

Britain's general election: Labour pressures media to censor election coverage

Julie Hyland
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Labour has covertly sought to put pressure on the media to censor coverage of the general election campaign, after scenes of government ministers being harangued by members of the public were broadcast.

On Tuesday it was revealed that Labour Party general secretary Margaret McDonagh had written confidentially to three main broadcasters—the BBC, ITN and Sky News—claiming there was "growing evidence that broadcasters have been inciting and colluding with protesters at campaign visits made by senior Labour politicians."

"This behaviour by broadcasters is putting at risk the safety of Labour party staff, politicians and the public," McDonagh went on, stating that it "crosses the line between creating and reporting the news." In the same letter, McDonagh demanded an urgent meeting with the broadcasters. According to press reports, McDonagh and her officials held discussions with Richard Sambrook, head of BBC News and Current Affairs, Stewart Purvis, head of ITN News, and Nick Pollard, head of Sky News. The Labour Party refused to be drawn on the contents of the discussion, a spokesman stating only that the meetings were "private" and had been constructive.

McDonagh's letter was dated May 18, just two days after Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott was shown on prime-time news programmes punching a rural contract worker in the face. The incident occurred during a protest by farmers and pro-fox hunting supporters outside a Labour Party rally in Wales—an area hit hard by the collapse in many small farmers' incomes over the last period. The same day, during a stage-managed walkabout at a Birmingham hospital, postmistress Sharron Storer, whose partner is seriously ill with cancer, waylaid Prime Minister Blair, angrily berating him about the state of the National Health

Service.

Later, Labour officials complained that details of ministers' engagements were being leaked to the press to ensure protesters appeared, to discredit the government. Prescott has apparently claimed that hunt protestors tipped off Sky News to be present in Rhyl for his arrival, when he was hit by an egg. A spokesman for Blair also claims that the BBC had put a microphone on a farmer to "have a go at Tony" during his visit to Birmingham, but Ms Storer had reached the prime minister first. The broadcasters have all vehemently denied the accusations.

Labour's allegations are truly astonishing. Blair is one of the few Labour prime ministers in history to have achieved the backing of the majority of the British media, including those traditionally on the right of the political spectrum. Only on Monday, reports indicated that the *Times* newspaper would critically back a vote for Labour, for the first time in the paper's 216 year history. Of all the national papers, only the *Daily Mail* and the *Telegraph* are backing William Hague's Conservative Party.

According to the Communications Research Centre at Loughborough University, Labour has so far enjoyed the majority of news airtime during the election, occupying 44 percent of the coverage, compared with 35 percent for the Tories. In terms of presenting party policy, Labour has 24.3 percent of media coverage compared to 12.6 percent for the Tories and 5.6 percent for the Liberal Democrats, with 11.9 percent of news coverage defending its policies, compared to 5 percent for the Tories and just 0.2 percent for the Liberal Democrats.

As for the accusation that Prescott was "set up" in Rhyl, no one could have anticipated that a politician with more than 30 years of political experience,

campaigning for a government tipped to win the election comfortably, would end up physically assaulting a member of the public. Although the incident made exciting coverage for the media in an otherwise stale election campaign, most commentary was generally sympathetic to Prescott, echoing his claim that he had only been defending himself (from an egg!).

The news media have rejected the accusation that Blair's itinerary, which is given to broadcasters in advance on an embargoed basis so they can prepare their reporting teams, has been leaked on several occasions. They point out that each ministerial event is strictly controlled and access to the prime minister closely monitored.

Reports indicate that despite extensive travel across the country to various key constituencies, Blair will have spoken directly to just 500 people by June 7. The prime minister has done just one walkabout during the election, and cameramen and photographers travelling on Blair's campaign bus are not informed about its destination until they board.

The broadcasters would no doubt have preferred to have kept their discussions with Labour officials a secret, and reacted angrily to the leaking of McDonagh's letter. But the revelation that the three main television news providers did attend a "private" meeting with Labour officials indicates the real conspiracy that is taking place—between the media and the government. The press may enjoy the boost to their ratings and sales from titillating scandals, and have certainly helped to set up a few. But the major newspaper and broadcasting barons—who back Blair's commitment to privatisation, cuts in welfare and "free market" economics—are just as anxious as the government to prevent any serious discussion during the election campaign of the issues concerning millions of working people.

The real problem is that Labour cannot control the public in the same way that it manipulates the media. Despite strictly controlled access, and largely handpicked audiences, Blair has been unable to completely avoid confronting expressions of discontent. Last Friday, during a visit to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, King's Lynn, the prime minister stood helpless as a surgeon complained about Labour's failure to deliver on its promise to safeguard the

National Health Service. Nicholas Packer, a consultant orthopaedic surgeon at the hospital, told Blair that government standards for the NHS were "arbitrary" and had placed huge pressures on doctors. One newspaper report claimed that a senior Labour aide had pulled the plug out of the back of a television camera as the cameraman attempted to film Blair during the visit. During a live radio phone-in show with the prime minister on Monday, single mother Rita Williams complained that the government's workfare New Deal policy was an "absolute disaster".



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