Poor Emotional Governance

The anti-smirking campaign and other failures

One thing that was new about ‘New’ Labour was arguably the attention paid to the emotional tasks of political leadership, to intuiting the anxieties of the public and seeking to respond to them. This attention entered into policy development as well as communications strategies: ‘New Labour is perhaps the first government genuinely committed to the view that presentation is part of the process of policy formation’ (Franklin, 1998, p. 4). The student who when asked to define ‘emotional labour’ said ‘Tony Blair’ (Smith, 1999) was correct. Some of the emotional attentiveness comes from Blair’s own self. He is the first premier with a social self formed during the Sixties, and so has styles of thought, speech and demeanour which are attuned to the reflexive and emotionalised modes of today. And some comes from the much-criticised practices of communication and image management. Evaluations of these differ, from Left and Right excoriations of the cynicism and anti-democratic nature of ‘spin’ to other more complex and potentially favourable assessments. But beneath these arguments we can see wide acceptance that the political scene is more about emotions and their management than it used to be, and that politicians and their advisors are intensely involved in certain kinds of emotional labour, whereby through new modes of personal presentation they are able to contribute most effectively to the mass-mediated management of public feeling.

Yet in the 2005 election, as in 2001, Labour pulled back from developing its strength in this area. The battle lines in 2005 were drawn around the economy for Labour, and for the Conservatives around immigration. As for the core, general issue of trust, this was
potentially very dangerous for Labour, mainly because of the ‘WMD’ (weapons of mass destruction) problem: the failure to find WMDs in Iraq and the suspicions that the case for invasion had been knowingly inflated. But as things developed, trust was actually a less prominent issue than might have been expected, at least on the surface. However one novel, and at times quirky, strand of the Conservative campaign did attempt to exploit the issue of trust in the PM, and in so doing reached into some dark corners of the electoral psyche.

This strand began with the Conservative poster campaign and its theme of ‘Are you thinking what we’re thinking?’ The appeal here is to an inner state of mind in the individual, which, the slogan implied, the Conservatives knew about, and shared. The slogan offered recognition and validation of this mindset, and so tried to build a sense of spontaneous and psychological connection between the Conservatives and the public. However it fell far short of the requirements for good emotional governance. Posing questions such as ‘How would you feel if a bloke on early release attacked your daughter?’, these posters spoke to the know-all and self-righteous parts of their audiences, and conscripted legitimate concerns (about over-lenient sentencing, hospital hygiene, and so on) into simple attacks on the government. They aimed to flood the reader’s mind with angry resentment, and thereby cancelled the possibility of thinking about the problems of the criminal justice system or health service in more rounded and complex ways.

Moreover, the address to the inner person took a curious turn when the then Conservative leader Michael Howard said on 5 April that the Prime Minister was ‘already secretly grinning’ at the prospect of victory. Here, a claim to knowledge of the PM’s inner mind was used, along with a comment on his outer facial expression – a reference to ‘smirking politics’ – to tap the public distrust of Blair. This moved the trust issue away from the invasion of Iraq, where politically the Conservatives had no clear blue water between the PM and themselves, to a generalised psychological space where alleged states of mind and emotional characteristics are being judged rather than policies or decisions.

The notion of a ‘smirking politics’ is of course a vacuous one. Yet vacuous ideas may have considerable purchase on the public mind. The cinema advertisement offered by the Conservatives suggested they clearly saw value in this anti-smirking campaign: to a musical soundtrack of ‘Take that look off your face’, there were various clips of the PM, most with a characteristic smile or broad grin.