

*Spinning to destruction:
why Alastair Campbell
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for the end of human
civilisation.*

Lindsay Camp

I wrote this piece a few years ago, when Alastair Campbell and his boss loomed much larger in our national consciousness than they do today.

But I'd suggest the main argument advanced here - that a pervasive culture of spin has made it virtually impossible for mainstream politicians to win the trust of voters - has clearly been borne out by more recent disastrous events.

How else can we explain either Trump or Brexit? If all politicians are always lying, what does it matter if one of them claims that Mexico will pay for a wall? Or that £350m a week saved from the EU will go into the NHS?

Spinning to destruction: why Alastair Campbell may well be to blame for the end of human civilisation.

I'm serious, actually. I genuinely believe that the culture of spin - for which no individual is more responsible than Tony Blair's former communications director and arch accomplice - fatally weakens our political system, thereby endangering us all. But we'll come back to the grandiose theses and crazy-sounding claims a bit later; first, I think we need to define our terms.

So, what exactly is this thing we call spin? To answer that, let's look at a recurring news story; one that crops up every summer and which, like all parents, I'm interested in. This year, the nation's 18 year olds did very well in their A levels. In fact, according to the newspapers, their results were the best there have ever been. So far, everything I've said is factually true. But now, what interpretation shall we put on this story? Here are five possibilities:

1. Today's teenagers are harder working and more highly motivated than their predecessors.

2. Today's teenagers are a feckless, work-shy rabble, but A levels are much easier than they used to be; a cynical ploy to make the government's efforts to raise standards appear successful.

3. Today's teachers are harder working and more professionally competent than their predecessors - thanks to the government's efforts to raise standards.

4. Today's teachers are harder working and more professionally competent than their predecessors - despite the government's "efforts to raise standards".

5. The examiners marking this year's A levels were all on ecstasy at the time, and consequently suffused with a sense of warmth, well-being and good will towards their fellow creatures.

Which interpretation do you prefer? They all represent perfectly tenable points of views (except maybe the last one). But, in all probability, you will think that at least one or two of them are an outrageous distortion of reality. In fact, you may well feel that anyone who expected you to believe that particular interpretation was treating you like an idiot.

And that, I'd suggest, is all that we actually mean by spin: an unsuccessful attempt to persuade others to “buy” a particular interpretation of a story, resulting from a disastrous failure to understand their feelings or respect their intelligence.

Important to note, before going any further, that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with putting an interpretation on a set of facts or events. We all do it all the time. And, in this case, I'd say the emergent New Labour was entirely justified, back in the mid-90s, in believing that it was an urgent necessity to ensure its own version of any important story in the news was heard by the electorate - in the face of concerted efforts by the right wing press to ignore or misrepresent its views.

But oh dear, since then, it's all spun so horribly out of control. In a nutshell, the positive interpretation has come to be seen as more important than the underlying story. Remember Mr Blair's heart-breaking plea for more "eye-catching initiatives with which I can be personally associated"? That was in 2000, just three years after New Labour had come to power in a blizzard of public good will, and with an enormous electoral mandate for change. But already, all that really mattered was how things looked; the positive impressions and warm fuzzy feelings that

master communicators such as AC could conjure up around actions and policies designed primarily to facilitate that process.

Among professional New Labour politicians it quickly became axiomatic that spin counted for more than substance. Being "on message" at all times - mindlessly parroting the high command's approved gloss on any story, regardless of how implausible or stupid it might sound - came to be seen as the single most highly valued quality for anyone serious about career advancement. A junior minister, under cross-examination by a Paxman or a Humphreys, would prefer to be tied in complicated knots and verbally eviscerated than give an answer that departed by as much as a couple of microns from the party line. Not making a mistake of the kind likely to incur the wrath of Tony and his scary henchman Alastair became a priority higher, by a factor of several thousand, than saying something honest, relevant and interesting to the voting public at large.

Spin worked! At least, that's what the rest of the political world concluded, as Labour romped to successive election victories. And very soon, politicians of all persuasions were at it - taking innocent facts, statistics or events, and brutally forcing totally inappropriate meanings onto them.

To reject this new orthodoxy in effective political communication meant to mark yourself out as a maverick outsider, a Tony Benn, a Dennis Skinner or an Anne Widdecombe. Talking candidly in public about complex issues, in a way that treated the voting public as intelligent adults, came to be seen as the second most compromising form of behaviour in which a politician could be caught indulging (seeking casual encounters with members of one's own sex on Clapham Common narrowly holding onto first place).

And then, of course, came spin's finest hour: a needless and illegal war that killed hundreds of thousands. Yes, I suppose we could argue over whether Iraq should be chalked up to spin or old-fashioned lying (though my argument would be that, like Orwell's men and pigs, the two had by this time become indistinguishable). But what is indisputable is that the dossier containing the evidence of Iraq's WMD programme, presented to Parliament and the British people as the justification for war, was extensively and lengthily rewritten by Labour spin doctors, including Alastair Campbell, who personally made three significant changes to its content.

Just stop and think about that for a moment: an unelected political appointee, whose only professional expertise was in persuasive communication, let loose

on a document on which the most serious decision an elected government can take - whether to go to war - was entirely dependent. How could that possibly have been allowed to happen? Quite easily, actually, in a world where "success through spin" had become the unchallenged political orthodoxy.

And so dozens of Labour back-benchers allowed themselves to be talked into voting for war. Did they really believe that the evidence the dossier contained was, as Tony Blair claimed, "extensive, detailed and authoritative"? Maybe a few really were that stupid. But most, I'd be prepared to stake my children's lives, simply believed in spin. They knew it was what had turned New Labour into the natural party of government. They knew it was how business was routinely conducted by Blair and his sofa cronies. They knew that if they were to pull the rug from under it, they themselves would go flying and land heavily on their backsides: they were New Labour, New Labour was spin; without it, they were nothing.

And so we joined in George Bush Junior's war; the one, remember, which he and his own spin doctors, more brilliant even than the great AC, sold to the American people by somehow convincing a majority of the population that Iraq had been responsible for 9/11.

But, at the risk of minimising the suffering of the Iraqi people and the families of the soldiers who have died there, I think the war may not have been the most appalling consequence of the triumph of spin. That, I'm afraid, is the destruction of trust in our political system, and what may follow from it.

I'm not suggesting, of course, that mistrust of politicians is something entirely new; but I am convinced that the degree of mistrust, the pervasive, corrosive, and near-universal belief that politicians are "only in it for themselves", constitutionally incapable of giving a straight answer, driven by an agenda entirely opaque to ordinary people, has only taken such a powerful hold on our consciousness over the last 10 years or so, the period of spin's unquestioned ascendancy. Far more systematically and intensively than in any earlier era, our political class has treated us like idiots - and, as a direct result, we've come to resent and mistrust them more powerfully than ever before . . . just exactly at the moment in history when we need trusted political leaders more urgently before.

What makes me say that? In two words: global warming. If we seriously believe what virtually every reputable scientist on the planet is telling us - that our species faces ecological catastrophe, pretty soon, unless we radically mend our ways - we're going to

need politicians with the vision, courage and persuasive skills to sell us policies that we're not going to like in the slightest.

Of course, politicians who are addicted to spin would never attempt such a thing. But even if, by some unimaginable sequence of events, a principled and passionate government did come to power firmly committed to telling us uncomfortable truths about our profligate consumerist lifestyles, and to chivvying or coercing us along the road to the necessary vast reductions in our carbon output, we'd pour scorn and derision on their arguments; we'd question their motives; we'd wonder aloud if maybe they all had shares in alternative energy companies. They would be telling us the truth, but we wouldn't believe them: that's what happens when trust is gone.

You think I'm exaggerating the problem? Then consider the recent hoo-ha over the EC's decision to ban conventional incandescent lightbulbs from 2012. In relative terms, it's a very modest step towards reduced carbon emissions; one that's easy to implement, and has almost no downside. It's even possible, in this case, to argue that people will see an almost immediate financial benefit in acting to protect the environment. And yet news of the forthcoming ban was greeted with a cacophony of howls and

squeals of outrage and complaint. How dare politicians dictate to me what I can and can't buy? These new energy-efficient bulbs aren't what they are cracked up to be. The old bulbs give a nicer quality of light. It's all a money-making scam cooked up by evil manufacturers in cahoots with crooked politicians . . .

And now try to imagine a leading politician announcing a really radical new environmental measure of the kind that will certainly be needed if we are ever to make any serious headway in meeting the emissions targets widely agreed to be absolute minimum requirements for preventing catastrophic climate change. Banning second cars, for example; or requiring all cars to be electronically limited to a maximum 60mph; or rationing of flights; or making it illegal to set domestic thermostats over 20C; or fining householders for ineffective insulation . . . or anything at all, in fact, that would have any significant impact on our lifestyles.

It just wouldn't happen, would it? No politician, in any imaginable near future, would be physically capable of opening his or her mouth to give utterance to words that so many voters would be so extremely pissed off to hear.

Without trust, persuasive leadership is impossible. Without persuasive leadership, we won't be able to change the way we live. Without changing the way we live, the temperature will continue to rise . . .

Alastair Campbell? Brilliant communicator; massive Burnley supporter; dedicated charity fund-raiser. Oh yes, and the man who, more than anyone else, has made it near-impossible for us to save the planet for our kids.

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