Delusions of grandeur?
Marketing's contribution to "meaningful" Western political consumption

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Abstract *This paper explores the contribution of marketing to Western politics. Moving away from traditional views of marketing located in means-end relationships, it examines contemporary views of marketing that focus on consumption as a process of signification and representation. This more radical perspective offers contemporary insight into the many manifestations of political consumption, and the meanings the electorate ascribe to them, both individually and socially. This contemporary approach challenges critics' claims that marketing encourages politics to be shallow. It offers far more in-depth insight into the electorate and their appreciation, understanding and relationship with politics.*

Once upon a time ...

Societies grow, they change, and they evolve. What once was fought for is now ignored. What once was the embodiment of a free, civilised society is now tarnished by age, by accessibility, and some would argue misuse. From innocent child to withered crone, this is no fairy tale; it is the state of Western political democracy in the twenty-first century.

Diminishing confidence in parties and politicians characterised the latter years (1979-1997) of Conservative rule in the UK (Jowell and Curtice, 1997). Turn-out figures at general elections show decline (Miron, 1999; Butler and Kavanagh, 1998) with potentially disastrous consequences for the democratic process (Teixeira, 1992). On the day of the 1997 British General Election, only 57 per cent of 18-24 year olds said they would definitely vote, compared with 86 per cent of 45-64 year olds (Gallup figures, cited in King, 1997). Neither is this decline just the preserve of the younger electorate; in the USA participation by older age groups is also in decline (Teixeira, 1992). While political scientists argue that public disenchantment with political parties is not the same as disenchantment with democracy, a recent survey by Gallup (1999) highlights worryingly negative public attitudes towards aspects of Western democracy (Spogard and James, 2000).

Marketing has been blamed to some extent for this degeneration, or rather the selective use of some elements of the marketing mix (principally communications and research (Kavanagh, 1996), to sell parties and candidates to the electorate. Mass communication has generated electoral familiarity with political offerings, and familiarity breeds contempt. With the emphasis on

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satisfying needs and wants, the electorate have learnt to be much more discerning customers looking for obvious benefits to themselves. If no perceived benefits exist, individuals may conclude, "there is nothing here for me", thereby encouraging "self-centred" political attitudes, and the demise of citizenship. An example of this is the recent UK New Labour budget (8 November 2000) that increased pensions and slightly cut fuel tax. Public opinion is divided; not surprisingly the fuel lobbyists are demanding greater cuts, the pensioners greater increases, but what is interesting is a minority view that the tax on fuel should be cut at the expense of the increase in pensions taxes; the underlying sentiment from these individuals being "me, me me" (Radio 4 and Channel Four news reporting, 8 November 2000).

Politicians have become magpies, seeking out tactical marketing techniques to make them relevant to the electorate in order to gain the benefits of re-election. They recognise the need to match their political offerings with the core values of their voters (Lock and Harris, 1996). A typical perception might be, prior to re-election they seek to discover and promise to satisfy the needs and wants of the electorate, and post election rely on positive publicity. This emphasis on tactical electioneering does little to enhance the reputation of party politics.

Yet is the application of marketing to politics inherently negative? If operating within a persuasion typology that uses election campaigns to sell promises that will not be fulfilled, or falsehood to attack the opposition, we would argue it is best if politics and marketing divorce. While accepting that some individuals still regard the union of politics and marketing as an attempt to "engineer a state of ecstatic regression involving a collective loss of the faculty of judgement" (Neubaur and Wilkens, 1997, p. 255), we believe that what was possible with the Nazi political propaganda in the 1930s, is not possible for the electorate of today; not least because of audience fragmentation, the proliferation of mass media, and the consumer as king. Marketing could become a positive force influencing the way in which politics operates: for example, contributing to policy formation and aiding the prediction of future trends in the political marketplace (O'Cass, 1996). This ability to forecast future needs might include introducing new forms of voting and new forms of political participation (see, for example, Mattinson, 1999; Bucy et al., 1998). Or within marketing communications, ensuring campaigns offer the electorate something they might find relevant, might help increase levels of involvement in the political process, particularly where the involvement itself does not create the relevance (Dermody et al., 1999).

Interactive media has been credited with the ability to achieve this (Bucy et al. cited in Lee Kaid and Bystrom, 1998), particularly for the younger electorate where this technology is a normal part of their lives, or within the remit of consumer as king, where consumer new-found political and commercial power is exemplified by the retreat of the GM food industry and Labour policy. Single issue pressure groups borrow much from marketing in order to successfully pursue their goals, thus becoming an inherent part of the direct action, "news

generation" and utilisation of public opinion characteristic of such groups. The emergence of public choice theory (Self, 1993), which places self-interest above public interest as a framework for decision making further illustrates this majestic position of the consumer in a political context. Yet it also represents an ideological stance, by empowering consumers in the public domain e.g. schools, hospitals. Currently public choice appears to be "owned" by the politically right, for example, Conservative party rhetoric appealing to the self-interested rationalist; "we will give you a choice of public vs private healthcare, it is your money – it is your choice". Yet this does not have to reside within any political creed to be a contemporary form of democratic expression. The coalition context of much latter political reality, for example Scottish devolution and the emergence of relationship marketing with its emphasis on co-operation and loyalty (Gummerson, 1996), could also offer new relevance to the political marketplace. However, at the current time it would seem that principles of marketing are applied in a limited manner, with too much emphasis on communications focusing on image creation and manipulation. For example, Prescott's warnings that the Labour party need to move away from "spin" back to substance – a return to some core Labour values? It is therefore not surprising that marketing has been accused of making politics shallow. Even where marketing has been used to understand the electorate, this is based on assumptions of a rational voter seeking fulfilment of their cognitively based needs and wants. Thus the hedonistic, experiential elements of decision making and consumption are largely ignored. Marketing may have more to offer by aiding our understanding of the electorate in terms of what political consumption means to them.

Political marketing as a process of signification and representation
Traditional views on the contribution of marketing to politics reside within managerial thinking (Brownlie *et al.*, 1999), where political behaviour and offerings are viewed (and restricted) within an exchange process; and where "meaning" is externally determined. Contemporary marketing thought is beginning to move away from means-end relationships, the satisfaction of consumer needs and wants, towards the study of the "symbolic manufacture of consumption" (McDonagh and Prothero, 1996; Baudrillard, 1995, 1993). Central to modern marketing thinking, then, is the centrality of consumption in creating meaning and significance in peoples' lives. We would argue that in order to understand contemporary electoral behaviour, we first need to understand political consumption and the meaning(s) ascribed to it.

It is generally agreed that marketing plays a pivotal role in the operation of both Eastern and Western societies (Brownlie *et al.*, 1999; du Gay *et al.*, 1997; Whittington *et al.*, 1994); for example, the increasing use of marketing techniques by parties and candidates to win elections. The influence of marketing "thinking" in determining and shaping social relations (Morgan, 1992), is increasing its use in solving societal problems, and is establishing consumption as a dominant force in society (Brownlie *et al.*, 1999). We therefore

live in an era of "consumption-think, consumption-behave". Within these typically Western, but increasingly Eastern societies, social relations are expressed through marketing rhetoric (Morgan, 1992); and human beings' identity and worth can only be understood in terms of their ownership (and collective value) of commodities (du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Morgan, 1992). As a consequence, material objects have gained pivotal signification in contemporary society, transforming them into signs of individual identity and worth (Brownlie *et al.*, 1999; Elliott, 1997; Miller, 1997; du Gay *et al.*, 1997; du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Douglas, 1992). A traditional view of marketing would argue it is the transcendent values of a product that determine its value, rather than the consumer's experience in consuming it. Yet this assumes some detachment between a product's worth and the meaning(s) of its consumption, as if individuals always passively consume rather than actively interrogate what they are consuming. Heilbrunn (1996) argues individuals attribute value to their objects of desire through their acts of consumption, where consumption becomes "a constructive and evaluative process by which an object's value is created, transformed, and negotiated" (Heilbrunn, 1996, p. 129). Thus the consumption experience itself (advocated by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982); Holbrook, 1995) is a critical part of this signification process. This attribution of value goes beyond material objects to include non-tangible experiences, for example the outcome of election promises and other political product offerings (Dermody *et al.*, 1999), and the consumption (voting) experience itself. Furthermore, the involvement of the public in political participation will determine the value ascribed to it (Dermody and Scullion, 2000), since only the politically involved will attribute "value" to politics as part of their repertoire of "objects of desire". Non-participation generates little meaning because the political "offering" has not been consumed.

Yet marketing has been criticised for this societal reconstruction. Sawchuck (1994) and Kundera (1991) argue that we now live in an age of image rather than reality, where illusion resides at the heart of marketing practice. But is this inherently negative? While it may lead to an over-emphasis on materialism, and the pursuit of fantasy and fun in preference to more "serious pursuits", Belk (1996), maintains it can also enable us to have hope – for ourselves, for the future:

> What is created more assuredly than the actual payoff promised is the hope that it may occur. Alluring fantasies provide us with something to believe in and hope for. It is this hope that sustains us, even though it may well not be realised ... For the act of imagining is an enlarging and empowering one. In an age of abundance, it is the sizzle rather than the steak that nourishes us ... If we ever conclude that marketing has gained too much magical power through fantasy creation, it will be because we have found a better source of hope (Belk, 1996, pp. 102-3).

Hope is a critical feature of politics. It is offered in many shades and perhaps purchased to varying degrees by the electorate. Thus politicians need to continue to address the electoral hope contained in the act of voting, as New Labour did in 1997 in their vision of a brave new world. Following the Labour

victory in 1997, the electorate were reported to have high hopes and optimism for the future (Jowell and Curtice, 1997). So is hope the core offering of marketing to politics? Where voting represents a commitment to the aspirations and promises of democracy, with non-voting the symbolic rejection of the very essence of our political process (Dermody *et al.*, 1999)? If so, then this symbolic meaning challenges critics' allegations that marketing creates empty images, and empty lives through instant gratification. Contemporary marketing with its emphasis on experiential consumption has become "the conscious and planned practice of signification and representation" (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993, p. 246), and thus has progressed from a "needs and wants" paradigm. Consequently political parties need to constantly review the meanings and representations of their political offerings: for example, anti fox-hunting legislation signifying a progressive, civilized society. Accordingly, greater understanding of the electorate is needed in an attempt to understand their attributions of meaning and significance, and thus to make "politics" more meaningful to them. Perhaps the public proximity offered by the development of regionally based parliaments will help achieve this fuller understanding (Dermody *et al.*, 1999). Certainly there are opportunities to create significance in political participation, to recharge the concept and principles of democracy, whether at national or local level. In so doing, politicians can begin to address the concerns raised by Spogard and James (2000).

So it would seem that the essence of contemporary political marketing lies in consumption as expression, in all its different guises. This reincarnation, whose attributes are presented in the section entitled "Rethinking political marketing", recognises that consumption can take a variety of forms; individuals can construct their own meaning. So for example, a consumer's relationship with a brand is not necessarily the one prescribed; consumption is as much experiential as it is tangible; emotion, fantasy and play are important parts of consumption (Dermody *et al.*, 1999).

Yet political scientists currently evaluate voting behaviour in a largely quantitative manner. Qualitatively they seek to understand electoral behaviour using a rational behaviourist perspective. Given the preceding discussion this would seem fundamentally inappropriate. Furthermore if the meanings ascribed to acts of consumption vary by individual consumer, then non-voting may symbolise much more than apathy. It might be motivated by non-political factors; equally it may be a declaration of disillusionment with democracy (a system lacking decisiveness). It is almost certainly meaningful to the individual (whether consciously or subconsciously), and cannot just be "written-off" as indifference.

Rethinking political marketing

Evaluating existing societal norms and values – do they collude with current perceptions of marketing? (Brownlie and Saren, 1995).

Investigating how the processes and practices of consumption of objects make them meaningful (Brownlie *et al.*, 1999).

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Recognising the varying forms of consumption and their meanings to different people (du Gay *et al.*, 1997).

Understanding that consumption articulates social difference and social relationships – we can relate to each other through our acts of consumption (Brownlie *et al.*, 1999) that "weave the web of culture" (Belk, 1995, p. 69).

Exploring how social bonds or distinctions are shaped by material possessions (signs and symbols), and how organisational circumstances orchestrate social relations and experiences (Brownlie *et al.*, 1999; Giddens, 1991).

Examining the contingent and temporary meanings and codes allocated to products and services in day-to-day life (de Certeau, 1984).

Acknowledging the active and creative role of consumers in fabricating the meaning of objects – that meaning is not pre-ordained (Cova, 1999; Elliott, 1999; du Gay *et al.*, 1977; Heilbrunn, 1996).

The implications of political marketing as a process of signification and representation

Two issues emerge from viewing political marketing in this way, the considerable importance attached to image and an increasingly "schizophrenic" electorate (Dermody *et al.*, 1999).

Can marketing contribute more to politics than shallow political imagery? While we may live in an era of illusion rather than reality (Sawchuck, 1994; Kundera, 1991), which gives more emphasis to image rather than substance, our preceding discussion has emphasised the need for this imagery to actually represent something of significance, for example, democracy. The challenge is that it is electors themselves who will determine what it represents and its significance to them. For example de-alignment (Dunleavy, 1993) does not necessarily suggests that politics is not meaningful to the majority of the electorate because "meaning" does not remain static, but rather is "free-floating" and "inconsistent" (Elliott, 1999), where truth has become irrelevant, (Foucault, 1977). As a consequence this may have resulted in the electorate "buying" the image not the substance. The red rose, smart suits and vague promises become the focus, not the hard-nosed policy, need for compromise, and unpredictable nature of political reality. Disappointment, even disillusionment is inevitable for those participating as if in a fairy tale. These feelings are exacerbated by the proliferation of other consumption acts offering deliverable "vivid, immediate, affect charged experience or simulations" (Elliot, 1999, p. 117). Your "dream red sports car" becomes a fulfilling experience, determined and owned by you. Delivering the promise in politics is far more difficult. For example, there is less shared meaning (consider the notions of justice, equality, and opportunity). Further, the offering can only begin to be produced after it has been "purchased". For example the New Labour 1997 election claim "we will reduce hospital waiting lists" is part of the offering bought into; however the how, the timing and the consequences of this policy being given priority come later after the party has been elected (purchased). No wonder the New Labour image-based campaign of 1997, although successful,

has generated little loyalty. At the same time, however, given that political consumption can be symbolic, the act of voting is in itself deeply meaningful for some because it represents amongst other things participation in democracy, granting of authority and feelings of freedom; for example, devolution in Scotland representing the ending of Whitehall's domination (Dermody *et al.*, 1999).

Interestingly, however, Taylor and Saarinen (1994) make the point that "Desire does not desire satisfaction. To the contrary desire desires desire. The reason images are so desirable is that they never satisfy (Taylor and Saarinen, 1994, cited in Elliott, 1999). Thus it is the pursuit rather than the end that is important, what Holbrook (1995) and Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) term the experiential dimensions of consumption. So the electorate of this new century are never going to be completely satisfied; if they were it would probably make them dissatisfied! Perhaps political consumption serves a valuable purpose, being an activity we can consistently vent dissatisfactions towards, though clearly, there is a danger to democratic practice if this antagonism leads to malaise (Spiker and McKinney, 1998).

This dilemma for political marketers is exacerbated as elements of our different selves (nurtured by advertising) compete with each other to be satisfied (Elliott, 1999), or to remain dissatisfied, thus leading to a state of "multiphrenia" (Gregson, 1991). Little wonder then that rational choice and decision making are becoming less meaningful, which in turn suggests that the traditional models used to understand voting behaviour are becoming less relevant. Indeed a key question all political parties need to ask is "What kind of public will we be inheriting if we win?" Political activists must appreciate they are dealing with a schizophrenic electorate, one which may value emotion over reason and are likely to be illogical in their decision making at times as they desperately search for "desirable psycho-ideological signs" (Wernick, 1991, in Elliot, 1999, p. 115), to give symbolic gratification to their lives (Dermody *et al.*, 1999). The electorate is therefore becoming much more difficult to understand. Even psychographic segmentation is limited because they have become simultaneously rational and irrational, able to consume and reject what is being consumed, to desire but to consume without satisfaction (Nava, 1991). Thus "Identity becomes infinitely plastic in a play of images that knows no end. Consistency is no longer a virtue but becomes a vice; integration is limitation" (Taylor and Saarinen, 1994, in Elliott, 1999, p. 117), and where "The consumption of meaning ... is always ambivalent and contradictory" (Ang, 1985, in Elliott, 1999, p. 117). If we continue to use traditional segmentation techniques and positivistic research designs, what chance do we have of really being able to understand the electorate in all their different guises, their voting choices, and what this voting or abstinence means to them? Ironically, as party pollsters and other researchers learn more about the electorate, the assumption that political leaders can know their audiences becomes less plausible; their diversity is too great. While Blair spoke of "one Britain" he must have appreciated that the British electorate vary significantly in their experiences,

knowledge and interests. The theory of motivated choice is helpful here, with its emphasis on the importance of emotion in decision making (Forgas, 1992; Kunda, 1990). This is a far cry from the historical dominance of a cognitive processing perspective with its emphasis on cool, calculating rational consumer decision making (Dermody, 1999; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982). An even more interesting contribution of the theory of motivated choice is that voter choices are not necessarily a reflection of what we would like, but can also represent a rejection of what we find most distasteful (Elliott, 1999; Bourdieu, 1984). So non-voting allows us to communicate our displeasure with political parties/candidates; non-voting is a form of consumption. Or we vote to keep the "bad guys" out, rather than because we support and want to consume the policies of the party we have voted for. This perspective aids our understanding of a common form of political consumption, tactical voting.

The preceding discussion has focused on individuals' consumption of politics, yet consumption is also a collective, socially symbolic act where meaning is determined through social affiliations. This opens some interesting vistas for political parties.

Political consumption as a "community" vector
Socially symbolic consumption has become one way of becoming involved in social life, and forging social relationships (Osterberg, 1988). Heilbrunn (1996) argues the meanings attributed to consumption are in part derived from individuals' social relationships. Political discourse can be socially symbolic and in this sense contribute to a person's overall identity. However, this discourse may be avoided when presented in an aggressive, non-consensual manner (a feature of most political systems) that threatens to undermine the cultural stability symbolic consumption offers (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979). Consumption therefore becomes a facilitator of community relationships, "a vector of the community link" (Cova, 1999, p. 77), where consumers in the twenty-first century value products and services for their potential offerings of social relationships and identities (Godbout and Caille, 1992; Cova, 1999). This move towards "marketing as societing" can lead to societal innovations that encourage change, the repackaging of the familiar in unconventional ways and facilitating social support through shared consumption (Cova, 1999; Cova and Svanfeldt, 1993; Gobbi *et al.*, 1990). So politics could be repackaged to promote community; to illustrate how voting, for example, really can contribute to social life and how parties themselves can represent the hopes of the people. In the USA, for example, President Clinton was elected in part because of his focus on home issues, while former President Bush was criticised for spending too much time on international affairs and too little on "home" issues. A more worrying example of parties representing community issues is the BNP in the UK who have "adopted" the "right" of rural communities to hunt foxes with hounds. They have positioned themselves against the "liberal fascism" of New Labour, while conveniently obscuring the racism issue at the heart of the party. This repositioning has replaced the thuggish skinhead image with smart suits and laptop computers – "suit and tie fascism" (File on 4, 2000). New Labour is a

further example of this repositioning, particularly Blair's vision of communitarianism – values which embody every community, excluding none; although the specific meaning of communitarianism is left deliberately vague to allow all individuals to "buy" into the concept (Smith, 1999). Blair (1996) argues that communities facilitate the growth of individual freedom and abilities, and the benefits of rights to education, health, property, personal safety, etc.:

> ... individuals prosper only when supported by a strong community. Individual and family are not the antithesis of community, as Mrs Thatcher said, but dependent on it. And the great power of community – of what we do together – is to make equal our opportunity and ability to develop our talents to the full (Blair, 1996, p. 156).

Yet Blair also argues that community is an important part of British society because it balances self-interest with societal interest:

> The word "community" ... for me ... expresses the mutuality of both interest and obligation that rises above a narrow view of self-interest. It allows a more enlightened and actually a more rational idea of self-interest, and by placing the individual within society, rather than apart from it, recognises that people need to cooperate as well as compete (Blair, 1996, p. 218).

This socially symbolic political consumption is embedded in the concept of tribalism as an embodiment of community, "... a local sense of identification, religiosity, syncretism, group narcissism ..." (Cova, 1999, p. 67), where tribes are "brought ever again into being by repetitive symbolic ritual of the members, but persisting no longer than these rituals' power of attraction" (Bauman, 1992, pp. 157-8). So through acts of consumption, individuals form and sustain relationships with their tribes. Cova (1999, pp. 67-8) argues, the future of marketing (including political marketing) lies in offering a renewed sense of community through "a network of societal micro-groups in which individuals share strong emotional links, a common subculture, a vision of life"; thus echoing Blair's vision of communitarianism. This vision of life can be expressed through social causes, for example single-issue pressure groups (e.g. animal welfare, environmentalism). While young voters are typically viewed as politically disinterested or disenchanted, evidence suggests that issues pertinent to them can inspire political involvement (Jowell and Curtice, 1997). In the USA, the New Deal generation have been more politically active than previous or subsequent generations (Teixeira, 1992). The youth in Romania were largely responsible for the 1989 revolution and collapse of communism (Miron, 1999).

Individuals may belong to several tribes, and in each they may play a different role. Belonging to their tribes is more important to them than belonging to a particular social class (which no longer determines their status anyway). Instead their status is determined by their position within and between their tribes. Thus standard segmentation techniques can contribute very little to the classification of these individuals. Furthermore, for these individuals, individualism has been replaced by "an aesthetic enjoyment of everyday life, in the collective passions of the tribes, in all ephemeral communions" (Maffesoli, 1992, p. 269). Thus emotion and communion are central, resulting in the reintegration of rituals and transcendence in everyday life (Cova, 1999; Lipovetsky, 1992). Indeed Cova (1999, p. 79) maintains:

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The meaning ascribed to products and services is often related to societal occasions and to social links, and rituals are one of the best collective opportunities to affirm, evoke, assign, or revise these meanings.

Ethnomarketing then is of benefit to political marketing because it can identify the intangible elements of political consumption leading to rituals (Badot *et al.*, 1993; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991; Belk *et al.*, 1989). These rituals only emerge in situations of trust over a period of time, their pursuit is often perceived in terms of pursuing the sacred (Cova, 1999), and they would be invisible and meaningless in isolation. What then are the social meanings of voting? The expression of freewill? The collective representation of the greater good? Clearly each tribe determines this meaning.

It would, therefore, appear that the consumption of politics is more symbolically meaningful (in a number of ways), indirectly through individuals' tribal affiliations. Some examples of political tribes are presented in Figure 1. It is important to remember that membership is fluid – individuals move between tribes, and tribal influence may be superseded by membership of another tribe. As a result, the political offerings can take on different meanings depending on the nature of these tribal affiliations.

Our political reality may well, therefore, be increasingly determined by the collection of tribes we belong to. If so, much political communication, which barely uses rudimentary segmentation bases, is not only poorly targeted but also largely meaningless to its recipients. For example, the "mass advertising appeals" of the 1997 general election campaign resulted in some party loyalists feeling aggrieved and insulted by the trivialization of the issues (Dermody and Scullion, 2000).

This notion of tribalism as a facilitator of social support through consumption has partially been addressed within the relationship marketing literature.
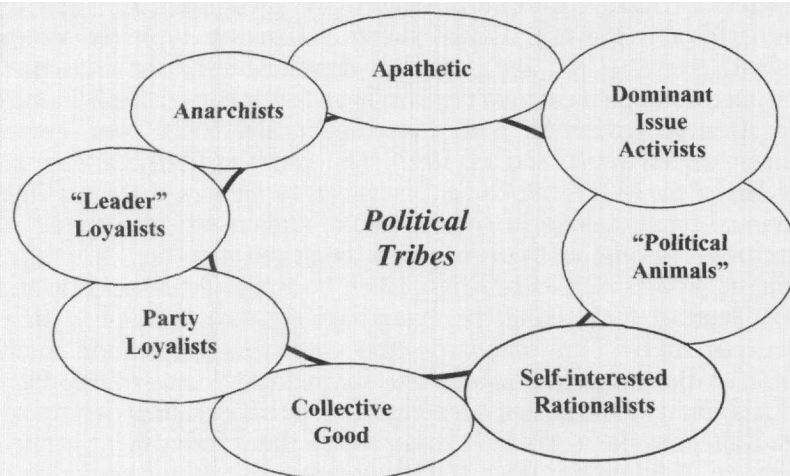

Figure 1.
Political tribes

Source: Adapted from Dermody *et al.* (1999, p.15)

Relationships can lead to the growth of tribalism through their ability to offer social support. This support facilitates social interaction via social networks and relationships set within a wider community, as well as validating an individual's self-identity. They can, therefore, increase self-esteem and a sense of belonging, and do not necessarily have to be strong relationships to do so (Sheaves and Barnes, 1996; Adelman et al., 1994). This expanded role for marketing appears a mixed blessing for politics. The host of weak ties it establishes (including the ubiquitous loyalty schemes) offers a social support system for many which diminishes the role once played by political interest and allegiance. With the emphasis moving away from exchange to the development of relationships, the question arising is "What does the current political product offer in terms of relational value?" Other than for a small minority of party members and "activists" there appears to be little offered and sometimes even less asked for. The level of cynicism felt towards politicians is perhaps partly the result of this relational void (Dermody et al., 1999).

However, a relational perspective could be developed in a political marketing context if the political offering engendered commitment by ascribing, for example, renewed value on citizenship and by focusing on the ends (quality education for all) rather than the means (comprehensive verses selective system). Given the party-centred nature of much political activity and the ethos of collective responsibility, political consumption can partly be understood through this relational perspective. Particularly if the fragmented nature of its audience is appreciated, in terms of what they seek when consuming "politics".

... And they all lived happily ever after: some concluding remarks

While the marriage of marketing and politics can result in a shallow, party-centred democratic system, we believe that contemporary marketing can offer much more. It can make politics meaningful to the electorate by understanding the different meanings ascribed to political consumption. This consumption can fulfil hopes, it can facilitate communitarianism, it can empower. Parties need to understand what participation (in all its different guises) signifies, and to appreciate that this meaning is fluid. This has some interesting implications for political communication, particularly in the dyadic creation of message meanings between sender and receiver. Positioning is also challenging since it will be increasingly difficult to be "all things to all men". For example, the rhetoric used by Blair to address "one Britain" needed to be deliberately vague but specific enough to be inclusive rather than exclusive, hence his references to a tolerant, inventive, decent Britain which allows his audience to attach a range of meanings to these positive, but indistinct attributes (Smith, 1999). The challenges posed by consumption as "the conscious and planned practice of signification and representation" (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993, p. 246) combined with "free-floating, inconsistent meaning" (Elliot, 1999) offer many opportunities to boost the vitality of party politics and political democracy. The issues raised in this paper offer a starting point for this journey from decay (witnessed in the 2000 US president elect débâcle) towards hope and enlightenment.

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