

Meta-spin - UK Government Picks Climate Context For Nukes

The UK Government is currently indulging in a campaign to get the media to cajole the British population into accepting nuclear power. So far it's not doing at all badly.

For months a series of leaks and briefings have laid the groundwork by letting everyone know that Tony Blair is warm to the idea of nuclear power. Like the frog that never responds to the slowly warming pond and eventually boils to death, the gradual build up is designed to make the final decision seem like an inescapable inevitability. By not putting a clear case, and not creating any decision points or events, the government briefing machine tries to create an expectation without giving its opponents a target or opportunity to call a division (see page 103 in *How To Win Campaigns*) which it can win. This strategy of dribbling out the bad news is often credited to Bill Clinton. The current political game plan is explored in a short article in yesterday's Guardian, by Tom Burke of Imperial College [*"The power and the unglory"* <http://society.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1653490,00.html>].

On Tuesday 29 November *The Independent* newspaper's front page consisted of two 1970s style 'Nuclear Power' sun symbols - "no thanks" and "yes please", with five reasons for and against. The nuclear lobby must be delighted - the media are at least framing it as a debate of equal merits (even if the inside editorial condemned it as 'this costly dangerous and expensive distraction').

Perhaps the main interest for campaigners though, is the context. The UK Government has now launched an 'energy review' and called for a 'debate'. Much of the UK media is dutifully covering the Montreal talks on the climate. This gives them the context they need, because nuclear is being promoted as an answer to climate change.

The Power of Context

Not long ago I sat down with others and sifted through mountains of evidence based studies of 'what worked' in communications on drugs. Unlike most other areas of communication efforts, campaigns on (illegal) UK drugs have often been thoroughly evaluated. We came up with seven factors which are necessary to make an 'effective message'. This tool can be used to interrogate any communication exercise - the useful thing about it is that it does not use the word 'message'. Debates about 'messages' often go nowhere because people are arguing past each other saying they are talking about 'messages' while they are actually arguing about one of the seven elements. These are:

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- Channel – how the message gets there
- Action – what we want to happen (and what the audience is asked to do)
- Messenger - who delivers the message
- Programme – why we're doing it (essential to know this to assess effectiveness)
- Context – where and when the message arrives (including what else is going on)
- Audience – who we are communicating with
- Trigger – what will motivate the audience to act

The actual 'message' is, like a binary warhead: the call-to-action (effectively 'do this'), plus the trigger, or motivator (effectively 'why you should'). They may be communicated by an example or argument, or visually, but not often as an instruction or admonishment.

The programme is internal. The audience and the action should be determined by the critical path of the campaign. Qualitative research should determine the trigger, context, messenger and channel. Campaigners have to accept that they will not always be the best messenger. (In this case the UK Government is doing its best to enlist media commentators as 'messengers').

Timing (part of context) can alter the effect. This is not spin but meta-spin. Right now the UK nuclear proposition is wrapped in the climate issue, sustained by ongoing media coverage of the international UN talks. Every time the NGOs and other climate campaigners draw attention to the need to reduce climate emissions, they inadvertently reinforce the framing that the UK Government wants to use to promote nuclear power. (See George Lakoff's various works including 'Don't Think Of An Elephant' and www.frameworksinstitute.org)

To see what difference context makes, consider what would happen if the UK Government had suddenly announced it was considering more nuclear power stations, in the wake of a major series of terrorist attacks, or while the 'War On Terror' involved military action against supposed nuclear threats. Climate would not feature, or if it did, it would soon be overwhelmed by other connections.

If campaigners are now to succeed in convincing the UK public and media that more nuclear is a bad idea, they'll probably need to use different frames. Arguing from inside the climate frame is almost certainly doomed to failure. Others in which nukes invariably fail as a proposition include security/terrorism and economics. Of these, the one that most threatens Tony Blair's case for nuclear is terror - because he himself has been the champion of the 'war on terror'.

Triggering the alternative frames means starting the debate anew - signalling this for example with new events, actors or evidences - and doing so again and again.

Resentments And Well Placed Fears

A couple of years ago I was involved in some research into UK public perceptions of nuclear weapons. It hardly need be said that after the Cold War ended, the 'issue' dropped from the forefront of the 'public mind', and that post 9/11 world views of security had changed - but how? We looked at what routes might be used to bring the issue of nuclear proliferation alive. The findings are relevant to the current UK Government plan to build more nukes because, of course, more nuclear power stations and more piles of radioactive waste create more potential terror targets, while the plutonium it produces can make nuclear bombs, or the waste can make 'dirty bombs'.

We found three clear groups, which we called the Abolitionists, the [Frightened] Sceptics and the Resigned

- The Abolitionists are convinced that nuclear weapons are and always were a live and critical threat – they are the people who support, have supported or would support existing anti nuclear groups (a small minority)
- The Sceptics are defined by their high level of concern at global insecurity, which they see as driven by a breakdown in trustworthiness of politicians, coupled with a policy of belligerence on the part of the US and UK. (A lot of people).

They worry that this is increasing the risk of specific terrorism and a general breakdown of world norms and order. They are anxious for a return to a more honest, responsive, reasonable world but very sceptical of politicians and political processes.

They were not Abolitionist in the past and are not necessarily disarmers (certainly not unilateral disarmers). They do not approach the security issue from a starting point of nuclear weapons but they do have relevant views about nuclear weapons.

They are motivated by a very live and current sense of concern and want resolutions. Given the right cues or triggers they would engage with nuclear issues.

- The Resigned are defined by their belief that there is nothing they can do, nor do they need to do anything because it is not their place and more expert people are in charge.

Although we do not know they are in this segment for sure, such reasoning is typical of the security driven values groups (see www.cultdyn.co.uk) who most of all want security and belonging; as is

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their willingness to resort to punitive measures against external threats (which they see everywhere all the time). Eg it makes sense to have nuclear capability in order to deter or punish anyone who transgresses against us.

For them pre-emption of any sort is a relief from a weak world relying on moral norms. The nation state, like other 'clubs' easily provides a dividing line for us-and-them, hence most 'global' issues are immediately cast as tests of patriotism. While unimpressed by any idea of disarmament, these people are unlikely to actively engage in politics or discussion in the media (though the tabloid press often pitch to them).

This three-way picture is significantly different to the situation that prevailed in the Cold War. Then there was a bipolar map of public opinion. The threat – nuclear annihilation was largely undisputed and it was only a question of which camp you were in, pro-nuclear weapons (led by the Government) or anti. Now, in marked contrast, the threat is multifactor, and cause and effect are often inter-changed (eg the role of aspects of globalisation). Nuclear weapons are one fish in this sea.

This tripolarity is not well reflected in the media which is more influenced/intimidated by the government than is the public. The news media largely shared the Bush-Blair framing of bipolarity – you are for or against us and the war on terror is bipolar. Hence large scale expressions of opposition to the Iraq war or war on terror or its conduct, or measures of opinion about that, were discounted as 'wrong' by invoking 'experts'. This is important to the government because the 'Sceptics' are not abolitionists or others who they would have substantial reasons to discount.

A corollary of this is that the government response to any issue or campaign mobilising the sceptics will be to suggest they (the sceptics) are not bad but misguided and misinformed (as these are people the government feels should be natural allies). The best way to prevent this happening is to show that these people are becoming concerned as they get better informed. "The more I know – the less I like this ..."

In this tripolar world, the government's only default supporters are the Resigned – but then they are resigned to being ignored as much as anything else. UK political leaders are in a position of labile disconnection: formally they are in power but with many of the 'natural' ligatures that connect them to 'the people' and confer legitimacy, severed by distrust.

The research identified a 'cross over' zone between War on Terror issues (the dominant cause of concern) and nuclear issues (many of which were extant in the Cold War). This included:

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- WMD
- Non-first strike (especially against non nuclear states)
- Battlefield weapons development

As well as

- nuclear weapons information/ locations
- dirty bombs

Several of these are blurring-concerns: ie concern generated by a belief that politicians are trying to deceive, withhold information or blur lines and important distinctions; making things grey that should by rights be black and white. These people fear further application of the logic and reflexes (punitive action, pre-emption, revenge, weak analysis leading potentially to disaster) that led to a macho war on terror after 9/11, knowing however vaguely that this itself was somehow driven by hegemonic aspirations of the Neocons in the USA.

In the Cold War people feared what could happen if a lunatic got elected and pressed the button. Now they fear that the people who they have elected, are only too happy to press buttons, and so these people (messrs Blair, Bush and their class) need to be restrained.

It is also likely that many of the 'sceptics' will include esteem driven groups. These people eschew social risk (so don't normally 'campaign' and are allergic to 'lost causes'), like big brands, success and getting what they deserve. For these people, relationships are highly transactional so to be deceived by politicians they voted for, is a big deal. This is a major part of their discontent: Blair et al promised a better world and they have insecurity, and in part this comes about from ill-judged belligerence.

Here's an alternative frame to the we-need-nukes-because-of-climate change.

What Sort Of Electricity Would Osama Like?

If someone bent on terrorising Britain could write Tony Blair's energy policy, what would it say?

"Our country will in future rely on wind, wave, biomass and solar power"?

Or

"We will reduce our reliance on fossil fuels and nuclear by over 50% through implementing best practice energy efficiency"?

Or

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"We will build a new generation of nuclear reactors spread around Britain"?

Would our hypothetical terrorist prefer us to depend on a few centralised nuclear power stations, or millions of micro-generation systems for individual homes or communities, when it comes to security of a network?

And which would the terrorists stipulate when it came to potential targets for explosions?

Nuclear waste stockpiles and nuclear power stations?

or

Factories making wind turbines and warehouses full of insulation materials?

Answers on a post-card please to Energy Review, c/o Tony Blair, 10 Downing Street, London, UK, SW1

If campaigners are to defeat the Blair bandwagon on bringing back nuclear power, they first need to kick the ball off the climate pitch, and then restart the debate on a new one. Economics would do but terrorism is the one built by Tony Blair.

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To offer contributions or comments contact the author chris.rose@campaignstrategy.org

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