blair moments.

Having developed our trust in this model from many years of practice, it was still something of a challenge for us to put it to work in this project. The question arises whether the opinions and feelings of our small sample of respondents in the focus groups truly represented the voters of Britain, numbering many millions. Our thesis here is that the appearance of many dynamics and phenomena in small groups represent systems that belong to a higher level such as a society. Our proposition is that number as such is not the determining factor – something that was rather a contrary notion at a time when every national newspaper was publishing polls based on nationally representative samples on a weekly, if not daily, basis.

This is rather a fantastic proposition, yet there are examples and precedents from other fields of study and practice in which we have been engaged. Group therapists have noticed that in instances when a group of eight has been depleted by absence to two or even one, the transaction with the 'group of one' is markedly different from, meeting that same individual (or pair) in a one-to-one setting. In market research groups, similarly, many practitioners have had the experience of groups depleted in number having similar dynamics and process to those where a full complement has been present. The researcher in such cases may be absolutely
confident of the validity of this smaller group while the client is worried about the numbers!

Our thesis was that if, while doing our groups we addressed our respondents as if they were representative of the entire community, then at some level their ‘groupish’ selves would be mobilized. There was, however, one further complication: because the larger group is always potentially present in the smaller, at times the larger group threatens to break through. In such circumstances the small group becomes a crowd and its members part of a mass. They shift from what Turquet (1975) has called ‘individual members’ to ‘membership individuals’ – another way of saying that their group identity has come to the fore. This is exactly what happened when the cheering broke out after the two-chair work. We were, figuratively at least, in the presence of the entire British society of women. It is easy for a researcher focused on narrative only to miss these cathartic moments.

In his book ‘How the Media are Destroying our Politics’ John Lloyd has pointed out the degree to which politicians of all parties are regarded as mendacious, self-serving, manipulative, amoral and untrustworthy.

“The media have not come up with a better idea than democracy...but in many ways, explicitly and implicitly they act as if they have. The media have claimed the right to judge and condemn; more, they have decided – without being clear about the decision – that politics is a dirty game, played by devious people who tell an essentially false narrative about the world and thus deceive the British people.” (p. 20)

In the focus groups this was evident in the degree of aggression – even hatred – directed at Mr Blair and his government. One of the hardest things for research practitioners in this area is to keep thinking and working while people are calling out for the heads of the client who has sponsored your enquiry! It’s not merely dislike based in disagreement either, it verges on the hatred and nonchalant dismissal described by Victor Hugo in the deportment of the ‘tricoteuses’ who watched members of the French aristocracy, the authorities of their time, being guillotined while they knitted. There are shades of this disrespectfulness in the interviews by Little Ant and Dec who went on to give Mr Blair a pair of knickers for Cherie.

“The problem is that institutions are the only way society has found to enable people to cope with primitive feelings like dependence, hate and rage. We have developed a set of projective receptacles...we are describing a process through which we can get rid of bits of ourselves that we want to disown.” OPUS, April 1981:12
This is a serious issue for those who would use focus groups to understand the way in which political views are formed and what is to be taken at face value and what not. It is hard to sit in the presence of the group as the wrath of society at the failure of its institutions and leaders sweeps through the room and threatens to enlist us all in tearing down those who represent us. The government is increasingly perceived as being highly insensitive, uninterested in the people it purports to represent and pursuing an obsessional preoccupation of its own.

**A Megatrend: From Dependency to Autonomy**

At last year’s MRS conference (Langmaid 2004) we commented on what we are convinced is the biggest single trend determining a whole host of consumer – or citizens’ – attitudes and behaviours. We called it the shift from dependency to autonomy. Many of you will be familiar with the effects of this phenomenon:

- The rise of individuality
- The growth of celebrity culture
- Loss of trust in authority and institutions
- Increasing diversity
- Loss of communities and sources of identity/identification

When you work with a group in the presence of these factors people are ashamed when they discover the extent of the dependency they have invested in institutions and frightened when they have to take it back. Many of the surprising inconsistencies in attitudes to New Labour and especially the split between good and bad Blair, in fact reflect this split between the desire for autonomy and the need for a receptacle for our dependency. This does not just apply to the electorate, New Labour itself seems to be affected by the Autonomy/Dependency paradigm. You may witness it in the New Labour fascination with big business and wealth creation, the love of entrepreneurs and technology, contrasted with the massive increases in the size of the state and the mechanisms of control.
Fig 6 & 7 – photos of Blair with Oasis and Brown with Branson.

The experiences in the focus groups must be evaluated with this backdrop in mind. A question that increasingly concerns our individualistic society is: ‘who can we count on?’
Analysis - Freud, Klein and the Mechanism of Splitting

Freud was the first to point out the mobility of cathexes (the ease with which strong feelings of connection could shift from one person to be replaced by an opposite emotion) and the idea of ‘splitting of the mind’ (Freud, Studies on Hysteria). Later, Melanie Klein further elaborated the notion of splitting in her infamous and rather strange notion of the ‘good and bad breast’. Put more simply and in relation to our study, Klein’s thinking shows how a source of nurture (or authority), may be idealised if it endlessly supplies our needs, only to be demonised and denigrated should it fail to fulfil our wishes at some time – even if only once.

This is exactly what transpired about the character of Tony Blair in the groups. At first there was only ‘good Tony’. Blair was seen as open, sparkling, caring, responsive – a source of all good things. Moreover and importantly he was seen as permeable, open to many ideas and experiences. Already though, some elements of what would eventually become ‘bad’ Tony had started to appear. That selfsame permeability also made him easy to influence, a factor that was to become crucial in his perceived relationship with Bush. It is important at this point to notice that all of these perceptions of Blair are looked at through the lens of the media and are not based upon direct experience. Thus our picture of Mr Blair all through these times was very much a fantasy based upon the credence we placed in media reports (see John Lloyd, quoted above).

Moving on to the next phase with the 2001 election and administration, our picture changes and darkens. Bad Tony in the form of Tough Tony now outweighs the good. It is probable that we gave Mr Blair every indication during his first period as leader (1997-2001) of our wishes for strong, determined leadership but when we got it, the ideal Tony became the terrible Tony. Underlying criticisms of his decisions were the feelings of jilted lovers: he had become enthralled by someone else, a figure more powerful than ourselves, the resident of the White House. He was no longer permeable to us. Therefore, feeling rejected ourselves we must start to reject him.
In the third phase and the third panel in the diagram, which concerns the current and future relationship, we put forward to Mr Blair our ideas for reconnecting with the general public. Here we adopt the remedy recommended by Klein of trying to heal the split and reintegrate the whole. The Young Tony and the Tough Tony in the first and second diagrams are in fact parts of the same person that have become split off and separated in our fantasies. Mr Blair made direct reference to his history as seen in our perceptions and the split and his desire to heal it in his Gateshead speech some two weeks after the research:

*I understand why some people are angry, not just over Iraq but many of the difficult decisions we have made, and, as ever, a lot of it is about me.

...So this journey has gone from ‘all things to all people’ to ‘I know best’ to ‘we can only do this together’. And I know which is best of those three.
A partnership.

Forward together.

It’s your choice.

I’m still the same person. Older. A little wiser I hope. But still with the same commitment and belief.

And I believe that together we still make the best team for Britain and its future.”

(Excerpt from a speech to the Labour Party Spring Conference, The Sage, Gateshead, February 13, 2005)

Part Four: Outcomes and Conclusions

As polling day approached it became more and more evident how crucial the public’s estimation of Mr Blair would be at the polls. As Lloyd has pointed out (ibid, pp 1-26), the media feel no constraints upon what they say about public figures. Mr Blair’s ‘character’ – at least as it seemed in the fantasies of journalists responding to their own feelings and those they had discerned among the general public – was duly flogged to death in print. The Mail in particular ran with front pages saying that ‘Blair lied and lied again’ on April 26th and 28th, only seven days before polling day. Against this background of denigration, Philip Gould let us know how concerned he had become about the defection of female voters from New Labour that his polling had picked up. Correspondingly, we focused on the attitudes of women in the later groups and much of the reportage and analysis shown above is particularly developed with the idea of reconnecting with the female part of the electorate. Men seemed much more entrenched in their views, already determined in their opinion of Blair, and the lack of movement in the male poll over the course of the campaign bears this out.

There were also the effects of the Conservative’s campaign and Mr Howard to be taken into account. Three weeks before the elections we ran some further groups among ‘Undecideds’ in the London area. These showed that indeed, the focus on immigration and asylum had strong resonance with undecided voters, many of them feeling that they had not personally benefited from public services investment - so somebody else must have. The Mail and others were only
too ready to publish horror stories of asylum seekers being housed in multi-million pound luxury apartments and accounts of massive hand-outs to all comers from all corners of the earth. There was a difficult moment in a TV interview with Paxman who became convinced that Blair had no idea of how many asylum seekers were in the country.

Against this counter-briefing, it is little short of incredible that the Prime Minister did so much to move women back to himself and to New Labour. Here are the polling figures on voting intentions from Populus in the weeks leading up to the elections.

Figure 10 shifts in female voting intentions in the weeks up to polling day

Did our work make a difference? We believe that the reconnection strategy that we helped to devise and substantiate and which tallied so closely with Alastair Campbell’s gut feeling that the PM was perceived as out-of-touch, was a crucial pillar in helping New Labour avoid a hung parliament. More particularly, it was the analysis of unconscious splitting and the parts played by idealisation in 1997 followed by denigration from 2001 on, that helped us to iterate the reconnection strategy as a route towards repairing the relationship between Blair and the public, particularly the female electorate.
Too many surveys to ignore have come up with the finding that women feel men are unwilling to talk about relationships properly and unwilling to listen. On the morning of May 6th, Tony Blair stood outside Number 10 and said: ‘I have listened and I have learnt. And I think I have a very clear idea of that the British people now expect from this government for a third term.’ The reconnection strategy was at the heart of the first sound bite of the new government.

Did the Tories’ ‘mean spirited’ campaign as Kavanagh and Butler described it help the New Labour cause? In our view it undoubtedly played a part. The Tory campaign was almost obsessive in its focus on Mr Howard (and he in turn on Mr Blair). For example, across terrestrial TV channels and Radio 4, Blair was quoted in a ratio of 4.5 to 1 over Gordon Brown. Mr Howard, however, was quoted in a ratio of 13 to 1 over his nearest colleague, Liam Fox. Mr Howard’s constant theme was ‘wipe that smile off Blair’s face.’ Modernising Conservative Shadow Ministers called it ‘a disgraceful result, considering Labour was there for the taking.’ Blair’s lead of 12% over Howard had increased to 19% by the end of the campaign.

Another of our recommendations, agreed by many senior Labour politicians was the need for a reconciliation and supportive relationship between Blair and Brown. This reconciliation was launched on TV with pictures of the pair in relaxed and chatty style as they launched the New Labour poster campaign.

One further effect of the reconnection strategy was to bring ordinary people into focus in an election as never before. According to the Independent: ‘against expectations this has been a far from boring four weeks’. It had been a ‘frantic, intense, argumentative and often fascinating campaign, in which ordinary people in the street and in the studio audiences had been the ‘unsung heroes’, asking the commonsense questions that cut across political double-speak.

But what about the deeper analysis, our portrayal of a broken love-affair with Tony Blair wishing to return to the relationship and attempting to court the attention of his former admirers? We urge you to recall the mocking tones with which this was greeted in the press, immediately after the Gateshead Conference; Libby Purves in the Times was particularly critical:

“If Blair wants to cast himself as some sort of guilty husband, I’m first in the queue to biff him”

The Times, February 15, 2005

“Blair: I’m in a bad marriage...with you”

Daily Express, February 15, 2005
And to remember just how firmly anti-Blair the coverage of the election was. Five of the seven main topics created difficulties for the party: Iraq, immigration/asylum, Tony Blair himself, the collapse of MG Rover and the abuse of postal voting. The Conservatives could hardly have had a more favourable terrain. The issue of Tony Blair commanded as many front pages (14) as did immigration and asylum (14).

Against all of this, we believe that the reconnection strategy worked to restate a crucial element of Blair’s appeal, particularly to the female electorate. While we as a nation are quite happy to choose film stars and celebrities on the basis of their attractiveness and likeability, we are much more cautious about admitting these attractions when it comes to choosing politicians. The seriousness of the business of politics coupled with a natural British reserve keeps us away from the candid acceptance of the show-biz qualities of a Reagan or Clinton. Yet as in many things, perhaps we are again following the lead of the USA, all the while protesting that it has no influence over us?

We are only too aware that we face a market research community much given to measurement and favour of the survey or opinion poll. What has sex got to do with it, you may ask? In this project, as in all our in-depth work on the topic of real human motivation, we would point you to a couple of ‘leaks’ in the media that testify only too clearly to the background importance of libido and attractiveness. ‘On the eve of the poll, the Sun published a remarkable interview with Tony and Cherie Blair. Its front page trumpeted the coup with ‘WHY SIZE MATTERS’ and ‘Cherie says Tony needs a big one...a big majority.’ The story ran across three inside pages, revealing – among other private matters that Blair was a ‘five times a night man.’ (Kavanagh & Butler, ibid p 125)

Meanwhile in another location, namely a number of hoardings and poster sites around the UK, on the eve of the poll there was this stern warning to be seen:
Finally, when something of a breakthrough occurs as we believe the reconnection strategy was, the very next time something of a similar nature occurs, everyone treats it as a strikingly obvious example of that very thing they said had absolutely no validity the first time it happened.

If you were reading your newspapers in the weeks after the election of David Cameron as Tory leader, you will find a great number of headlines of this nature:

‘All right then, girls: what is it exactly about young Dave that ticks your box?’

The Times Dec 14th 2005

IT’S NOT A David Cameron thing, it’s a Gordon Brown thing. Women don’t like the Chancellor. Much has been made of the Conservative Party’s sudden “lead” in the opinion polls. This is in fact a notional lead at the next election if the parties were led by Mr Brown, Mr Cameron and Charles Kennedy. And the shift in fortunes is entirely down to women switching sides. The latest Populus polling for The Times, which mirrors other recent surveys, shows a three-point Labour lead today changing to a six-point Tory lead at the next election if Mr Brown is Labour leader.

Times: Dec 14th 2005
Both men had revised hard about policies for women before appearing on the Radio 4 programme, but were rendered momentarily speechless when Ms Kearney claimed she had been “dared to ask” the question, “boxers or briefs”? The generation and class gap between the men was encapsulated in their replies. We now know that Mr Davis’s bottom is clad in briefs, while Mr Cameron prefers boxers.

The Times Nov 10th 2005

We rest our case!
References


Klein, M. “Notes on some schizoid mechanisms” in 'Envy and Gratitude and Other Works’


Appendix – the Origins of our Methodology