

# "PRIME TIME POLITICS": POPULAR CULTURE AND POLITICIANS IN THE UK

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## Abstract

Politicians and parties are making increase use of popular culture. They make use of its practitioners, its generic conventions, its image and much else. This association with popular culture has provoked much derision, and the suggestion that democracy is being damaged in the process. This article contributes to this debate by illustrating the way in which politics and popular culture have become linked, and by exploring the reasons for this linkage. It then goes on to examine this relationship through two case studies, both drawn from the British Labour Party, which allows to examine in more detail how politics communicates through popular culture. Rather than seeing politics' use of popular culture as either a welcome populism or a dumbing down, the article argues that we need to look more closely and critically at the texts themselves, judging them aesthetically as well as culturally.

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## Introduction

In May 2000, the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, celebrated the birth of his son, Leo Blair. Although Tony and Cherie Blair have three other children, there was some novelty to this event. Blair was the first Prime Minister in over a hundred years to become a father while in office. But otherwise the news “man becomes father” would hardly seem to count as news — maybe a small mention in the Births and Deaths columns. Except that the front pages of the British newspapers were full of nothing else: “GORGEOUS LEO: Cherie’s a supermum” (*Sunday Mirror*), “Blairs greet the ‘gorgeous’ Leo” (*The Observer*), “Leo, 6lb. 12oz goes home to Downing Street” (*Sunday Telegraph*), “He’s a Lovely Little Kid...” (*Mail on Sunday*). It was not just the papers loyal to the Labour Party that greeted the birth, every paper, whatever its affiliation, had the news on the front page. The Conservative *Mail* had seven pages on baby Leo, including a special column by the paper’s astrologer. The loyalist *Mirror* proved its loyalty with thirteen pages of coverage: sleeping arrangements in Downing Street, advice on breast-feeding and nappy changing, and details of christening arrangements. Television news led with the story. For two or three days, the story dominated British media coverage, fuelled and sustained by the promise of exclusive photos of Leo, taken by one of Paul McCartney’s daughters, and sold for £500 (in aid of a children’s charity).

All of this might, at first glance, strike the casual observer as another example of a media feeding frenzy, and another sign of declining news values. But this snap conclusion, although no doubt valid in some respects, misses as much as it captures. What emerged later was that an opinion poll conducted over the weekend of Leo’s birth recorded a political swing to Labour. Tony Blair’s fatherhood (or rather, the way it was reported) generated an upsurge in political support. Blair did not have to invade a far off island; he did not have to perform an act of heroism; he did not even have to sing a duet with Mick Hucknall of Simply Red. He just became a father. What Blair benefited from was the fact of his celebrity status, a status that allows the most ordinary of events or acts — “Tony Blair changes his first nappy” — to become extraordinary ones. Blair was treated like any other celebrity — footballers, actors, and pop musicians; here was proof, if proof were needed, that contemporary politics inhabits the world of show business. But this, too, does not mark the end of the story, because in becoming a celebrity, in joining showbiz, politicians do not wave goodbye to politics. If anything, they engage with a more vital and more commonplace politics. The media response to the Blair baby, and the public response it orchestrated, highlighted many important political issues. Not, it is true, the politics of the National Health Service or of inflation rates, but of paternity leave, of the domestic division of labour, and of masculinity. In the weeks before the birth, the Prime Minister was quizzed about whether he would take paternity leave. His wife had insisted that he should, while others suggested that he could not be spared from running the country. His decision was not just a private family matter; it was a very public one. Two competing value systems focused on who was to look after the baby. Beyond this, Blair gave public expression to a form of masculinity that challenged more conventional stereotypes; he acted out the lifestyle of the “new man,” and provoked a whole set of arguments in the process. Leo Blair provided an excuse for the conjunction of popular wisdom and politics.

The example of Blair's baby stands as a symbol for the argument outlined here. It marks the ever closer connection between politics and popular culture, the medium through which celebrities are constituted, and it reveals how this connection, far from signalling the end of politics, sets in motion a different kind of political discourse. But in doing this, we cannot assume that this new politics will somehow guarantee the future health of democracy (any more than it causes its demise). Instead, what it requires is that, as observers of these changes and trends, we need to find a language and method for critically assessing the "new politics" of celebrity politicians and their parties. So, in this article, I trace the increasing intimacy of politics and popular culture and review the pressures leading to this conjunction. I then consider particular examples of the political use of popular culture and ask how we should understand them as forms of political discourse. Fears are expressed that politics is being "dumbed down" and/or that citizens' political power is being diluted by the popularisation of politics. My intention here is not to give comfort to either side in this debate; it is not to confirm or deny the fact of "dumbing down," but rather to develop an approach and criteria for understanding and judging the use of popular culture as politics. My two examples of the politics-popular culture connection appeared around the UK's 1997 General Election. Both involve the Labour Party. The first example is a Labour Party video, set to the sound of Labour's adopted theme tune, D:Ream's "Things Can Only Get Better"; the second is an appearance by the Labour leader, by this time Prime Minister, on the Des O'Connor Show, a mid-evening, high-rating chat show. .

## Politics and Popular Culture

During the 2000 US Presidential primaries, the rival candidates were asked about their policies, of course they were. But they were also asked about their favourite pop records. George W Bush chose Van Morrison's *Moondance*; Al Gore chose the Beatles' *Rubber Soul*; and John McCain opted for Frank Sinatra's *Songs for Swinging Lovers*. These things mattered. It was intended to provide an indication of what these men stood for, and you can be sure that they deliberated long and hard about the choice, about the demographics of fans of ol' blue eyes, and about what a particular musical taste "said" about the candidate. These choices, just like the decision to be seen with football stars and country singers, are meant to convey a message — about how hip or traditional politicians and their parties are. They use popular culture to evoke an image and to attract political support. However laughable such examples may seem, they are symptomatic of a now familiar and increasingly discussed phenomenon: the use of popular culture to promote politicians and their parties.

It is now commonplace for British newspapers to "review" party political broadcasts in the same way that pop videos, soap operas and commercial advertisements are reviewed. And one reason for this kind of approach is, of course, that party advertising is now self-consciously modelled on pop videos and other modes of popular culture. In 1999, a set of Conservative Party broadcasts was seen, not entirely accurately, to borrow the format used by Nescafe to advertise its Gold Blend brand — each advert advanced the story of a couple's relationship (an idea itself borrowed from the traditions of romantic fiction and soap opera). A Labour Party European election advert ended, not with a politician, but with Alex Ferguson, manager of Manchester United FC, who told his audience to "Vote Labour" for continued success in Europe (a reference to Man Utd's victory in the 1999 European Champions League).

This practice of promoting parties through reference to popular culture has been part of the landscape for some time, and the 1997 UK General Election was no exception. Labour recruited fashionable business leaders (Terence Conran, Anita Roddick) to endorse the party. In another broadcast, Labour was promoted through a video that echoed James Stewart's *It's a Wonderful Life*: an angel (actor Peter Postlethwaite) foretold the effects of a Conservative victory. One profile of Tony Blair used jump cuts and shots of no more than 10 seconds; another borrowed fly-on-the-wall documentary techniques (Butler and Kavanagh 1997, 152-3). This propaganda campaign did not just use the formats of popular culture; it also used the practitioners. One of the Blair profiles was directed by Molly Dineen, whose most recent film had been about Gerri Halliwell, the ex-Spice Girl. The *It's a Wonderful Life* parody was directed by Stephen Frears (director of *My Beautiful Laundrette*). The Conservative Party's series of European election broadcasts was produced by an ex-Creative Director at Channel 4, the man responsible for devising the popular breakfast TV presentation pairing of Johnny Vaughan and Denise Van Outen.

In one sense, the relationship between politics and popular culture has an immensely long history. In *The Republic*, Plato discusses at length the moral and political consequences of musical pleasure. He distinguishes between the beneficial and detrimental consequences of particular harmonic and rhythmic forms. A similar reasoning lies behind the decisions of different states in different times to either censor popular culture for fear of its effects on the dominant order, or to use it as a form of propaganda to bolster that order. This dimension of the relationship is still very evident today: whether in the strictures of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan; or in the US, where an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was dropped in the aftermath of the high school shootings in Columbine.

Paralleling the long history of the state's politicisation of popular culture has been another history, that of oppressed groups, for whom popular culture provides some means of expressing defiance and resistance, some alternative way of creating solidarity and communicating grievances. Drawing upon the examples supplied by historians of the working class like EP Thompson, James Scott (1990) writes of the "hidden transcripts" that are embedded in the popular cultures of subservient peoples. And this history too continues into the present. It is not just there in the ways in which popular culture addresses particular causes (as in the films of Spike Lee or Oliver Stone or John Sayles; or in the music of Sting or Public Enemy), but in the ways in which trends in cultural taste — from rock'n'roll to punk to dance — are interpreted as gestures of independence and resistance.

But these two general trends tend to preserve, formally at least, the separateness of politics and popular culture. On the one hand, there is the state imposing its interests and values on popular culture; on the other, there are artists and audiences who invest popular culture with political meaning and significance. Lurking between these separated trends in the linking of politics and popular culture, there is a third, less developed tradition. This is a tradition in which popular culture presents itself as a kind of "trophy" to be used in the enhancement of reputation. Its modern incarnation is the way in which political leaders attend high profile events in the popular culture calendar (football cup finals, awards ceremonies) or when they invite pop and film stars to receptions at the White House or 10 Downing Street. In previous eras, this was a practice adopted, in Britain at least, not by politicians but by the social elite. In the

1930s, society hostesses courted sporting heroes and performers like Noel Coward (McKibbin 1998, 30-1). These figures became adornments to their social life, and markers of their reputation. The same is now true in the political realm; cultural success is appropriated for political gain.

What has happened in the recent past, I want to suggest, is a coming together of these three trends to provide a more intimate intertwining of the worlds of politics and popular culture. This involves the blurring of the formal distinction between the two realms. That is, politicians become *part* of the popular culture that they also seek to control, and popular artists take on the guise of politicians. The case of the former is represented by the appearance of politicians in cultural formats that previously they chose to avoid or which chose to exclude them. In the UK in the 1980s, examples of this included Mrs Thatcher's appearance on a chat show hosted by Michael Aspel or on a daytime pop radio station (the Jimmy Young Show on BBC Radio Two). Meanwhile, her opposition rival, Neil Kinnock, reviewed pop videos on a Saturday morning children's TV show and also actually appeared in one such video (with Tracey Ullman). Not to be outdone, the UK's third party, the Liberals, produced their own rap song, "I feel Liberal all right."

This political symbiosis with popular culture, as we have already seen, has been administered increasingly by people whose background is not that of the traditional party apparatchik, but rather of media and popular culture. Back in the 1980s, a Kinnock party election broadcast was directed by Hugh Hudson, the maker of *Chariots of Fire*, while in the early 1990s, John Schlesinger (*Midnight Cowboy*, *Far From the Madding Crowd*) was hired by the Conservatives. Peter Mandelson, one of the chief architects of Labour's transformation in the late-1980s and 1990s, was recruited to the Labour elite at a meeting, hosted by one of his colleagues in television (where he worked as a producer), at which he was introduced to Philip Gould, who at the time worked in advertising. Years later, as the Minister responsible for the UK's Millennium Dome, Mandelson visited Disneyland in the search for "best practice."

The divide between politics and popular culture was not just being breached from the political side. In popular culture, the last decades has witnessed ever more direct cultural intervention into politics. This is most dramatically illustrated by popular music. From Rock Against Racism in the late 1970s, through to Red Wedge and Live Aid in the 1980s, pop musicians have become engaged directly in a variety of political causes and campaigns (Frith and Street 1992). Of course, there were earlier examples of this, most notably folk musicians' involvement in the peace movement or soul musicians' involvement in the civil rights movement. What was distinctive about the 1980s was the ways in which the musicians took on political responsibility and became engaged with mainstream political parties (to the extent that now members of the pop business sit on government advisory committees).

This brief history sketches the background to the examples I mentioned at the beginning of this paper and to the case studies I want to address in more detail. But before this, it is important to give a narrative to the history, to see *why* it followed this particular path. The story behind such developments will, after all, be relevant to the assessment we can offer of the detrimental or beneficial effects of popular culture's incorporation into politics.

## Explaining Politics' Use of Popular Culture

Any attempt to explain the ever-closer linkages between popular culture and formal politics needs to recognise the pressure coming from both sides: the pressure felt by the politicians and the pressure felt within popular culture.

### Imitation

British political use of popular culture derived in part, as with much else, as an imitative response to the American example. Many of the contemporary techniques of electioneering — spindoctoring, soundbites, and photo op's — were developed in the US laboratory. Both the British Conservative and Labour Parties spent time observing their US equivalents and drawing upon the experience and expertise developed across the Atlantic (Butler and Kavanagh 1997, 56-7; Kavanagh 1997, 29-30; Sanders et al. 1999, 58). The use of the icons and techniques of popular culture are no exception to this general rule — from the use of advertising jingles to sell Eisenhower, to Clinton's appearance on MTV. But in noting the power of imitation, two qualifications need to be added. The first, and obvious, one is that looking to imitative effect only moves the explanatory task back one stage, to the question as to why the originator of the technique came to this solution (and why it is this example being imitated and not some other).

### Rational Choice

One reason for resorting to the techniques of popular culture in the first place may lie in the rationality of electioneering. Antony Downs (1957), and the many who have followed him, have pointed to the disincentives for voters to acquire detailed information about any given set of political alternatives. The costs of acquiring information outweigh the calculable benefits of allocating an individual vote to any given party. Although this same logic, since it applies to all voters, does suggest that if all others abstain, it pays to vote, since that vote will be decisive. The point is that these competing logics create a state of affairs, which encourages the parties to provide information in an easily accessible form, to reduce the cost of information acquisition. Hence, there is a drive towards "branding," rather than detailed policy detail, and to the popular culture industries practised in the art of marketing products — advertisers, designers, graphic artists.

### Dealignment

But as with the imitation argument, the "rational choice" argument does not address the issue of *why now*? Why does the logic take hold at a particular juncture? In the British context, an answer to this question may lie with the erosion of traditional (non-rational?) forms of political allegiance. If traditional ties of party and class loyalty have been eroded, then, the argument runs, political issues become more salient in determining party preference (Crewe and Sarlvik 1983). Prior to this, party loyalty was a product of a process of socialisation, and the position adopted by citizens on any given issue was predetermined by their party loyalty. Now it is suggested that the relationship works in reverse — policy preference determines party choice. If this is the case, perceptions of parties and of the policies they advocate become crucial to party political strategy. Parties can not rely on traditional ties; they have to sell themselves. The mass media represent a key forum, and advertising a key language, for

this salesmanship. But even if voting is organised on this basis, and there are many who dispute the dealignment thesis, the change does not, in itself, guarantee the adoption of popular cultural modes of address; it just makes them possible.

### Technology and the Mediation of Politics

One argument for the particular adoption of popular culture has to do with the technology by which popular culture is disseminated. The massive penetration of television into domestic life, and the widely held view that television is now the main source of political information, is seen to create the drive towards parties' strategic focus on the medium (Negrine 1994). More than this, though, it is argued that the formats and nature of television, its particular character as a medium, has shaped the mode of address adopted by the parties. Joshua Meyrowitz (1985), for example, argues that television by its nature — its use of close-ups, its intimate tone — works against a declamatory oratory and leaderly aloofness. Instead, as he suggests, leaders are brought down to our (the viewers') level. Political communication is forced to take on the style of television's naturalism, and to adopt the codes and conventions that television demands.

A similar kind of argument, one which links the form of politics to the medium through which it is conducted, can be found in reflections upon the nature of fame and celebrity in the modern era (Marshall, 1997; Braudy, 1997). Here the suggestion is that the notion of "popularity" is not some given fact of political effort and ability, but is an idea with a history, and that it is differently constituted according to its context. The modern politician is required to seek popularity according to prevailing norms, and the current norm, according to David Marshall (1997), is that of "celebrity," itself a direct product of the popular culture of film, television and pop music. It is this pressure which lies behind the adoption by politicians of the formats and icons of popular culture.

The transformations are not seen just to apply to the politicians, but to politics itself. Roderick Hart (1999: 4), for example, talks of the way in which the traditional public sphere of politics is made to "seem more private." In this process, politics takes on the generic conventions of the medium — politics becomes melodrama through the recounting of personal anecdotes, interviews become therapeutic encounters (Hart, 1999: 25-9). In other words, the medium of modern politics invests it with a particular language and style, both of which derive from popular culture.

### The Commodification of Politics

A different account of this process derives from those who describe the commodification of politics, linking it directly to changes in the political economy of mass communications generally. Nicholas Garnham (1986), drawing upon Jürgen Habermas's account of the commercialisation of the public sphere, argues that mass communications is now organised around advertising. The "public" is now the "market," and media address and constitute citizens as consumers. In a similar vein, Marshall (1997, 205) argues: "The product advertising campaign provides the underlying model for the political election campaign. Both instantiate the prominence of irrational appeal within a general legitimating discourse of rationality. Both are attempts to establish resonance with a massive number of people so that connections are drawn between the campaign's message and the interests of consumers/citizens." By this account, the use of advertising forms and celebrity endorsements is less about a prag-

matic adoption of communicative conventions, and more about the enforced denial of full political participation and debate, but either way, the point is to recognise the wider processes that lead to the increased intimacy of politics and popular culture.

### The Politicisation of Popular Culture

While these arguments go some way to accounting for the political adoption of certain formats and stylistic conventions, they omit one crucial dimension. This has to do with the contribution made by popular culture (as a supplier of icons, endorsements, styles and creators). Although parties have drawn upon experts from advertising for some time, there was for many years a reluctance on the part of the entertainment world to associate itself publicly with political parties and explicitly political causes. It may have joined ad hoc campaigns, but typically these fell outside the formal political arena or commanded almost universal support (e.g. Live Aid). But from the late 1970s there has been an increasing involvement of stars in politics, not just as benefactors but as endorsees and as political actors in their own right. The explanation for this cannot, I think, rest simply with a changing political consciousness of these performers, but rather has to do with the changing popular economy of popular culture (Street 1997 gives a fuller version of this argument).

### The Debate about the Effects of Popular Culture on Politics

Explaining the use of popular culture in politics, and the transformation it entails, is clearly important, but this importance only really emerges through the debate, which these developments have provoked. Simply, there are those who see a general trend, of which the use of popular culture is but one sign, towards the damaging or “dumbing down” of politics. This argument is explicit in Robert Putnam’s (1995) general condemnation of television for the dissolving of social capital in the US. Another leading proponent of this view, Bob Franklin (1994), argues that the quality of political discourse has been diminished by the increasing reliance on soundbites and photo-opportunities, which signal a pre-eminence given to image over substance, presentation over content. Although Franklin does not address the use of popular culture directly, it is implicit in the criticisms he makes of the “packaging of politics.” In the same way, David Marquand’s concern about the prevalence of a populist rhetoric in politics can also be connected to the changes in political style associated with popular culture. Marquand (1999, 30) writes of the dominance of populism: “Populist languages make no demands on their listeners. They flatter the emotions; they promise the isolated and alienated membership of a greater whole; above all they place the burdens of freedom on the leader’s shoulders.” The rise of populism and the implications for political leadership also lie behind Meyrowitz’s concern about the new mass-mediated politics. Putting leaders on TV, and thereby revealing their front and back regions, their public and private faces, makes it impossible for great leaders — Churchills or Roosevelts — to emerge. For Meyrowitz, this is a loss; democracies need great leaders. Hart (1999, 11) expresses a similar worry in his view that we need a “new phenomenology of politics.” This is engendered by the way television represents politicians as personalities and political responses as structured feelings (Hart 1999, 70). As television presents politics through the generic conventions of television, so politics is presented in “television’s most natural language”; this is the language of cynicism (Hart 1999, 9). “Television,” writes Hart (1999, 10), “*makes us feel good about feeling bad about politics.*”



These judgements of television, and the styles it represents, express a general concern for the state of modern, mediated democracy. But not everyone who observes these trends share this judgement. There are those, for example, who challenge the empirical foundations to the dystopian reading of television's effects (Norris 1996; Hall 1999). More radically, others argue that democracy is actually enhanced by these new modes of communication (Scammell 1995). More cautiously, there are those who reject the implied technological determinism that underpins the critics' case and the implicit assumption of some previous golden age of political communication, but who argue for a closer examination of the reasons behind the new developments. Here the argument is that the new forms of communication represent attempts to repair a damaged democracy. Thus, Liesbet van Zoonen (1998, 196-7) writes: "Popular political communication should be seen as an attempt to restore the relation between politicians and voters, between the people and their representatives, to regain the necessary sense of community between public officials and their publics."

There are three strands to the debate about the new forms of political communication. The first is about the process of change, about what processes are at work in the development of new forms of political communication (and this leads to empirical questions about the perceived effect). Then there is an argument about political values, about what kind of communication, what kind of leadership and what kind of representation, is appropriate to a democracy. This is the debate about the changing character of political leaders. This, like the first debate, is fuelled by longstanding arguments within social and political science — about the causes of change and about the proper meaning and organisation of democracy. But there is a third strand which, I want to suggest, has received much less attention and is not yet properly acknowledged within the study of politics. This concerns the cultural dimension of the new forms of communication. The debate certainly assumes that particular messages — whether favouring or subverting democracy — are encoded in the new form of political communication. But very little is done to substantiate these claims or to draw on the cultural studies literature that would support such an endeavour. As I have tried to argue elsewhere, an assessment of new forms of political communication needs to recognise them as a form of popular culture, and to judge them accordingly (Street, 1997). In making these claims, I failed to provide, however, any substantial illustration of how this might be done. And that is the task I want to attempt here in looking at two examples.

### Case Study 1: "Do It"

In the run-up to the 1997 election, the Labour Party sent a video to the homes of young voters (Sanders et al. 1999, 37). The short video had two obvious purposes. The first was to encourage people to vote, and the second was to get them to vote Labour. Neither of these purposes was immediately evident to any individual recipient. Along the side of the box was the slogan "just play it," and on the front cover were the words "do it" (and here there was a small clue: the "t" resembled an "X"). There was no mention of a political party or of politics of any kind.

Once the video started to play, though, the first of its messages became clear quickly. The opening shot was of a red front door, and on the mat a newspaper front page, whose headline revealed that there were three days to go before the General Election. Then through the letterbox came the mail, including a polling card (notifying the anony-

mous recipient of the details of their polling station). Pages ripped from a calendar mark the passing of the days to the election, and then the card is taken from a pinboard and placed in the breast pocket of a blue denim shirt. The wearer turns out to be a casually dressed male — brown sneakers, cream trousers. We see nothing of his face, but as he walks through the streets to cast his vote, he is greeted enthusiastically. An elderly man gives him the thumbs-up from a car; a young woman grabs flowers from a stall; another man hands out balloons; a lad having his hair dyed bright red leaps from his salon chair; the people rise from their tables at outdoor cafes to greet the passing figure. At the polling station, there are looks of admiration, even awe, from the polling staff. As our hero casts his vote, the crowd that has followed him votes too. Finally, as the previously anonymous figure casts his vote, he is revealed as Tony Blair, who smiles awkwardly to camera. The screen cuts to the hand-written slogan, “do it,” signed by Tony Blair.

This entire story is cut to the sound of D:Ream’s 1993 hit “Things Can Only Get Better,” the song that became Labour’s theme tune. The video resembles a pop video — an anodyne version of Prodigy’s “Smack My Bitch Up,” which chronicled a debauched night on the town by a figure whose identity, too, is only revealed at the end. But this aspect of the video also draws from other genre, most obviously the British TV quiz show *Question of Sport*, in which the teams have to guess the identity of a fellow sportsperson in a film clip in which, as with the Labour video, they never see the full face. Besides pop video and TV formats, the video also draws heavily on advertising tropes. “Just play it”/“Do it” echoes Nike’s slogan “Just Do It.” The pied piper effect (the crowd that follows Blair to the polling station) is also reminiscent of other advertisements in which people gather one-by-one to be revealed altogether at the end.

These familiar references point all provide neat short-cuts and associations through which to reach the target audience. The video works insofar as these codes and genres are easily understood. But the video carries other messages. Everyone is attractive, able-bodied, and mostly young. The streets are clean, the weather sunny, the people friendly. To this extent, this was a typical advertisement, different only in that it was selling a political party (and its leader) not a product. What it was intending to do was to engage a young audience and to encourage them to participate in the election.

As an experiment, I showed the video to a group of students, roughly the same age as the target audience. They laughed mockingly. This laughter was a response to what they saw as the simple-minded nature of the video’s message and the “naffness” of the song. Partly because the song was — in pop’s terms — relatively old, but not old enough to be a “golden oldie,” and partly because D:Ream were not deemed to be a hip band, and partly because the song had already been appropriated by the Labour Party establishment, for all these reasons the music had limited cultural capital to work with. This weakness was compounded by the style of advert adopted, it too was marked as “dated” by those well-skilled in the reading of adverts. What “Do it” illustrates is the risks attendant upon using popular culture and the danger of not getting it right, of not striking the right note according to the complex criteria by which popular culture is judged.

“Do it” lacked the guile and sense of irony that popular culture that advertising in particular, and popular culturally generally, trades on. Advertisers expect their audiences to be “in the know,” to recognise the jokes and references. This is how they flatter the consumer’s intelligence. The Labour Party insulted its potential support-

ers' cultural intelligence. Their political message was lost because of the failures of their cultural judgement and understanding.

## Case Study 2: The Des O'Connor Show

A year after the General Election of 1997, Tony Blair appeared on *The Des O'Connor Show*. Des O'Connor is a comedian and singer (although the latter skill is as often mocked as celebrated). His show is broadcast in a prime evening slot on ITV. In front of a studio audience, it mixes chat, songs and comedy. On the night Blair appeared, the other main guest was Elton John, who sang and chatted on the sofa. The show went out just as the World Cup was beginning, and the programme was dominated by football. The audience waved scarves printed with the names of the home nations; a children's choir ended the show with a World Cup song; and the guests, including Blair, were asked who they thought would win. O'Connor himself acts as an amiable, chummy host. The air of conviviality is, though, offset by his fixed, slightly nervous smile and over-emphatic giggle.

This was Blair's second appearance on the show. His previous visit had been as Leader of the Opposition, when he had promised to return if Labour won the election. (He promised to return for a third time if England or Scotland won the World Cup, and to sing a duet with O'Connor). Indeed, O'Connor introduced Blair as "a politician who keeps his promises," and his entry from off-stage was accompanied by the theme tune to the film *Local Hero*. Both host and guest were in suit and tie, but Blair was the more formal of the two, both in his style and manner (he sat upright rather than sinking into the cushions on the sofa).

O'Connor's line of questioning seemed designed to get at the "human"/"ordinary" side of the experience of being prime minister: what were the pleasures of the job ("meeting exciting people doing exciting things"); what were the highlights (the Northern Ireland agreement — applause from the audience); what were the perks (he hadn't got tickets for the World Cup)? These led on to questions about his "other life" — being a waiter in France, playing and watching football with "the kids," trying his hand at tennis, renting a video, still strumming the guitar (a reference to the fact that Blair played in a group called Ugly Rumours when at Oxford). Then came several anecdotes, which included lines that might well have been pre-scripted. At a civic reception in France, his family was given a horse. "I didn't know," said Blair, "whether to ride it or eat it." Another, longer story was about his "mother-in-law." Was it true, asked O'Connor, that she acted as Blair's political adviser? This led into a story about how, at a visit to the home of the Spanish Prime Minister, when Blair was absent for the first three days because of the Northern Ireland talks, his mother-in-law sorted out the political business that Blair was meant to have dealt with. Though the "mother-in-law" stereotype framed the tale (O'Connor: do you take her on holiday "occasionally"? Blair: "no always, its obligatory"), it was also an opportunity to assert more formal notions of family closeness. A final anecdote recounted how he had to tell the Queen that he couldn't take her phone call (he was on a plane and had to switch off his mobile). The conversation ended back at football, and Blair's empathy for Glenn Hoddle, the England football coach — a tough job, taking tough decisions which will always be criticised.

O'Connor's treatment of Tony Blair was not significantly different from the way he treated his other main guest. Elton John was asked about being Chairman of Watford

FC, rather than about his music; he was asked who would win the World Cup. Elton John was, though, a more relaxed interviewee, more attuned to the casual informality of the chat show, less worried about the possible repercussions of his utterances.

In reading Blair's performance, it seems evident that he deployed the kind of devices that Hart (1999) characterises as generically specific to television (the anecdote, the confession etc), but that these were being used to develop a particular, pre-planned agenda. Television might configure the mode of address, but it did not set the political agenda. Blair was using the event to convey a number of messages, each intended to enhance or promote his political image, to "brand" him. And it was about *him*, Tony Blair, rather than his party — Labour was not mentioned at all. One message was about his achievements, notably the Northern Ireland agreement, which appeared several times in different guises. Another was about the demands and importance of his job, revealed in his remarks about Glenn Hoddle and his anecdote about the Queen. A third message was about him as an ordinary, dutiful family man: doing regular things with his children, going on family holidays. And finally, there was a message about him as a personality. The jokes evoked an air of mild, carefully contained mischievousness, teasing ever so gently the conventions of proper behaviour or respectability (at least as they are thought to apply to the politically correct politician). These messages were not simply contained in the oral text but in the tones of voice, postures and facial expressions ("thanks" muttered through clenched teeth when O'Connor notes that he looks older after a year in office). Blair can, therefore, be seen to have used the opportunities provided by the chat show to reinforce messages and images that are part of his political project.

At the same time, the format of the show, and the actions of the performers, sets in motion other meanings and images. The chat show defines itself against other conversational televisual modes. It deliberately eschews the combative, confrontational mode of the standard political interview, which *de facto* allows politicians to deliver and defend their established theme or message, and in which the interviewer implicitly takes on the guise of the political opposition or the citizenry (Harris 1991). The chat show also defines itself against the confessional or revelatory mode of interview. In its political guise, this style seeks merely to explore, rather than challenge, the logic and implications of a given political position. In Britain, this interview mode was most closely associated with the ex-politician Brian Walden; in its non-political guise, it takes the form of psycho-therapy (and one of its practitioners, Anthony Clare, is himself a psychiatrist). These are extended sessions of one-to-one interview in which particular themes or issues are explored at length. Each format defines itself against the other, and establishes particular roles and expectations for audience, interviewer and interviewee. The chat show adopts the conventions of conversation, rather than interrogation or therapy; the interviewer takes on the role of a populist friend ("what everyone wants to know is ..."), and provides a sympathetic and encouraging response to answers (at odds, say, with the scepticism of the political interviewer). The chat show encourages informality, and in this sense seems more revealing. The audience is not addressed directly, but looks, as it were throughout the keyhole, it eavesdrops on the conversation (Atkinson 1984, 171). And the tone of voice, the trajectory of the discussion, is pitched to fit into a domestic setting.

There is, though, a further dimension to this exchange and the judgements it encourages. What is most distinctive about the chat show (compared to most — but not all — political exchanges) is the presence of the audience. Their chorus-like commen-

tary, although orchestrated from the studio floor, provides a set of reactions and responses, which other forms of interview do not and which are only partially controlled by the two leading protagonists.

Blair's asides and jokes, his choice of accent and manner, all mediated partly by the studio audience's reaction, are also de-coded by the audience at home. As Paddy Scannell (1991, 3) has noted in his discussion of "broadcast talk," "the broadcasters, while they control the discourse, do not control the communicative event." In front of a studio audience, however careful primed and presented, this element of control is further qualified. Where a politician is involved, continues Scannell (1991, 8), "audiences make inferences about the character and competence of their elected representatives ... on the basis of common-sense evaluations of their performances." And, suggests Andrew Tolson (1991, 178), the chat show, because it breaches the traditional protocols of the interview, "presumes an increasing sophistication on the part of the television audience." Where the politician is taking part in a chat show, the "performance" is measured by different criteria, but it is assessed nonetheless. Blair's credibility as a "lad" is tested by his knowledge of the "appropriateness" of comparing the footballers Michael Owen and Teddy Sheringham, just as his remarks about family life are tested for their resonance with the daily routines of the audience. Blair's uses of colloquial language, of joke telling, of mimicry, all are part of the conventions of conversation. And as with any such conversation, the speaker is constructing an identity for themselves, in part deliberately, in part by default. However, stage-managed, the chat show format provides a different way of judging the politician, a way of measuring the extent to which they "fit" into the home from which they are being watched. Does she seem like one of us? Does he *represent* us? Clearly, proper analysis of these revelations, or rather what is revealed, is beyond the scope of this paper, and should, in any case, be addressed by empirical investigation. The point is that the chat show represents, like the Labour video, a form of political communication. But by the same token, the question of whether this communication is justly to be identified as a sign of "dumbing down," as designed merely, in Marquand's words, to "flatter the emotions," or whether it propagates Hart's cynicism, these questions cannot be answered by mere assertion. They too depend on closer scrutiny of the texts concerned and of the reactions they induce.

## Conclusion

This paper began by drawing attention to the presence of popular cultural styles and icons in politics. It also set out some of the trends that help explain this development. These led into the debate that frames developments in the presence of popular culture in politics and its consequences for democracy. In trying to advance this debate further, the last section has looked in detail at two particular examples of the linking of politics with popular culture. What they reveal is, I think, consistent with other points made in the paper: that we need to be wary of exaggerating the changes taking place. Not only are there precedents for the present condition of political communication, and insofar they are new, they are part of wider, more general change. They are not peculiar to politics, nor are they simply a consequence of the technology. Put another way, popular culture has been incorporated into the armoury of parties and politicians, and is used instrumentally to further particular political goals. But this rather dull conclusion does disguise a more interesting implication.

This implication is that the scope of political analysis, the way in which political thoughts and actions are symbolised and represented needs to draw upon literatures and forums that lie outside the formal bounds of political science. The experience and pleasure of popular culture derives from engagement with it, and, as Simon Frith (1996) has argued, this engagement is not simply one of populist celebration but of aesthetic judgement. More importantly, the aesthetics of judgement are themselves ethical. Responses to Blair's performance on Des O'Connor or to Labour's video entail judgements in which the aesthetic, the ethical and the political are entwined. We cannot watch Blair without judging him. We may judge him first as a chat show performer (how relaxed he appears, how well he tells the anecdotes), but we are also judging the stories he tells and the attitudes he strikes. These latter judgements determine whether we laugh at or with him.

This process of judgement means distinguishing between the popular cultural formats being employed, and between the skills of those who use them. "Populism" — and its capacity to flatter emotions — is not a fact of popular culture, any more than it is of political rhetoric. Instead, the engagement with popular culture calls into play, for its audience (its citizens), the judgements that are always a product of engagement with popular culture, just as it tests the skills and imagination of the authors of the political communication. Caught in popular culture's embrace, political communication finds itself playing with one of popular culture's most practised modes — irony. The distancing effect of irony, the questions it poses for authenticity and integrity, creates new problems for politicians schooled in the conventions of democratic authenticity. The chat show, as Tolson (1991, 178) observes, has an ambivalence inscribed in it; it is designed "both to inform and to entertain; to appear serious and sincere, but also playful and even flippant." These ambiguities, and the ironic reaction they evoke, can have damaging political consequences, it can make serious matters seem trivial, but it may have positive democratic consequences. As the poet Simon Armitage (1998, 154) recently observed: "Cynicism can help, but in the end, only irony can save us from becoming the people they want us to be." Political communications without a sense of irony risk failing to reach its audience, and if it does reach them of meeting resistance: popular communications that are devoid of irony become propaganda, pacifying rather than engaging their audience. On the other hand, trying to build irony into political communication means trusting the audience and losing control of the process. These are, I would suggest, the inevitable problems (from the point of view of the party and the politician) of engaging politics with popular culture, but they are also the sites for a better understanding of how contemporary political communication operates. To recall the response to Tony Blair's baby. The publicity that Leo's birth attracted spoke of Blair's celebrity status, but it also set in motion other ideas and arguments, all of which resonate political, and whose resonances Blair himself is powerless to command.

### Acknowledgements:

This paper was first presented at the "Popular Wisdom in the Perception of Politics" panel, International Society of Political Psychology, Amsterdam, 18-21 July 1999. My thanks to all those who commented on this paper, and especially Liesbet Van Zoonen.

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