CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org
Charity Registration Number: 208223

Transcript

E-Leadership: Political Communication in a Digital World

Alastair Campbell

Journalist; Director of Communications and Strategy, Number 10 (1997-2003)

Chair: Chris Mullin

Author; Journalist; Member of Parliament (1987-2010)

17 October 2012

Chris Mullin:

My name is Chris Mullin. I was a Member of Parliament for 23 years and briefly a minister in various departments in the Tony Blair government. Alastair Campbell needs no introduction to you, but he was the Director of Communications and Strategy for the Blair government from 1997-2003. He is also now on the advisory board of Portland Communications.

The format is going to be that he and I will have a conversation for about 25 minutes and then we will take questions from the floor – and via Twitter, so I am told. I'm sort of out of my depth on this e-communications.

Alastair Campbell:

One of my missions in life is to get Chris Mullin on Twitter. I've tried three times, at three events, and thus far I've failed.

Chris Mullin:

Tell us how many followers you've got, Alastair.

Alastair Campbell:

180-something thousand, which is not that many. It's quite a lot in politics, in Britain.

Chris Mullin:

What counts as a lot?

Alastair Campbell:

Lady Gaga's got 12 million. I think Justin Bieber's got about 10 million. Barack Obama has three-ish.

Chris Mullin:

Million, you mean.

Alastair Campbell:

Yeah. Alex Salmond, I was really surprised, only has 27,000.

Chris Mullin:

Rather reassuring, isn't it?

Alastair Campbell:

No, I'll tell you why – this is what I think is interesting about Twitter: the world, the Twitter world, which is kind of out there somewhere, they kind of work out if you're authentic or not. I don't know if it's still the case but I think in Britain, John Prescott and I are the most followed political tweeters. I think that's because people think it's definitely us doing it. If you read Alex Salmond's tweets, they're like press releases – and they probably *are*. 'Just had a great meeting with teachers about blah.' 'Really pleased to announce inward investment by American company in Linlithgow.' I'm not saying that's not very important for the company and for Linlithgow, but it's not what Twitter is about.

David Cameron, who initially said that 'too many tweets makes a twat', has gone onto Twitter. Needless to say, because he's the prime minister, he's got lots and lots of followers. But he just doesn't get it.

Chris Mullin:

But he doesn't do it himself, do you think?

Alastair Campbell:

I'd be very surprised. If he does, he's not doing very well.

Chris Mullin:

And Obama doesn't sit down and –

Alastair Campbell:

I think Obama does sit down and – don't forget, one of the first things about Obama when he took office was that he insisted on keeping his Blackberry.

He probably doesn't do them all, but you've got to be very careful – if you entrust someone else to do them, you've got to really, really trust them. Obama doesn't tweet that often but when he does he kind of tends to say something. I think for politicians, just putting up speeches – because what politicians constantly say is, what on earth can you say in 140 characters? Who cares what you had for breakfast? They think that all you put on there is what you had for breakfast. But if you did a speech, you could put a link up there and it's there. It's just a way of you getting the thing out there. Then all the people out there, if they want to read it, they can – if they don't, they don't. And the world moves on.

Chris Mullin:

What worries me about all this is it's actually quite a high-risk strategy, isn't it? One is always reading of politicians, often quite senior ones, who pushed the wrong button and sent out things they didn't mean to send out, or said incautious things that then get them into terrible trouble.

Alastair Campbell:

But all this is is a technological, electronic version of what happens in the real world. People say stupid things. They speak before they think.

Chris Mullin:

But it doesn't matter if you've only got ten followers. If you've got 130,000…

Alastair Campbell:

That's just thinking about it too defensively. You and I are speaking now. There is a part of our brain, just before we say something, that is thinking: is this a wise thing to say or not? It's exactly the same. Touch wood, I've not yet – I don't think – said anything really terrible. But I do this thing where just before I hit the button, I kind of have a read of it and say: is that a sensible thing to do or say?

Chris Mullin:

But often you won't realize that it's not a sensible thing to say until you've had some reaction.

Alastair Campbell:

No, this is the thing. In my mind, the reason why I see it as quite a strategic tool is that it only works if it sort of fits your own bigger picture. Up until now – this is why I think you really should enjoy it and embrace it – the people who decided what the agenda is have tended to be newspaper barons (who you don't like), newspaper editors (most of whom you don't like), a very small number of politicians who get to the very top, and occasionally their spin doctors (who you do like).

Chris Mullin:

I like some.

Alastair Campbell:

But this actually allows you, as an individual politician, or a company as a brand or a charity or a football club or whatever it might be – it allows you to set your own agenda and then, if you do it properly, to build your own audience. This is why the papers hate it.

Chris Mullin:

And who are the audience? Are they nerds with nothing better to do?

Alastair Campbell:

No!

Chris Mullin:

Or are they important movers and shakers?

Alastair Campbell:

Some are. The reason why it's such an effective media communication channel is that if you are vaguely newsworthy, all of the papers will have somebody who follows you. So if something happens that you feel they're going to be – I find it brilliant just for stopping people phoning you. For example, something happens that they start phoning you, you tweet a very short reaction or a link to a blog or a statement or something, and then

nobody phones you. That means you've got out there what it is that you want to say. You've got to sort of let go of the idea – the answer to your question, who are they? – I don't know. I don't know all the people who follow me.

I had an extraordinary meeting with a woman in Liverpool recently. She came up to me at Lime Street station and said, 'You don't know me, but I'm your friend.' I thought it was just a kind of weird assignation I'd forgotten about, but of course it was Facebook. All of my tweets go onto Facebook. Randomly she had asked to be my friend and I'd said yes.

The truth is there was a sort of bond there. We did start talking about politics and sport and things that we were mutually interested in, because that's why she follows me.

Chris Mullin:

Right. So you've got friends everywhere.

Alastair Campbell:

And enemies.

Chris Mullin:

Well, one or two over the years, yes. Okay, let's go back to the beginning a bit. You started as a lobby journalist for Mirror Group Newspapers. You went to work for Tony Blair in 1994, very shortly after he was chosen as leader. In those days, political communication was entirely different, wasn't it? Just describe how it was then as opposed to now.

Alastair Campbell:

It wasn't entirely different, but what *was* different was this idea that if you had two or three of the newspapers on your agenda for a 24-hour news cycle – which is how long a news cycle was then – you set the agenda for the day. The broadcasters followed. The big difference now is that there really is no such thing as the agenda, because news channels are instant.

I think the other thing that was different then was – because that was really just when 24-hour news was coming in. That was in its own way as big a change as the advent of the internet. Those two things have completely changed the dynamics and the reality of the news and media environment.

Back then you didn't really have either of them. You had 24-hour news beginning. What I think that has done is forced a huge change upon the newspapers. They don't do news anymore. Any big event – the TV debate between Obama and Romney last night, if people are really interested in it, they watch it on TV or online. That guy who jumped out of the capsule 24 miles above the earth the other day, eight million people watched it live on YouTube. I can remember watching – I'm not saying it's comparable – when the first guys landed on the moon. We all had just one place that we could go to watch that and that was a very rare thing to have something live on television. Now, as you said, this event is being live streamed. I can't imagine anybody who would – sorry, this is not to insult people who have come along – but all that sort of stuff is totally new.

What I think it means for the politicians and for campaigners is that they can afford to be much more strategic, but actually what most of them have done is become more tactical. Our own dear prime minister is the best example of this.

Chris Mullin:

In what way?

Alastair Campbell:

He's on the news pretty much every night, because he thinks that's where he has to be seen. But he's on the news talking about somebody else's issue all the time. Sometimes, like tonight – I don't know what will be on the news, probably Andrew Mitchell or jobs maybe, because that's what came up at Prime Minister's Questions – but he popped up the other day about Jimmy Savile, he popped up last week about the little girl who was missing. It's like he just has to get out there every day.

Chris Mullin:

But he's not actually the first, is he? It was true to some extent of Tony Blair and even more so Gordon Brown. Do you remember Gordon Brown put out a statement when Jade Goody died?

Alastair Campbell:

And Tony, I must confess, one of the moments of my career when I still wake up and think, god, did I really do that – he joined the Free Deirdre Rachid campaign. To those who don't know, she was a character on *Coronation Street*. No, that's true, but what I think we always –

Chris Mullin:

I think we should get to the bottom of this. Whose idea was that, yours or his?

Alastair Campbell:

It was Fraser Kemp's, one of your colleagues.

Chris Mullin:

Oh yes, indeed he was.

Alastair Campbell:

That's the first time I've dropped Fraser for that one. It was actually quite a good idea but, you know.

That was a bit of an aberration. What we always tried to do in terms of Tony, and John Prescott and all the other key people, in terms of their public contributions to debate – the stuff that we were planning for them to be on the news – was to try to fit it to a broader, bigger strategy. I don't think Cameron does that. I think he just thinks he has to be on the news, because he's the prime minister.

Chris Mullin:

But your idea, when you got to Number 10, was to set the agenda for the day as far as possible, wasn't it?

Alastair Campbell:

To set the agenda, full stop.

Chris Mullin:

And not to be blown off course.

Alastair Campbell:

Yes, but you don't set the agenda by saying you're going to set the agenda for the day. You can set the agenda for the day in all sorts of different ways, but unless you are setting the agenda for the medium and long term – and that's why I say that most politicians are too tactical. They confuse being on the news, being in the newspapers, with setting an agenda. It's not the same thing. Setting an agenda actually is often about having other people talk and debate about what it is that you are saying. So for example, Ed Miliband at the Labour Party Conference comes along and makes this speech about 'one nation Britain', and for a while that's what people are talking about. *That's* setting the agenda. It doesn't mean he has to be out on the television every day talking about it.

Chris Mullin:

The start of all this is 24-hour news.

Alastair Campbell:

I think so, yes.

Chris Mullin:

That has led, has it not, to the feeding frenzy which is now a phenomenon in British politics – and became so, I think, in your time.

Alastair Campbell:

It did. Back when we were planning the 1997 campaign, you had your kind of big message, 'New Labour, New Britain'; you had your kind of sub-messages; and then you had the policy and the manifesto. You planned – remember, it was a six-week campaign. We planned a four-week campaign so then we had to extend it to six weeks. You could pretty much get by with one big thing per day, or the start of the day and the end of the day. So press conference in the morning, say, then a big speech by Tony Blair or Prescott or Gordon Brown at the end of the day. You'd build the day around these two big events. The fact

is the last election was a bit different because of the TV debates. If I think of the 2005 campaign, you probably, in terms of planning the campaign, that single news cycle would probably have got into three. Even though the public are carrying on with their lives and taking their kids to school and dropping their mum at the hospital and going to work and looking for work and all the other things that people do – so that most of this stuff is passing them by, unless they happen to hear it on the car radio or see a TV in the supermarket or whatever it might be. But in the media/political bubble, which is where most journalists and politicians are living, what is news at 10:00 in the morning – Gordon Brown or Tony Blair or David Cameron or George Osborne has said something newsworthy – for them in the bubble, it's old news by 6:00 pm, when they're putting together the main news bulletin (which people still regard as the main news bulletin). So they've decided the public now needs something different, but the public haven't even gotten to the first thing. So that sense of the news agenda becoming shorter and moving more often –

Chris Mullin:

And more frenetic.

Alastair Campbell:

Definitely more frenetic, but I think that is partly about the way that the media has developed, not just in Britain but right around the world. Again, 24-hour news is a big thing here, because it's the sense that news *has* to be breaking all the time. One of the failings of the modern media is their assumption that an average member of the British public cannot cope with anything that stays on the screen for longer than ten seconds, cannot cope with a story that has lasted for longer than an hour, have to have breaking news. My favourite 'Whoosh! Breaking News' ever was 'Bernard Jenkin responds to Geoff Hoon'. I thought that was absolutely brilliant. That's what they feel they have to do, is make everything sound a bit more dramatic than what they talked about half an hour ago. And most of the time, it's not.

Chris Mullin:

My favourite feeding frenzy – and you'll remember it, I think, being in the eye of the storm – was when somebody alleged that Tony Blair had tried to manoeuvre himself a better place at the Queen Mother's funeral. Remember that one? It raged for days.

Alastair Campbell:

Remember it, it was horrific. The horrible thing about those situations is when you know something is not true. I would sit in a chair like this day after day after day, telling the press that it wasn't true. But it was being fed from somewhere. To be fair to the media, and I think this came out later, what you might call 'members of the establishment' were sort of putting this out there. Of course, when people are briefing against the centre like that, that's a perfectly nice, legitimate thing to do which you should do. When you are fighting back against them – I can remember, I think it was *The Mail on Sunday* that had the headline, 'The Smearing of Black Rod'. Not that Black Rod had anything to do with it, obviously. But that was because I was, as it were, fighting back. The story was complete nonsense, absolute nonsense.

Chris Mullin:

The beauty of it was it eventually stopped as though someone had flicked a switch. That's because I think word came from the Palace to the Tory party, via Nicholas Soames I think – probably Charles, I don't know about his mother – that it was not very –

Alastair Campbell:

I didn't know that. That was where we made another mistake, when we bothered to complain to the Press Complaints Commission, which as I discovered over several embraces with them is a complete and total waste of time. I'm very pleased that it's PCC, RIP.

Chris Mullin:

I know we probably can't do very much about it, but is this progress? When I read the diaries of, say, Jock Colville, and you read about government in the 1940s or 1950s – I mean, they had a world war to run – it was all so much more laidback. Whoever was doing your job, or private secretary to the prime minister, found time to dine at the usual clubs in St. James's, just around the corner from where we are now sitting. That's the thing that really comes over about the diaries of that era, how laidback it all was. When one reads your diaries, it's just frenetic the whole time. You're wearing yourself into a frazzle trying to cope with it all.

Alastair Campbell:

Yeah. The other thing you find about politicians of a different era is, you know, Churchill going off on holiday and writing a 700,000-word history. These guys could go and do other things. I think it has become more frenetic and it isn't necessarily a good thing.

I think the other thing that has happened is the internationalization of politics. I don't know if the prime minister is in the country today but I know he's got a summit coming up. They do travel more because a lot of the decisions they make are more interconnected.

Chris Mullin:

Whereas in the old days, they went on the *Queen Mary* over the Atlantic, took a few days to get there, went away for three weeks, drifted back again.

Alastair Campbell:

Yeah. The other thing though, I sometimes wonder, when you look at characters like Attlee and Churchill, someone really recognized as really successful prime ministers, you do wonder how they would have coped with the 24-hour frenzy. Churchill used to famously like a drink, and he had depression and sometimes stayed in bed until the afternoon. Can you imagine the multiple orgasms in Downing Street? 'We still haven't seen the prime minister.' 'It's very unusual for the prime minister to be in bed at this time of day.' They would go mad. Yet he could do that.

Chris Mullin:

Attlee couldn't have coped. Yet Attlee would have been rather good at tweets, wouldn't he? He was very brief.

Alastair Campbell:

Quite pithy, yes.

Chris Mullin:

Let me ask you, with the benefit of hindsight, do you think New Labour was hyperactive? Perhaps life for everybody would have been a bit easier if it hadn't been so control-freaky and all the rest of it?

Alastair Campbell:

No, I don't. I think we had to be control-freakish at that time, partly because of the media. I feel that command-and-control communications like we ran then wouldn't work as well today, partly because of Twitter. You'd have to make a judgment – if we were starting now, we'd have to make a judgment, is it on balance a good thing or a bad thing that John Prescott is on Twitter, that David Blunkett is on Twitter, or whoever? I think on balance it would have been a good thing. That means that you wouldn't necessarily have had the same sort of command-and-control, where we were sort of crossing the 't's and dotting the 'i's of virtually every word that was going out.

What I feel is that if you get the strategy clear, then actually that stuff sort of takes care of itself. Also, I don't think we were too frenetic. A lot of the frenzy that you read about in the diaries was actually because we were trying to manage this crazy beast that was around us 24 hours a day.

Chris Mullin:

But a lot of politics is actually, in the end, not the government of the day setting the agenda but reacting to events. When New Labour was elected in 1997, you – we – went out of our way to be cautious in what we were promising.

Alastair Campbell:

I don't agree with that.

Chris Mullin:

If somebody had said in 1997 that we would end up bogged down in two foreign wars and nationalizing three banks, you would have said they were barmy, wouldn't you? 'Events, dear boy, events.'

Alastair Campbell:

Well that's important, but that's why it's even more important to hang on to that sense of what it is that you're trying to achieve. Something like 11 September, yes, 'events, dear boy, events' – totally unexpected and seismic in terms of its implications, which are still going on today. That utterly defined George Bush's presidency and to some extent defined Tony's premiership. But if you go back to 1997 – I don't often disagree with Tony, but he ran this line when he published his book about he wished we'd done more in the first term and we were too cautious and so forth. I think if you look back at the first term and think about things like [Northern] Ireland and the minimum wage and Bank of England independence and the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly and Sure Start and civic partnerships and the rest of it – I think we did a hell of a lot. Certainly this lot that have been in power, however long it is, I think have done nothing comparable, if you're talking about historic, epoch-making stuff.

Just to go a bit further afield, if you think of somebody like Clinton – if I say Clinton and difficulties and troubles, I reckon between 70 and 100 per cent of people here will think about Monica Lewinsky, because that was kind of defining in some ways. But actually he was a hugely successful president and most people in politics and elsewhere view him in that way. So he had to deal for years with frenzy.

Chris Mullin:

But self-inflicted.

Alastair Campbell:

I'm not saying it wasn't self-inflicted, but my point is he got on and carried on doing the other stuff. Eventually that comes through to the public. That's why I keep banging away about this point, that politicians and any organizations can endure enormous amounts of frenzy and negativity provided they are clear about the bigger stuff they are trying to do. That's why I think that Tony was a very successful prime minister and, for all the negativity that still surrounds him, will be seen as such.

Chris Mullin:

Do you think all this tweeting has bred a generation of politicians with short attention spans, and that perhaps they'd be better off governing rather than thinking of their sound bites?

Alastair Campbell:

No, this is totally to misunderstand it. The first point is that you don't have to spend that long doing it.

Chris Mullin:

But you have to spend a lot of time thinking of the next pithy thing you're going to say.

Alastair Campbell:

You don't!

Chris Mullin:

You don't, because you're a natural, but JP or –

Alastair Campbell:

JP is very good at it. You used to work for John Prescott.

Chris Mullin:

Yes, I did. A white-knuckle ride.

Alastair Campbell:

Reading your diaries, I don't think you always enjoyed it. But it's no different to speaking. How many conversations do you have? How many text messages do people send, how many phone calls do people make? It's no different. It's just another extension of all that. I think because people tend to be nervous – I'm normally very nervous of technological change, but I find the attitude that you have to it, which is very common amongst the political classes –

Chris Mullin:

I'm just old-fashioned and hopeless with technology, that's all.

Alastair Campbell:

No, you're not, though.

Chris Mullin:

It's my fault really, I'm not blaming anybody else.

Alastair Campbell:

No, you're not. You're resistant to it because you think it's something that it's not. It's just another communications tool in an era when communications is more important than it's ever been.

Chris Mullin:

Yes. In my next incarnation, I'm going to grow vegetables.

Alastair Campbell:

That's fine. You can call yourself @vegetablegrower.

Chris Mullin:

One last question and then we will throw it open to the floor. Tony Blair said that the Freedom of Information Act was one of his biggest mistakes. Do you agree with him?

Alastair Campbell:

Well, if I say no, you're going to say, what were his biggest mistakes? No, I don't think it was. I think it has been a pretty spellbinding pain in the butt.

Chris Mullin:

From the point of view of anybody in government.

Alastair Campbell:

It's a legitimate goal of government to be an effective government. If freedom of information is about citizens genuinely finding out about the decision-making process and things that affect them and interest them and the services that are there on their behalf, that would be great. But the truth is, I don't know what the figures are, but if you analyse the demands for information that are done through the FOI, the vast bulk are basically about trying to mess up the government and bugger it up and waste its time. Do we really need to know how many toilet rolls have been used at Chequers? It's funny. The truth is, you could have put down a question on that as an MP, and I'm not sure that we get that much more out of the system. Within government it has made people much more reluctant to have conversations and commit them to paper that they should be having.

Chris Mullin:

That is one of the great difficulties. Someone puts forward an options paper which inevitably includes the more extreme options and the less extreme options – you can be sure that the only one that will be reported in the papers is the most extreme option. 'Government considers murdering all firstborns.'

Alastair Campbell:

Right. But I still think on balance it is a good thing. But I think it's only going to become a *very* good thing that will genuinely benefit us if both politics and the media make a jump together and say, let's not just do all the trivial stuff and let government really genuinely want to open things up. But it's a tricky one which I don't think has worked terribly well.

Chris Mullin:

One of the results is that ministers tend to communicate by backchannel now, a channel that they hope won't ever see the light of day.

Alastair Campbell:

One of my great rules of strategy is that you have to write things down, and that includes the differences of opinion that you have. You have to thrash them out on paper, not least because in government you can't always get people together to have meetings. If it's a foreign policy thing, you do need to

involve ambassadors and people who are living abroad and people who are not necessarily on the end of a phone line all the time. The way to do that is to circulate all the thinking, as deep and wide as you want to go, as widely as you have to. But again, as you say, if the media are always going to pick on the one thing – and of course it's not just the media, it's what the opposition do to the government, the government do to the opposition. If they're always going to go on to the point of maximum damage, so-called, then we don't really have a proper debate.

So I think actually within government, people shouldn't go down the route of not committing to print. They shouldn't do this sort of 'let's put it on a Post-it' rather than write it down. I think that leads to bad government. I think government should just kind of go with the flow.

The momentum *is* toward openness, there's no doubt about that. I wrote this piece in *The Times* today and one of the points I made is that governments that are still trying to stop – like the Chinese and others – still trying to shut down the networks… they can have some success in doing that but the momentum is all against it. That's partly what the Arab Spring was about. I think we should celebrate it for all sorts of reasons.

Chris Mullin:

So on balance, a good thing.

Alastair Campbell:

Yes, I think so.