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# Tories hope attack ads will put the election in their pocket

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Vote Conservative )

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Vote Ed, get an interesting new fashion accessory. Conservative Party, Author provided

The news today that Ed Miliband has ruled out forming a coalition with the SNP may come too late to limit the impact of the latest Tory attempt to illustrate that the Labour leader is a political lightweight.

And who knows? Maybe Miliband's decision to speak today is linked to the now immediately recognisable poster by the Conservatives which shows a giant sized Alex Salmond, the former leader of the SNP now standing for the Westminster seat of Gordon, looking down on a puppet-like Miliband perched comically in the breast pocket of his dark blue suit jacket.

The Conservative Party has a famously large election war-chest, far more money to spend than its Labour opponents. So they have decided to spend a large portion of it on outdoor advertising in the run-up to May 7.

This latest gambit – which effectively says: “Vote Labour, get SNP” was an interesting departure from the previous ad, which focused on the potential damage a Labour victory might do to the economy.

Many have pointed out that these are classic pieces of attack of attack advertising. Sebastian Payne in *The Spectator* got it spot on when he wrote that it: “suggests that the Tories are less interested in bigging up their own brand than they are in terrifying voters about the prospect of a Miliband government”.



Can you feel the fear? Conservative Party, Author provided

Which is to be expected – the ads were apparently created by M&C Saatchi, run by brothers Maurice and Charles who have been associated with the Tories for some 37 years and, over that period, have shown themselves to be the masters of highlighting the perceived inadequacies of Labour.

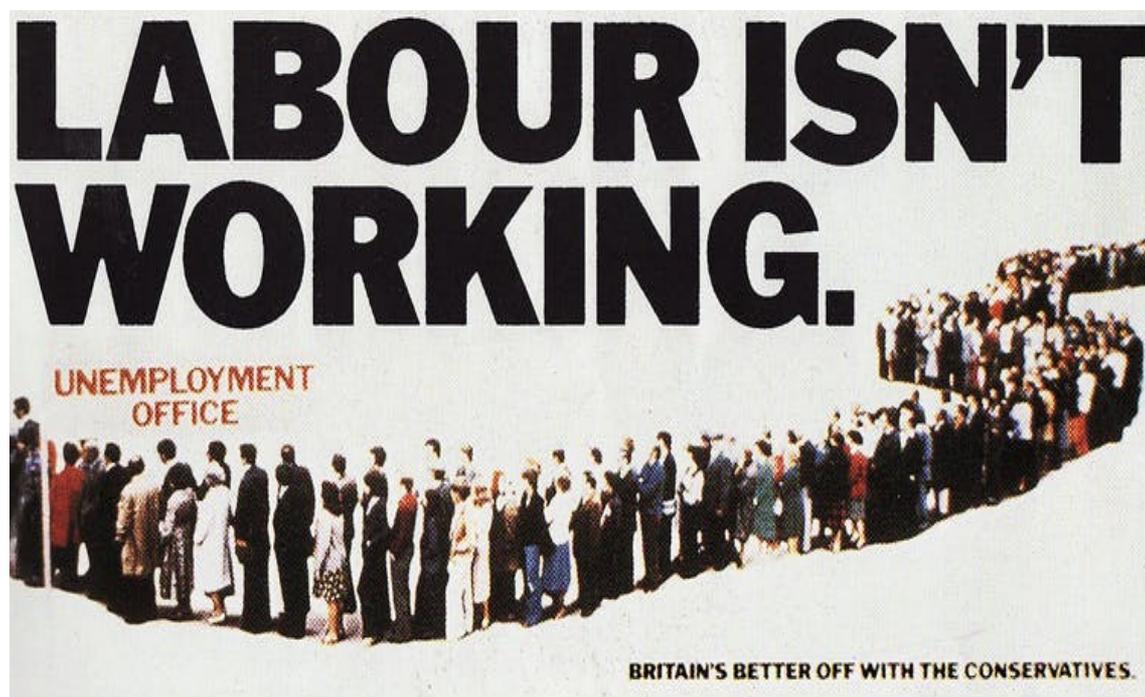
Was it not Tim (later Lord) Bell, the chairman of the agency in the 1980's, who said that the focus of the Tory party campaign in 1979 was to sharpen public dissatisfaction with Labour? Who, according to Sam Delaney, said that:

*There are only ever two ad strategies in an election. It's either the opposition saying: 'Time for a change', or the government saying: 'Britain's great again, don't let the other lot muck it up.' The rest is just details.*

The Saatchi agency's importance to political communication has been well documented and is difficult to overstate.

First employed by the Tories in 1978, Saatchi and Saatchi were the fastest-rising names in the advertising industry whose instructions from the party hierarchy were to sell a “in a most acceptable way”.

The idea of “selling a brand” represented a move away from conventional political communication. Policy was secondary and the “most acceptable way” to sell their brand was to simply highlight the deficiencies of the competition – in this case, Labour.



Was this the one not won it? M&C Saatchi, CC BY

## Keeping it simple

The advertising campaigns and party political broadcasts (PPBs) of the 1979 election focused not on Tory strengths, but on Labour’s failings: the public’s perceived fear of strikes, high unemployment, national bankruptcy and a general fear of socialism as an entity.

Bell also saw Saatchi’s task as converting policy, as decided by Tory central office, into key phrases, visual ideas and key words. He envisaged a target group of potential key voters – women, skilled workers and first-time electors. Thus, “inflation” became “prices”, “unemployment” became “jobs”. Assertions of policy were discarded in favour of simple statements: “It’s time for change” and “You have a choice”.

Research from Tory focus groups indicated that this was the way in which women, skilled workers and first time voters thought and articulated their political feelings. So, in effect, Bell told people exactly what they wanted to hear and nothing more. A phrase that may well sum up the Conservative campaign as a whole.

The “tone” of the broadcasts was of utmost importance to Bell. He wanted the voice adopted by everyone to be warm, confident and, importantly, exciting. The voice had to be warm in order to engage public sympathy - to talk with people rather than at them. The Conservative



Party had been for so long perceived as uncaring and cold. This had to change. The voice had to be confident in order to establish the Tories as fit for office. And the voice had to be exciting – with excitement comes hope, with hope comes assurance. This would contrast effectively with the images of labour mismanagement.

The broadcasts themselves were highly polished affairs. The first, transmitted on April 19, was technically, visually and contextually innovative. It was a satirical film portraying runners at an athletic track representing the nations of Britain, Japan, France and Germany. This action was intercut with graphics and the authoritative, confident and warm voice relaying the news that under Labour inflation was the worst that it had been since the great plague. The film ended with an address by Thatcher, kept until last for maximum impact, who informed the nation that not only should they hope for a better life, they should vote for one.

The second broadcast was almost apocalyptic in its overture, when the nation was shown the worst available images of the winter of discontent. Rubbish was piled high the streets, graves were undug, hospitals picketed and airports closed. Again graphics were used as a disembodied voice (not “warm” but menacing) evoked Callaghan’s “Crisis? What crisis?” phrase of 1978.

A couple was shown in the dock of a courtroom. They were found guilty. Guilty – of wanting better schooling for their children. Guilty – of wanting the option to purchase their own home. Guilty – of wanting to make a profit. Sentence – nationalisation. This was the politics of shock and negativity, with tactics adapted from the American style of presidential politics.

## Soap-powder politics

The Labour leadership was quick to accuse the Conservatives of selling politics like soap powder, yet it also sought to use the skills of advertisers. However, there was a lack of professionalism that resulted in the first party-political broadcast being prepared in just five days. By contrast the Tories had filmed all theirs, with the exception of the final address, weeks before the campaign began. They even had three others that they did not use. Ultimately, Labour had to record four broadcasts in as many weeks.

However, the question of whether Saatchi and Saatchi significantly aided the Conservative victory in 1979 is perhaps irrelevant. The point is that the methods and techniques used by the agency changed the face of political advertising irrevocably. The fact that the Tories won means everything. If they had lost, then their whole campaign would have been analysed endlessly and scapegoats found.

They had begun the campaign determined to sell, and they sold. The political process was again in transition and organisations such as Saatchi and Saatchi were part of the process – and in the future, part of the body politic.



Not for nothing was Tim Bell a life-long friend of Lady Thatcher. Ian West/PA Wire

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