

SIMON ROBERTS

How the election was won

by Peter Wilby, 2010

After the 1945 General Election, the first in which radio played a role, the Nuffield College election study hailed a transformation of politics. Public meetings, previously the only forum where large numbers of voters could make direct judgments of candidates and party leaders, were sparsely attended and, though it was the first general election in a decade, the electorate's mood had been judged apathetic. But, the Nuffield study pointed out, an average of 45 per cent of the adult population listened to party broadcasts every evening after the nine o'clock news. Astonishing, as it may now seem, these took the form of a single politician making a speech (rather as he or she would on a public platform) for at least twenty minutes and sometimes thirty. While acknowledging that the electorate's role was now more passive – before phone-ins, radio lacked questions and heckling – the Nuffield academics' verdict was largely positive. "The exposition of policy," they wrote, "tends to be more lucid and intellectually able than that delivered from the local platform...the element of mass emotion, which is always liable to arise and sweep through large congregations of people, intensifying their passions and clouding their judgment, is entirely absent."

What was extraordinary about the 2010 General Election campaign was that its central events, the televised leaders' debates, could easily have been on radio in 1945. This was expected to be "the first internet election" because it was the first in which a clear majority of UK households had internet access, rather as a clear majority had TV sets for the first time in the "first television election" of 1959. Moreover, Barack Obama's success in winning the Democratic nomination and then the US presidency in 2008 was attributed partly to his skill at exploiting networking sites. But in Britain, the internet played at best a

supporting role to television. Not only that, but it was very old-fashioned television. Lasting ninety minutes and free not only from filmed sequences or computer graphics or any kind of visual stimulus but also from spontaneous audience intervention, the debates amounted to little more than radio with pictures.

True, it wasn't 1945 in every respect: the modern media will not countenance anybody talking for even two minutes uninterrupted, never mind thirty, and the leaders were restricted to one minute each for their opening statements and initial answers to questions. But the transformation was as great as that of 1945. The debates changed, to an extent none of the parties anticipated, the texture, rhythm and feel of the election. Each week, they became the main focus of press attention. The traditional morning press conferences, previously the centrepieces of national campaigns, almost vanished. Instead, the parties designed their strategies around the weekly debate.

The chief effect was to put the third party leader, Nick Clegg, on an equal footing with the Labour and Conservative leaders. Though the Liberal Democrats usually benefit from the greater exposure of an election campaign, they lack dedicated press supporters, willing to report with as much as partisanship as the Daily Mail does for the Conservatives and the Daily Mirror for Labour, and news editors prefer to present an election as a simple two-sided contest rather like a football match. The TV debates provided Clegg, a recently elected leader whom many voters would have struggled to recognise in the street, with a far higher profile.

The debates, it was said, also allowed voters to make their own judgments on the personalities and trustworthiness of the leaders, watching the twitches of their facial muscles and hearing the nuances in their voices. They need no longer rely on newspapers to tell them who was putting forward the more convincing policies or displaying the most impressive leadership qualities. Their judgment, to echo the Nuffield authors of 1945, was less clouded. That was the theory. In fact, the aftermath of each debate saw other media, old and new, come into their own. If Clegg was declared the 'winner' of the first debate, that was largely through internet polling (there was, after all, no definitive 'score' as in a sporting contest) and the polls, in turn, were influenced by comments, many of them made during the debates on social

networking sites, which some observers compared to old-style heckling at public meetings.

Clegg's 'victory' in the first debate was undoubtedly the campaign's defining moment. The only other memorable incident concerned Gillian Duffy, a Rochdale grandmother, whom Gordon Brown, after an apparently friendly exchange in the street, described to his aides as "bigoted", unaware that his microphone was still live. 'Duffygate' as it was inevitably known, briefly excited the press, demoralised Labour campaigners and distracted Brown from his preparations for the next TV debate. But it apparently had zero effect on the vote. Indeed, in Rochdale itself, Labour recorded an unexpected victory. One-off incidents of this sort – John Prescott's punch in the 2001 campaign was another example – are heavily covered in the media, but quickly fade from the public memory. Where newspapers detect fatal character flaws, voters are unsurprised, and even slightly reassured, to see politicians behaving as authentic human beings. As an issue, Duffygate lacked staying power.

Clegg was different. After his success, both major parties, and particularly the Tories, feared leaking votes to the Lib Dems. Here, the press played its role with a classic campaign of character assassination. Clegg was excoriated for his dubious ancestry – he had foreign blood in him and had even married a Spaniard – his pro-Europe views and his expenses. Guilt by association was ruthlessly deployed: he attended Westminster School when lots of pupils were taking drugs; he worked for a lobbying firm that once represented Colonel Gaddafi and Vladimir Putin. No political party would dare make open use of such smears against an individual. But it can brief its friends in the press and, in this case, newspapers, notably the Daily Mail and The Sun, responded with enthusiasm. Right-wing papers also warned that the apparent surge in Lib Dem support raised the prospect of a hung parliament.

This, they predicted, would be a disaster, giving Britain as feeble a government as Greece's, a country which, all but bankrupt, was then in the throes of civil unrest.

For The Sun, the stakes were particularly high. It is part of its brand image that, since Rupert Murdoch took control, it has never backed a general election loser. It cheered Margaret Thatcher throughout her leadership, transferred its allegiance to John Major for the 1992 election

(prompting the famous headline, after Major's unexpected victory, that it was "The Sun wot won it") and then, a few months before the 1997 election, switched to New Labour. Most pollsters and academics agree that newspapers' direct influence on voting habits is slight, and that if the party The Sun supports invariably wins the election, this is mainly because Murdoch and his editors are smart at sniffing the public mood and picking winners. But that is an oversimplification. Readers may not vote as newspapers tell them, but the press continues to set the agenda, which is followed by TV, radio and internet bloggers. Crucially, politicians also follow the press agenda: think of how often Tony Blair dreamt up 'policy initiatives' in response to newspaper outcries about rising crime or falling educational standards. As long as politicians think newspapers are important, they really are important.

Several months before the 2010 election – neatly timing its announcement to coincide with Labour's annual conference – The Sun transferred its loyalties. This time, despite Murdoch's doubts (as a populist, he is suspicious of Cameron's privileged background), the paper's senior editors persuaded him they should back the Tories. Murdoch had already made the wrong call in the US election, plumping for John McCain rather than Obama. It was unthinkable that he should be on the losing side a second time, puncturing the myth that any successful politician needs Murdoch's support and cannot afford to ignore him, still less offend him. As Tom Newton Dunn, The Sun's Old Etonian political editor, reportedly told colleagues: "It is my job to see that Cameron f*****g well gets into Downing Street."

He did, but only just. Lib Dem support, which seemed at one stage to match that of the two main parties, melted away. There were several likely reasons. First, the support may never have existed in the first place: when people told pollsters they intended to vote Lib Dem, they may really have been passing a verdict on who won the first TV debate. Second, Lib Dem support was disproportionately among young people, many of whom didn't vote and probably never intended to. Third, the Lib Dems, having at first benefited from a higher profile, later suffered from closer scrutiny of their leader and their policies, particularly on immigration. Fourth, press warnings about a hung parliament, echoed in TV and radio discussion, may have had a perverse effect. Many voters concluded, logically enough, that, if they wished to avoid weak government, they should support one of the two bigger parties. The Labour vote therefore strengthened as polling day neared. In the end,

the UK had a hung parliament, not because the Lib Dems did well, but because Labour and Conservatives were closer than anybody expected.

Far from being the internet election, then, this was one in which older media, TV and newspapers, played a more significant role. This is not to deny the importance of the internet, particularly in its use by the parties to keep active supporters connected to the campaign at large. As the Hansard Society observed in a post-election report, the internet “is an increasingly important component of the political process” but it is not yet – and perhaps never will be – “a game changing technology.” The Obama comparison is misleading. He used the internet to raise campaign funds – which he then spent on TV advertising.

If the 2010 General Election belonged to anything, according to the authors of the latest Nuffield study, it belonged to a medium that dates back at least 350 years: the postal service. All parties used direct mail more than ever before and, for Labour, it accounted for three-quarters of its central spending. Drawing on marketing databases, the parties targeted ‘swing voters’ in marginal seats in the same way that commercial companies target likely customers. The letters voters received were personalised, with a high degree of precision, according to age, occupation, education, cultural interests, buying habits and even health. Though a Labour letter sent to voters who might be suffering (or feared they might be suffering) from cancer caused a brief flurry of press indignation, direct mail went almost entirely unnoticed by other media. Yet very probably, it did more to influence the final outcome of the election than even the TV debates. Perhaps email or social networking can one day perform the same function but, for now, marketing experts judge that voters are more likely to open and read letters.

The lesson is that we should never write off old media, not even those we scarcely think of as media at all. The public election meeting is almost extinct, yet the enthusiasm for live concerts, festivals, book readings and debates, shows that, despite the growth of digital media, the opportunity to see, hear and meet famous people in the flesh still attracts large numbers. Billboard posters, too, have largely gone out of fashion, partly because hostile websites can re-design them to make satirical points, as happened to Conservative posters, the only ones put out in large numbers, in 2010. But many party workers regret their loss,

partly because they reach people who normally pay no attention to politics, partly because nobody has yet invented a better way of persuading party leaders to define their core messages and boil them down to a few simple words. Even canvassing, apparently in terminal decline because active party memberships have dwindled, could still make a comeback. Any candidate knows that one successful personal contact – with its word-of-mouth offshoots – is worth a thousand mentions in the local paper.

A General Election is the moment when we remember that, however powerless we feel between elections, we still have the power to throw governments out. Political leaders must abandon their air-conditioned, chauffeur-driven cars, their international conferences, their plushly carpeted offices, their power over our lives and become, for just a few weeks, humble supplicants to even the most humble citizens. Modern media provide many new and more sophisticated means of reaching voters. But they are merely elaborations of the oldest, simplest form of campaigning: a man or woman on a street corner, begging for our support.