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Introduction: What is Modern Spin?

1945–51 was a seminal period in the development of communication between the government, the media and the people in Britain. The Attlee government was the first British government to engage fully with the dilemma of how a government communicates with its citizens to sustain a credible democracy. The concepts and methods it pioneered then became the organisational framework for all subsequent British governments. This book tells the story of this government's journey from idealism to pragmatism, from a vision of an informed electorate to a worldly acceptance of the manipulation of communication to engineer consent – what has now come to be known as modern 'spin'.

The term 'spin' has now become ubiquitous and is normally used pejoratively. But spin, in the political sense, is simply the way in which a government, any government, seeks to present its actions in the most favourable light. Every government spins. It is the means by which they maintain and enhance their power. Henry VIII led a large scale propaganda programme to convince his subjects that Catholicism was no longer the true religion. The Victorians very successfully diverted industrial unrest at home by extolling the successes of imperialism abroad.

Information management, and its iniquitous offspring – modern spin, are more recent phenomena. They are phenomena that have neither been properly examined nor sufficiently understood, by their practitioners or by their targets. And yet they are integral to the practice of modern government. Information management involves the constant, systematic control of the flow of information from government. It would not be necessary without substantial national governments with large scale administrative bureaucracies and easily accessible mass

media. It requires state machinery and personnel whose primary function is not execution or administration but simply communication. It requires the ability not just to provide information but to measure the effectiveness of that information. It requires an institutionalised series of methods for delivering that information to the mass media, and an awareness of those methods across government. Most importantly, it requires a new conceptual understanding of communication as a distinct function of governance.

Modern government communication is not simply about the provision of information but also its deliberate management. Such management can be for entirely benign and constructive reasons. Democratic governments have information that they believe is important for people to know, but they are conscious that in its raw form this information may be indigestible by the majority of the people to whom it is aimed. They know that most people will receive this information from the independent mass media. They therefore have to consider how best to select, shape and distribute the information to increase its chances of being properly received, and to take account of the way in which it will be presented by the mass media. In practical terms this might mean targeting sections of the population with specific information through particular media outlets, commissioning an advertising campaign to raise awareness about a health issue, or releasing information in such a way and at such a time that it will be integrated into the independent news media. Many of these, and other techniques, are now very familiar. But this conscious separation of policy from presentation, and the constant management of information in order to engineer consent, emerged as a feature of government in the aftermath of the Second World War.

But not all information management is benign and constructive. Modern spin evolved from information management but is distinct from it. It involves the deliberate distortion of information and manipulation of the independent media in order to achieve government objectives. In modern spin the information itself is no longer considered to have inherent value but is regarded as malleable raw material in the service of an eventual goal. How it is perceived and its predicted response are considered more important than any ideals of objective truth. Modern spin developed in response to the government's acceptance that it had to rely almost entirely on the independent mass media as the primary means of political communication. Yet, at the same time, the government recognised that it was severely constrained in the overt control it could exert over that media. It

therefore felt justified in maximising what control it had and exerting whatever covert influence it could – concealment being critical since once this influence becomes public the information loses its credibility.

The methods of information management and modern spin are similar, but their motivation is different. The purpose of information management is to clarify government information, to target it at specific audiences who need or could use it, and to make it more comprehensible. The purpose of modern spin, on the other hand, is to sustain government popularity and to secure popular consent no matter what the content of the information. For this reason modern spin is inordinately focused on the government's relationship with the media, and the presentation of its policy within the media.

Over the past decade there has been a significant increase in writing devoted to the subject of political communication and spin. Margaret Scammell, Pippa Norris, Bob Franklin, Dominic Wring, Martin Rosenbaum, Dennis Kavanagh, Nicholas Jones, Michael Cockerell, Bernard Ingham and others have all written about the phenomenon.[1] Much of this work, however, concentrates on party political communication. Though fascinating, this has to be distinguished from government communication. Party political communication is about partisan propaganda, and normally focuses on elections. It is characterised by books such as Norris et al.'s *On Message: Communicating the Campaign* (1999).[2] But, as Edward Bernays, 'the father of public relations', wrote back in 1928, 'campaigning is only an incident in public life. The process of government is continuous'.[3] This book is about the continuous process of government and its ongoing attempts to manage the information its citizens receive.

There is also a propensity in the literature on spin, especially in journalism about it, to focus on the recent past. But modern spin did not suddenly appear in 1997, as some people have suggested. To understand its origins one must go back to the period immediately following the Second World War. It was in this period that the institutional, methodological and conceptual frameworks for both information management and modern spin were first developed. Since then they have been immeasurably enlarged and enhanced, and yet their outline remains much the same and many of the problems associated with the framework remain unresolved.

In 1945 the Labour government did not think too much about the dilemma of how to communicate within a democracy. It had much else on its mind. The war was ending and there was the huge task of

making the transition to peace. Moreover, the government had plans to overhaul the entire economic infrastructure of the country.

Yet it is important to recognise that Labour was in a distinctly different position from its predecessors as regards communication. Pre-1914 governments had not engaged with the dilemma because they had not needed to. They did not feel it necessary to communicate with the whole population because, prior to 1918 less than a third of the adult population, under eight million people, could vote.[4] So although political rhetoric referred to democracy and the 'will of the people', the government only needed the support of a significant minority of the nation. Yet by the 1930s the franchise had been extended to 30 million people, just under the whole of the adult population.[5] Moreover, prior to the Second World War the size of the state and the number of places where it touched people's lives was still limited. Equally, before the 1920s, it was not possible to deliver a similar message to virtually the whole population simultaneously.[6]

By 1945 this had all changed. Not only did almost the whole adult population have the vote but their political consciousness had been raised by the war. Everyone had a more immediate relationship with the state at the war's end than at its beginning. This was not surprising since the 'bureaucratic empire' had, in Richard Crossman's words, 'been both enormously enlarged and dangerously centralised during the war'.[7] Between 1939 and 1947 the total number of civil servants rose from 397,570 to 722,294.[8] In addition, the penetration of the contemporary news media was approaching saturation point. The national daily press, whose circulation had jumped from 3.1 million in 1918 to 10.6 million on the eve of World War Two, was now read by 87 per cent of the adult population (its circulation would continue to rise to its all time peak in 1950).[9] Over 30 million people went to the cinema, and saw the newsreels, each week.[10] Almost ten million homes had a radio.[11]

The significance of these structural developments should not be underestimated. For the first time it seemed as if the democratic ideal, of 'common information' for the whole community, could, theoretically, be fulfilled. Walter Lippman wrote in 1922, that whereas 'the pioneer democrats did not possess the material for resolving the conflict between the known range of man's attention and their illimitable faith in his dignity', the material, in the form of the mass media, was now available.[12] By 1945 it was therefore possible for a Political and Economic Planning broadsheet to state that 'it is high time, in consonance with democratic principle, that fuller and simpler explana-

tions be given to the great majority of people, who have a right to know why and what their government has done, is doing, and wishes to do'.[13]

In addition to these structural changes, Labour's attitude in 1945 was fundamentally different from its pre-war predecessors. Communication, if not at the forefront of its mind, was implicit in much of the new government's thinking. The war had generated a huge confidence in the potential positive influence of the state. Peter Hennessy has said of the new Ministers in the administration that, 'They really did think that Jerusalem could be builded here'.[14] But it could only be built if the government organised it, planned it, and led it. This was what Ministers believed the war had shown and what they believed the electorate had voted for in July 1945. As Hilary Marquand, the Secretary for Overseas Trade, said in a speech in autumn 1945, 'The verdict of the election was unmistakably in favour of planning'.[15] Though they were not conscious of it yet, they would soon come to believe that communication would be vital in translating planning into action.

Labour was also committed to a much closer partnership with the people. The Party's legitimacy was based very consciously on its belief in its role as the representative of the people's interest, as compared with the Conservative representation of 'Big Business' (according to the Labour manifesto). Nationalisation meant an unprecedented alliance of the people with the state. The war and the election landslide gave Labour the confidence that such an alliance was both necessary and attainable. Just as the war 'persuaded Government that victory hinged upon a frank and acknowledged partnership between the Government and the people' so too, they believed, would success in the peace.[16]

Therefore at the end of the war, motivated by idealistic intentions and democratic principles, the government decided to establish the machinery of communication; the Central Office of Information, the departmental press offices, and the Prime Minister's public relations adviser (examined in detail in Chapter 1). At this point Ministers assumed that packaging the information would be simple, that channelling it to the public via the mass media would be straightforward, and that ensuring it was seen, understood and accepted by the public would not be a problem. All these unexamined assumptions would be challenged over the following six years.

1945 was, therefore, a critical turning point in the history of government communications. It was the moment at which the government recognised the need for communication within a democracy, though not yet the obstacles to it or the difficulties of achieving it.

The subsequent experience of that administration proved immensely instructive for subsequent governments. It learned, over the course of its first term in office, how disruptive the mass media could be to what it thought should be communicated, how difficult it was to produce effective government information without resorting to persuasion, and how hard it was to make people 'informed' (an experience described in Chapters 2 and 3). In the process of trying to resolve some of these difficulties it began to think of presentation as distinct from policy making. It began to consider how it could and should relate to the independent mass media within a democracy and then how to use these media to its advantage. And, for the first time, it began systematically to measure the public's attitudes to its policies; not just to inform policy making, but also to make its presentation more effective. Information management became a new tool of governance, as outlined in Chapter 4.

Ministers within the administration had become convinced that they were justified in taking such action. They were simply trying to gain the consent of the people to plans which they were persuaded would be to everyone's benefit. Indeed the period, for the most part, is characterised by sincere politicians and earnest officials struggling to deal with overwhelming economic and social adversities as best they could.

Therefore it was only when Ministers like Herbert Morrison felt that the nature of the press had begun to inhibit political communication and was leading to the misrepresentation of the government's policies, in mid-1946, that they considered restructuring the newspaper industry (see chapters 5 and 6). It was only when the Cabinet saw the failures of government communication in the wake of the 1947 fuel crisis that it sanctioned its centralisation and the employment of communications specialists. And it was only when Ministers began to realise the constraints on their original ambitions regarding information that they sought to infiltrate their messages through the existing media disguised as independent news. But the effect was that in trying to find solutions to these difficult situations, Ministers and officials began to devise and institutionalise the techniques of information management and modern spin (as illustrated in chapters 7 and 9).

The way in which these emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War was not inevitable. Had a government informed by a less radical ideological agenda been elected in 1945 its development would have been different. As it would had Labour not produced such enormous amounts of information in an effort to inform and persuade the

electorate. Over six years, this administration made over 500 films, ran upwards of 30 advertising campaigns each year, organised over 100,000 lectures nationwide, set up over 170 exhibitions and published numerous pamphlets and books (particularly on economic information). 'No former Government of the United Kingdom had allocated so great a proportion of its resources to the tasks of informing and cajoling its citizens'.[17] Examining how it came to do this is crucial to understanding why it eventually abandoned this approach, and why the experience had such a profound impact.

Prior to the First World War the British government expended little effort in trying to communicate with the population at large (though considerable effort trying to influence small sections of it). The Stationery Office, though established in the late eighteenth century, printed a limited number of government papers, and these were aimed specifically at MPs and officials. Those wanting political information were most likely to look to the press. This, though diverse, could not be considered independent. Most publications relied, for part of their funding and much of their readership, on political patronage. Moreover, throughout the 18th and first half of the 19th centuries the press was so heavily taxed and regulated that its circulation remained small. It was not until after 1855, with the repeal of stamp duty, that newspapers began to appeal to a much wider readership.

The First World War represented a watershed in the government's approach to communication. The war was of such length and intensity that the government devoted much more attention to propaganda, at home and abroad, than it ever had previously. Intellectuals and writers were employed at Wellington House, writing articles to appear in foreign journals, particularly in the US. Departments brought in journalists to act as press advisers. In 1917 the Lloyd George administration went as far as to create a Department of Information. This was transformed, in 1918, into Britain's first Ministry of Information, headed by the Canadian newspaper baron, Lord Beaverbrook.

The Ministry was, however, shortlived. It was disbanded after the end of the war and the nascent departmental press offices were also closed down due to spending cuts in the early 1920s. The government was as yet not convinced of the necessity of communication in peacetime although there were certain people who were starting to recognise its value and to promote it. Foremost amongst the early evangelists of publicity was Sir Stephen Tallents, who in 1926 was asked to run the newly created Empire Marketing Board. As well as conducting research, the Board promoted the idea of Empire abroad

through films and publicity (spawning the renowned documentary film movement). From 1933, when the EMB was closed down, Tallents led discussions within Whitehall about the legitimate use of propaganda by the State.

Other progressive groups, such as the think tank Political and Economic Planning (PEP), did the same. PEP had been formed in 1931 to emphasise the importance of planning. It published regular 'broadsheets' on issues ranging from the control of national utilities to the state of the press, written by committees of between three and ten people and published anonymously. During the Thirties its 'inquiries played a vital part in the emergence of what has been called a "consensus on social responsibility"'.[18]

In November 1933 PEP published a broadsheet on 'Government Public Relations'. This rationalised the new role of the State, arguing that due to the growth of the population and enlargement of the electorate there was an 'acutely felt need… for more and more knowledge and informed criticism in regard to government and its function'. At this stage, however, it recognised that such a role remained conceptual. 'Very little indeed has been done', the article said 'or even seriously contemplated in the direction of creating a full scale and alert public relations service as an essential and specialised part of the machinery of government'.[19]

This was no exaggeration. In 1931 there were only 44 people employed on publicity work within government.[20] Even these, Mariel Grant has shown, are difficult to identify. One was George Steward, previously of the Foreign Office news department, who was seconded to Downing Street and the Treasury to liaise with the press. His role had similarities to the future Number 10 press secretary but he remained a 'peripheral figure'.[21] Others began to be employed across a number of government departments, in a sporadic and haphazard way. By 1937 'seventeen departments maintained permanent public relations and/or press divisions'.[22] But there remained no central direction, and many people were highly suspicious of the whole idea of government communication.

One of the reasons for this was the use of propaganda by the British state in the First World War. A myth had grown up, most famously promoted by Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, that the war had been won as much by propaganda as by arms. In this view the British government had undermined the spirit of the German army, lied to its own people about German atrocities, and convinced Americans to join the war under false pretences. As has been shown since, though propaganda

was a much greater factor in this war than in previous ones, its effectiveness was hugely exaggerated by contemporaries.[23] Their perceptions, however, led directly to the use of propaganda by fascist states in the 1930s and added further to Britons' concerns.

Such was the level of suspicion of government propaganda that even when another world war seemed imminent the government was very reluctant to set up any central machinery of communication. Discussions began as early as 1935, but little was done over the following five years.[24] When the Ministry of Information was eventually established, in 1939, it was made clear that it was a temporary measure, and done with such haste and ill-preparedness that it became the object of general ridicule.[25]

When the war broke out there was, therefore, still only a small number of people who saw communication as a responsibility of democratic government. Many still thought such an idea was dangerous and unnecessary. Certainly few of the politicians who would later lead the 1945 government were yet convinced of its necessity. Clement Attlee, leader of Labour from 1935 and Prime Minister from 1945, was famously uncommunicative and dismissive of the media. His Downing Street press secretary, Francis Williams, tells the story of how he only managed to convince Attlee to install a teleprinter in Number 10 by saying it would enable them to find out the cricket scores. It is particularly ironic that someone as unaffected and as unforthcoming as Attlee should have overseen the development of modern government communication.

But some of Attlee's colleagues were already much more conscious of the value of communication. One of these was Herbert Morrison, Lord President in the 1945 Labour government, head of its information policy (and grandfather of Peter Mandelson). Anthony Eden later said Morrison was the 'the lynch-pin of the post-war Labour government'.[26] Some have also said he was its engine. Short, stocky, with only one working eye and a trademark quiff (beloved by cartoonists), Morrison powered the Labour administration through its first two most radical years in office. He organised and led Labour's legislative programme, he co-ordinated economic planning (until 1947), and he directed Labour's nationalisation measures.[27]

Three factors connect the lead actors in this story and provide an important insight into what informed the change in the approach to communication. The first was that almost all the key figures were linked in some way to Herbert Morrison. Some were officials in the Lord President's office, such as Max Nicholson, the head of the office,

John Pimlott, Morrison's Private Secretary, and 'Puck' Boon, his public relations advisor. Others had worked closely with Morrison in the past. Clem Leslie, head of the influential Economic Information Unit from 1947, had been Morrison's Principal Assistant Secretary at the Home Office during the Second World War. Robert Fraser, the first Director General of the Central Office of Information, had helped on Morrison's London election campaigns while at the London Press Exchange in the Thirties (where he also worked with Leslie). Others were Members of Parliament who shared Morrison's attitude to communication and who he appointed as his Parliamentary Private Secretaries. His first PPS, Christopher Mayhew, became chairman of the Overseas Information Services Committee and formed the secret Information Research Department of the Foreign Office. His second, Patrick Gordon Walker, became deputy in charge of Information Services in October 1947 and took over as head of information policy in 1951. His third, Stephen Taylor, was instrumental in convincing the government to continue using public opinion surveys after the war. Finally, there were the Prime Minister's two PR advisors during this period, Francis Williams and Philip Jordan. These were the only two without close ties to Morrison.

The second factor connecting these figures was their extensive media experience. Almost all of them had worked in the press, broadcasting or advertising. Nicholson, Jordan, Williams and Gordon Walker had all been journalists. Nicholson had written briefly for the *Week-End Review* and *New Statesman* before helping to found PEP. Jordan made his name writing for the *News Chronicle* from Spain during the civil war, while Gordon Walker made his writing for the *Daily Telegraph* from Germany (after which he joined the European Service at the BBC). Williams wrote for and then edited the *Daily Herald* in the 1930s before going onto the Ministry of Information, at which he worked with Robert Fraser and Stephen Taylor. Both Fraser and Clem Leslie also worked in advertising.

The third and final connection was ideology. Even though more than two thirds of these figures were government officials more than half of them were also committed socialists. Robert Fraser stood as a Labour candidate in the 1935 election at York.[28] Francis Williams' left-wing credentials were so strong that he was offered the Labour candidacy of no fewer than 26 Parliamentary seats prior to the election in 1945, but decided not to stand.[29] Clem Leslie had a 'lifelong devotion to progressive democratic socialism'.[30] Max Nicholson was a committed planner, as demonstrated by his intimate connections with PEP.

Even if they tried to keep their ideology out of their work, there is no question that it helped to inform their subsequent actions.

This book argues that 1945–51 was a decisive period in the development of communication in Britain and that the organisation and practice of modern government communication date from this period. In order to substantiate this, the book first needs to show how and why the government set up the machinery of government communication immediately after the war and how its initial attempts to use this machinery to create direct communication were fraught with difficulties. The book then needs to show how the government tried, and essentially failed, to re-cast the existing media of democratic communication (newspapers and broadcasting) to make it easier to channel government information to the people. In the process it developed the frameworks and techniques of modern government communication that exist to this day – one of the most important among them being modern spin. The first part of the book, therefore, is about the organisation of communication, and the latter two about the practice. The reason the book concentrates on newspapers, journals and broadcasting is because they were by far the most dominant media of political communication at the time. The reason it focuses almost exclusively on the BBC in the third part is because the BBC held the broadcasting monopoly in the UK until 1954.

This argument has not been made before. Although there have been many books written about the 1945–51 Labour government, very few of them deal with government communication. Even those that do, tend to refer to it only in the context of other policies. William Crofts' dense and valuable book on the Attlee government's economic campaigns is an exception and provides an essential background to this study. But it is a subject that remains, as yet, chronically under-researched, despite its increasing centrality to democratic governance. Hopefully this book will generate further interest and encourage more research to help explain and illuminate the current situation.

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