

Chronicle of a failure foretold

Coverage of Iain Duncan Smith and other political protagonists on BBC and ITV TV news 01/2001 - 10/2003

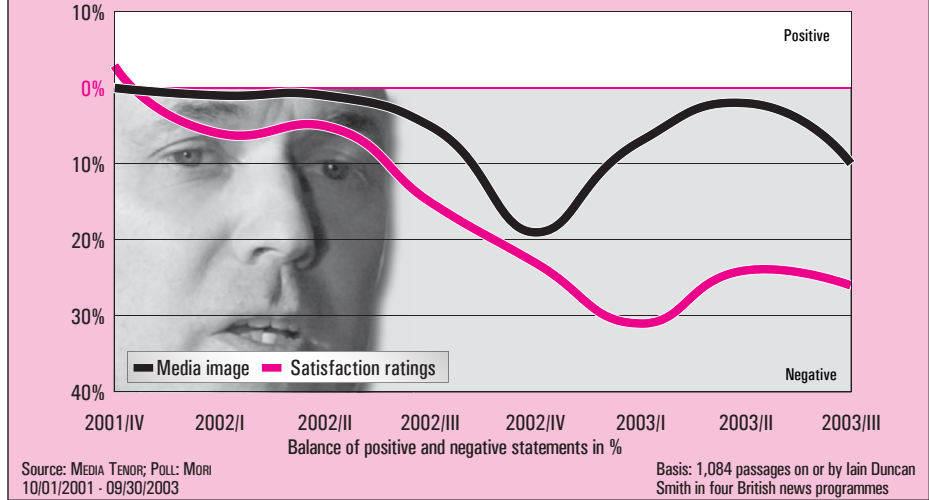
The Conservative Party's decision to oust Iain Duncan Smith as party leader could not have come as a surprise given the media image of party leader and party during the past two years. Like his predecessor William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith failed to capitalise from the negative image of Tony Blair's government in the media.

While TV news reports on Tony Blair have continuously deteriorated since the final quarter of 2002, Iain Duncan Smith's media image recovered only slightly and turned more unfavourable just before the party conference in October. His image in opinion polls, such as MORI's satisfaction ratings, worsened correspondingly to his image in the media. The main factor in the negative presentation of the Tory party leader in the TV evening news programmes of BBC and ITV was the increasingly focused coverage on his personality and leadership. Since late 2002 the share of reports on Duncan Smith's personal abilities oscillated between nine and sixteen per cent, culminating in the coverage of the Tory party conference in October, when one quarter of all reports on Duncan Smith discussed his leadership skills and personality. Despite the much covered questions regarding Tony Blair's honesty and integrity in connection with the row over weapons of mass destruction and the Hutton inquiry, only less than five per cent of all news reports mentioning the Prime Minister discussed his personal characteristics and leadership.

The way Iain Duncan Smith was presented in the media did not only raise questions about the strength of his leadership, it also shifted the attention away from a debate over political issues. While only 50 per cent of all statements by or about Iain Duncan Smith were concerned with political issues such as foreign affairs, immigration, Europe or taxation, the share was much higher for his political counterparts Charles Kennedy (61 per cent) and Tony Blair (82 per cent). The low share of news on political issues in connection with Iain Duncan Smith presented him not only as a weak leader but also his party as lacking in ideas. Duncan Smith lasted two years, one month and 16 days as Tory party leader. During this period IDS did not receive a positive media presentation in TV news, in terms of a higher number of positive than negative mentions, in any quarter since 2001. Only

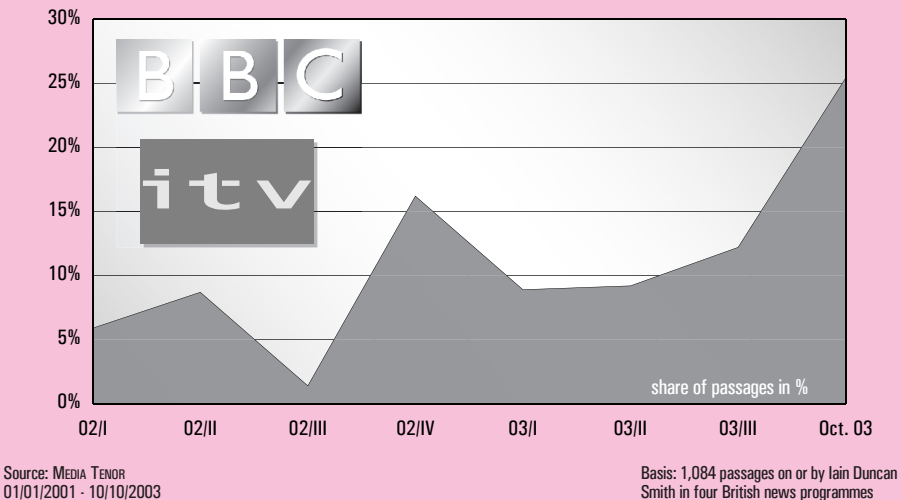
News coverage supported negative image

Rating of Duncan Smith in TV news and polls 10/01 - 09/03



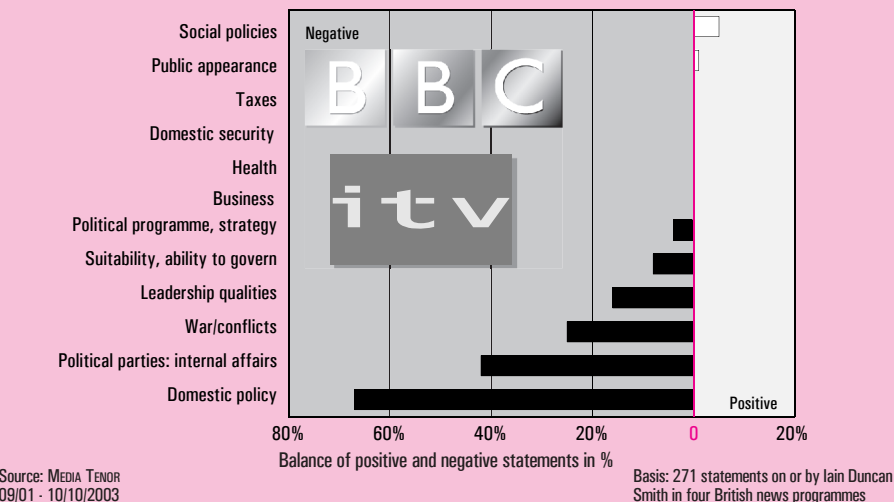
Raising the leadership question

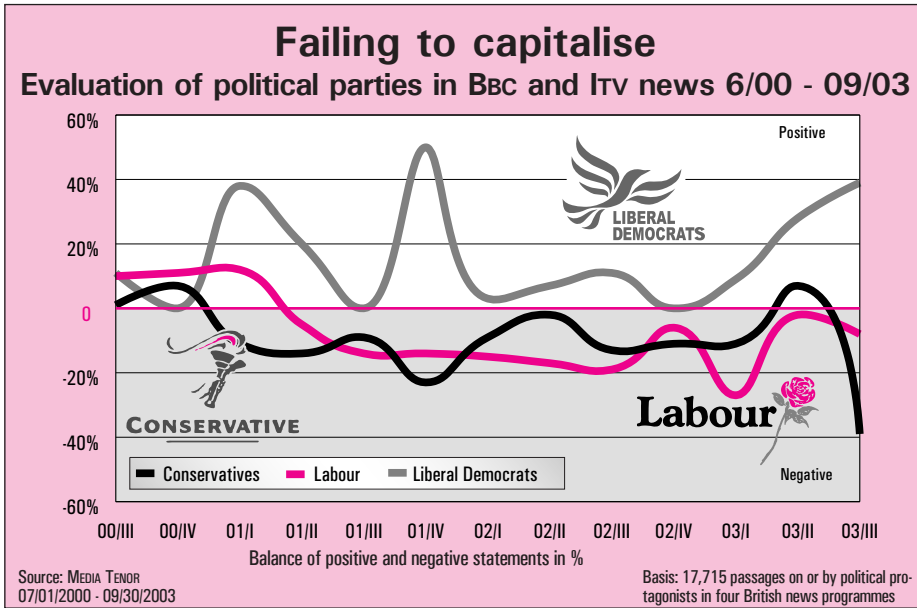
Share of IDS's personality and leadership coverage on BBC/ITV



Lack of leadership and ideas

News coverage of IDS during the party conference on BBC/ITV

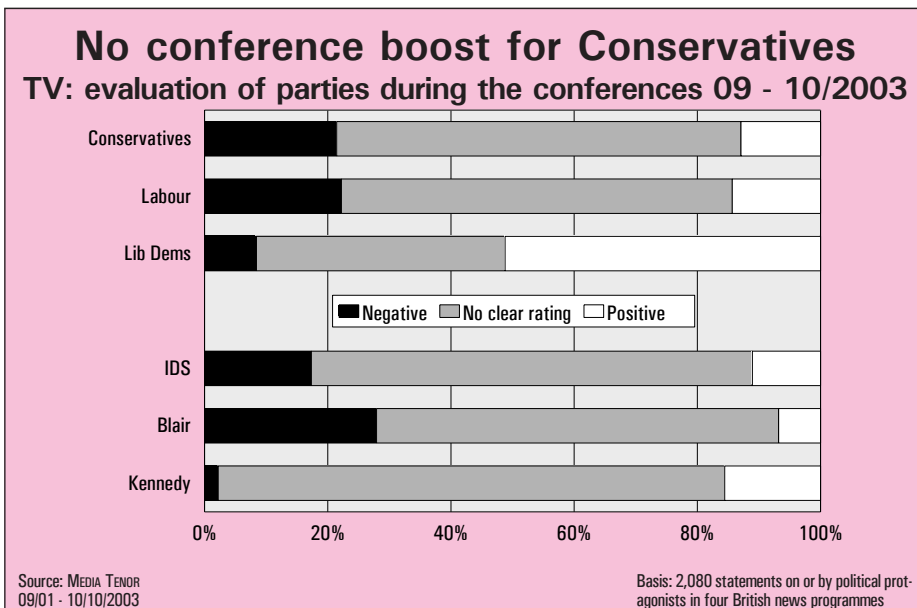




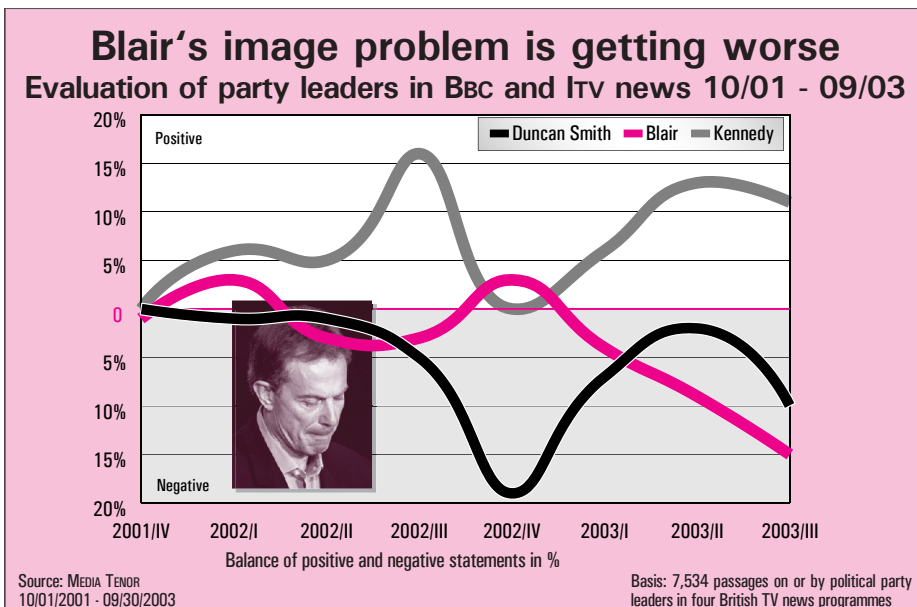
in two months did he generate more positive than negative news reports. He shared this poor media image with his predecessor William Hague. Neither party leader generated positive news for themselves or their parties, despite similar image problems for Tony Blair and his government at the time. In their respective last nine months as party leaders, William Hague and Iain Duncan Smith received an overall negative image whilst Tony Blair underwent an image crisis as well. It was this failure to capitalise from a weakened position of the government in the media that generated the pressure to dismiss Duncan Smith.

Unsuccessful Tory conference

The number of TV news reports on party politics shows that the party conferences are the main events of the year for political parties to generate media coverage. At no other time during the year will the Conservative Party or the Liberal Democrats receive as much media attention and actually exceed the volume of coverage of the government or the Prime Minister. In 2003, the share of opposition parties in the TV news bulletins on BBC and ITV sunk to a low. Less than 10 per cent of the party political coverage focused on the opposition. Party conferences represent therefore a major opportunity to raise awareness in the public about party political programmes and set the media agenda.



The Conservative party did not realise this aim as it became apparent that TV news programmes set their own media agenda with regard to party conferences. During the party conferences TV news featured much less information on political issues than on party-internal affairs and personal-ity topics. In general, the share of political issues being discussed in the news dropped for all parties to 40 per cent down from 89 per cent before the party conferences. As a result a party lacking unity would be facing much closer scrutiny of its internal affairs than usual. The announcement during the conference that 25 letters from Tory MPs calling for the dismissal of Iain Duncan Smith were to be collected was therefore timely and did not miss the effect of generating a substantial amount of media pressure on the Tory party leader and the party members. At a time when the „quiet man“ of British politics aimed to turn up the volume and revive the Conservative bid for a term in government, the TV news of



BBC and ITV concentrated on his leadership skills and the question of his suitability as Prime Minister. Coverage of the Conservative Party during the party's conference was therefore less favourable than media reports on Labour or the Liberal Democrats during their party gatherings.

TV news determine Blair's successor

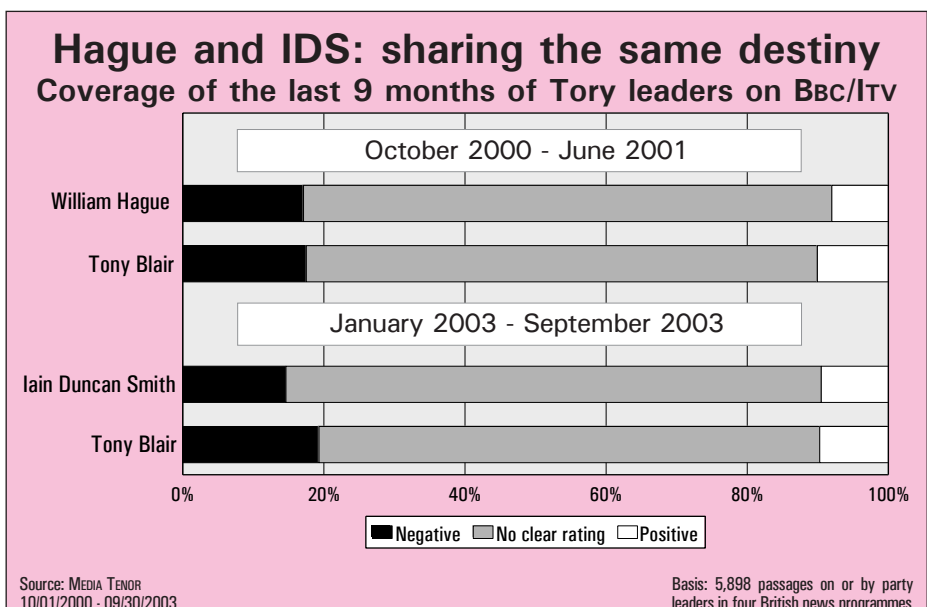
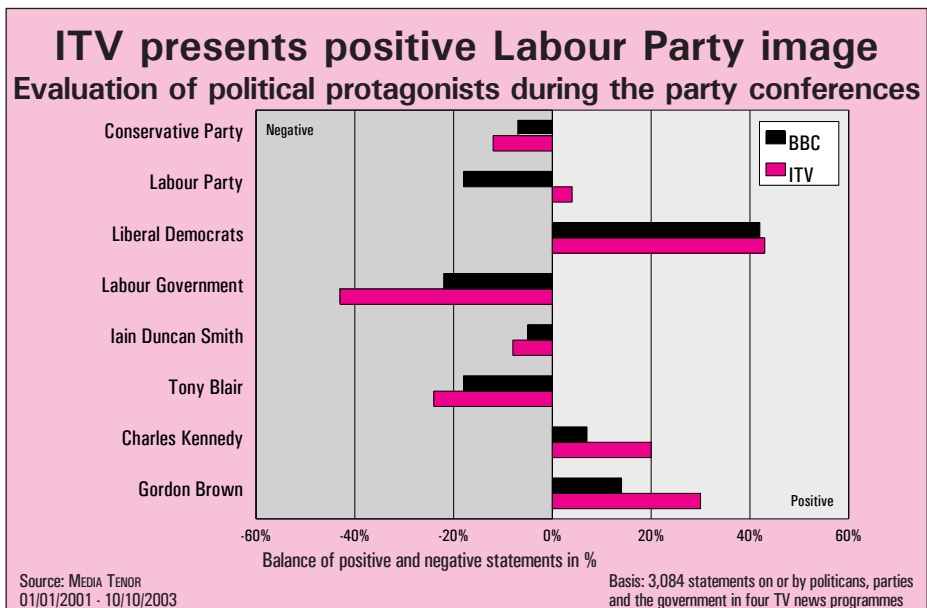
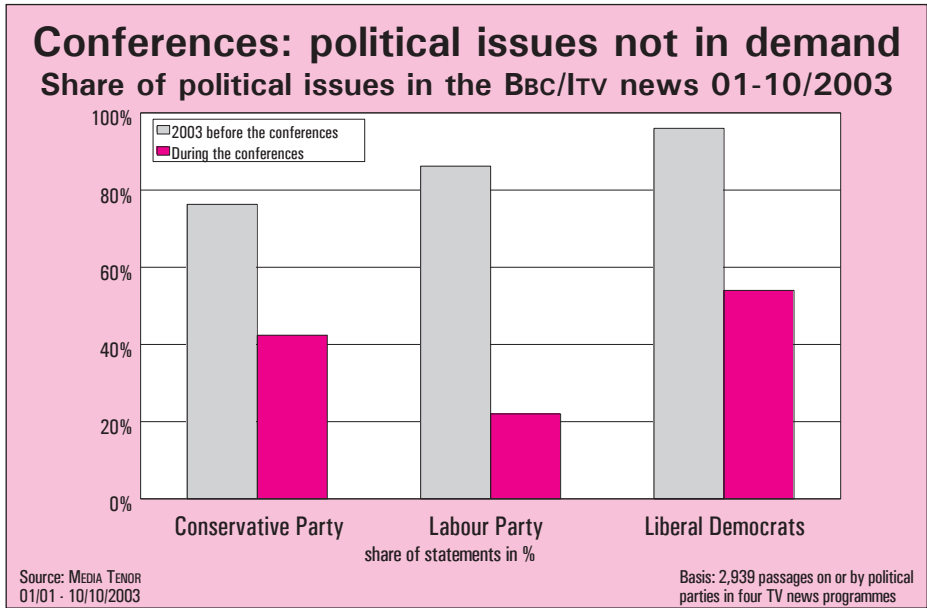
While the statements about political parties and politicians had a stronger positive or negative bias in ITV news, BBC and ITV generally assessed the political protagonists in the same way as far as a surplus of positive or negative statements is concerned. The only notable exception was the Labour Party, which was presented with a majority of favourable mentions on ITV, but a rather critical image in the sum of all statements on BBC. The reason for this difference in the presentation of the Labour Party is based on ITV's focus on "old Labour" which received a rather positive presentation.

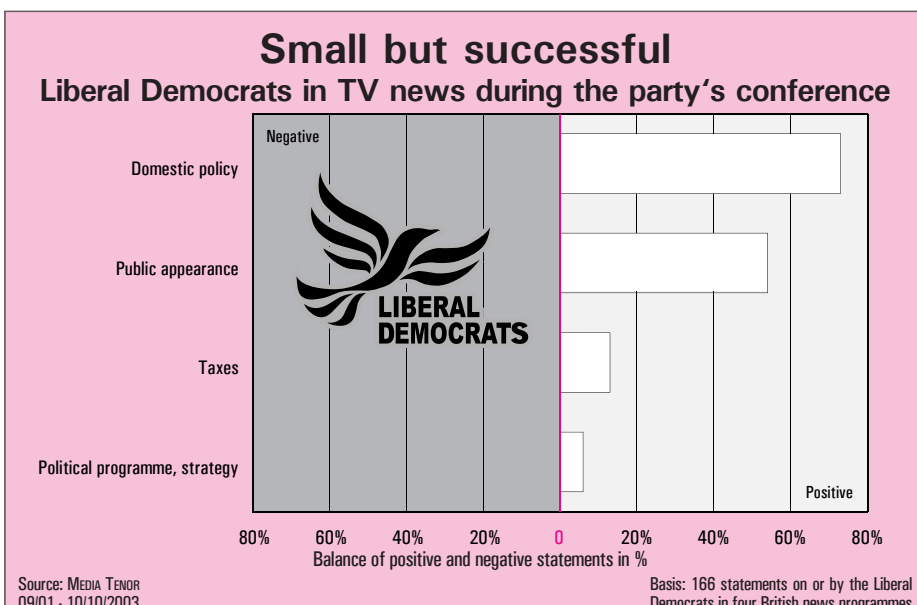
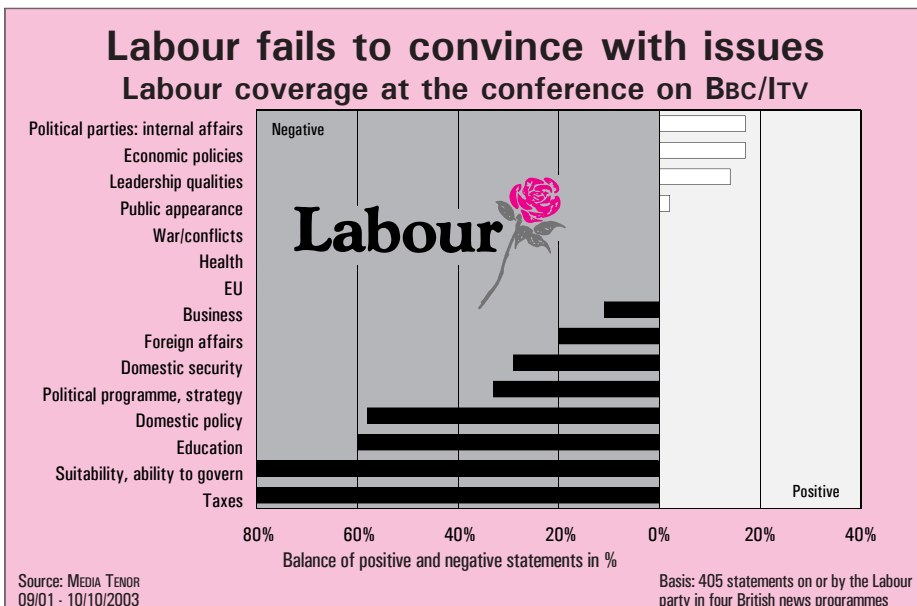
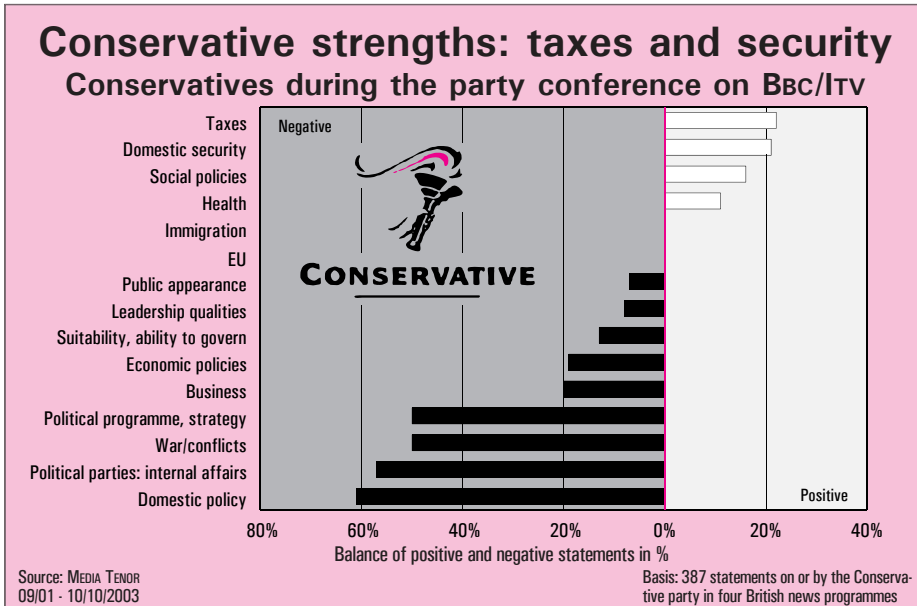
It also highlights a potential leadership question in the Labour Party. Tony Blair's deteriorating image in the third quarter of 2003 and reports of health troubles have caused speculation about the Prime Minister's ability and willingness to run for a third term. His possible successor has already been found by the TV news. Gordon Brown's speech received a high degree of media attention, notably his frequent use of the term "Labour" as opposed to Tony Blair's "new Labour". The image of the Chancellor on BBC and ITV is on a high, exceeding even that of Charles Kennedy, a feat that Tony Blair has achieved in only one quarter during the past two years. Based on his record as Chancellor and due to the healthy state of the economy Gordon Brown did not receive a single negative mention during September and October.

Struggle for positive news

In spite of the positive image on ITV the economy was the only positive political issue associated with the Labour party in TV news. The party's leadership and public appearance was not as much in question as that of the Conservative party but a lack of positive policy issues in the media is apparent. TV news featured a majority of negative statements on the party's politics concerning foreign affairs, education, taxes and domestic policies.

If the recently found unity of the Conservative party is going to last under the leader-





ship of Michael Howard, the weakness of the Labour government in the media could be exploited by the communication of credible policies through the media.

During the party conference the Tories already established a positive media image with regard to taxes, domestic security, social policies and health. Irrespective of the ongoing image crisis of the government, the years under Hague and Duncan Smith have shown that only if the Conservatives can be perceived in TV news with a long-lasting favourable assessment of their policies and leadership, will they be able to increase their chances at the polls.

One party that has achieved a favourable presentation in the news before and during their party conference were the Liberal Democrats. Far away from leadership discussions and with momentum from a recent by-election success as well as favourable polls, the Liberal Democrats managed more than other parties to talk about political issues. More than 50 per cent of the coverage was dedicated to political issues, whereas reports from the Labour conference contained only 22 per cent of information on political issues (Conservatives 42 per cent). Still, of all issues debated in Brighton only domestic policy and taxes found their way into the news.

This indicates the party's general problem: a lack of media coverage. Unlike the Labour and Conservative Party's struggle for positive coverage, the Liberal Democrats will need to establish their positive media image on a wider-ranging and higher volume of coverage. The small amount of coverage dedicated to the Liberal Democrats is an indicator of the significance with which they are regarded by the national broadcasting media. As the agenda setting research has proven over the years, the topics and organisations that are salient in the media are also regarded as important by the public and the issues and protagonists cut from the media agenda are less significant in the public mind.

Basis

Media: BBC SIX O'CLOCK NEWS, BBC TEN O'CLOCK NEWS, ITV EARLY EVENING NEWS, ITV NEWS AT TEN

Period: 01.07.2000 - 10.10.2003

Analysis: All statements on or by political parties, party leaders and the government in British TV news.

Polls: Mori, share of positive - share of negative responses to the question of satisfaction with party leaders aggregated per quarter