

Reviews

The Political Brain: The role of emotion in deciding the fate of the nation

Drew Westen

PUBLIC AFFAIRS, 2007

Reviewed by Jonathan Rutherford

What will be the fate of Labour in 2008? There was a sequence of events in 2007 that stick in my mind. In his speech to the Labour Party conference, Gordon Brown confidently promoted himself as a stentorian father of the nation. He would rise above the political fray, bringing to his people 'British jobs for British workers'. And then he U-turned on the election and was faced with David Cameron's verbal pummelling during Prime Minister's Question Time. Visibly shaken by the younger man, he fumbled his way back into his seat. The scene spoke more than words ever could about defeat. Brown won the rational argument, but he lost the emotional conflict. In the game of politics reasoned argument cannot match a powerful symbolic message. And the story ran like an oedipal drama of the patriarch deposed that will have resonated in the psyches of those who witnessed it. Brown, and with him the New Labour project, had just lost the future. Temporary or otherwise, it was a defining moment that shifted the political advantage to the Conservative Party.

If we want to understand the significance of these kinds of symbolic events, Drew Westen's excellent book is a good place to start. *The Political Brain* is about how voters' political choices are shaped by their emotions. Emotions are not tangential to our lives, they are the foundation of language and rational thought. First a feeling then a word. Emotions, conscious and unconscious, bind individuals into groups and society. What drives people is not rational thought and calculation but wishes, fears and values. Westen's central point is that successful political campaigns 'compete in the marketplace of emotions and not primarily in the marketplace of ideas.' Words, images, sounds, music, backdrop, tone of voice are likely to be as significant to the success of a political campaign as its content. We need to pay close attention to the positive and negative images and emotions that are becoming associated with candidates in the minds of voters, whether or not they are aware of them. In other words, successful political campaigning is about being attuned to what is being felt, but remains unspoken.

Westen is a frustrated Democrat. His book is a debunking of a Democratic Party politics which has been wedded to rationality and rationalising argument: 'We're a party that talks like technocrats when people are asking us questions about the meaning of life', he says. Rationalisations are the 'post-hoc smoke that billows from emotional fires'.

Arguing about the rationality of the opposition's rationalisations is attacking the wrong target. Voters tend to ask a hierarchy of four questions that determine who they will vote for: 'How do I feel about the candidate's party and its principles?'; 'How does this candidate make me feel?'; 'How do I feel about this candidate's personal characteristics, particularly his or her integrity, leadership, and compassion?'; and 'How do I feel about this candidate's stand on issues that matter to me?' Candidates who focus their campaigns toward the top of the hierarchy and work their way down generally win.

Successful candidates tell emotionally compelling stories about who they are and what they believe in. They can move people to tears, laughter, anger, compassion. Candidates who start at the bottom of the hierarchy, presenting voters with position statements and laundry lists of facts and figures, trusting them to weigh up the information and reach a rational decision, generally lose. Alongside a main narrative, successful candidates offer a number of key signature issues that illustrate their values and principles. These signature issues should derive from the main narratives of both the party and candidate and they should have the same narrative structure.

Westen accuses the Democrat establishment of not only failing to recognise this hierarchy, but also of failing to use cutting edge technology and scientific data. He vents his frustration on the 'tone-deaf' Presidential campaigns of Al Gore and John Kerry. Both were heavily influenced by the veteran Democrat strategist Bob Shrum, who is the focus of Westen's ire. This is reason alone for reading the book because Shrum is a friend of Philip Gould and close to Gordon Brown, who takes his advice. He recently spent time as a paid research fellow at the Smith Institute. Westen describes him as a man who has 'lost one presidential contest after another, using the same failed tactics each time.' He reserves particular contempt for the vacuous Kerry campaign slogan: 'Together, we can do better.'

By contrast Westen shows grudging respect for Republican strategists like Karl Rove and Frank Luntz who turn emotionally neutral language into turns of phrase and metaphors with rich emotional overtones. Luntz, he says, has not only a good ear for words that activate emotions, but also a good understanding of scientific method. He made his name in 1994 when he transformed Republican fortunes with Newt Gingrich's 'Contract with America', and went on to turn the Republican campaign to cut Estate Tax into a populist revolt by redefining it as a 'death tax'. Luntz's arts have been employed in the UK in commissions for *Newsnight* and as an adviser to David Cameron. Rumours in the blogosphere link Luntz and Cameron as contemporaries at Oxford. Luntz's *Newsnight* focus group on potential Tory leaders was viewed by many as the clincher of Cameron's success. Casting one's mind back over 2007 it has been Cameron who has eclipsed Labour with his re-inventions and political poaching: his claim to the green agenda, a speech on sexual violence against women. His call for a 'progressive alliance' as a disrupting incursion into Brown's 'progressive consensus' exposed its vacuity. Who isn't for 'progress'? The gamut now stretches right across the political spectrum.

Luntz's method is simple. He pays close attention to non-verbal communication and the way images, words and phrases resonate in the unconscious. The associations that link together thoughts, smells, memories, sounds, are familiar to the advertising industry which has been using them for years to manipulate people's emotions. But word and image associations are also widely used by the tabloid press, and while the right employ them in politics, the left has clung to its belief in the superior force of rational argument.

Westen's book reveals the weakness of this position. He explains the importance of a candidate's 'curb appeal', the feeling voters get when they first see a candidate on TV. They form an emotional impression from facial expressions and body language. Westen gives the examples of John Edwards' nervous curling up of the right corner of his mouth, and Howard Dean's immobile neck, both characteristics which led to negative associations amongst voters. With Edwards, facial asymmetry prompts unconscious dislike. During television debates Dean fails to turn to his opposite number or he twists his entire body, creating an impression of his being tense and 'inflexible'.

People are on the whole ambivalent about conflictual issues such as race, homosexuality, migration or social welfare payments. Conscious values of tolerance and fairness are often contradicted by unconscious aversions and prejudices. Dyed-in-the-wool haters are a minority, people's better natures can be appealed to. However the question is how to appeal to voters' more enlightened conscious values without activating their unconscious prejudices. These unconscious prejudices are social realities: white people raised in a post-imperial, racist culture harbour racist feelings and racialised fantasies; men have misogynistic feelings about women; straight people can feel aversion toward gay people; the middle classes feel fear and contempt toward the working class. These are usually private and shaming feelings that, increasingly, people do not broadcast to others. However they can be goaded out into public discourse, and the right are adept at this kind of provocation. The left know it, they secretly fear popular bigotry and so retreat into silence or call foul when the right play dirty and unleash it. Westen argues that the electoral failure of the Democrats has been their evasion of these cultural fault-lines. Retreating from them has allowed the right to frame the terms of the debate and define the language, and so tip people's ambivalent feelings in their direction.

This goes to the heart of Westen's message to the Democrats: be bold and be truthful, take a principled stand and avoid hedging and defensiveness. Go straight to the heat, tackle the controversial issues head on. Get in your 'counterpunch' first. The way a politician responds to an opponent's first attack sends a crucial signal to both the public and the opposition. Never let the other side create emotional associations without countering them. Even a trivial attack left unanswered can become powerful. And when you hear the opposition employing euphemisms, you know they're hiding a vulnerability.

This is all good advice for a British Labour Party which has spent ten electorally successful years burying social-democratic values. Westen's book is filled with illustrations from US electoral campaigns and frequently resorts to the language of American patriotism. This will make many on the British left suspicious about adopting his ideas. The commercialised electioneering of the US is seen as the biggest culprit in reducing politics to presentation, personality and media spin, serving to disguise ideological and class interests. A left politics must articulate empirical reality. But this misses Westen's point about the influence of emotions and the unconscious. Political preferences are not solely determined by material interests – working class Toryism has been central to the electoral success of the Conservative Party, and Labour has relied on a significant progressive fraction of the middle classes. Britain has a different culture and political system to the US, but developments here over the last three decades only strengthen the value of Westen's argument. Our tribal political loyalties organised around the two classes have lost some of their cultural tenacity. Politics has become more ethical and individualised and rooted in a

diversity of lifestyles. Parties with their singular, often rather obsessive, cultures are a political home to ever fewer numbers. The electoral system and our archaic institutions of representative democracy have lost popular confidence and become disconnected from people's lives. Sections of the electorate, disconnected from traditional class loyalties and political identifications, have become more fluid and unpredictable in their voting patterns.

This conjuncture requires reform of our political institutions and electoral system. It also means doing electoral politics in ways that utilise new technologies and modern forms of communication, but which do not simply reproduce the ersatz world of advertising. Increasingly politicians and also political movements must come to embody a set of ethical values, create a tone, a timbre that is capable of resonating in hearts and minds. Politics is not a battle for the centre ground. It is a battle for people's imaginations. Labour needs a cultural revolution of its own in order to establish the kind of deep and long hegemony which will bring the neo-liberal era to an end. Westen's book provides some important ideas to help achieve this.

Jonathan Rutherford is Professor of Cultural Studies at Middlesex University and editor of *Soundings*. His latest book is *After Identity* (Lawrence and Wishart, 2007).