

Britain: Campbell's resignation throws spotlight on Labour's loss of credibility

By Chris Marsden
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The resignation of Prime Minister Tony Blair's director of communications Alastair Campbell on August 29—at the height of the judicial inquiry under Lord Hutton into the death of Dr. David Kelly—marked a further escalation in the Labour government's crisis over the Iraq war.

In his resignation statement, Campbell denied any connection between the two events, but Kelly had famously identified Campbell as the man chiefly responsible for having “sexed-up” the September 2002 intelligence dossier on Iraq. And Campbell has spearheaded the government's efforts to discredit the BBC report of Kelly's comments in a dispute meant to divert public attention away from its failure to find Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

The timing of his resignation statement was determined by the worsening position facing the government. The inquiry had heard testimony from Blair on August 28 in which the prime minister was forced into repeated lies and convoluted evasions in order to deflect questions related to the September 2002 dossier and his own role in naming Kelly. Public and media reaction to Blair's performance was negative, and Campbell may have decided that it was time to go—partly in an effort to distance himself from the government and partly in an effort to take attention away from Blair.

But Campbell's resignation will not succeed in diverting attention from the government's difficulties. He is to face a second round of questioning by the Hutton Inquiry and will be asked to explain why he underplayed the number of changes he asked intelligence chiefs to make to the September dossier— by saying he had asked for only 11 changes when he had in fact asked for 15.

Aside from issues surrounding the unraveling of the Blair government's lies about Iraq, Campbell's resignation exposes some key aspects of the Labour Party's political physiognomy—its resort to “spin” or “spin-doctoring” for which he has been hailed as the master practitioner.

Campbell has come to embody the spirit of Blair's Labour Party to such a degree that the *Guardian's* September 1 editorial was moved to complain, “...plough your way through the mountains of coverage and the oceans of speculation which have filled the airwaves and the newspapers ever since his departure announcement on Friday. Hours and hours of it. Pages and pages of it. Almost all about process, or else about personalities. Little of it about policy or about real political argument. Not all of it

terribly well informed. An entire government seen through the prism of its communications director.”

The *Guardian* is a loyal defender of the government. It is irate not because Campbell's significance is being exaggerated, but because drawing attention to it reflects badly on all concerned. That is why the departure of a man often hailed as a “dark genius” and “arch manipulator” was used by the government to proclaim a new era in which spin would no longer play a part and “truth” would be the watchword.

By spin, commentators generally refer to efforts spearheaded by Campbell to rebrand the Labour Party and ensure that its image was presented favourably through careful media management.

In reviews of Campbell's career, he is given joint authorship with Blair of the term “New Labour” and the political concepts that lay behind it of a party that had broken with old-style reformist policies based on an outmoded “tax-and-spend” agenda. He is said to have coined the term “People's Princess” for Diana Spencer when the newly elected Blair used her death to link his government with her popular image—his the People's Party and he the People's Prime Minister.

Campbell is said to have placed a premium on establishing favourable relations with the media so that Labour would never suffer the type of hostility that former leader Neil Kinnock had faced in the 1980s. He made sure that newspapers were given the line from Number 10 and that dissent was marginalised. Key phrases were authored to put over policies. Blair's speeches were drafted for him, even supposedly off-the-cuff remarks. Labour MPs were issued with pagers so that they too would be on-message and would parrot the official line. And when problems arose in the party, Campbell fulfilled the role of enforcer-cum-hatchet man.

But to reduce the political phenomenon of New Labour to a “culture of spin” characterised by obsessive media management and to attribute this solely to the baleful influence of one man would be absurd.

In the first place, the effort to portray Campbell as a latter-day Rasputin with semi-mystical powers conceals an important truth. He was never that clever or substantial a figure. He was, rather, a very troubled man who happened to be in the right place at the right time and possessed of the necessary thuggishness and lack of principles to do a necessarily dirty job.

He went to Cambridge and read modern languages before writing soft porn for *Forum* magazine as the “Riviera Gigolo.” He

went on to work for the *Daily Mirror* in the 1980s under disgraced former owner Robert Maxwell, where he became its political editor and later became the news editor at Eddie Shah's failed *Today* newspaper.

He was an alcoholic and was famously found drunk at the Labour Party conference by Kinnock, who promised him a job in his press office once he got to No 10 if he cleaned up his act.

Campbell suffered a nervous breakdown in 1986, after which he did set about cleaning himself up. Kinnock never rode into power, but Campbell made it by establishing a rapport with the up-and-coming Blair in 1994 and helping him be elected in 1997.

He went on to become arguably the most prominent political persona within Blair's government, despite not being elected, and was popularly depicted by impressionist Rory Bremner as the real power behind Blair's throne.

Why did Campbell assume such political prominence and power? None of this would have been possible if Blair had merely required someone adroit in handling the media. After all, there has not been a government in recent history that did not require the use of public relations in its dealings with the press. Yet there is no parallel to Campbell's fame, or more correctly infamy, to be found.

What is essential in understanding Campbell is to consider what it was he had to sell to the media and to contrast this with what he had to sell to the electorate.

No amount of "spin" by Campbell would have convinced the likes of Rupert Murdoch's News International to be sympathetic to Labour had the party not been refashioned as a right-wing advocate of free market, pro-big-business policies.

The dominant sections of the ruling class were persuaded to back Blair because he had junked any lingering connection the party had to reformist policies and its old social base in the working class. Campbell had to make sure the press barons of Fleet Street were aware of how determinedly this break had been made, but he did not have to spin something out of thin air.

Here it was not a question of deceiving the media, but of silencing or marginalising the infrequent voices of dissent that were raised within the Labour Party itself. Spin in this case became bold announcements of political initiatives that were looked on favourably by the super-rich, such as tax cuts, and attacks on welfare rights, on industrial militancy and on the outmoded ideology of the class struggle.

The aim was to make sure that the powers that be understood just how far Labour was prepared to go to meet their requirements. And Campbell, far from dictating the agenda of the media, was more often involved in telling the Labour Party what the media wanted of it.

Spin meant something else entirely when it came to Labour having to present its policies to the voting public. Here Campbell and others had to create a veritable mythology in order to dress up right-wing policies that were detrimental to the interests of the broad majority as a fresh, realistic but still compassionate alternative to the previous Thatcherite orthodoxy.

Here spin became more akin to the Orwellian concept of double-speak. In the political lexicon of New Labour, to attack welfare provisions was to strive for "rights and responsibilities."

Underpinned by essentially Tory-style initiatives made you one of the "forces of Conservatism." A renewal of colonial wars of conquest became the ultimate expression of a commitment to an "ethical foreign policy" and to "world peace."

And that is why all talk of Campbell's departure signalling an end to spin is so much hot air. For it is impossible for Labour to ever present itself honestly to the general population because it would never be elected again.

The government announced that Campbell was to be replaced by David Hill, a veteran Labour Party press officer who had worked with the former deputy party leader Roy Hattersley, and that he would have much reduced powers and be ultimately answerable to his civil servants and not the other way round.

Blair was also said to have welcomed a report into the government's communications strategy by Bob Phillis, the chief executive of *Guardian* Media Group, and to be considering creating a "department of truth" by appointing a permanent secretary to oversee the entire communications network.

But almost immediately, the "new broom" rhetoric began to unravel. First it was revealed that as a reward for his work as a lobbyist, Hill had been given an option for 95,000 shares in Chime Communications, which handles business for the GM food giant Monsanto, amongst others. Such intimate connections to big business would necessarily create a conflict of interests.

Then it was revealed that the man who had presided over Campbell's departure was none other than Peter Mandelson, the former Northern Ireland minister and one-time Labour Party director of communications, who is arguably second only to Campbell in the public's perception of the archetypal spin doctor.

And finally, it was made clear that Campbell was to take pride of place in Blair's "kitchen cabinet," advising him on his election strategy.

On the face of it then, the more things change the more they remain the same. Yes, but only up to a point. This does not detract from the fact that despite the efforts of Campbell, Mandelson et al, and a media that is quite willing to sell Labour to the electorate, spin is not working any more. The government's lies are generally seen for what they are, and Blair and company are viewed as being just as corrupt as the Tory governments they replaced. Once the public trust has been so comprehensively lost, it takes far more than media management to save a government's skin.

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