



Permission to engage?

Paul Richards

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FACING THE FINAL CURTAIN

Imagine the opening night of a new play. The curtain rises, the drama unfolds. It starts well enough – the audience laugh and applaud in the right places and the actors remember their lines. Then, somewhere in the second act, things start to go wrong. The audience begin to fidget, then catcall, then leave the theatre. By the interval, only the actors, stage hands and a small band of critics remain. The circle and stalls are empty. That's politics in Britain today. The show goes on, but most of the audience have gone home.

This essay seeks to challenge the assumptions underlying most communications and campaigns in modern British politics, to explain why they are contributing to the collapse of trust in traditional politics, and to offer a new way of thinking about political communications: 'permission campaigning'.

THE REVERSAL OF THE REFORM ACTS

There is little point rehearsing the dismal figures for British election turnouts in recent years. Anyone keeping even half an eye on politics knows that election turnouts are falling to crisis levels. We know it's bad, and we know it's getting worse. In 2001, just 59 per cent of people voted; more people didn't vote than voted Labour. Five million fewer people voted than in 1997. Only 39 per cent of 18-24 year olds voted.

But of course the national average masks constituencies – mostly inner-cities where people have the most problems for politicians to solve – where the turnout was much lower.

For example the five lowest turnouts in England in 2001 were:

Liverpool Riverside	34.1%
Manchester central	39.1%
Salford	41.6%
Leeds central	41.7%
Manchester Gorton	42.7%

The five lowest turnouts in Wales in 2001 were:

Swansea East	52.3%
Pontypridd	53.4%
Newport East	54.7%
Cynon Valley	55.4%
Swansea West	55.8%

In Scotland, all five of the lowest turnouts, all below 50%, were in Glasgow.

In 2001, the biggest falls in turnouts compared to 1997 were in Regent's Park and North Kensington, Newport East, Cannock Chase, Denton and Reddish, and Liverpool Wavertree. Three of these constituencies are classic urban working class seats in London, Manchester and Liverpool. Newport is a former industrial town based on steelworks, and Cannock Chase, a former mining area, comprises 'gritty little towns'.¹

These geographical disparities are supported by demographic evidence. Sixty-eight per cent of top-income

professionals, in social group AB, voted in 2001, but only 56 per cent of social group C2, and 53 per cent of social group DE. Sixty-eight per cent of people who owned their own homes voted in 2001, but only 52 per cent of those in council or social housing. Fifty-seven per cent of those in full-time work voted in 2001, but only 44 per cent of the unemployed.²

At the Brent East by-election in September 2003, fought against the backdrop of the build-up to the Iraq war, and with intense media attention and 16 candidates standing, the turnout was a mere 36 per cent. With abstentions on this massive scale, no one won the Brent East by-election – all the parties lost.

At the Birmingham Hodge Hill and Leicester South by-elections in July 2004, the turnouts were 37.8 per cent and 41.4 per cent respectively. The Tories claimed to have delivered 300,000 leaflets to the voters of Hodge Hill. With an electorate of just over 50,000, that's six leaflets per voter, from just one of the many parties contesting the seat. Few could have been unaware that an election was taking place; but a majority of voters didn't exercise their vote.

And what about local elections, European elections, and elections for devolved assemblies? The situation is even more desperate.

The European elections fought in June 2004 attracted a turnout of 38.2 per cent, largely helped by postal voting in several areas. This was a triumph compared with the 1999 elections, the turnout for which was a mere 24 per cent. But a voter strike by over 60 per cent of the electorate is nothing to celebrate. For the London Assembly elections on the same day turnout was 37 per cent.

This means that:

- traditional politics is being rejected by the very people
 - the poor urban working class – who need political solutions the most
- the lexicon of politics ('the voters', 'the electorate', etc) is becoming misleading and anachronistic – most people are not potentially voters, they are potentially abstainers

- the working assumption of social-democratic parties that a enfranchised working class would mean progress is undermined to the point of destruction
- the Reform Acts – designed to bring the vote to working people – are being reversed: politics in Britain is becoming once again a minority pursuit conducted by the educated, wealthy, propertied classes

VOTER DISENGAGEMENT

It is hard to discern definite reasons why people are not voting. As usual with political science, there are disparate forces at work. Some blame the erosion of powers from local government and the nation state, the rise of unaccountable multi-national power, and the alienation of local communities caused by globalisation. Others blame the convergence of political identity and ideology towards the centre ground, so that people think 'they're all the same'.

This is mirrored, and some would argue partially caused, by the long-term trend of voter re-alignment (or more properly de-alignment) following shifts in class identity with its accompanied breakdown of voting according to familial, class, or geographical circumstance. This same phenomenon has magnified the numbers of floating voters and established what we now think of, in electoral terms, as middle England.

There is a cynicism about the efficacy of political systems in a society conditioned to want instant gratification and results. This is not aided by the trivialisation and simplification of politics by large sections of the media. We should ask whether soundbite culture is the fault of the politicians who make the soundbites, or the media producers who stipulate how long they have on air. Others point the finger at the behaviour of politicians themselves.

Some argue that it was the predictability of the result in 1997 and 2001 which depressed turnout, and that a knife-edge contest would encourage more people to play their part. However, the Brent East by-election was deemed a close run thing before the result, and turnout was still only 36 per cent.

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Powerlessness, cynicism, disgust, boredom: these may all be factors which help us explain the downward trajectory of UK election turnouts.

This paper seeks to identify and analyse a further factor: the manner in which political parties conduct their campaigning and communications, with both their members and with the wider electorate, which I will argue exacerbates the process of voter turn-off.

MAY I INTERRUPT?

Let us consider the environment in which political communications is conducted. Political communications occupies a small corner of the welter of advertising and marketing communications which pollutes our senses and invades our thoughts every minute of every day. In 1980, we might expect to receive on average 300 commercial messages (TV adverts, flyers, posters, etc) a week. By 2000, we were receiving 3,000 commercial messages a week.³ Today, with the explosion of the internet and mobile phone technology, the cacophony is even louder.

An individual citizen is bombarded with every kind of attempt to plant messages in their brain: media advertising, direct mail, telephone sales, emails, pop-ups, sponsorship, door to door sales, text messages, and so on. Just consider how many different kinds of marketing you encounter from your bedroom to your workplace on an average morning. Turn on the radio or TV, open a newspaper or magazine, open your post, step over your doormat, walk down the street, use public transport, enter your office, turn on your PC, talk to your colleagues – by 10am you've been subjected to hundreds of attempts to change your attitudes or behaviour.

For the vast majority of people, politics is a tiny part of this persistent clamour, and not a welcome one.

For many people, a party canvasser knocking on the door is not considered a welcome opportunity to find out more about a party's policies: it is an interruption. Campaign newsletters join the bulging pile of take-away flyers and free newspapers, to be glanced at and binned. Telephone canvassing comes alongside double-glazing sales calls. Parties' street stalls compete with tabard-wearing charity fundraisers. Party activists are not creating 'lifetime customers': if they are lucky, they may find someone willing to participate in a one-off transaction.

Political communications, which were once part of many people's lives, have become an intrusion into their lives. Modern political campaigning is mostly about interrupting people – and who likes to be interrupted?

Within living memory, it is possible to recall the days when the political canvasser, with a brightly coloured rosette, megaphone, and stack of leaflets was part of the rhythm of community life. Up until the 1960s, in most working class neighbourhoods, a knock on the door might have meant the rent collector, the insurance man, the coal man, the butcher's boy, a door-to-door salesman, or most likely a neighbour coming round for a chat. Election campaigns, like Bank Holidays, church parades, scout marches, or the ice-cream van, brought colour into working class districts, and were understood, expected and welcomed.

As society has retreated from the public into the private⁴, and most marketing and sales activity is conducted through media advertising, direct mail, telesales or the internet, one of the few door-to-door activities left is political canvassing. Party canvassers are left alone in the street, like museum animatronics depicting a bygone age. A knock on the door in most places no longer heralds a breezy encounter with a neighbour, or the chance to buy a new brush, it means trouble.

Locally, I've noticed the proliferation of home-made signs appearing on front doors: 'no fliers' 'no junk mail' and 'no

free papers'. Britain seems to have put up a giant home-made sign: 'no politics'.

At Labour's Spring Conference 2004, John Prescott held up the most famous fist in politics and called it his 'weapon of mass communication'. He appealed to the party activists to go out campaigning in the June elections. He exemplifies the party's problem. His WMC is in fact a WMI – a weapon of mass interruption. Political canvassers from all the parties could knock on doors from now to the end of time, and it would make very little difference. The potential voters of Britain are not slumbering beauties, waiting to be awoken by a knock on the door from an eager council candidate. It will take more than a leaflet and a cheery candidate's smile to persuade most voters that they should bother to vote.

So traditional political communications is becoming part of the problem, not its solution. Party strategists find it hard to avoid 'going negative' – so people associate national campaigns with mudslinging and playground taunts. Local campaigns are based on knocking on doors, blitzing, street stalls, direct mail, and telephone canvassing – which annoy rather than inspire, and which ultimately become counter-productive.

Political parties of every hue, and especially the Labour Party, have exhausted their right to be given attention by the public. From now on, that right has to be earned.

FROM INTERRUPTION TO PERMISSION

So is there a better way, or should we resign ourselves to US-levels of political participation and politics with a predominantly middle-class accent?

In the United States, with its no-holds barred political advertising culture, colossal party budgets, and glitzy campaigns, turnout has been under half the electorate for presidential elections:

1992	42.9%
1996	49.2%
2000	47.9%

If more noise does not mean more voters, then how can the problem be addressed? There may be some useful lessons from successful companies.

Marketing guru Seth Godin describes what he calls the 'clutter' of modern advertising and the 'attention crisis' of modern consumers in his book *Permission Marketing*.⁵ Godin distinguishes between 'interruption marketing' which is unexpected, unwelcome, and unasked for, and 'permission marketing' which is anticipated, personal and relevant. It can be argued that Godin is not saying anything new: good customer relations has always been central to sales and marketing. A consumer is more likely to shop at the grocers where they remember their name and predict their order, than the one which doesn't. What is significant about Godin's argument is that this basic premise, that relationships are what matter, which drove the town or village economy, can be applied on a global scale. The idea that 'mass' marketing need not be impersonal flies in the face of globalisation.

Successful companies such as American Express, Amazon, or Ocado, the food delivery service from Waitrose, have developed marketing and customer service to the point where they can deal with millions of customers as individuals. They use database technology to track and record the preferences of their customers, so that they can make recommendations, remind them of goods they've forgotten to order, and build up an accurate profile of each customer.

Each of these successful companies has built relationships with their customers, beyond the narrow buyer and seller nexus. They engender a feeling of belonging, being important and special – and they do it for millions of customers. 'Mass' marketing has evolved, using database technology, into 'markets of one.'

If only political parties could achieve this level of relationship with their members and supporters. If the Labour Party had spent half of what it spent on 'Excalibur' (the computer database which stored information about its political opponents) on gathering information about its supporters, it wouldn't be in such trouble today.

If Amazon or American Express ran any of the parties that you and I might belong to, how different things would be. They would plot what activities we enjoy, which

conferences we attend, which books and magazines we read, which pressure groups we belong to, and they would develop a relationship with us over the years. We would happily give our time and money, we would forgive their errors, within reason, and we would stay loyal over the decades. Turning out to vote would be just part of a long-term relationship.

Parties would identify 'levels of permission' for their target audiences. Someone who donates money to a political party also donates a great deal of permission for that party to strike up a relationship. If someone is active in a party, they have consented to be communicated with. An inactive member has given less permission, but is still willing to hear what the party has to say. Then there are party voters – who through their support in the past, have given conditional permission. Beyond these groups are people who may have never voted for the party, but may have points of commonality. Here, political parties must develop methods of seeking 'permission to engage' on ideas and issues. This might be through discussion groups, public meetings, on-line communities, petitions, campaigns, surveys and questionnaires. The relationships engendered through these methods must be nurtured and developed with subtlety, as they can be terminated by the voter at any time.

PERMISSION CAMPAIGNING

So how can parties develop their strategies to win permission? Parties' communications must become more lateral, not horizontal. It means the end of the highly centralized 'war room' campaign headquarters. Instead there will need to be devolved campaigning, responsive to local concerns and issues, with mini-war rooms in different regions.

Instead of the party hierarchy sending messages down the line, from top to bottom, successful parties will develop local word of mouth networks, driven by local advocates and champions who are authentic, respected and trusted. In the US, this means attorneys contact other attorneys, teamsters other teamsters, and veterans other veterans.

In Britain, Labour used to have a system of 'street captains' to provide a point of contact in every locality. In Sweden and elsewhere, a similar system works. The modern party will recapture some of these approaches – and use trusted word of mouth instead of impersonal posters and leaflets.

Permission campaigning will need to develop an alternative to the soapbox and megaphone approach of the past. If properly applied it will transform the ways political parties operate locally, from being mere vote-gathering machines, to being enmeshed in local civil society.

Labour's 'Big Conversation' process in 2003-4 can be seen as an experimental example of permission campaigning – asking people for their views, not preaching or spouting propaganda. Philip Gould, in a presentation to Labour campaign strategists in October 2003 said: "We have to transform campaigning so that the battle for engagement and participation is as important as the battle to defeat the right. The premise is that engagement is the necessary platform for victory."

Once someone has volunteered information about themselves, via an event, survey, or face-to-face meeting, they have also volunteered 'permission'. A political party armed with this permission can develop a relationship, which may lead to voting, donating, or becoming an active member.

The language and tone of political campaigning must become less bombastic and noisy. In essence, permission campaigning means that political communications will become about building a stable relationship based on mutual understanding and trust. One of the best examples of permission campaigning I witnessed was the morning after the 2001 general election in Lewes. The winner's campaign team had eschewed a celebration and instead gone round the constituency fixing poster boards with a simple message to the voters: 'thank you.' At 8am on the Friday morning after polling day, the next election campaign had begun.

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The key features of permission campaigning are:

- it is not focused on election campaigns, it is a year-round process
- it is not focused on merely voting, but on long-term engagement and loyalty
- it is focused on individuals, based on their interests and aspirations, not on the marginality of the constituency where they live
- it becomes lateral, not top-down
- it listens, engages, disagrees, says thank you and says sorry

Those of us taking part in the political drama, as we eat our ice creams in the theatre interval, and wonder where everyone went, are faced with a choice. We could return to our seats and watch the rest of play, pretending the theatre is still full, and hope for a happy ending. Or we can tear up the old script and start afresh. When we write our new play, we must ensure that everyone is given a part.

¹ *The Political Map of Britain* ed. Simon Henig and Lewis Baston 2002

² Source: MORI, quoted in *Explaining Labour's Second Landslide*, Worcester, et al 2001

³ *The Empty Stadium*, presentation by Philip Gould, October 2003

⁴ See for example *Bowling Alone*, Robert D. Puttnam 2000 or *The Fall of Public Man*, Richard Sennett 1986

⁵ *Permission Marketing* Seth Godin 1999

Voter disengagement, particularly among the poor urban working class, is effectively bringing about the reversal of the Reform Acts, Paul Richards argues in this latest essay from the Social Market Foundation. Traditional politics is being rejected by those who need political solutions the most. The reasons are manifold, but the implications have not been grasped by political campaigners. Canvassing is often an unwelcome interruption, and a new approach is needed: permission campaigning. This involves building relationships with party activists, members and voters over time, based on "permission" granted through previous engagement.

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