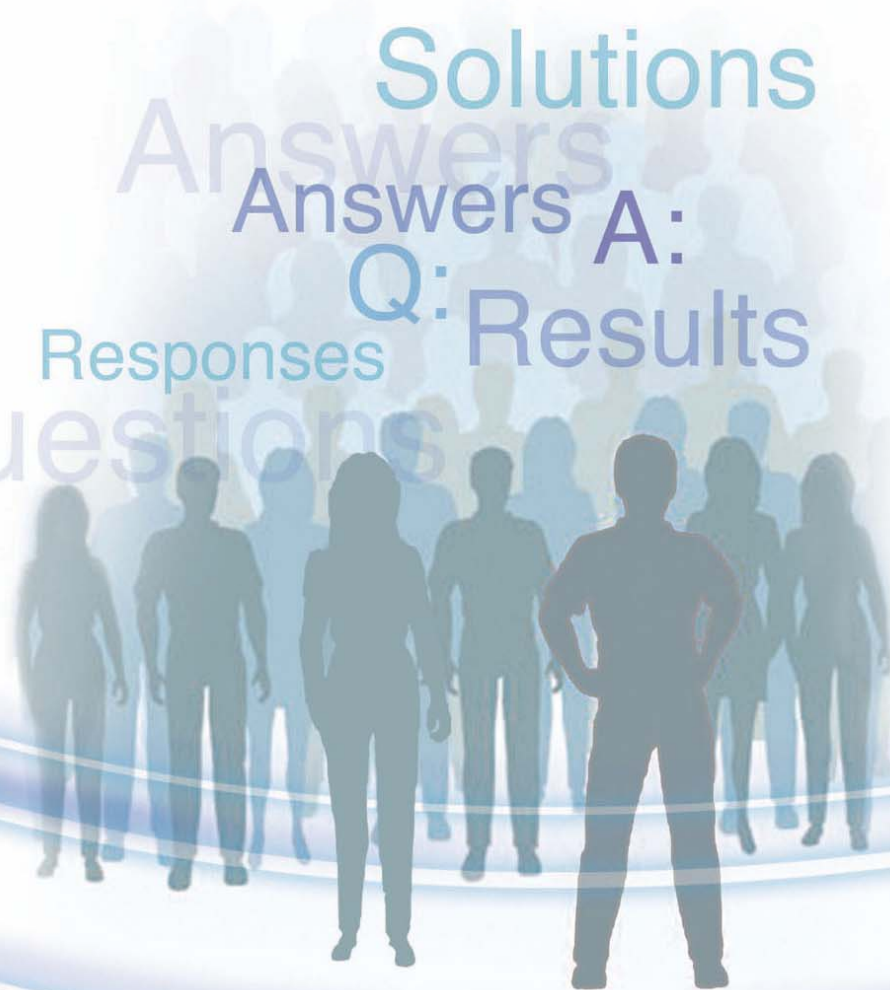


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**The four messages in British
Politics**

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There are only four messages that make a significant difference to the outcome of general elections, "let us finish what we started", "don't let them ruin it", "their policies won't work" and "time for a change". The outcomes of most post-war elections have hinged on the impact these four statements (or combinations and variations thereof) have made.

It is never too soon for the political parties to prepare for the next general election. Within days of the Conservative 1992 general election victory, Maurice Saatchi circulated a memo to party strategists entitled 'How To Win The Next Election'. Similarly, soon after Labour's 1997 election victory, Philip Gould began brainstorming sessions with Number Ten staff about winning the second term. Both main parties should have already looked forward to the next election in 2005 and chosen their main message.

A message's particular gloss depends on the length of time the governing party has been in office. After one term, incumbent parties have most usually asked for more time to finish the job as Labour did in 2001 and the Conservatives before them in 1983. Opposition parties have been largely limited to the message that the government's policies are not working, as the Tories did most effectively in 1979 and tried less effectively in 2001. Usually the opposition front bench still contains many ex ministers, re-enforcing the message that there is an experienced alternative.

"Let us finish the job" becomes less usable after a second or third term. Increasingly the government is judged on its record rather than its plans for the future. In any event, it is usually a risk for government to campaign on its record, given the fickle mood of voters. The governing party therefore is increasingly driven to find ways to deflect voter dissatisfaction and to rebut the rival's message of change. Ex-ministers start to melt away from the opposition front bench, enabling the incumbent to claim that the opposition lacks experience and will ruin things if allowed into government. In both 1987 and 1992 the Conservatives ran brilliant negative campaigns suggesting Labour was not to be trusted (on tax and leadership).

But new faces on the opposition front bench give more credibility to the message "time for a change to something new". At the same time voters generally fail to accept government claims that promises are being fulfilled. Meanwhile necessary compromises, U-turns and unforeseen events conspire to confuse voters and contradict the government's assertions that they are firmly in control and still have a clear agenda. The Government becomes ever more fretful that progress is not fast enough or that the press and public don't appreciate their efforts. Slowly the feeling grows of drift and muddle. Time for a change should slowly acquire resonance.

If the Tories recognise that "time for a change" will be their best hope of unseating Labour next time, how can they make that message stick with voters? It obviously requires that voters will become disillusioned with Labour and enthusiastic about the Conservatives. One without the other will not work. But, as any good salesman will tell them, reasons to be dissatisfied with Labour are best communicated by outside observers. As much as many Tory politicians want to bang on about Labour's many failings, and count it as their job to do so, such criticism is a gift to Labour. Labour can confuse voters over the arguments involved, criticise the opposition's own record on the same or related issues and point out that the opposition has a vested interest in doing the government down. Confused voters turn away muttering that they are all as bad as one another. This explains Labour's fury with the media, for it is the media themselves who will most credibly communicate the message that Labour is not to be trusted.

So how might the Conservatives position themselves to benefit from growing dissatisfaction with Labour? After 1992 Labour could not have foreseen the mess the Tories would get themselves into, nor played any meaningful part in orchestrating it. But Labour, like other successful opposition parties, focused on the things they needed to change about themselves to make the message resonate with voters. The key election message was identified and applied with ruthless consistency. Blair thus reinvented his party as 'new', as Harold Wilson had done before him in 1964 and R.A. Butler and Harold Macmillan had done for the Tories after 1945. Labour failed in 1987 and 1992 because, even though voters had begun to lose trust in the Conservatives, old Labour seemed an unattractive alternative.

The Conservatives have to communicate the message that the party is changing to something new in a modern media environment to voters who are bored by politics listen to politicians with only half an ear. Successfully communicating the message of change means not only changing policies and priorities but also building a consistent new image for a modern Conservative brand. Only by making sure that the whole package conveys the message that the Conservative party has changed and has something new to offer, and repeating the key message over and over, will voters even begin to notice. This means changing the way leading Conservatives talk, their body language and even the way they dress. Dominic Cummings (The Conservatives head of strategy) recent admission that the only thing less popular than the Euro is the Conservative party was seen by some Conservatives as a gaffe, but is the kind of honesty and straight talking the public notice and appreciate and will make the message of change believable.

The suspicion that Labour's policies, particularly on public services will not work and yet more tax is, at best, only part of the answer, needs yet more time to grow and develop. Spin may yet to do for Labour what sleaze did for the Tories. But when the tipping point is reached voters will only turn to the Conservatives if they perceive the Tories have credibly changed and have something genuinely new to offer.

Nick Sparrow is managing director of ICM Research. He has been conducting political opinion polls for The Guardian and other media organisations since 1984 and is an industry acknowledged expert on political opinion research. He won the Market Research Society Silver Medal for his work on the development of accurate opinion research, and was pollster for the Conservative Party from 1996 to 2003.

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