

The Debating Group



A Parliamentary forum for Media and Marketing Debate

Do celebrities have more influence than politicians?

“Politicians no longer have any influence”. These were the words of Max Clifford, the well-known PR consultant, speaking at the Debating Group debate on 28 November 2005 at the House of Commons on the motion ‘Celebrities have more influence than politicians’. The Debate was sponsored by JICREG, with Patrician Mann OBE, Chairman of the Debating Group in the Chair, substituting for Lord McNally of Blackpool who was indisposed.

Max Clifford suggested that these days politicians do not even have influence on other politicians.

He used the charity sector as a particular case of celebrity influence. He cited CHASE, a charity devoted to hospice care for children, which received no government help and was threatened with closure. The TV celebrity Simon Cowell took up the cause and with his name attached, vast sums of money came in very quickly. A similar case was the Royal Marsden Hospital, which was in danger of closing. Max Clifford secured the help of Sean Connery who had been treated there. Politicians and ‘pillars of society’ did not have the same influence – getting Sean Connery involved made all the difference.

Max Clifford went on to illustrate the influence of celebrities in the US elections. One of the first things the candidates do is get the biggest stars in Hollywood to endorse them. These stars have more influence than the candidates will publicly admit.

“In my business you create things which have nothing to do with reality,” admitted Max Clifford. “The best way to be popular is to get a good PR person. The influence of image is incredible. People like celebrities – sometimes they love them. Celebrities don’t mind saying what they think and feel. Whereas it is increasingly difficult for politicians to be honest”.

The advertising business spends vast sums of money in order to influence people and they use celebrities to front their products and services. Market research experts know

that Gary Lineker will sell crisps. Celebrities have the power, influence and, importantly, incredible access to media. They can get good coverage as and when they wish. This works in a way that is incredibly effective and in a way that politicians could never achieve.

The power of the politician

Austin Mitchell, Member of Parliament for Great Grimsby and President of the Debating Group, opposing the motion, acknowledged that celebrities have a wider reach, but while they have influence, politicians have power.

“A definition of influence is to exert power, to possess authority and that is us”.

Austin Mitchell listed some of differences between celebrities and politicians:

“We think long-term; celebrities want instant gratification;
We are trained on the job, gaining years of experience; celebrities can become famous overnight;
We find it difficult to reach people; they are over exposed;
We persuade; they perform;
We listen; they won’t shut up”.

Austin Mitchell admitted we are in a celebrity culture. “Politicians are the universal whipping boy: everyone blames us for something, but they turn to us for decisions”. People live vicariously through celebrities. But it is tinged with schadenfreude – they are delighted when celebrities fall from grace.

It is certainly a celebrity world – look at *Hello*, *OK*, and the numerous TV programmes devoted to celebrities. “Old celebrities never die; they become ‘Desert Island celebrities’ ”. And some politicians defect to the celebrity culture eg David Blunkett; David Mellor. “But remember”, admonished Austin Mitchell, “celebrities are phoney, politicians are real”.

“Max Clifford makes celebrities. He has a huge celebrity factory where he takes in rude, ignorant, under-educated, loud-mouthed egomaniacs and, for a large fee, turns them into celebrities who can mime to his scripts.... He is the Dr Frankenstein of Celebrities”.

Austin Mitchell described the ‘floors’ of this ‘factory’ which are devoted to different specialisms: story enhancement; breast enhancement; reading, writing and preparation for interviews; tailoring; make-up of faces and endearing anecdotes about themselves; with a special floor for footballers and their wives.

Austin Mitchell acknowledged that life would be duller without Max Clifford and less stylish without Peter York and the *Sun* would be blank or devoted to long articles on ‘Domestic Violence’ by Rebekah Wade, if there were no celebrities. “But what purpose do they serve? None. Celebrities provide a lot of fun to people, but not influence. Politicians do not have the same exciting sex lives, but they do have power”.

When celebrities do something useful eg Jamie Oliver and school meals, the implementation is still left to the politicians. Celebrities highlight the issues. However, politicians are the masters and have the influence to do things. Politicians are concerned with the public good and with the desire to build a better world “We are serious, we listen. Politics isn’t about self-gratification; it’s about building a better world and a fairer society”. Austin Mitchell stressed that politicians try to accomplish the things people want by using their influence.

Being famous

Seconding the motion, the well-known cultural commentator Peter York, Director of SRU, quoted a modern verse:

*“Oh I can’t tell you when you’ll see your name up in lights
When will I
Will I be famous? You keep asking me babe,
I can’t wait.
You won’t suffer in silence
You’re a talent
You know that I’ve noticed
You’d like to be a legend
A big star over night!
When will I be famous?”*

Peter York pointed out that it is a measure of one’s popular culture savviness – and age – whether one knows *who* and *what* and *when* that was (‘When will I be famous?’ by Bros, 1988).

This is the first articulation of a new playground culture and an aspiration to be famous – for...whatever? Does it matter? Certainly, current polls say it is a key young aspiration, played back to Tony Blair via Lord Gould.

Peter York stressed that we were not debating whether celebrity *influence* is a good or a bad thing – you could believe it was a corrosive opiate of the people and still support the motion – we are debating whether their influence is greater than that of politicians.

Nor are we talking about *power*. Unknown junior ministers (or senior ones like Geoff Hoon) and military men and industrialists wield more immediate *power* than celebrities – power to push through legislation or declare martial law or corner the market in something essential. But you usually need consent in this country – and getting it needs influence.

“And we’re not talking about creepy Lobbyists, grey eminences, insiders’ ‘corridors of power’ influence stuff. People who can drop resonant words or brown envelopes around the Palace of Westminster. We’re talking about having the greatest influence on the thoughts and behaviour of the greatest number – on the way we live now, the way we talk now”.

Celebrity influence is self-evident. It derives from the way 21st century media works and whom it makes visible and recognisable – and from the skills it develops in those people. Media develops celebrities, and free-booting turbo-capitalist media develop celebrities who can sell – people whom audiences identify with or aspire to be like – people who can sell newspapers or cause audiences to turn on.

There has been a change in the nature of celebrities:

- there are more of them (more media / more products; capitalism *require* them as part of the process)
- they are more meritocratic / modest, less ex-officio (fewer royals, toffs and fewer politicians amongst them)
- they are more dependent on their own personality / appeal / looks
- and more the second type (identifiable / someone like me, rather than a magic, untouchable person).

In a *less deferential age* we want a different relationship with celebrities – not worshipping or aping them *but learning about life from them*, letting them dummy-run things for us – from relationships (Sven Goran Eriksson or Posh and Becks) to drugs (Kate Moss) to fashion, diet and skincare (anyone in *Heat* or *Closer* or *Now*).

The new kind of celebrity, produced by the entertainment / feature side of mass media is *better known*, more accessible and identifiable, actually a more skilled *communicator*, (particularly on the non-verbal side of things) and much more relevant on the skincare and sartorial than politicians. In advertising research ‘awareness’ is used to measure the power of a brand – how many people know it. Other measures: identification, credibility, attractiveness – all support the cause of the celebrity.

Politicians, on the other hand, are increasingly turning right to the back of the celebrity plane as those new kinds of celebrity take precedence. It is not just because people trust politicians less. It is because they are more volatile, more single-issue and more distracted. Nothing could be better testimony to this change in status than the pathetic reliance politicians in America, and increasingly here too (look at our PM’s early days) place on celebrity endorsement of them and their policies. They know celebrities can reach more people more directly than they can.

That is why advertisers want modern celebrities to endorse their products – advertising is meant to have the most direct influence possible on spending behaviour. They didn’t sign up John Major or John Nott when they left office. And celebrities’ influence goes far beyond the marginal and the low-ticket. There is a great trade in linking *appropriate* celebrities to causes and charities and investment schemes. But the best testimony is Max Clifford, because he knows precisely the media value of a name and a story, at every level, because he makes his living out of their judgements.

Showbiz for the ugly

Seconding the opposition Jonathan Bracken, Head of Public Policy, Bircham Dyson Bell and Chairman of the CIPR Government Affairs Group asked, “Do celebrities have influence?”. The answer is ‘yes’. “Do they have more influence than politicians?” The answer is ‘no’. Influence equals the exercise of power. Celebrities may have influence on issues such as navel piercing, tattoos or buying crisps. Serious issues such as crime, health, education and the economy are dealt with by politicians.

Celebrities do have some influence eg Jamie Oliver and school dinners; Band Aid; individual hard luck stories. They have an effect, but not influence: Band Aid has not resulted in the end of war in Africa. Celebrities do not make fundamental changes to public policy. Politicians are serious and dull. Politics is not sexy. It has been described as ‘showbiz for the ugly’. It consists of dreary old standing committees.

24/7 media are desperate for news. They are hungry beasts that lap up stories. They are not interested in ‘nuts and bolts’ issues. Media are increasingly electronic so people can tailor-make their own news and pretend the world is full of celebrities.

But media coverage is not influence. Column inches do not change policy. Dull, dreary politics cannot be exciting; if it were, a different group of people would be in it.

In America, stars such as Susan Sarandon and Barbra Streisand have devalued politics. ‘Hollywood liberals’ have helped to end sensible political debate on issues such as unemployment and health care.

The real influence is held by the people who wield power. Celebrities can help by endorsing and encouraging, but power really rests with people such as Austin Mitchell and others in the Palace of Westminster.

Discussion from the floor

For the motion

- Celebrities have more influence than politicians. Look at the influence of the media and specialist magazines.
- Celebrities are trusted more than politicians. They are a triumph of individuality over the system.
- It is more difficult for politicians to have influence: they are subject to central direction. They tend to be pale, male and stale. Celebrities can reproduce themselves and thus reinforce their influence.
- Politicians have power eg the war in Iraq, but power is different from influence. With power there is no choice. Celebrities have more influence.
- Celebrities have influence, not power. George Best had an influence on life style.
- The law often changes following changes in society.

- Politicians do not sell magazines and newspapers. *Big Brother* and *I'm a Celebrity* are watched by more people than political programmes.
- Certain celebrities have more influence eg The Beatles. When they performed in New York in 1964, no major crime was committed in that city during the performance.
- Celebrities do have power and some politicians master the elements of celebrity eg Churchill. The politicians who rise to the top become celebrities.
- Politicians would not have raised so much money as celebrities for causes such as Children in Need and Band Aid.
- Most politicians want to be celebrities.
- People like Sebastian Coe have turned from celebrity into politician. A person like Judi Dench also has influence.

Against the motion

- Any celebrity would love to have Bill Clinton at his or her party. Churchill, Mao, Hitler, Stalin, even Saddam and Usama Bin Laden have had more influence than any celebrity.
- Celebrities manufacture their celebrity.
- Simon Cowell could save one hospice, but Aneurin Bevan set up the NHS.
- Politicians have more influence for good or bad than any celebrity. They can influence things such as pensions, nuclear power and gas supplies.
- Politicians work with evidence.
- Celebrities are fun to be with and to know. They can light up a room, but politicians can light up our lives.
- Jeremy Bullmore has pointed out the 2-dimensional aspect of some celebrities. Some of the most well-known are not even real people eg The Jolly Green Giant, Mr Kipling, The Bisto Kids. Max Clifford does not need celebrities. He can make them up.
- Celebrities are exciting and can influence buying habits and many people in the audience are experts at using this influence. However, politicians don't just have influence on our ephemeral behaviour but have power to legislate to pass laws. They affect and influence the way our society develops. They have more lasting influence. They have the power to influence long term
- The behaviour of celebrities is influenced by the misbehaviour of politicians.

Summing up

Summing up for the opposition Austin Mitchell asked 'What is influence?' and 'What kind of influence is most important to us?'. He believes that politicians have more influence on the basic issues which affect our lives. In a democracy the exercise of power is listening to people. "We have more influence because we have to take decisions". There is less glamour in being a politician. "In fact" said Austin Mitchell "I should like to abolish celebrity culture for everyone except myself".

Politics is a quiet process of persuasion. Some celebrities do more for charity than politicians, but many celebrities do nothing for charities.

Issues often change from unpopular to popular and then back again to unpopular eg Iraq. What use is celebrity in such a circle? What use is it in issues such as pensions and education? Politicians are accountable to people. Austin Mitchell stressed that the role of the politician is exercised in important areas. It is very boring in politics, but at the end of the day politicians are exercising influence for a purpose – to contribute to society.

Summing up for the motion Max Clifford pointed out that the debate is not about power, but about influence. Celebrities have tremendous media coverage. When Armistice Day on November 11 needed more publicity, stars went to *The Sun* and reversed a trend. National coverage works. Politicians do not have respect or influence.

You feel you know celebrities. Max Clifford admitted that lies were part of the PR process, but the PR industry admits this. Politicians do not admit that they lie.

The Olympic Bid for London succeeded because celebrities from sports and entertainment were involved. That London is hosting the Olympics is due to celebrities not to politicians.

The single word ‘sleaze’, used by Max Clifford, helped to bring down the Conservative government. That is influence.

Ronald Reagan walked into politics because he was a star. Stars set the agenda in the most powerful nation of the world. Celebrities have massive influence.

If celebrities wanted power, it would be very easy for them to have it. They don’t want it here (although they do in the US). Most stars are only interested in themselves. They have influence by the bucketful and they use this to change attitudes and make things happen. They are miles in front of politicians. The influence that politicians used to have is gone. Max Clifford concluded, “Let’s hope celebrities don’t change the kind of influence they have into power. They could if they wanted to.

The result

The motion was carried by a show of hands.

Next Debate

The next debate will take place on Monday 23rd January 2006, sponsored by The Chartered Institute of Marketing. Details from Debating Group Secretary, Doreen Blythe, Tel: 020 8202 5854.

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