

On tour with the Labour Party hit factory

BRITISH ELECTIONEERING provides wonderful spectacles. Each time Labour gives a press conference the candidates sit on the stage bathed in the florescent peach and electronic violet tones of the backdrop that announces New Labour New Britain. They don't disappoint.

While the line up of characters may change from day to day every time they go one by one to the podium to deliver their solo turns, Tony Blair, David Blunkett, whoever, they seem to swing their hips. Just like the Motown group The Supremes each member giving a rendition of the same song. Sometimes the theme is health, sometimes it's education, sometimes it's the economy, stupid. They are always cheerful, always chirpy and always, well, cynical.

What you can be sure of is that Tony Blair, in keeping with his scripted role, will take off his jacket, marking his territory as leader of the band. This sartorial statement ensures he stands out. He doesn't need the body-hugging sequined gowns that earmarked Diana Ross as a superstar because he is always the supreme Supreme.



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Here is a party that understands marketing and communication as no other in this country. And this is the era of marketing and communication. There is a Hollywood aspect to the early-morning press conferences. They pitch to the media audience as if they were important producers, and Labour's sole purpose is to get to No 1 in the charts by 7 June. Perhaps that explains their tetchy accusation that ITN, the BBC and Channel 4 were plotting against them. How very African.

In the background sit the agents of this supergroup, chief among them Labour spin-doctor Alastair Campbell who acts more like one of Papa Doc's Tontons Macoutes. He ominously watches and rates their performance. As none of the government ministers has yet disappeared and no mutilated bodies have mysteriously turned up he must so far approve. So the election is on track.

Once you chip away the Tinsel Town glamour there is also a third world aspect to this, which sells well in South Africa. In fact, Labour pledged in its manifesto to give Britain the opportunity to change, presumably from a developing nation, where public transport doesn't work and there are outbreaks of killer diseases in both the human and animal populations, to the first world. Oh yes, and cricket corruption. It's comforting to know that we have so much in common.

The Tories just cannot compete. They are dead in the water; a defunct party with a leader whose image is of a neo-Nazi skinhead caricature without the necessary skills to effectively deliver any message in a

time when the medium is the message. I imagine Hague in jack-boots, goose-stepping to bring me my repatriation papers.

This is the image of Britain that is so hard to dispel, and so much fun to play with during the campaign, although as my editor said, election, what election?

Watching Tony Blair is a lesson in modern politics even if he doesn't possess any of the Clinton/Mandela-charisma. He remains the consummate politician, and an amazing act to observe if just for his earnest down-home ways.

In this time of clever packaging everything is stage-managed. When Blair and Co leave their Millbank headquarters to hit the hustings, the Lighthouse Family song "Lifted" blasts bleary-eyed journalists just in case they had forgotten the message. Do they really think that we would fall for this?

Next time Blair and his supremes perform he might be advised to look up some of Diana Ross's old recordings. They would suit him well, starting with "Lovin', Livin' & Givin'" and "I Thought It Took A Little Time". Encores anyone?