

TONY BLAIR’S DISCOURSE ON NEW LEFT AS A POLITICAL COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN

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ABSTRACT

Political communication is a necessary routine in democracies for both decision makers and candidates for decision-making bodies. For those political parties in opposition and enthusiastic for overthrowing the current long-running government via elections, a significant part of political communication strategy is the creation of a new story, a new paradigm and new promises for people. A significant instance for such a new story in the history of British politics was Labour Party’s 1997 election campaign based on “New Left, New Labour” discourse. The campaign became successful for ending 18 years of Conservative Party rule and providing indoctrinational basis for Labour's next 13-year rule.

The study aimed at comprehending how Labour Party’s “New Left, New Labour” campaign was designed and integrated to the Labour’s official discourse. Content analysis, with the contributions of discourse analysis, was determined as the research method for analysing the elements of Labour Party’s new left such as speeches of Blair, manifesto of the Labour, campaign posters, political advertisements and election slogans. During the campaigning process, Tony Blair, the party leader, renewed the official discourse of Labour Party by emphasising innovative elements of new left vis-à-vis traditional left. The discourse of new left symbolised an important turning point in the left-wing political tradition in Britain with more market-oriented and individualist perspective as compared to the ‘old left’. Moreover, the new left strategy could also be regarded as an attempt to avoid Conservative Party's criticisms towards the traditional British left. Thus, the ability of Conservative Party to base its election campaign on opposition to the Labour Party has been restricted.

Keywords: Political Communication, Labour Party, Left-Wing Politics, New Left, British Politics

1. INTRODUCTION

Political communication has become a significant determiner of political races around the world with the rise of democratic regimes. It is a professional practice that encompasses a range of communication processes, often including political marketing, political campaigning, electoral marketing, political public relations or propaganda (Gonçalves, 2018). The term corresponds to “the process by which language and symbols, employed by leaders, media, or citizens, exert intended or unintended effects on the political cognitions, attitudes, or behaviours of individuals or on outcomes that bear on the public policy of a nation, state, or community” (Perloff, 2014: 30). As an academic discipline, it is a branch of political science and communication and focuses on how information flows and affects citizens, policymakers, politicians and the news media (Ray, 2022).

Because of the long-standing tradition of English democracy, the United Kingdom (UK) is one of the geographies where political communication studies can reach significant and inspirational findings. Labour Party, the deeply rooted left-wing political party of the UK founded in 27 February 1900, can be regarded as a pioneer and a role model for left movements around the world in terms of constructing discourse and designing political campaign. Since the party has historically been a coalition of different groups such as socialist societies, trade unions, trades councils, professional groups, women’s associations, occasionally cooperative parties, and constituency parties from 1918 (Worley, 2009: 1), its political campaigns appeal to a wide range of segments of society. The 1997 general election campaign of Labour Party, however, represented a turning point in the discursive history of the party.

The main goals of this research are to determine how the ‘new left’ campaign of 90’s Labour Party was designed, to detect the ideological elements of new left, and to comprehend the difference between the ‘old left’ and the ‘new left’. By this means, the research is expected to contribute in understanding 1990’s ‘new left’ trend developed in the UK and the transformation of the left-wing political movements by such trend around the world.

2. SLOGANS

A slogan can be defined as a “rallying cry; catch phrase; a brief message that crystallizes an idea, defines an issue, the best of which thrill, exhort, and inspire” (Safire, 2008: 666). Slogans are effective phrases that shorten and summarise a leader’s or political party’s key standpoints, policies and promises. Labour Party proposed four slogans that give similar messages to people in the process of 1997 election campaign:

- New Labour, New Britain.
- New Labour, because Britain deserves better.
- Britain will be better with new Labour.
- New Life for Britain.

As Lees-Marshment (2014: 119) underlined, rebranding in political communication is a difficult as well as crucial task for parties and leaders at the times when the current brand possesses negative connotations or when a leader determines a new direction that requires public attention. Therefore, Labour Party's slogans were a product of a new direction towards 'new left'.

The main promise embedded within the slogans was the change of the 'existing'. The 'existing' corresponds both to the current conditions within the country under the government of Conservative Party and to previous political position of Labour Party just before the 'new Labour'. In the slogan, the statement of 'new Labour' precedes the statement of 'New Britain', since Labour Party is positioned as the pioneer and the main initiator of change. Claiming that the country deserves better and will be better with new Labour can be regarded as a reference to the unachieved potential of Britain. Life span refers to the longest individually perceivable period for a human being. Therefore, the promise of a new life corresponds to a very long-term and radical change.

3. OFFICIAL LOGO OF THE 'NEW LEFT' CAMPAIGN

The Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defined logo as "a design or symbol used by a company to advertise its products". Logos possess distinguishing characteristics for political parties and their campaigns in order to differentiate the policies and promises of political parties from rivals. Labour Party designed and put into circulation the official logo below for its 'new left' campaign in 1997.



Image 1: The 'New Left' Campaign Logo of Labour Party (IHR, 2023).

The expression of "new Labour new Britain" is located on a red background within the logo. The colour of red symbolises socialism and social democrat movements in the world. Therefore, the colour is a significant element that universalises the party. By means of the colour of red in the logo, the Labour Party pledges its commitment to the universal values of the left. Moreover, it demonstrates Labour's claim to lead the new left universally.

The words 'Labour' and 'Britain' was written as bolder as compared to the repeating words 'new'. Such a preference can be interpreted as an emphasis on the conservation of Labour's

and Britain's essence. In other words, proposing a "new Labour" and a "new Britain" does not mean a total disengagement from or demonization of the core values of them.

4. LABOUR PARTY'S 1997 GENERAL ELECTION MANIFESTO

Although election manifestos have a very limited effect on updating the perceptions of voters about parties' positions (Adams, Ezrow & Somer-Topcu, 2014), these documents are still important for official determination of party position. As Eder, Jenny and Müller (2017: 76) underlined, a political party manifesto has three functions: Providing a compendium about valid standpoints and approaches of the party; ensuring supremacy over the whole range of alternative party positions attributable the party; and by this way, streamlining the election campaigns of the party; and directly informing the public. In this line, the 1997 election manifesto was written as Tony Blair's personal address to the public.

In each area of policy a new and distinctive approach has been mapped out, one that differs from the old left and the Conservative right. This is why new Labour is 'new'.

In these statements, the 'old left' and the Conservative Party governments are equalised in terms of their distance towards the 'new left'. The word 'distinctive' signifies a rupture from the previous political position of Labour Party. By constructing a dichotomy between the old left and the new left, Labour Party attempted to build a 'new left' free from all the mistakes of the past. By this means, the party possessed the opportunity to avoid criticism from its rivals targeting past Labour governments.

New Labour is a party of ideas and ideals but not of outdated ideology. What counts is what works. The objectives are radical. The means will be modern.

In this part of the manifesto, the statement of 'outdated ideology' directly targets so-called 'old labour'. The statement offers an up-to-date ideology vis-à-vis the outdated ideology. There is a reference to modernity. Such a reference can be interpreted as an attempt to reconcile the party's position with capitalist type of developmentalism. Moreover, the word 'ideal' was used in order to idealise the future policies and promises of Labour Party without being obliged to defend the current position of the party in practise.

5. TONY BLAIR'S SPEECHES

Speeches of political leaders are one of the most important trivets of political campaigns. Although political leaders resort to persuasion in the cases of the absence of power, persuasion is also the essence of power as it increases the influence on other people's behaviour. There are societies in which power among institutions is stably allocated; however, people must compete with each other for gaining or maintaining position within the framework of those institutions. Therefore, public speaking can be regarded as a way to reach political authority due to its relationship with persuasion (Arno, 1985: 124).

"This is a new age, to be led by a new generation" (Blair, 1995)

Blair's expression within his 1995-dated speech can be regarded as an introduction for strong the emphasis on the key word of "new" in the "new Labour" campaign. Blair was only 39 years old when he ran his campaign. A new age brought unique problems, necessitated unique approaches to those problems and required a young leader to lead the process. At this point, Blair was ready to fulfil the condition of being young.

The coming election is not a struggle for political power. It is a battle for the soul of a nation and I say to you, my party, be strong and of good courage. The Labour Party that first won support from the British people was new Labour then. 1945 was new Labour, 1964 was new Labour - both new Labour because both had the courage to take the values of the Labour Party and use them, not for the world as it was, but for the world as they wanted it to be. New Labour now is ready in 1995 to build new Britain. (Blair, 1995).

On the other hand, Labour refrained from building its discourse of new left on an entirely flawed legacy. It was emphasised that the policy-based and discursive transformations repeated in the history of the party were also 'new' under the conditions of those periods. Thus, the message is given that the Labour Party has always pioneered the most innovative policies and discourses in the political history of the UK.

... The prize is immense. It is new Britain, one Britain - the people united by shared values, shared aims, a government governing for all the people and the party, this party, the Labour Party, new Labour, founded by the people, back truly as the people's party. (Blair, 1995).

New Labour, new Britain, the party renewed, the country reborn. New Labour. New Britain (Blair, 1995).

These statements in the manifesto reveals that the Labour Party does not propose self-declared innovations, and that the demands and suggestions for innovation come from the people. There is an emphasis on the shared character of new values offered by new Labour. Moreover, the change towards new begins with the renewal of the party and leads to the renewal of the country. When a living creature is reborn, it completely starts a life with a new body and soul. Therefore, being reborn of Britain symbolises a radical rupture from the past of the country and a radical change towards the 'new'.

The new welfare state must encourage work, not dependency.

Modernisation is not an end in itself. It is for a purpose. Modernisation is not the enemy of justice, but its ally.

Progress and justice are the two rocks upon which the New Britain is raised to the heights. Lose either one and we come crashing down until we are just another average nation, scrabbling around for salvation in the ebbing tide of the 20th Century (Blair, 1997).

The statements above signifies an acknowledgement of criticisms towards the traditional left in the issues like those towards welfare state and can be regarded as a reference to the Third Way, which was conceptualised by the British sociologist Antony Giddens. Giddens (1998: VIII) used the term ‘Third Way’ in order to refer to the attempt to renew social democracy. For him, the Third Way corresponded to renewed version of the periodic rethinking that social democrats had to do quite often in the last century. Instead of creating a new paradigm per se, therefore, Giddens' main motivation was proposing a set of ideas and policies that preserve the spirit of social democracy while reconsidering its principles according to the conditions of the day (Başkan, 2022: 570). From this point of view, the manifesto distributed the burden on individuals by drawing attention to their tendency of dependency and shirking, rather than laying the whole burden on welfare state. With the Third Way, moreover, Blair proposed a political model in which the basic principles of social democracy such as social justice, equality in political rights, mutual responsibility, freedom and internationalism were preserved, but the dynamics of the free market economy were taken more into account (Başkan, 2022: 573). Thus, the concepts of ‘modernisation’, ‘progress’ and ‘justice’ were consciously preferred in order to reconcile the traditional left with neo-liberal worldview in the manifesto.

That is why we changed the Labour Party. To make New Britain. It is why we will carry on changing. ...Yes, we are New Labour. Yes, our policies and attitudes have changed. But there are no Old Labour or New Labour values. There are Labour values. They are what make us the Party of compassion; of social justice; of the struggle against poverty and inequality; of liberty; of basic human solidarity; and the day we cease to be those things is the day we keep the name of the Labour Party but lose the reason for its existence. And these are indeed the best of British values too. The point of modern Britain is not to dishonour the past. But to honour it by improving it, by taking the best of it and adding to it. Ours is a simple enough vision. But it will require a supreme national effort. It is a task for a whole people, not just a government (Blair, 1997).

In his speech, Blair differentiated ‘making a change in attitudes and policies’ from ‘making a change in values’. While renewing the boundaries of Labour Party’s position of left, he preserved the nucleus of the ideology shaped by core values such as basic human solidarity, social justice, compassion, liberty, and the struggle against inequality and poverty. In the speech, honouring was proposed against the attitude of dishonouring. This attitude can be interpreted as a measure against the demonization of the party's past.

6. ‘NEW LEFT’ CAMPAIGN POSTERS

Political leader branding is a significant element of political marketing. In the process of branding a political leader, a distinctive and simple leader vision is featured by values that stimulate public awareness, construct a connection with the intended audience, and evokes positive associations (Lees-Marshment, 2014: 106). Election posters are important visual instruments for branding a political leader. The image of a leader on a poster is under the

control of communication experts and can be shaped in accordance with the intended message. Moreover, the image can be supported with effective slogans and short messages targeting public.

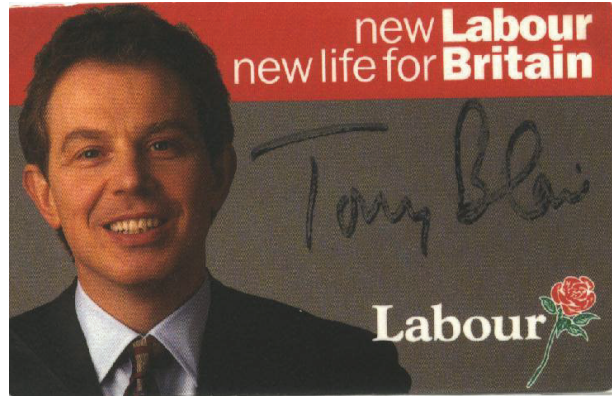


Image 2: Labour Poster with Tony Blair's Personal Sign (Koçer, 2020)

Many memorable posters were used during the 'New Left' campaign of Labour Party. The prominent figure within those posters was Tony Blair as the initiator of 'new Labour' ideal. The poster above revealed the sign of Blair as the most dominant image near his smiling face. The gesture of a smile leads people to positivity. Thusly, Blair promises people a positive future with his smiling face. A sign is a personal symbol peculiar to a person for the representation of his/her will, so personalises what was signed. Therefore, Blair affirms and takes responsibility for his promises with his personal sign. In other words, the responsibility for the fulfilment of promises is automatically placed on Blair's shoulders.

Moreover, when a person signs a contract, it becomes binding for him/her. Therefore, signing something is a step for laying a burden on that person. With a sign on election poster, Blair's promises for future become binding for him and his party. Since unilateral renegeing on a signed contract would result in sanctions, Blair is accepting at the outset the possible sanctions he may face from his voters in the future.



Image 3: Labour Poster with Tony Blair as an Explicator

The brand personality of the leader needs to be characterised with credibility, competence, sincerity and openness (Lees-Marshment, 2014: 106). Blair's election poster above reveals an image of a competent leader who is open to new developments with his hands outstretched towards the people in front of him. Blair is in a position of a narrator in the poster with his posture and open mouth, as if explaining something. Thus, he gives the impression that he has an answer to every possible question. In other words, he is capable of finding a solution to every problem faced by society. Such an image can be particularly effective on those segments of society who are highly concerned about the future of the country.



Image 4: Tony Blair with White Shirt (Mirror, 2012)

In Image 4, Blair's shirt sleeves are seen as rolled up. Rolled up sleeves shows a person's readiness to start a new task. Since the colour of white represents transparency and purity, Blair is regarded as an initiator to transparently initiate new tasks for the sake of British nation. The tie adds 'formality' to the image of Blair. Thus, Blair can be perceived as young and dynamic as well as 'formal'. At this point, being 'formal' reveals compliance with the seriousness of the state.

7. CONCLUSION

Political communication has been an indispensable element of political struggles in world democracies. Victory in the political race or the maintenance of prevailing position in power depends on how a political leader or a political party communicates with society. In this respect, Labour Party, which was able to gather different segments of the society under the same roof, provided an example worthy of research for political communication studies with its discursive transformation in the mid-1990s.

It can be claimed that Tony Blair successfully renewed the official discourse of the party by emphasising innovative elements of the ‘new left’ vis-à-vis the traditional left. The discourse of ‘new left’ symbolised an important turning point in the left-wing political tradition in Britain with its more market-oriented and individualistic perspective as compared to the so-called ‘old left’. The theoretical foundations of the New Left were based on Antony Giddens' idea of the Third Way, which aimed at finding a reconciliation point between socialist ideals and capitalism.

Two words of ‘new’ and ‘better’ were used as two key words during the election campaign of Labour Party under Blair leadership. By this means, Labour Party has proposed an alternative to both past Labour governments and the current Conservative government. In this line, the ‘new left’ strategy could also be regarded as an attempt to avoid Conservative Party's and other rivals' criticisms towards the traditional British left. Thus, the ability of Conservative Party to base its election campaign on opposition to the failures of Labour Party has been restricted.

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