

Sleaze or clear blue water?¹: The evolution of corporate and pressure group representation at the major UK party conferences

Phil Harris and Andrew Lock
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The Manchester Metropolitan University, Faculty of Management and Business, Aytoun Campus, Aytoun Street, Manchester, M1 3GH, UK; tel: +44 (0)161 247 3727; fax: +44 (0)161 247 6301; e-mail P.Harris@mmu.ac.uk

Dr Phil Harris is Chairman of the UK-based Academy of Marketing, and a member of the Senate and International Board of Trustees of the of the Chartered Institute of Marketing and Global Marketing Board of the American Marketing Association. He is Co-Director of the Centre for Corporate and Public Affairs at Manchester Metropolitan University Business School. He is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing, Institute of Public Relations and Royal Society of Arts. He is a past Vice Chairman of one of the UK political parties and has stood as a candidate for both the EU and UK Parliaments. He has been a political adviser in the last five UK general elections.

He is co-editor of the Journal of Public Affairs and a member of a number of various editorial and advisory boards. He has over 100 publications in the area of communications, lobbying, political marketing, relationship marketing and international trade in such journals as the European Journal of Marketing, Journal of Communication Management, Management Decision, Journal of Marketing Management, Journal of Psychology and Marketing and Journal of General Management. Dr Harris coined the phrase 'Machiavellian Marketing' to describe modern campaigning and pressure group activity as an integral part of modern marketing management.

Dr Andrew Lock, BA MSc PhD CIMgt MBCS FSS FCIM FIDM FRSA is Professor of Marketing and Business Administration and Dean of the Business School at the University of Leeds. His current research interests are in marketing communications, political marketing and the management of business education. He graduated from Leeds in French returning in 2000 after 30 years to be Dean of the Business School, having been previously Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Dean of Faculty at Manchester Metropolitan University. He is the immediate past Chair of the Association of Business Schools, which represents the great majority of business schools in the UK. His work has been published, inter alia, in the Journal of Marketing Management, the European Journal of Marketing, the Journal of Advertising Research, the Journal of the OR Society, and Management Learning.

ABSTRACT

There has been growing academic and public interest in corporate political lobbying in both the UK and EU in recent years. In Britain, links between politicians and commercial interests have been one of the areas examined by the Committee on Standards in Public Life ('the Nolan Committee' and now 'the Neill Committee'). A visible but under-researched aspect of political lobbying by

firms and other groups is the range of activities that take place at annual party conferences. An exhaustive study of these activities at the three main British party conferences between 1994–97 is reported, covering the period from Tony Blair's first appearance as party leader to the aftermath of the 1997 General Election. There is clear growth of visible lobbying, particularly at the Labour conferences, over the period leading up to the election, and a dropping off in 1997; particularly at the Conservative conference. The implications of the results for organisations, and particularly for public affairs practitioners, are considered.

KEYWORDS: *lobbying, public affairs, political parties, party funding, sponsorship, marketing, exhibitions, pressure groups, ethics*

INTRODUCTION

The links between commercial interests, politicians and political parties have attracted particular attention in the past decade. One manifestation of the level of public concern about undue influence on our elected representatives is the Committee on Standards in Public Life, chaired by Lord Nolan, which published its first report in May 1995. There is a limited but growing literature on the subject, especially in the pressure group and public relations research areas (O'Shaughnessy 1990; Jordan 1991; Richardson 1993; Harris 1994; Grant 1995 and Harris *et al.* 1999a). In the management and marketing literature, however, there has been little published in this crucial strategic area, yet its importance is clearly recognised (Harris and Lock 1996 and Harris *et al.* 1999b).

This paper examines the growth of political lobbying by companies and pressure groups with a particular focus on the annual conferences of the three major political conferences from 1994–97. The 1994 Labour conference, Tony Blair's first, attracted the interest of senior British management, paralleling extensive media coverage and unusually high numbers of international and

corporate interests evaluating the new leadership. For example, it was attended by the CEOs of the British Airports Authority (BAA), British Airways and Sainsbury. The paper outlines the development of corporate and pressure group representation in the period leading up to the May 1997 general election, and the aftermath at the conferences in the autumn of 1997. It quantifies the extent and growth of commercial exhibitions at the three major party conferences over the period and attempts to estimate the range of interests and extent of commercial lobbying through other means on the fringes of the conferences.

The three major British political parties, Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat, hold their principal party conferences annually in September and October. They generally alternate between Blackpool, Bournemouth and Brighton, though the Labour conference has now deserted Blackpool.

As well as showing the growth of commercial and pressure group representation over the period this is broken down by organisational categories for each conference. The impact of the lead-up to the general election and perceptions about the likely winner are clearly visible. The present analysis is set in the context of a review of the evolution of commercial political lobbying in the UK and is an analysis of the reasons for the growth of this activity. An analysis is made of the extent and the way in which political lobbying at party conferences is becoming a significant part of public relations and marketing communication practice and an explicit part of an organisation's public affairs strategy.

PARTY CONFERENCE LITERATURE

Much has been written and broadcast about the activities, events, movements, individuals, psychology, design, political management and even the ambience of the principal UK party conferences in recent years. The bulk of the material that has appeared has

been written and or presented by well-known political columnists, sketch writers, specialist journalists and broadcasters. Most of what has been produced has been of a commentary nature on recent or current events for short-term press or media coverage. Occasionally a more reflective piece has emerged from this source on policy development, image and the behaviour of politicians and parties (qv Day 1993).

Fairlie (1968) presents a broad historical perspective of party conferences over a 20-year period and more recently Morris (1991) gives a useful focused account of the Conservative one (they were then the party in government). Jones (1995), a regular BBC political correspondent, added useful anecdotal evidence on the workings of spin doctors at conferences. Political scientists have focused on party conference and rally management, communication with the media and the electorate (O'Shaughnessy 1990; McNair 1995). The UK literature is, however, still relatively undeveloped compared to that in the USA (see for example Bernays 1955; Perry 1968; Agranoff 1976; Sabato 1981 and Denton 1985).

Politicians published memoirs and reflections can also be a useful source of comment on party conferences (Lawson 1992; Baker 1993; Thatcher 1993; Benn 1994; Howe 1995 to name but a few) but need to be used selectively and with a degree of circumspection and detachment. Roberts (1995) has commented that it is amazing how many British politicians have written their diaries or autobiographies in the past five years, apparently recalling vividly every incident and conversation over sometimes 20 or more years with incredible clarity.

The prime thrust of this research has been to analyse the growth of business and interest group activity and its relationship to the management and marketing disciplines (Harris 1994; Harris and Lock 1996). Research on party conferences from this perspective is very limited.

Prior to 1994 the authors had attended over 20 party conferences in the UK since 1977. One served for three years on the conference organising committee of one of the parties and its national executive for a further five. This experience has been useful in enabling the authors to gain access to the party conferences, conduct interviews, amass material and research and begin to put together a realistic picture of commercial and pressure group interests at party conferences and the distinct cultures of the three party conferences. Fairlie (1968: 214) has commented that there is a distinctness about the parties and their members 'Moving from one party conference to the other is like moving from one house at the zoo to another. The animals, in each of them, may be quadrupeds and carnivores; but, for the rest, their coats are different, their smell is different, their mating habits, and even their feeding times, are different.'

BUSINESS AND PRESSURE GROUP ACTIVITY AT PARTY CONFERENCES

Importance and growth of area

Commercial lobbying and consequent representation at party conferences has grown substantially in recent years. Exhibitors at the Labour conference in Blackpool in 1994 ranged from the AUEW, sponsored by Vauxhall Motors, through to the Scottish Whisky Association.

Commercial exhibition at Conservative conferences has a longer history and has been on a much larger and sophisticated scale, reflecting the need to influence the governing party from 1979 to 1997; its ministers, and policy network process (Smith 1993) particularly in respect of decisions that affect an organisation's business. In 1994 organisations exhibiting ranged from ACA Technology to the Water Services Association, with the scale and size of corporate receptions reflecting a more libertarian and overt approach rather than the rather more politically correct version adopted at Labour. Interest in

Liberal Democrat conferences has increased, as it became the second player in local government, controlling large budgets and having major influence on commercially important planning policy.

It is very difficult to say precisely when party conferences started to charge exhibitors' commercial rates to generate income at conferences, but it seems safe to say that by the early 1980s this was becoming firmly established at the Conservative Party, the SDP and eventually Liberal Party conferences (or, in the latter case, assemblies). Labour has always had exhibitions by trade unions, but until recently was not interested in having commercial exhibitions. Also unions and other organised interest groups found some companies and organisations unacceptable. The Post Office Union stopped DHL exhibiting until 1994 as they were direct rivals. These restrictions now seem to be at an end and it is calculated by the authors that Labour currently earns in excess of £2m from the exhibitions held at its annual party conference.

Organisations exhibiting seem to fall into three groups in terms of choice of party conference: those showing interest in one particular conference in support of a specific cause or interest—defence companies traditionally at the Conservative conference showing support for the Ministry of Defence and Unions at the Labour one. A second category is those who exhibit at all three conferences—many of the former utilities, their associations and pressure groups adopt this approach. The third category is where the organisation attends only the large two party conferences. British Gas and the British Bingo Association were examples in 1994. This is becoming rarer as the Liberal Democrats have become electorally stronger and the second largest party in local government holding large budgets.

At conferences of the party in government, ministers attend and bring their advisers and officials, this allows discreet

gatherings to occur and sometimes issues to be discussed and resolved. The sight of a minister with his officials and well-worded brief shows to many the power of government and the need to influence.

Strategies of interest groups at party conferences seem to vary from a discreet provider of information on an individual basis through to exhibitor and fringe event organiser trying to amend policy. Many of the interest groups organise themselves around particular policy debates; this has seen the animal rights alliance of pressure groups organisations at party conferences debating animal welfare, education unions in a high attendance at education debates and privatised utilities in strong evidence. What seems to emerge as the best form of lobbying at conferences is that which is regular and focused; those organisations who exhibit regularly and arrange fringe events, do well. Those who do this discreetly seem to succeed.

COST OF PROMOTION AT CONFERENCES

To start with the 1994 Labour conference, it was reported that larger stand spaces cost over £100,000 and that income for the party from the whole exhibition area would exceed £1m. The authors' current research suggests that this grew to an income of £5m by September 2000; with the Labour Party stating that it was holding the largest commercial exhibition ever held at any political conference in the world (it reported 217 exhibition stands). In the same year the Liberal Democrat conference passed the Conservatives in size and replaced it as the second most corporately supported conference in terms of exhibitors, sponsorship and advertising. Interestingly the broad costs of exhibition stands at the three parties are the same for commercial exhibitors (authors' interview with conference organisers), but there does seem to be a reduction for non-corporate exhibitors and at some conferences these are in the majority. The basic 3m × 3m

shell scheme for a exhibition unit at one of the conferences costs approximately £5,500; more advantageous positions, increased size and full electronic connections as in other commercial exhibitions add to the cost.

The hire of rooms in conference hotels is on a sliding scale with quality of food and drink offered being dependent upon the budget and choice of the host. It is occasionally noticeable how one organisation on the fringe may vary the quality of its reception food and drink depending upon the guests, a rule seems to be good wine, fresh orange juice and high quality food for senior politicians and the famous rubber chicken, vin ordinaire and juice for mass member receptions.

There is also the hidden side of persuasion at conferences, ie the cost of entertaining, accommodation, fees and salaries, for the lobbyists or organisation staff. Three party conferences over consecutive weeks places logistical and physical burdens on both staff and the organisation; this has to be built into any pre-planning. The consequences of this pressure on resources has been that many organisations only take an active part at one or two conferences and make positive choices about which.

In addition to exhibitions, there are normally large numbers of private gatherings held by corporations, lobbies, consultants and pressure groups which can vary on a scale of a small gathering to the Saatchi and Saatchi party at the Conservative conference in 1994 which was supposedly for 500 select guests. A string quartet, conjurers and monkeys performed, as the event had a Georgian style.

Given the potential costs and scale of using the party conferences for promotion purposes it is becoming essential that a full-scale communications plan and budget is devised to maximise impact at these events. This can be seen in the fact that political parties are now offering options on spaces at future events up to three years ahead (authors' informants).

METHODOLOGY

One or both the authors attended all three major conferences in all four years 1994–97, collecting data on organisations or groups exhibiting, advertising or sponsoring fringe meetings. The data were obtained from the published party agendas, conference, fringe and media guides produced for registered delegates, observers and accredited attendees. In addition, extensive interviews were carried out with a range of participants. A full list of organisations, groups and the conferences at which they were present is available from the authors.

(1) Advertisements

Advertisements that appeared in the official publications were counted, itemised and listed by sector. It was considered unnecessary for the purposes of this study to measure the size of each advertisement or appraise its professional qualities. Content analysis techniques (Krippendorff 1980) were used to strengthen the collection and gathering process.

(2) Exhibitors

The exhibitions at party conferences were visited over the same period as that used for gathering advertisement data and a comprehensive list of exhibitors produced.

The basic data were extracted from the exhibition area plan and list of exhibitors (this is an integral feature of the official political party conference guide). The list was subsequently checked for accuracy and late additions and withdrawals by visiting the exhibition area. The quality and size of stands and personnel was noted separately to aid the analysis. A selective photographic record of exhibition stands and their featured messages and associated exhibits has been maintained over the period. Approximately 200 stands and associated exhibitors have been photographed and catalogued.

(3) Fringe meetings

The base data for fringe meetings were extracted from the previously mentioned official party publications and in particular the list of published events. This was augmented by analysis of the invariably erratically circulated and occasional daily produced party guide to fringe meetings and events. The data included sponsored entertainment activities (balls, dances, fashion shows, films, etc) and receptions, as these would normally be considered by delegates as part of fringe meeting activity. A selection of a range of fringe events, meetings and receptions was attended throughout the research.

(4) Categorisation of data

A typology of organisations based on the earlier work of Presthus (1973, 1974), Schmitter and Streeck (1981), Whiteley and Winyard (1987), Jordan (1994), Stanyer and Scammell (1996) and research observation was developed. The five types or sectors (with the abbreviations used in later tables in brackets) are:

- Public Sector (Public)
- 'Not for profit' (NFP)
- Unions and Professional Associations (UPA)
- Private Sector (Private)
- Party Associated Organisations (Party)

The above five broad categorisations used to sub divide data collected at conferences are described in Appendix 1. Some examples could be classified under a number of headings. For instance, for the private company sponsorship of a Conservative fringe meeting or the GMB stand sponsored by Vauxhall Motors at the 1995 Labour conference, in each case the example could fit into two sub categories of sector. In these cases the most visible sponsor, exhibitor or advertiser was listed as the main organisation behind the particular event or feature. In the case where there is no single clear promoter of the

advert, event or exhibition all organisations are listed.

RESULTS

Advertising

From the data in Table 1 a number of features become apparent. As one would expect there is a surge of activity in purchased advertising in election year allowing organisations to raise their awareness and promote issues ahead of an election. This is particularly marked in the 'not for profit' sector where advertising in Labour publications increased nearly 450 per cent (from 5 to 27) over the period 1995 to 1996.

The Trade Unions and Professional Associations also increased their expenditure on advertisements at the 1996 conferences ahead

Table 1: Advertisements placed in official party publications, 1994–97

<i>Year/Party</i>	<i>Public</i>	<i>NFP</i>	<i>UPA</i>	<i>Private</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>1994</i>						
Conservative	4	7	10	23	4	48
Liberal	3	6	10	10	1	30
Democrat						
Labour	7	7	12	24	2	52
<i>1995</i>						
Conservative	4	8	13	21	9	55
Liberal	3	5	10	15	9	42
Democrat						
Labour	5	5	6	12	9	37
<i>1996</i>						
Conservative	8	16	9	29	4	56
Liberal	7	13	11	10	7	48
Democrat						
Labour	15	27	22	27	11	102
<i>1997</i>						
Conservative	5	12	7	14	4	42
Liberal	6	9	8	11	6	40
Democrat						
Labour	1	9	6	22	1	39
Total	68	124	124	218	67	591

of the 1997 general election. As can be seen in Figure 1 the most dramatic rise in advertising support was by this sector at the Labour conference of 1996; indicating that they wanted to be associated with that party and its policies particularly. The data also suggest that the parties are more focused on raising money from earnings from sold advertising space in the run-up to the election than they are outside the campaign period. In addition, there is a tendency by advertisers to want to be associated with the victorious party of an election, also it must be added that a significant number of advertisers in this period back the leading two parties and in some cases all three.

The results also show clearly that the Labour Party benefited ahead of the 1997 general election in 1996 from a surge in adverts from the private sector placed in its conference publications. There was also a small increase for the Conservatives. The Liberal Democrats, on what is a limited sample, appear static in a period when they should be trying to attract this type of revenue to finance the expansion of their organisation and levels of activity. Figure 2 graphically outlines this situation.

All sectors show that there is a surge of interest just ahead of an election by advertisement purchases and that this tapers off once

the electoral process is complete. The breakdown of advertising by category for the period of research can be seen in Figure 3.

The private sector is the largest purchaser of advertising at party conferences and much of this activity took place ahead of the general election. The next largest sectors are 'not for profit', trade unions and professional associations, which are equal in size over the four-year cycle of conferences. However, when one looks in detail at Table 1, one can see that the latter group has been in steady decline whilst the 'not for profit' group of interests became much more visible ahead of the general election.

The actual impact of advertising at conferences is difficult to assess, because of the scale of activity and the clear influence of the general election leading to a surge of interest in 1996. There is one dramatic feature of interest that emerges though, and that is that by the 1996 conference season Labour was the clear favourite for advertisers in that it had seen a 175 per cent increase in advertising over 1995; whilst the Conservative Party had remained static and the Liberal Democrats had shown a marginal increase. This suggests that purchases of advertisements were intended to gain favour with the most likely winner of the 1997 election — Labour.

Figure 1: Not for profit advertisements in official party conference publications 1994–97

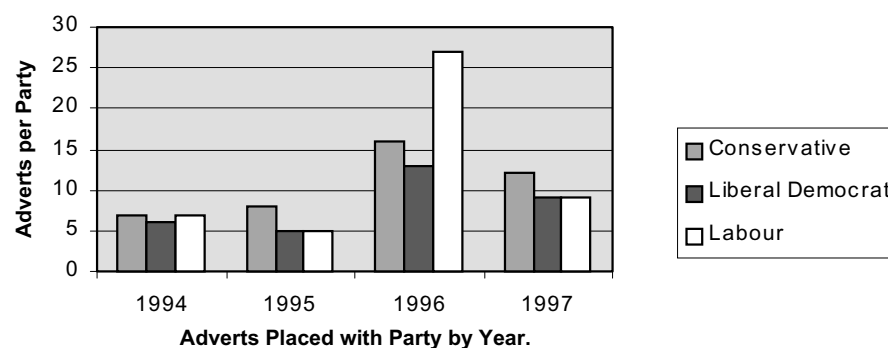


Figure 2: Private sector advertisements in official party conference publications 1994–97

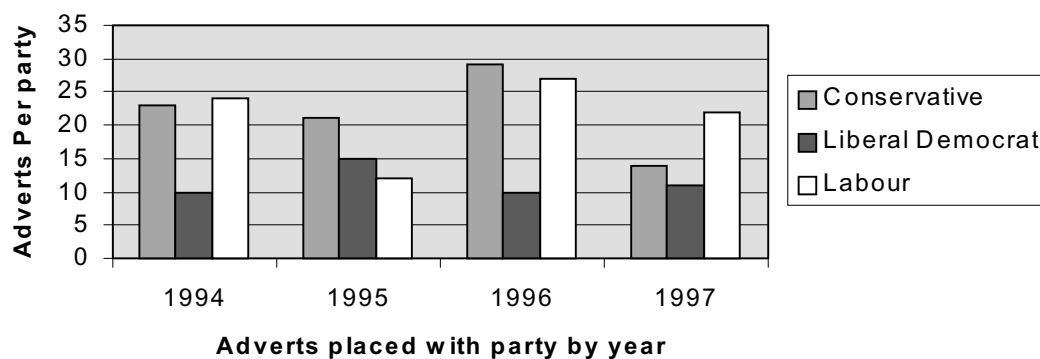
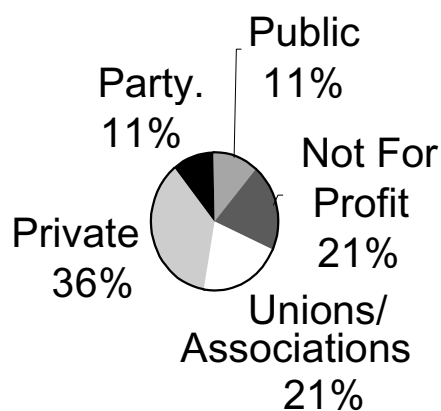


Figure 3: Advertisements at party conferences 1994–97



Exhibitors

Commercial exhibitions at party conferences have grown in significance as both an income generator for the political organisation and as a provider of information for party activists and politicians. A further indication of the size of this business activity at party conferences can be found by analysing the financial accounts and reports of the respective politi-

cal organisations presented at the annual conferences. For instance, the commercial operations of the Labour Party (conference exhibition income is by far the largest component according to the author's sources), made a net contribution to party funds of £513,000 in 1996 (Labour Party National Executive Report 1997: 19). In the same document it was reported that all exhibition

space for the 1997 conference was sold out within three hours of going on sale. This was the largest ever commercial exhibition held at a party conference in the UK and was observed and monitored as part of this study. Such was the scramble for exhibition space that, as in over subscribed trade shows, late applicants and bookings found themselves on poor sites tucked away in an alcove in a secondary hotel, where their ability to meet participants and do business was limited.

Even the third major party in the UK, the Liberal Democrat Party, reported an income of £263,756 from commercial sources at its 1996 conference, which was 17 per cent up on 1995 (Liberal Democrat Party Publication 1997: 19, 'The Role and Operation of the Party Conference'). At the 1997 Conservative Party conference (post their election defeat, demand was down) it was estimated that they had made a surplus from this activity of £160,000 in the previous year. This suggests that organisations are much more interested in buying exhibition space the year before a general election.

Senior ministers and members of the leading parties normally have responsibility for visiting exhibition stands during the party conference. In addition, exhibitions are one of the most visible signs of the promotion of a corporate or organisational interest at the party conferences. Over the four conference seasons of the research a steady improvement in the quality, size and professionalism of the exhibitions at the conferences was observed. This growth in overall quality paralleled similar developments in trade show activity being seen at commercial exhibitions in Europe (Cope 1989; Shipley *et al.* 1993 and Dekimpe *et al.* 1997). Exhibition stands that attracted the most attention and interest had proactive staff, were well manned and underpinned by regular promotion ahead of and during the conference. At party conferences national and international organisations clearly could exert the power of brand over lesser known organisations which concurs

with the findings of the trade show research of Gopalakrishna *et al.* (1995).

The size of stand can vary significantly; the small party organisation or charity may have one standard stall and even share it with other organisations to reduce costs, whilst SKY, British Airways or Cable Communications Association will have a large multimedia-driven stand which is bolstered by a large number of staff and regular promotional events to enhance perception and knowledge amongst delegates. To ensure validity of data the author took photographic evidence of the stands throughout the research.

Exhibitions are also one of the most visual features of commercial lobbying and interest group behaviour at party conferences. Table 2 summarises exhibitors at party conferences over the period 1994–97.

Since 1994 and before, Conservative party conference exhibitors have declined 30 per cent over that period whilst Labour has increased by 51 per cent from a lower base level.

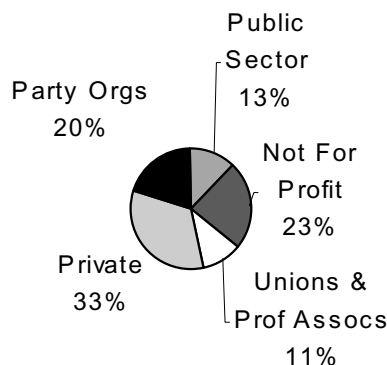
The data clearly show that levels of exhibition activity increased ahead of the general election and declined immediately after with the exception being the new governing party. It is a reasonable surmise that this would generally be the case, though obviously data over a much longer period would be needed to establish this. As shown in advertisements, the public sector and trade union/professional association sectors appear in relative decline (see Table 1).

It is also worth noting that those parties with fewer financial resources have the greatest number of voluntary activist groups at party conferences and this is particularly apparent at Liberal Democrat conferences. However, it also highlights the fact that much stall space at the third party's conferences is filled by party supporters rather than interested private sector, public sector, unions and associations or 'not for profit' organisations. Income is thus accordingly limited for the third party from this activity.

Table 2: Exhibitors at party conferences, 1994–97

Year/Party	Public	NFP	UPA	Private	Party	Total
<i>1994</i>						
Conservative	17	23	8	44	8	100
Liberal	12	21	9	19	29	90
Democrat						
Labour	16	27	15	31	20	109
<i>1995</i>						
Conservative	12	15	9	40	10	86
Liberal	4	15	5	16	29	69
Democrat						
Labour	15	25	20	36	15	111
<i>1996</i>						
Conservative	12	15	7	37	10	81
Liberal	10	19	4	18	31	82
Democrat						
Labour	17	24	19	38	13	111
<i>1997</i>						
Conservative	8	13	6	31	11	69
Liberal	5	15	4	13	31	68
Democrat						
Labour	12	40	15	47	13	127
Total	140	252	121	370	220	1103

Figure 4 is a total picture in percentages of all exhibitors at party conferences over the period and indicates that the bulk of activity is quite clearly in the private and 'not for profit' sectors. It is known from analysis above that the category 'party organisations' is a group that can be just a reflection of the status, professionalism, voluntarism of the party organisation. This group could be a reflection of large numbers of volunteers or enthusiasts within the party and may not even pay much of a fee for their stall. It is also known from the previous analysis of adverts and the data in Table 1 on exhibitions that the public sector and unions and professional associations are in relative decline at conferences. Consequently, what is being seen is

Figure 4: Exhibitors by sector at party conferences 1994–97

that increasingly activity by outside groups at conferences is coming from the private sector and 'not for profit' categories. All of these groups are normally at the conference to exert influence or communicate messages to government and politicians through the use of one medium or another. The rise of the private sector and 'not for profit' sector organisations can be seen in comparing Figures 5 and 6. There has been a steady growth in activities by these organisations over the four-year period of the study and a slow but continuous decline amongst public sector, unions and professional association interests. This indicates the increasing competitiveness and awareness of effective political lobbying by the private sector (this normally is reflective of large-scale organisations rather than small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)) and 'not for profit' organisations (which have invariably been dominated by a number of prime issues — for example, animal welfare).

An analysis of the data in Table 2 starkly shows the decline in attractiveness of the Conservative Party conference against a commensurate rise in interest in Labour, reflecting the growing strength and attractiveness of Labour to the commercial and

Figure 5: Exhibitors by sector at all 1994 party conferences

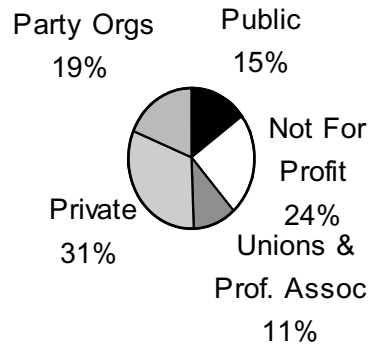
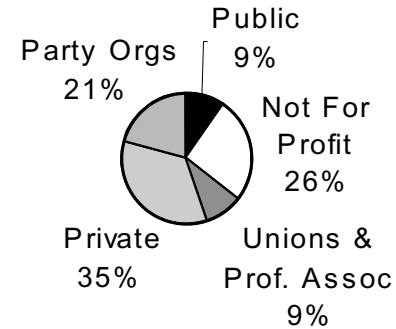


Figure 6: Exhibitors by sector at 1997 party conferences



pressure group interests at conferences. It is noteworthy to find a steady decline in commercial/not for profit activity at the Liberal Democrat conferences at a time when relatively they have had more influence and power than before.

A particular feature that emerges is a steady decline in public sector interests being represented at Conservative Party conferences. At the end of the period of research these had more than halved from 17 to 8 over the period of the data collection. The Conservatives have also seen a steady decline in 'not for profit' exhibitors over the same period from 23 to 13. Another feature is that 65 per cent of all Union and Professional Association stalls were at the Labour Party conferences reflecting the long historic link between the Labour Party and trade unions.

The number of exhibitors in total at conferences is relatively static, although there is some evidence that Labour's increased commercialisation of its conference is beginning to reverse any potential decline. However it should be noted that many of the stalls and exhibitions are becoming more sophisticated and considerably more is being spent on renting exhibition space. It is known that there is significant cost differentiation on

stands and the actual site within exhibition areas and that space is at a premium at Labour conferences (National Executive Report 1997: 19). Interestingly, this research observed less pressure on exhibition space at the defeated Conservatives' conference and certainly this was the case at the Liberal Democrats' who have clearly a significant way to go to market space, as the data indicates.

Fringe meetings

Fringe meetings are those meetings and events outside the main conference hall which are held at breakfast, lunch time and early and late evening times by parties for the benefit of giving a platform to organisations, interests and speakers to discuss ideas and areas of common interest with those attending conferences. They may present alternative policy perspectives, be a platform for well-known politicians or provide a forum for individuals and organisations to consider particular policy issues or concerns. Recently many of the events have become platforms for coalitions of interests to consider a particular issue, for example Europe, animal welfare or health care. Table 3 outlines the number of these events by category held at

Table 3: Fringe events at party conferences, 1994–97

Year/Party	Public	NFP	UPA	Private	Party	Total
Conservative	15	39	23	32	5	114
Liberal	11	32	19	16	7	85
Democrat						
Labour	15	33	26	22	16	112
1995						
Conservative	6	32	17	21	50	126
Liberal	9	28	14	20	54	125
Democrat						
Labour	13	39	24	27	108	211
1996						
Conservative	12	45	14	21	34	126
Liberal	12	36	18	20	48	134
Democrat						
Labour	12	42	24	27	107	212
1997						
Conservative	9	38	14	22	39	122
Liberal	10	35	16	18	57	136
Democrat						
Labour	14	35	23	32	82	186
Total	138	434	232	278	607	1689

the various conferences between 1994 and 1997.

This is a difficult area to assess as the Conservative fringe until recent times was very limited, but this type of event had become established by the 1994 conference and has grown remarkably since then. It should be noted that the overall figures are distorted by the large number of party organisation meetings at the Labour and Liberal Democrat conferences; these meetings are invariably used as election and candidate training meetings whilst the Conservatives have tended to use private professionally run events. An interesting phenomenon that emerges from the research is the steady increase in private sector events and the sponsorship of fringe meetings. Labour's growth in privately sponsored fringe meetings is in

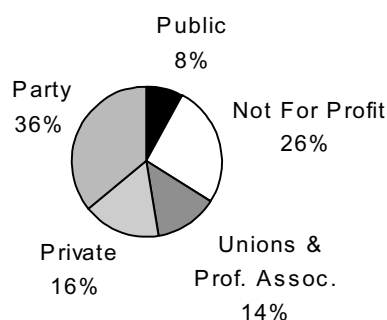
marked contrast to the Conservatives' relative decline, which parallels the findings of the previous data set cited. The 'not for profit' sector, as one would expect, is the largest provider of fringe meetings and these become more pronounced just ahead of the general election as can be seen in the figures for the 1996 conference season. The total figure for fringe meetings by category is indicated in Figure 7 below.

The broad trends that emerge from the data for fringe meeting activity at conferences parallel that reported previously on the other observed features of party conferences (advertisements and exhibitions). That is that public sector activity has been in steady decline at Conservative conferences and that there *was* a surge of interest in the Labour Party ahead of the 1997 general election shown by the increased activity levels at the 1996 party conference and at the post-election conference in 1997. There is a significant move of private sector supported fringe meetings from the Conservative Party to the Labour Party over the period of research.

DISCUSSION

The data gathered from the party conferences on business activities show a substantial interest in the promotion of messages, interests, policies and themes within the political process. There is only a limited portion of overt

Figure 7: Fringe events by sector at party conferences 1994–97



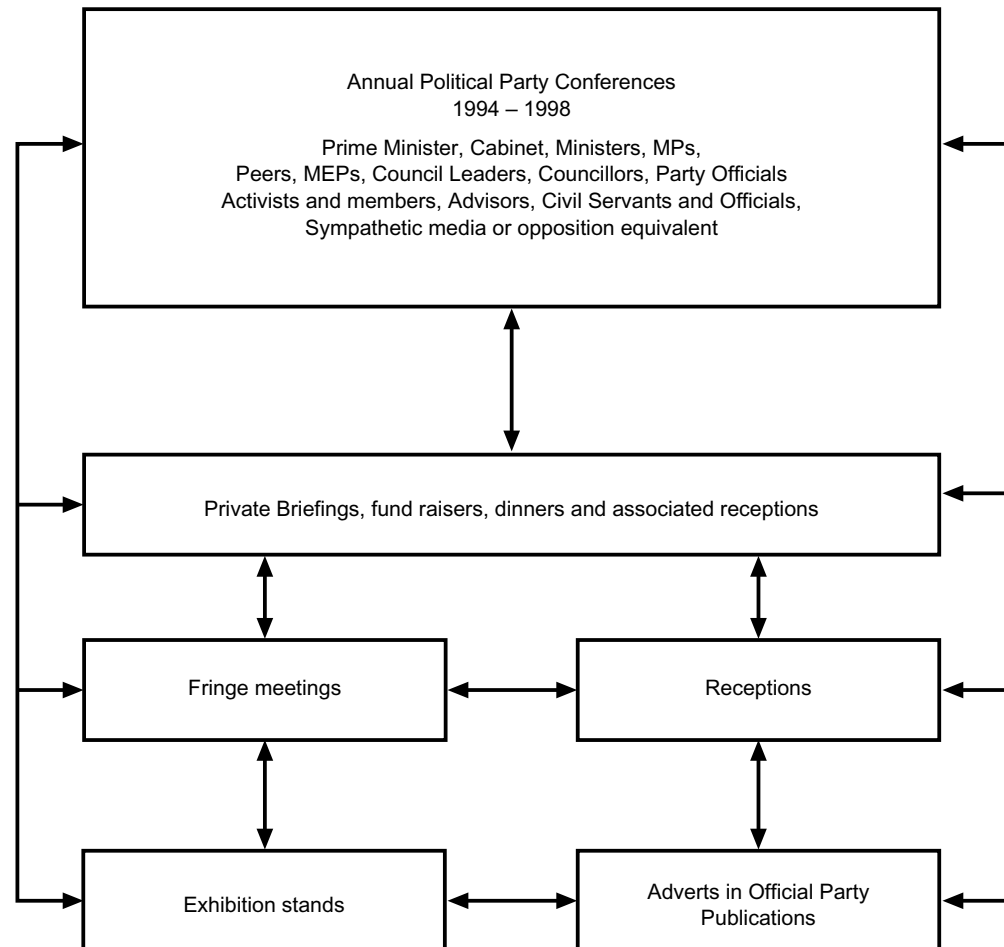
lobbying at party conferences and as has been argued previously much lobbying at these events is difficult to monitor, quantify or tabulate. The three featured measured data sets of adverts, exhibitions and fringe meetings show both the diversity and vibrancy of selling messages by the sponsors to politicians and public decision makers.

The core features of lobbying and marketing activity are indicated in Figure 8, which outlines the use of the relationship marketing approach and network theory at party conferences.

This outlines the key events, fora and

media that can be used to gain access to politicians and decision makers at party conferences. Clearly, a well-structured communication plan to use these opportunities as part of an overall strategy can be very effective. The well-prepared campaign will use a combination of fringe meetings, receptions, adverts and an exhibition stand supported by informal briefings, lobbying and dinner to get over the required message. This is all part of a well-gearred public affairs or political lobbying campaign to provide information and/or exert influence on government decision making.

Figure 8: Relationship marketing at party conferences — the new policy network



CONCLUSIONS

We have been able to construct a complete record of exhibitors, advertisers and publicised sponsors of fringe meetings at the three major annual conferences over the period. The one area of limited information is of private meetings between politicians and representatives of organisations falling within the categories identified in the paper.

The scale of business and marketing activities at UK party conferences has grown considerably in the last decade. Media and political attention remains focused on the activities of politicians at party conferences, but there is only limited research on the vast amount of lobbying and business marketing activity at these events. Levels of activity have been measured and observed over the period 1994–97 and point to the increasing role of the party conference as an interface between business and politics, where political lobbying can be seen at first hand.

The data confirm the growing level and importance of business lobbying and associated relationship marketing at party conferences and show the trends in promoting causes interests and issues there by the private, public and ‘not for profit’ making sectors.

Future research

This paper is only an initial excursion into the complex world of party conferences in the UK for the management and marketing researcher. Clearly the size and scale of conferences and their complexity is growing. Political scientists and journalists have dominated research and comment on these events in the past. They are seen here as markets where a complex process of interactions is going on by interest groups using a number of developed tactics and associated strategies. The aim is to assess and evaluate this activity.

This paper highlights some of the essential areas for exploration to enable management and marketing to evaluate decision making

and how to influence it. Crucial areas for future study are as follows.

Semiotics — the language of political parties and power

An evaluation of the language and code systems used to communicate between supporters and adherents of a particular party, which impact upon the negotiation and can influence decision making.

Symbiotics

The symbols employed at conferences are also significant not just amongst members and party supporters, but amongst the interest groups represented. Stands and issues conveyed are invariably very similar and need evaluating to see whether some pattern of alternative communication and reinforcement is emerging.

Discreet lobbying

In the initial investigations it was not possible to gather information on the more discreet receptions held at conferences. This will, in the future, build up the database of influence and pressure activity at party conferences.

Evaluation of lobbying strategies

It will be useful to take a deeper look at lobbying tactics used and their probable success rate.

Effective promotion

It will be important to assess the various techniques used by influencers and interests at party conferences to support their policy priorities, and to develop a taxonomy of best practice.

NOTE

- (1) Sleaze was a theme heavily used by Labour to criticise Conservative links with commercial interests. Clear blue water was a Conservative slogan for the differences between themselves and Labour.

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Appendix 1: The categories used to classify organisations and groups

(1) Public sector

Government controlled, owned or sponsored agencies or organisations (eg the Arts Council, BBC, Campaign for Racial Equality (CRE), Government of Gibraltar, Post Office etc) and interests controlled or owned by local authorities (eg Local Government Association or Bilston College).

(2) 'Not for profit'

Charitable trusts, recognised pressure groups and think tanks. For instance, Age Concern, Child Poverty Action Group, Greenpeace, Leonard Cheshire Foundation, RSPB, and in the latter category DEMOS, Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) and Social Market Foundation (SMF).

(3) Unions and professional associations

Traditional trade unions such as the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), Unison etc through to professional associations and federations, for instance, the British Medical Association (BMA), the Police Federation of England and Wales and the Advertising Association.

(4) Private sector

Public limited companies, industry groups and associated business interests. For instance, Boots the Chemist, Cable TV Association, Guinness and the Rail Freight Group.

(5) Party associated organisations

Groups and organisations in this sector cover predominantly official political party organisations such as interest groups or campaigning parts of the organisation. This category includes ALDC (Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors), Conservative Anti-hunt Council, Conservative Medical Society, European Parliamentary Labour Party through to the Welsh Night (traditional entertainment organised by the Welsh Liberal Democrats).