



Public Diplomacy and the Blair Effect

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Theme: Tony Blair has a significant impact on the way Britain and modern Britons are perceived. This, in turn, has important implications for foreign relations, tourism and inward investment.

Summary: In the eight years since his election as Prime Minister, Tony Blair has arguably become as internationally recognisable a British leader as his celebrated predecessors, Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher. To many around the world, Blair is the quintessential modern Briton; a charismatic, professionally successful, family man, Blair is also international statesman and centre-left visionary who, at least according to our television screens, mingles happily with the rich, famous and glamorous. In a series of surveys undertaken by the British Council in 1999 and 2000, Tony Blair topped a list of British celebrities and world figures in terms of name recognition, recognition as British personality, and as a positive British role model. Like other contemporary national ‘icons’, such as the Queen and David Beckham, Blair has a significant impact on the way Britain and modern Britons are perceived. This, in turn, has important implications for foreign relations, tourism and inward investment.

Of course, Tony Blair is not unique in this regard. The globalisation of communications means that national leaders increasingly play a role not just as ‘policymaker-in-chief’ but as ‘cultural ambassador’. When people around the world think of the USA they think of George W. Bush. When they think of Pakistan, they think of Pervez Musharraf. When they think of France, they think of Jacques Chirac. Never before have national leaders had such impact on the way their countries and their peoples are perceived globally. In this context this article briefly examines the extent to which Tony Blair has become a global icon, and seeks to understand the implications this has for Britain, for British public diplomacy, and for other states’ communications and cultural relations strategies. How and why is Tony Blair so well-recognised? Why, and to what extent, is Blair a public diplomacy asset? Can, and should, other national leaders seek to replicate the Blair ‘brand’?

Analysis:

Tony Blair and New Labour 1997-2005

Tony Blair and New Labour’s landslide victory in May 1997 was a turning point in modern British politics. A Labour party which had spent eighteen years out of government, at times wondering if it would ever return to power, had succeeded both in reorganising and ‘re-branding’ itself, and so occupying the centre ground of British politics. Since then ‘New Labour’ has pursued an ambitious domestic agenda including the devolution of power to elected assemblies in Scotland and Wales, the passing of Human Rights legislation, the establishment of an executive London Mayor and significant constitutional reform. Tony Blair’s government has also been unexpectedly active on the international

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stage, involving itself in armed conflicts in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan and Iraq, and, since 2001, playing a major role in the so-called 'War on Terrorism'. More recent high-profile initiatives have included the establishment of a Commission for Africa (2004) and consequent lobbying of the international community on issues of aid, trade and debt relief issues, and the presidencies of the G8 and European Union Council (2005).

Blair's government has had to learn to do all this in an age of unprecedented communication, where 24-hour news broadcasts are available across the world, and where governments have become increasingly conscious of the need both to better manage their own domestic political communications and to expand their international communications initiatives through better public diplomacy and cultural relations. It seems fair to say that in recent years the UK government has demonstrated significant skill at operating in this new communications environment in both the domestic and foreign spheres.

It can be argued, for example, that New Labour under Tony Blair has pioneered a new kind of UK politics in which the communication of the policy at times has become as important as the message itself – a strategy which, depending on the political affiliation of the commentator, has been either derided as dishonest 'spin' or celebrated as evidence of open and consensual government. This strategy, sometimes referred to as 'permanent campaigning', has been a conspicuous characteristic of the Blair government.

UK foreign policy has also changed direction since 1997. The traditional realist approach to international affairs favoured by the likes of Margaret Thatcher and John Major's Conservative governments has been replaced by a policy perhaps best understood as 'enlightened self-interest' (an expression used by former Foreign Secretary Robin Cook). At the same time, just as communications strategy has been a constant consideration in domestic policy, the Blair government has gradually explored foreign policy opportunities and requirements presented by the new global media environment. The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, for example, has taken international strategic communications and public diplomacy seriously, establishing a dedicated Islamic Media Unit, a Foreign Correspondents Unit, and, in a recent strategy document, highlighting the importance of 'global influence' using public diplomacy and communications, as a major strategic priority. At the same time, although public diplomacy organs such as the BBC World Service and British Council have been serving British national interest for generations, they have enjoyed something of a renaissance under the Blair government. Steps have also been taken to refine UK public diplomacy structures, including the creation of a Public Diplomacy Strategy Board (2002) and the establishment of two major reviews, Wilton (2002) and Carter (2005). The Public Diplomacy Strategy Board, for example, has been an interesting initiative, pulling together representatives from government, the media, cultural relation agencies and the national tourist board, as well as independent public diplomacy analysts. The board has sought both to assess and redirect UK public diplomacy strategy according to strategic priorities. It is also the case that during the so-called 'War on Terrorism', media and communications have acquired greater strategic significance, and government policy has adjusted accordingly. For example, during the 2002 war in Afghanistan, on the recommendation of UK government advisers, the US-led Coalition established dedicated Coalition Information Centres to counter efforts by Taliban sources to dominate and influence news agendas. At the same time BBC World Service broadcasts to the Middle East and South-West Asia have increased since 2001.

UK Public Diplomacy and Brand Blair

While it is difficult to gauge the distinct public diplomacy value of a national leader like Tony Blair without extensive surveying and focus groups, it seems self-evident that different leaders or styles of leadership, particularly as projected through the broadcast media, can impact on the perception of that country abroad. This is perhaps best illustrated by the contrast between the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush presidencies.

Tony Blair's own public diplomacy impact is perhaps best understood on two levels – shorter-term *event-driven attitudes* and longer-term *underlying attitudes*– each of which can vary from country to country, and be distinct from the other at different times. Thus an informal survey conducted by the author suggests that while attitudes to Blair can vary in one way –in Russia he is generally perceived as a staunch ally of Russia's rival the USA, in the USA he is perceived as a loyal friend, in France he is seen as a servant of the USA– in all of those countries he is often considered something of a charismatic and determined visionary. In other words, even where the Blair government's actions are disapproved of, Tony Blair himself can still project a positive image of Britain. Blair's premiership contrasts markedly, for example, with that of John Major.

Blair has also shown an unusual willingness to use international media to reach out to foreign audiences –appearing, for example, on both MTV and Al-Jazeera–. This has been a particularly conspicuous strategy since 2001, and should be expected to continue in the aftermath of the July bombings in London. Blair has also demonstrated the utility of major keynote speeches, directed at international audiences, as a means of signalling policy change abroad, itself an important element of contemporary public diplomacy. It may also be the case that Blair's willingness to engage with the media, often in a quasi-presidential manner, has helped him maintain his domestic political standing in the aftermath of the recent bombings in London (particularly in contrast to the experience of former Spanish prime minister, Jose Maria Aznar in March 2004).

As a supplementary point, it is worth acknowledging the role that Cherie, Tony Blair's wife, may be playing as a 'public diplomat'. It can reasonably be argued that Cherie, a distinguished lawyer and mother of four, has joined a long tradition of leaders' wives who themselves act both as public diplomacy asset and unofficial cultural ambassador. Analysts should not underestimate, for example, the historical impact of the likes of Raisa Gorbachev, Nancy Reagan, Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush.

Blair's appeal seems to have been particularly strong in Europe. It is perhaps here that the term 'the Blair Effect' (or *L'effet Blair*) has been most commonly used and understood. Although the term itself may over-hype the reality of Blair's impact on European politics, it rightly acknowledges that he has indeed had some noticeable impact. Following the 1997 election, Blair was greeted by some in Europe as a dynamic centre-left reformer and pioneer of the so-called 'Third Way' (a quasi-philosophy which sought the middle ground between traditional socialism and free market conservatism). Blair has also been a conspicuously pro-European British leader. As such he has been able to forge links with like-minded centre-left leaders such as Gerhard Schröder of Germany and more recently José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero of Spain (whose own political party adopted the term 'The New Way') and has been something of a political trailblazer. European popular attitudes towards Blair, altered though they were by Britain's leading role in the invasion of Iraq, have, with some exceptions such as in France, generally been good. They appear recently to have improved as a consequence of Blair's handling of the crisis which followed the

referendum 'No' votes in France and the Netherlands, and his firm stance on the EU budget and Common Agricultural Policy. As such, even where short-term event-driven attitudes towards Blair have been negative, it appears that underlying attitudes towards Blair the strong, dynamic visionary have persisted. In other words, popular opinion may respect Blair even when it does not respect what he does.

The fact is that Tony Blair's own media appeal, skilled strategic media management, the rise of 24-hour global television news and Britain's unusually high level of international political action (particularly since 2001), have combined to make Blair a almost uniquely visible and recognisable British leader. The fact that he is generally perceived to be relatively young and charismatic and that in many ways he embodies both 'old' and 'new' Britain, means that Blair has himself become a significant public diplomacy asset for the UK.

Conclusion: National leaders seeking to leverage global public opinion in the way Tony Blair seems to have done face something of a struggle. Circumstances have certainly favoured the British Prime Minister. His own telegenic demeanour and charisma have been significant assets. At the same time the UK's close alliance with the USA as part of the 'War on Terrorism' has cast Blair as a leading actor in the dominant global news story of the times; as such, his media profile has been massive. The fact that Tony Blair is British, and therefore a speaker of the world's unofficial *lingua franca*, may also be significant – news editors are more likely to use footage of a speech if they and their viewers can understand it–. The lesson of Blair's experience is a simple one. The political leader who aspires to be a national public diplomacy asset needs both to regularly appear on television screens around the world and to look and sound good when he or she does so. In reality the first of these may be much more difficult to achieve than the second.

A key consideration must, of course, be policy itself. Attitudes towards the USA, for example, as surveyed by the Pew Center have worsened significantly since 2001, apparently as a consequence of US-led military action in Afghanistan and Iraq. Governments need always to remember that in the era of satellite television news their image, and by association that of their country, is as much a function of what they do as what they say. In the case of the USA, negative perceptions may also have been reinforced by the media performances of a president who deliberately reaches out to a conservative domestic constituency and worries less about global public opinion; in this way the global unpopularity of policy can be amplified by a globally unpopular leader.

In recent years much has been made of the extent to which politics in the developed democracies has become 'personality-driven'. If electorates are indeed voting according to how telegenic and charismatic their political candidates are, the lesson of contemporary public diplomacy is that they may be sensible to do so. 'Brand Blair', it seems, is good for Britain.