Political Marketing in the UK and Canada: A Comparative Study of the British Labour and Canadian Conservative parties

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Abstract

Through the lens of the Lees-Marshment framework, this article compares and contrasts the evolution of the British Labour Party from 1979 to 1997 and the Canadian Conservative Party from 2004 to 2006, finding many similarities between the two. Owing to their employment of the tools of political marketing, both parties would abandon ideological policies that notably deviated from those of the center, precipitating the defeat of their long-time incumbents

Through the lens of the Lees-Marshment framework, this paper will compare and contrast the British Labour Party of 1979 to 1997 with that of the Conservative Party of Canada from 2004 to 2006. Beginning by explaining the terms and concepts necessary to understand the Lees-Marshment framework of political marketing, it first explains the experience of Labour with the model, before moving on to the Conservative's example. It will then briefly touch on the amount of contribution to the democratic deficit that the advent of political marketing has brought to the forefront. The Conservatives' shift to the ideological center in between 2004 and 2006 employed many aspects of political marketing, aiding their path to victory in 2006. Conversely, the British Labour party of 1979, 1992, and in between, chose to stick to a product and later sales approach. In the face of Thatcher's market-oriented party, this would put, and then keep them out of government, for nearly two decades. Although the context in which they existed is radically different from one another, there are many parallels between the transformations of the two parties; the Conservatives were simply much faster and more acceptable to change, with Labour by comparison stubbornly clinging to their old product. Although ideologically opposed, both parties managed to overcome previous electoral difficulties and adapt their policies towards the ideological center.

The means by which the Thatcher-Blair generated model is structured has come to be known as the Lees-Marshment framework. This consists of three core concepts. The first, product, includes how the party behaves: incorporating leadership, its MPs, membership, staff, symbols and branding, constitution, policies, and any other activities. This can also be expanded to the value of the relationships it holds both internally and externally, and how this value is maintained (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 16-18). Second is "the market", consisting of the voters required for electoral success, however that may be defined by the party. More broadly speaking, anyone who may have an influence on these voters should also be included (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 18-19). Finally, party goals, generally fall into two categories: major parties who are looking to form a government and minor parties, who may only wish to influence the political process (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 19-20). These three concepts form the background on which Lees-Marshment's three party orientations and their processes take place.

As they were rather unsuccessful for Labour in the 1980's, the first two orientations are seen by Lees-Marshment as stepping stones to one of the market (2004: 19). First, the product-oriented party assumes voters will agree with their ideas and vote for it, refusing to change its product, even if it fails to gain electoral success. Here, marketing consists of communicating the

most positive aspects of its product offering. Second, the sales-oriented party seeks to persuade voters through extensive marketing communications and manipulation of the market; through research for advertisement and message construction. Although the party will not change behaviour to what people want, it will attempt to persuade what people want to the product. This makes use of a large variety of marketing communication techniques. Different from a market-oriented party, it is sometimes called a "marketing-oriented party". While the former employs market intelligence to make product decisions, the latter is primarily restricted to communication decisions (Marland, 2010: 20).

A market-oriented party turns around traditional ideas about politics as interactions between parties fighting for what they believe to be right. Instead, the party will do everything it can to win an election, so long as this product adjustment factors in four core variables: achievability, internal reactions within the party, competition analysis, and support analysis (Pare and Berger, 2008: 48). The former two of these simply means that, at least in theory, the policy promises that are made must actually be deliverable once in government, and they must also be accepted by the party internally. This inevitably implies that party unity is essential. Competition analysis means that the new product must be distinguishable from that of the competition, and marketing should highlight its own relative strengths, while downplaying any weaknesses. Finally, support analysis involves targeting those segments of the market that are necessary to achieve party objectives.

Marketing in a business sense is only applicable to political processes insofar as they involve a transaction that occurs between the electors casting their votes, and the party instating better government after their election. This specifically concerns how these transactions are created, stimulated, and valued (O'Cass, 1996: 38). It attempts to sell an abstract and intangible product; a brand, for the party rather than the party's product on its own. This can embody a promise about the future, some kind of attractive life vision, policy, leader image, inherited memory and promise (O'Shaughnessy, 2001: 1048). From a more cynical point of view, political marketing will often involve creating and selling a personality, image, authenticity, and/or vibe, rather than any issues or solutions to issues (CBC, 2010). At its most basic, the political marketing concept is about parties changing their behaviour to match what voters want. Additionally, it is important to stress that this is merely based on voters' perception, rather than whether or not there was actually any discernable success (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 53-54).

A final note on the market-oriented party is that it is not completely unique, and that it shares many similarities with the catch-all party and a Downsian rational choice model. Lees-Marshment herself acknowledges this likeness: "Rational-choice literature in the 1960s and after led to the assertion that the dominant goal of the major parties is to obtain control of government through long-term electoral success." She also accounts for minor parties that are unlikely to form a government, remarking that "smaller parties which do not aim to win control of the national government can be inclined to exert influence over the political agenda on behalf of one section of society" (Lilleker and Lees-Marshment, 2005). This is how marketing effectiveness is measured.

Lees-Marshment states that she has never claimed the model to be applicable to countries other than the UK, and thus this paper is going beyond her original intentions with the framework (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 36). On the other hand, she does make the claim that the

concept "is being used around the world" which infers that it certainly can be applied to other liberal-democracies (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 13). In any case, there is evidence to indicate that many of the same political marketing tactics and processes employed in Britain have also been applied by the Conservative Party of Canada (Pare and Berger, 2008).

While Thatcher was for the most part successful in her application of the political marketing concept, much of her success was due to the continuation of a product and later sales-oriented approach from Labour. Since Clement Atlee's government of 1945-1951, there had been what became known as the "post-war consensus" in Britain. Based on ideas of John Maynard Keynes, this was characterized by the nationalization of industry, full employment, and a strong welfare state; a "bottom-up" approach to creating and sustaining demand in the economy (Jones and Kavanagh, 2003: 42). However, this consensus faced challenges in the 1970's, culminating with mass strikes and the "winter of discontent". The stage was set for change: the new Conservative leader, Margaret Thatcher, and her party would become market oriented, utilizing a political marketing approach. Lees-Marshment explains this further: "Not only was marketing used in the design of the leader's image, it influenced policy to a greater extent than just setting the parameters." These efforts were met with product-oriented, and later sales-oriented approaches from Labour, who were reluctant to change their product, despite a change in electorate demands, or "the market" (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 88-95).

Although they would retain much of the popular vote, seat-wise and perception-wise the election of 1979 was a considerable blow to Labour, and would initiate their relegation to nearly two decades of opposition. With leader James Callaghan forming the party's strategy in its entirety himself, the party would take on an increasingly ideological or product-oriented approach, neglecting to utilize market intelligence or effectively respond to voter's demands (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 87-88). Lees-Marshment asserts this through a number of polls, showcasing the incongruence of Labour's platform with those desired by electors. For example: according to a BES poll on nationalization, 77% of voters were either opposed to further nationalization or in favour of denationalization (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 46). Nevertheless, Labour's platform would tout plans to nationalize even more firms and industry (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 45). Furthermore, the issues Labour would choose to focus on were not those of the highest priority to voters. This contrasts with that of the Conservative Party of Canada, whose policies were mostly in line with those issues voters identified as most important (Pare and Berger, 2008: 50).

One problem for Harper in 2004 that Callaghan of 1979 did not have was that of leadership image: Thatcher at this point in time was less popular than him (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 88-89). In 2004, Harper would face image difficulties, with the Liberals making efforts to brand him as an ideological extremist, adopting the theme of "our Canada" versus "Harper's Canada" (Ellis and Woolstencroft, 2004: 94-95). These branding issues would have to be dealt with if they were to ever form a government.

Under the leadership of Michael Foot in 1983, Labour would continue as a product-oriented party, of a similar kind to that of 1979. However, this time the results would be even worse, giving Thatcher the most decisive victory, and conceivably greatest mandate to govern, since that of Clement Atlee in 1945 (providently enough, as Atlee was ideologically-wise Thatcher's polar opposite). Again, the party's marketing intelligence would not influence

product design, and internal battles within the party between left and right would only exacerbate the problem. To make matters worse, the party suffered from a loss of MPs to form the new Social Democratic Party (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 111-112). In Canada, the Canadian Alliance—forerunner to the Conservatives—would nearly find themselves in the same situation, with a dozen MPs leaving to join the Democratic Representative Caucus in 2001 (Flanagan, 2007: 25).

Between the elections of 1983 and 1987, and with much prodding from new leader Neil Kinnock, Labour would successfully move to a sales-oriented approach. This resulted in the party retaining its previously decided product design, but also recognizing that those whose support they needed would not necessarily vote for such a product. Thus, they would attempt to persuade them (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 125). This is to say that Labour facilitated their previous product offering with a sales approach in 1987, employing marketing intelligence to inform the party on how best to persuade voters. Described by Lees-Marshment as "a perfect example of a Sales-Oriented Party", the party would conduct polling and focus group research, along with surveys of target groups and marginal seats. This research would more precisely divulge the gap that existed between what Labour was offering, and what the electorate actually wanted (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 125-126). However, divisions between trade unions, the National Executive Committee, and party membership would continue, making change more difficult. Labour advisor Philip Gould described the party as "at war with itself at every level" (Foley, 2002: 81). There was also immense resistance to adopting a market-oriented approach, with delegates voting to retain most of the same policies that had lost them the previous election (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 127). In spite of this, there were still some minor changes to the product. Thatcher's popular policy regarding the sale of council houses was finally accepted, for instance. Still, Labour continued to promise a further expansion in state ownership, among other policies, that the party knew—through market intelligence and past elections—were unpopular (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 129-130). Thus, a sales-oriented approach was the next best option for the party. This would consist of some minor alterations to their image, such as a new symbol, and presentational aspects designed to suit television, as well as new communication strategies, such as the use of mass media to gain publicity (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 129,131). In an attempt to improve their leader's standing, new television ads would present a warm and caring image of Kinnock (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 132), not unlike that manufactured for Harper after 2004 (Pare and Berger, 2008: 51). Unfortunately for Kinnock, these improvements were not enough, and Labour's electoral results would not significantly improve.

Labour's disappointing results in 1979, 1983, and 1987 would demonstrate the difficulty parties of a product and sales orientation can have when faced with competition of the market-oriented variety. Accordingly, Labour would attempt to move towards this approach between the 1987 and 1992 elections with some success. Lees-Marshment remarks that "in terms of market orientation, the parties were closer in this election than at any other" (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 138). Both parties would engage in perpetual marketing intelligence and communications, utilizing these to adjust their product (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 138-140). Kinnock's increased control over the party would allow for some policies to be changed to reflect electoral preferences. This included less emphasis on state intervention, favouring increased regulation instead, a reversal of defense policy, and a weaker relationship with the trade unions (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 141, 145). With polls having predicted a hung parliament, the results were surprising (Lees-Marshment, 2008:138). Lees-Marshment mostly chalks this loss out to electorate memory of Labour's failure in addressing voter demands in the past three elections,

with the impression persisting that the party was not ready to govern (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 167-168).

In all four of these elections, Lees-Marshment insists through polling data that the Conservatives' behaviour was perceived to be in line with electorate opinion, or at least more in line than Labour's (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 87-170). Whether or not this is true is extraneous to the party achieving electoral success. Perhaps Conservative politician, and former leader of the House of Lords, John Wakeham, can best sum up the egregious image problems that Labour would endure after nearly ten years of market-oriented Thatcher:

> … we had every hope that Labour's weaknesses would drag them down. They were socialists, in a world that had turned against socialism; union-dominated when unions are demons from the past, and widely seen as a party that was still unable to be trusted on Europe, defense, and nationalization; led by a man whom it appeared the electorate neither trusted nor respected; and, most of all, a still thinly disguised party of tax and spending addicts (Wakeham, 1995: 3).

Indeed, Lees-Marshment believes true conviction politics—those that can potentially go against the beliefs of the electorate—to be dead in Britain (2008: 123). However, it remains to be seen whether the same is true for Canada, where ideology may still play a major role (Pare and Berger, 2008: 48-49). In 2004 Harper too was confronted with a powerful incumbent: the Liberals had been in power for over a decade, and the Conservatives were still carrying the proverbial baggage of the Reform Party, with its populist, right-wing ideology that was known to be unpopular in the east (Marland, 2010: 6-7).

The story of Labour, self-proclaimed "New Labour" in 1997, is one of immense success for the party. Under the leadership of Tony Blair, the party became more united than ever, putting to use the tools of political marketing to great effect. The party moved to the center-left, with a focus on raising the standards of public services such as health and education through greater investment. Pledged policies were achievable, and the product that arose was effectively communicated to the electorate (Lees-Marshment, 2004: 22-24). Lees-Marshment declares that "[1997 Labour] remains the fullest example of a market-oriented party, following the model to the greatest degree of any party before or since" (2004: 20).

Still, the market-oriented approach does not always guarantee success (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 36) and "failing at just one or two marketing stages disqualifies a party from being [market-oriented]" (Marland, 2005: 72). Due to Canada's geography and first-past-the-post electoral system, even the amateur campaigns more characteristic of product-oriented parties can win seats so long as they are regionally concentrated. For example, the Bloc Quebecois and the Reform Party have been quite successful within Canada's party system, despite adopting mostly product or sales approaches (Marland, 2010: 19-20). Thus, the British experience of evolution from a product-, to sales-, to market-oriented party is a mould in which Canada may not fit. Alex Marland stresses the importance of financial and labour resources in determining whether or not a Canadian party will engage in "American-style political marketing", or "tried-and-true" methods such as comparative advertising (2003: 24).

Compared to Britain, the amount of research that has been done on political marketing in Canada is weak, and although the strategies are known, few have examined them through a marketing lens (Pare and Berger, 2008: 46). Marland supports this notion, affirming that innovations in Canadian electioneering often come from Australia, Britain, and especially the United States (2010: 19). Britain itself is notable for having contributed the Thatcher-Blair-generated model which has since been used to explain politics in Canada and beyond (see Lilleker and Lees-Marshment, 2005).

Throughout the 80's and 90's there was a painstakingly long reinvention of Labour taking place; nonetheless, this would pay off, and by the 1997 election the electorate would be fervent for the brand of New Labour. In contrast, the Conservative Party of Canada would make themselves electable to Canadians in less than two years, "reconfiguring itself and its political communication strategy in a manner that enhanced its appeal to the Canadian electorate" (Pare and Berger, 2008: 40). (To be fair, Labour was arguably compelled to change significantly more of their policies, with a large shift in ideology (real socialism to "socialism-lite"), to become a viable centrist option than the Conservatives. Moreover, Marland reiterates Gibson and Römmele's position that "well-funded, mainstream right-wing parties with a centralized power structure that recently lost an election are more likely to adopt professional marketing techniques" (Marland, 2010: 19; Gibson and Römmele, 2001: 31-43)) But was this reconfiguration done in accordance with the Lees-Marshment framework? Harper appears to think so, stating that "when we had the last elections afterwards we had a complete review of what we did, what we did right or wrong and then made the appropriate changes. And that's what we will do when this election is over" (Persichilli, 2006). This is the essence of what a market-oriented party is: utilizing market intelligence before product design (Lees-Marshment, 2004: 210).

The 2004 election would see the Conservatives coming from the right, allowing Martin's Liberals to adopt a stance and strategy similar to that of Chretien's in the 90's. Although the seminal Reform Party (later known as the Canadian Alliance Party) had already evolved from a product to sales orientation, their focus was still very much on right-wing voters (Marland, 2005: 62). Even after the merger with the Progressive Conservatives in late 2003 there was much skepticism of the party as a viable centrist option. The media too, would play a part in communicating concerns regarding Harper's social conservativism (Clarkson, 2004: 29). "Media mishaps" such as the "culture of defeatism" statement—referring to Atlantic Canada—would hinder the party in the region "at least until the beginning of the 2005-06 election" (Flanagan, 2007: 74-75). Additionally, Harper's off-base accusations that Martin was soft on child pornography would quickly backfire on the party (Ellis and Woolstencroft, 2004: 97). Perhaps the best avouchment of the party being too far right for Canadians—or at least, its perception as such—would be the decline in popular support for the newly merged party (Pare and Berger, 2008: 40). This support was recovered by 2006 (Pare and Berger, 2008: 55).

After 2004, marketing intelligence was used not only to communicate the Conservative's new centrist product, but also to define it. The policies produced were those most likely to appeal to those to the left of the party, rather than those "core voters" on the right, who would vote Conservative anyway (Pare and Berger, 2008: 49). This is a complete reversal of Labour's stance in 1979, where they would continue policies well to the left of Thatcher, leading to a situation

where Tory voters would completely oppose Labour's proposals, while a "significant majority" of Labour voters would support Thatcher's policy (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 89).

Between 2004 and 2006, at least a partial shift to the market-oriented party would take place, with the information gathered by marketing intelligence contributing to a more centrist agenda and a rebranding of Harper's leadership image (Pare and Berger, 2008: 51, 56). This would be followed by implementation of this product, with Conservative policies reflective of the concerns of their core segment of their electorate (those more likely to vote Conservative) and a demonstration of party unity in their ability to stay on message. Ellis and Woolstencroft note that "…there was a great interest in change but only if it was moderate, balanced, and circumspect" (2004: 87). To win the election, the Conservatives would have to convince the electorate that they were able to deliver such change.

Although some may argue that a party must adopt nearly every aspect of a market-oriented party to be classified as one (Marland, 2005: 72), within the confines of the Canadian context, the Conservatives between 2004 and 2006 are one of the closest examples of a Lees-Marshment-esque market-oriented party. Furthermore, their evolution from 2004 is a clearly visible one, with many of the more partisan aspects of their platform being dropped, as Labour would do after 1988 and especially 1992.

The communication of this product externally during the campaign also featured a number of innovations from 2004, predominantly concerning media relations. Pare and Berger observe how the Conservative Party took advantage of the media news cycle, successfully framing itself as speaking on behalf of citizens, and thereby making it more difficult for journalists to criticize them (2008: 54). A major part of this was accomplished through the choice to communicate just one policy announcement per day, over a period of nearly seven weeks. These policies were of an "easy-to-digest bullet form" (Flanagan, 2007: 255). This contrasted with 2004 when policy was announced at a far greater rate over a period of only two weeks. This strategy forced the Liberals to attempt to counteract these announcements rather than delivering their own. Marland also points out the intelligence of these tactics: by announcing policy each morning, Harper would "set the daily media agenda and put his opponents on reactive footing", "[by design] resonate with issue-based segments of the electorate", and would create "policy substance [that] contrasted with its competitors' lack of such content" (2010: 10). Such tactics allowed for the party to take control of the news agenda, with the Conservative Party receiving more positive coverage from the media. As one may expect, and at least partially in consequence of this positive media coverage, public opinion support would too, turn positive (Pare and Berger, 2008: 55).

The Conservative Party was also successful in framing itself in a positive light for the media. Nowhere else was this more visible than in the coverage of the Party leaders. For example, CTV coverage from just prior to the leadership debates described Martin as "[trying] to put on a brave face", while Harper was deemed to have "a big edge in momentum" (CTV, 2006). Of course, the Conservatives were assisted by a number of Liberal misfortunes, including the sponsorship scandal and a perception of Liberal corruption (Pare and Berger, 2008: 53). Nevertheless, it is clear that the Conservatives were more effective in communicating their latest product than the Liberals, and that this contributed to their electoral victory.

Another key to the Conservative victory was the successful delivery of a concise and easy to understand message that would emphasize the strengths of its platform. An additional benefit of this was a minimization of the possibility of candidates going off message. As this message was one that had been redesigned from 2004 based on proceeding market intelligence, it can be seen as further support for a Conservative market-oriented approach in the 2006 election (Pare and Berger, 2008: 52, 54). The election results themselves would show that the Conservative marketing efforts had paid off. The party gained a remarkable 7% of the popular vote from the 2004 election just 18 months prior, though they would fall short of a majority.

One could argue that the ideological shift to the center by the Conservatives was a mere continuation of a process that began with the Reform Party, and was continued by the Canadian Alliance, before finally being picked up by the unblemished Conservative Party. However, there is little evidence to indicate that these previous changes to the party were of the political marketing variety. Instead, Marland sees this as a move to a sales-oriented approach, or "marketing orientation", with the Canadian Alliance as a mere repackaging of the former Reform product (2005: 62).

The experience of New Labour and the Conservatives under Harper raises concerns that elections are no longer a contest between political ideology, but one of tactics and strategy. Another version of this is the observation that parties appear to care more about winning than they do about representing the electorate (Marland, 2010: 22). Both the hard left of Labour and hard right of the Conservatives would eventually come to terms with the idea of conceding certain policies they believed in if they were ever going to form a government. As previously stated, this is important as it "turns around traditional ideas about politics" as a contest of ideology, to one of not just marketing of policy, but adapting policy to suit "the market". Although it is well beyond the scope of this paper, the idea of political marketing is very much an extension of consumerism (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 8-10), and is as such vulnerable to its myriad of criticisms. There remain serious questions regarding whether or not voters should be treated as consumers within the political process (Lees-Marshment, 2008: 10-13), and whether market-oriented parties truly give the electorate what they want, or merely give the parties what they want (Pare and Berger, 2008: 58-59). Accusations that these developments do not follow the principles of democracy can be viewed as part of the "democratic deficit".

Despite the difference in context, there are many parallels between the British Labour Party's and the Canadian Conservative Party's rise to power. This involved a shift to the center, while maintaining their status as left- and right- wing parties respectively. Both would go through a painful process of abandoning former ideological beliefs, followed by marketing efforts to remove the perception of these beliefs among the electorate. This process took much longer for Labour than the Conservatives; however, both would eventually unite under their new leader and accept internally that policy sacrifices would have to be made if they were to ever form a government, thus overcoming their former difficulties through the successful adoption of a market-orientation.

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