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Time for a new age of trust

Politicians and the press have to forge a new relationship to end voter apathy, says Philip Gould, personal pollster to the Prime Minister

A GALAXY of forces is taking politics into a new era. Globalisation has collapsed barriers of distance and nationality; citizen expectations grow insatiably; the demand for empowerment is relentless; deference is declining; corporate power increasing; the scope of the media has been transformed. We live in an age of continuous global communication. This is a new age of politics.

These forces centre on a paradox: an upward pressure for greater political participation and pluralism and a downward pressure for control in the face of an uncertain, often dangerous externality. Political institutions are struggling to catch up. The result is a crisis of politics, apparent in falling turnout rates and flagging membership of political parties.

David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh's recently published 2001 election study expresses little doubt as to where the blame lies, arguing that the low turnout was a "fundamental indictment of modern campaigning". This is a convenient explanation, but insufficient. The post-war period has seen three major campaigning phases, with a fourth just beginning.

The first phase is "marketing campaigning", which first emerged in the 1959 general election. It was the first televised election; the first to use professional public relations consultants; the first to use polling; the first to treat the voter as the consumer; the first explicitly to use the concept of image. This model held for the next 20 years, and in some parties lingered longer - Labour's 1987 campaign had its roots there.

The next phase was the "negative campaigning" of the Thatcher years. This involved tapping into public concerns about tax, crime and



The Prime Minister and the press: too much cynicism?

Owen Humphreys/PA

defence in order to evoke fears about competing parties. This reached its apotheosis with the tax bombshell and "demon eyes".

We are now in the third phase, seen in Labour's 1997 election campaign. This is "total campaigning" - the campaign as an integrated machine, rooted in message, able to defend itself against attack at speed, connecting with voters with increasing sophistication. This integrated campaigning was the left's response to a decade of highly effective negative campaigning from the right.

But this model has its limitations. Even in 2001 we knew that. We wanted not just to win, but to inspire and engage. We made a start by reaching to people in new ways. The "thank you" advertising campaign and extensive use of direct-telephone contact broke new ground. But this was only a beginning.

It is time for a new campaigning phase - "participatory campaigning", which recognises that voters are empowered citizens who need a new relationship with political parties: one based on the understanding that people need to become involved in politics, and that campaigning must facilitate that involvement.

This is about more than the increased involvement of the

electorate in election campaigns - it is about creating a new kind of politics. The glass wall separating public from politics is the result of a circle of disengagement that flows through a media that is more intrusive; a public that is more demanding; a Westminster political framework that is less relevant; and political parties that can appear more controlling in their communications. To break the circle, everyone - media, political parties and citizens - must take responsibility.

First, we have to forge a new settlement between politicians and the press. Political parties can be defensive in the face of a media they see as intrusive and cynical. The media resent this, leading to mutual distrust. Trust must be rebuilt and space created for genuine dialogue. If we want a society that is more participatory, we need a media that is more constructive and politicians who can respond with openness.

Second, we need a settlement between politicians and citizens. Most voters want the opportunity to be part of the political process. Modern political leadership must honour the electorate. But modern government also demands leadership robust enough to withstand the turbulence of short-term pressures,

and to be able to achieve long-term goals. Striking a balance between leading and listening is key to participatory politics. The more politicians listen, the greater their capacity for effective leadership.

Third, there has to be a new understanding of what politics means to groups now feeling shut out of the political process. People care as much about political issues as ever, but cannot connect to the politics they see articulated by the Westminster political process. Changing this means reaching out to less formal political forces. It is about reframing political communications, rooting them in real people's lives.

Finally, it means an approach to constituency campaigning that maximises interaction and involvement at every point. It is about all voters, not just swing voters; it is about a continuing process of interactive communication, not just at election time, but all the time; it is about direct contact between politicians and the public in small groups where real dialogue is possible.

We must reverse the circle of disengagement and destructiveness that leads so many to turn their backs on politics. This is not something others can do, it is something we must do. All of us.