

The Debating Group



A Parliamentary forum for Marketing Debate

Is political advertising a barrier to the democratic process?

“Political advertising requires a huge money-making machine” according to Michael White, Political Editor of *The Guardian*. He was speaking for the motion at the Debate “Political advertising is a barrier to the democratic process” organised by the Debating Group at the House of Commons on 8 July 2002. The Debate was sponsored by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising 44 Club and chaired by Peter Bottomley, MP for Worthing West.

Michael White began by discussing the crisis which is absorbing politics. “What is politics to do with real people leading real lives?”. Young people particularly feel that politics is of no relevance to them. He questioned the role of political advertising in this situation. Political advertising is part of the debate to make people more involved eg using text voting, voting in supermarkets.

In arguing that political advertising is a barrier to the democratic process Michael White included government advertising and party political broadcasts. He saw the former as a form of clandestine political advertising. He suggested that the aim of recruitment advertising for nurses and teachers, for instance, was to make people feel the government cared about these sectors.

As far as party political broadcasts were concerned, polls generally showed that people found these boring and unsatisfactory. There was a case for making them shorter. However, whatever changes were made, Michael White felt that they should be regulated and restricted. Civic society and politics are not commodities. Advertising is primarily about shifting products. Advertising also lends itself to brilliant and funny executions; Advertisements are there to convey simple messages, albeit in a sophisticated way. This is not appropriate for politics. In an age where there are so many sources of information, we do not need more speed and less reflective messages.

“The thing I most fear from unregulated political advertising – advertising-driven politics – is money politics”. Money-driven politics, as in the US, creates an unattractive system. “Wherever the money comes from, it debilitates political dialogue”.

The quality of an idea

Lord Bell, Chairman of Chime Communications, opposing the motion, argued that effective advertising is not about an advertisement's length nor the amount of money that is spent, but about the quality of the idea.

“Much as we might want to manipulate and make people do something they don't want to do, we can't and don't. People are ‘freeish’ in this country and do not have to watch advertisements if they do not want to. They do not have to do anything that the advertisement tells them to do”.

Macaulay said “Controversy is the mother of truth”. The motion, according to Lord Bell, breaks one of the fundamental rules of advertising: ‘You can't blame the marketing for the shortcomings of the product’. The product here is our democracy. The threat lies in the state of our politics, not in the state of its marketing. The only true measure of a health of a democracy is the level of participation. Levels of participation are on a constant downward trend, as consumers become disenchanted with product performance. “The greatest threat to democracy currently is the undemocratic behaviour of the executive exercising power through spin; off-the-record briefings against off-message colleagues; and leaking of policy to the press, rather than through proper interaction with the peoples' representatives in the House of Commons”.

How can political advertising be a threat to democracy when there is no evidence that the electorate even notices it? Political advertising has become like its first cousin, the party political broadcast. Everyone knows that no-one watches them. But no-one dares to stop doing them in case the other parties gain an advantage.

Party political broadcasts are not made for the electorate. First, they give local MPs a warm and wholly inaccurate sense that their efforts at local level are backed by a powerful, committed central office. Secondly, political campaigns are made for the political media., noticed only by the political media and generally rubbished by them. “Ignore the romantic notion of Philip Gould going out night after night, conducting his focus groups with ordinary members of the public. That's simply a smokescreen sent up to promote the idea of a government interested in the electorate's will. In reality, when the campaign chief chooses an ad, or greenlights a party political broadcast, he does so on the basis of how it will play with John Humphreys on the *Today* programme. When he unveils the ad on a poster site he's really only thinking about debating its creative merits with Jeremy Paxman on *Newsnight*. “As far as the general electorate is concerned, it's the sound of a tree falling in a far-off forest”.

At its best, political advertising can be effective at catching the mood of the electorate, maybe re-enforcing it. But it only works if there is something to reflect in the first place.

Lord Bell went on to talk about the successful advertisement ‘Labour isn't working’. “That ad, however brilliant in its conception, would have passed unnoticed if it had not captured a belief that was already at large within the electorate. Political advertisements which work reflect what is already there. More powerful forces are at work”.

Lord Bell argued that while advertising is relatively irrelevant in the democratic process, two other marketing disciplines are far more potent and therefore potentially more threatening: first, PR: a national campaign of 2000 ‘48’ sheet posters is probably less potent than a favourable comment from Trevor Kavanagh. What price a front page of *The Sun*? Secondly, packaging of the re-presentation of Labour in the 1990s.

He suggested that the Labour advertisements in 2001 did not make a jot of difference to the outcome of the election. Labour was home and dry. The electorate still had not forgiven the Tories for the chaos and arrogance of their last term in office, while Labour had attained the historical achievement of managing the economy with a degree of competence.

There is a flaw in the motion that implies that advertising has an effect on the democratic process. No one party has any advantage over another – it has nothing to do with money, but with the quality of the idea.

“If you think telling people what you think and what you will do and what you think of your opponents is a barrier to democracy, you are rejecting free speech and the notion that more information leads to better choice”.

Credibility

Seconding the motion, David Rendel, MP for Newbury, argued that advertising works. Advertising can raise sales and political advertising can garner votes. The slogan ‘Labour isn’t working’ changed voting behaviour when it was first used and continued to do so. The advertisement was brilliant and very effective.

Political advertising brings credibility, the most important thing a party can have. The LibDems have not got this credibility because people do not think they will win. “In our party we do not have the money and if we can’t pay for advertising we lose credibility”... “Wealth can buy you enormous benefits. Parties which support the rich become rich. Parties which support sectional interests become rich. Altruistic parties which try to do what is right for the whole community find it harder to raise funds”.

David Rendel suggested that government advertising was as old as democracy. He criticised the misuse of government advertising for political ends. Mr Blair castigated the Tories when they used political advertising for political ends, but he has also done so. The budget for government advertising rose from £105 million in 98/99 to £192 million in 00/01, most of the expenditure being in Spring 2001 – intended to be run before the election in May 2001, although, in the event, the election was delayed. However, the government advertising on nursing recruitment and whistleblowing, while having no effect on these figures, was effective for their real purpose – showing how good the NHS at its best had become and that this government was tough on crime. “Why should these advertisements be run in February and March? This kind of advertising should be done all the year round”.

Not only party political advertising but even government advertising (when misused) can be a barrier to the proper functioning of democracy. Lots of government advertising and political advertising is misinformation.

It is damaging to our democracy that advertising can give some parties credibility, but leave some parties without it.

Slogans and sound bites

Seconding the opposition Trevor Beattie, Creative Director & Chairman of TBWA/London, argued that political advertising is not a barrier to the democratic process. Politicians are a barrier to the democratic process. “Party politics is a weird occupation and is less relevant than it has ever been. It’s elitist, it’s old, it’s complicated, it’s male... Politics is peopled by dull men afraid to speak their minds. The people politicians need to speak to don’t watch Newsnight, listen to Radio 4 or read the *Guardian*. Young people have rejected One Size Fits All politics. They want Sky TV style choice. For policies, read channels, it’s the politics of self. Party

of One. Young people want to choose things that are relevant to them. We are not addressing this. We are talking to ourselves”.

Advertising can be used as a messenger across all media: email, text messaging. “Don’t sneer at the Internet. Sneer at what’s put on it”. These media are a chance to present individual policies to individuals, without the politicians.

Good slogans have always been at the heart of politics. It’s how some of the world’s finest political communicators communicated. Eg ‘Never in the field of human conflict’; ‘The pound in your pocket’; ‘The lady’s not for turning’; ‘You’ve never had it so good’; ‘Soak the rich’ ‘Ditch the bitch’; ‘Veni, Vidi, Vici’; ‘If this man wins, will the last person to leave the country switch the lights out’. These are all slogans, sound bites or adlines and also perfect distillations of policy. If the average politician sat down to explain the differences in political standpoint between their parties, “it could well occupy the rest of your natural life... We took Hague’s head, stuck Thatcher’s wig on top and added the line ‘Get out and vote or they get in’ and everybody got it. If the LibDems had run such a strong idea on one site, they would have got the same coverage. If an idea is strong enough you don’t need money. If ads don’t work, it is because they are not good enough.

“That’s not creating a barrier. It’s explaining things, simply. The line exhorted people to vote. It didn’t attempt to stop them. To suggest that political advertising is a barrier, is to suggest that it can stop you voting.

“I cannot prevent you from voting. I’m not a barrier. In fact if you vote me down, I’d still have won, because you will have proved to yourselves that Tim Bell and I and our advertising sloganeering were no barrier to tonight’s democratic process”. Trevor Beattie exhorted the audience to vote: “I can’t stop you. Neither can advertising”.

Discussion from the floor

For the motion

- Advertising is very effective but can be used in the wrong way, particularly when targeted to the vulnerable in society. It is insulting to people that they need short slogans to believe in the political process.
- Advertising is not just about good ideas. Good ideas cost money. The large parties go to the advertising agencies which cost money. It is naïve to suggest that money is not part of the process. Do we want to go the way of US politics where money is necessary?
- Advertising and PR are propaganda. In Nazi Germany and other countries, terrible things came about through the use of advertising.
- Money buys voice

Against the motion

• As a cynic the speaker opposed the motion because, with some exceptions, most political advertising is terrible and ineffective. In the US it is detrimental to the political process, because candidates have to beg for money. In this country political advertising does not have to follow the self-regulatory rules of advertising. As an idealist, he quoted Bill Bernbach who said “Good advertising makes a bad product fail faster”. Good advertising is a dialogue, concerned with what the audience thinks. The role of advertising can be as a conduit for democracy.

• Politics is another product. Commercial Union identified the messages it wanted to communicate and political advertising can work in the same way. There should be political advertising. It is a question of whether the product is relevant to the consumer. If a product is communicated properly, it boosts democracy.

- It is a great shame that there is a perceived barrier between advertisers and politicians. David Low the cartoonist, was seconded from *the Star* newspaper to produce political posters. Posters, newspapers and magazine advertising can be very effective.

- Our political memories are defined by advertising. It is a very important part of our political culture. It is unfortunate that politicians have not agreed to stick to the self-regulation rules of 'legal, decent, honest and truthful'.

- Political advertising is not bad per se, but it should obey the same rules as other advertising.

- Advertising is a means of enhancing democracy. If you have artificial regulations, they are a barrier to democracy.

- Media is effective and young people are influenced by images and trends.

Neutral

- Advertising does work, but it can be a dangerous weapon. It can promote myths, beliefs and prejudices and its use can be very bad eg Nazism. Political advertising can be used to distort the picture.

Summing-up

Summing up for the opposition Lord Bell pointed out that great political advertisements had always created controversy.

He believed that the problem of apathy was not that of young people. They should not be fascinated by politics. The real problem is that people of all ages are not bothering to vote and to use their democratic rights.

It is not true that you need vast amounts of money for effective advertising. Advertising does not make people do what they do not want to do. It only works if it meets a mood that already exists.

Summing up for the motion, Michael White pointed out that poster campaigns reach voters through comments on TV programmes. They are used as a 'multiplier' to get free media coverage.

He suggested that party political broadcasts should be broken up into more manageable spots and that they should be free and regulated.

We live in a time of peace and plenty, so politics is not a matter of life and death. We can afford the luxury of treating politics as just another product or service. But something can change the benign circumstances in which we live and then politics will take centre stage. Society has been marketised and Michael White made a plea for politics not to be marketised in the same way. "We need a larger and more complex framework for political advertising than slogans. Advertising is not a barrier to voting, but to political discourse. We treat it as a commodity at our peril".

Result

The motion was defeated by a show of hands.