

Will Blair be counted out?

Labour is increasingly seen as ruthless and squalid. But don't blame Campbell, blame his boss

By William Rees-Mogg - The Times, February 7, 2005

Has the Labour Party now become 'the nasty party'? If so, it is Tony Blair's fault. He has been Prime Minister for nearly eight years, his image has coloured the whole image of his party. If Labour is not trusted, it is because Mr Blair is not trusted.

He has, I think, badly misread the coming general election. He won landslide victories in 1997 and 2001 by his own charm - in those years still a potent weapon - by exploiting the unpopularity of Conservatives and by relying on the disciplined propaganda machine that was built by Alastair Campbell.

He is trying to repeat his successful formula a third time. He has appointed Alastair Campbell as head of election communications, and has authorised an American-style 'attack' campaign against Michael Howard personally. Yet the conditions have changed. For too many of us Tony Blair's charm has worn off. His infectious, youthful grin only reminds too many people of their cumulative feelings of distrust.

The Conservative Party and its supporters are no longer the Conservative Party of 1992, or of the Thatcher or Major years. They are not particularly popular, but they are not particularly hated. It is the Labour Party that has been in power for nearly eight years. It is the Labour Party that has to bear the odium of office.

In 1997 Alastair Campbell was only a communications apparatchik, a little-known, but highly competent professional. The Hutton inquiry simultaneously made him famous and hated. He was seen as an obsessive bully - ask Greg Dyke - and as a manipulator of the case for war. To appoint him as head of election communications is as clear a signal as running up the skull and crossbones on a pirate ship. Labour has decided on a dirty campaign.

Obviously, there is a price to pay in reputation, not so much for Alastair Campbell as for Tony Blair. He has, after all, traded on his image as a

'pretty decent sort of a guy'. If one wishes to maintain a 'nice guy' image one cannot set a scowling cutthroat to attack one's enemies.

Mr Blair is not a particularly nice guy; he is a professional politician, perhaps less truthful than most, who has decided to get his closest ally to do his dirty work for him. He wants the dirty work to be done.

The strategy itself is flawed; the guns are pointing in the wrong direction. At present most polls point to a very comfortable Labour victory, something like 38% for Labour, 33% for the Conservatives and 21% for the Liberal Democrats. That gives Labour a 5% lead, large enough for a majority of about 100 seats.

It is the campaign that Labour has to fear. In 1997 Labour started the campaign with a lead in the polls of 24% over the Conservatives; it won with a lead of only 12.5%. In 2001 Labour started the campaign with a lead of 16%; it won with a lead of only 9%. Nobody commented much on these figures, because at each election the Labour majority in seats was so large.

Nevertheless, both campaigns showed big swings away from Labour. The falls in Labour lead averaged 9%. Such falls made little difference in terms of seats, because Labour had started from a polling lead well into double figures. Now, however, the Labour lead in the polls is only 5%. If you deduct 9 from a Labour lead of 5, you get a Conservative lead of 4%.

In both of the past two general elections the fall in the Labour lead can be accounted for by two factors: unexpectedly low turnout and gains by Lib Dems. In 1997 turnout fell by 6% on the previous election; in 2001 it fell by a further 12%. Recent research by Communicate Research suggests that each 10% fall in turnout might now be equivalent to a 2% fall in the Labour lead.

The other factor is the rise in Lib Dem support during the campaign. This happened both in 1997 and 2001, by 6% in the first election and 5% in the second. The publicity in the campaign usually increases the Lib Dem vote; in 2005 this effect is likely to be enhanced by resentment over the Iraq war.

If one adjusts current opinion polls to anticipate similar movements of opinion during the next election campaign, one gets very worrying figures for Labour. The outcome would be Conservatives 33% Labour 29%, Liberal Democrats 27%.

In the past election a quarter of voters said that they had made up their minds in the last week of the campaign. These figures are, therefore, entirely possible. They would produce a swing of 6.5% to the Conservatives and of more than 10% to the Lib Dems. That would probably produce a Labour overall majority of around zero or possibly below.

This means that the election campaign, from Labour's point of view, has two central issues, turnout and the Lib Dems. The Conservatives will almost certainly win about a third of the electorate; that was their result in both 1997 and 2001 and it is what the polls are saying now.

If turnout is no higher than in 2001, and if the Lib Dems get their usual campaign gain, Labour's overall majority will be largely or wholly dissolved. If I can work this out, so can Labour; that may explain the panic in their campaign.

Yet, if this is right, Alastair Campbell's campaign will be a disaster. It will not raise the turnout; on the contrary it may turn voters away from a party they see as ruthless and squalid. If offers no reason to support Labour rather than the Lib Dems., Its message is that Labour and the Conservatives are both nasty parties; that is surly a Lib Dem message. Alastair Campbell was an architect of two great Labour victories; perhaps he will now be the architect of a much more unexpected defeat.

But do not blame Campbell, blame Blair.