



## Politics

### *Spin*

One important topic in this course is the whole issue of spin. We all tend to think that we know what spin means but in the debate about spin there are a number of different views given as to what spin is and whether it's a good or a bad thing. The debate I think starts with where we would probably normally start, which is regarding spin as being, as it were, a bad thing, being about dishonesty, about being about manipulation, even to the extent of being about lying perhaps, but then there's another interesting side to this, which is presented to us, which suggests that even if spin might not be such a good thing, it seems to be almost a kind of necessary part of contemporary politics for a number of different reasons and that even in a more critical kind of way, people that do spin might be employing the kinds of techniques which have been around since time immemorial almost in the political context using techniques such as rhetoric, for example, to make their point. So, I think what this debate does is make us think a little bit harder about our immediate reaction to spin which is generally I think speaking, you know, that it's a bad thing and we'd rather have less of it please.

One example we take in the course is the Iraq war and we did so because it seemed to contain so many of the themes that we wanted students to think about when they were considering spin and whether it was a good or a bad thing, and how important it might be in contemporary politics. It was chosen in part because it was so incredibly important at the time, and well indeed still is, it's not as though it's gone away, but it was very much in the programme makers' minds at the time, as well as it was in the minds of the general public.-It did also seem to bring to our attention a number of themes in the whole spin debate, which were really important, around truth, around manipulation, the interesting debate around the idea of embedded reporters/journalists, for example, the degree to which they were therefore constrained in terms of participating in the public discourse, and enabling the public back home, as it were, to hear about what was really going on, it just seemed to be a very rich seam to mine in terms of the themes that we were trying to get students to think about when they were thinking about spin.

One of the points this made in the debate is that arguably the media is one of the reasons why spinning takes place. The proliferation of media that we have available to us nowadays makes it very, very difficult for politicians to control information in the way in which they they might want. But it also gives them the opportunity to make pithy, quick, sound byte remarks about events or facts which can be pretty confident will find its way onto the airways or onto the television, or whatever media it happens to be, and so I think that the media therefore has played a fundamental role in this. In part it's a cause I think, arguably, of spin in the contemporary world, but it's also used to great effect by politicians at the same time. And learning about spin is important in the Politics course I think for two reasons because the issue of communication is so important in and spin is an element in the modern communication of political ideas and political positions. But also very important because we were interested in getting students to think about the relation between evidence and argument, and when one's thinking about evidence and argument one would rather have truthful evidence and effective argument, than non-truthful evidence and ineffective argument, and spin therefore really is a disruptive idea in the context of evidence and argument because if issues had been spun, as the recipient of spin you can never really be sure, and this is perhaps part of the point of it, you can never really be sure whether what you're hearing is the truth or not, and if you're not sure whether it's the truth or not, you're not really sure then whether the evidence stacks up either on one side of the argument or the other. So those were the fundamental reasons why we were interested in getting students to think about spin in a politics course.

We probably wouldn't have talked about spin in a politics course twenty years ago. I think it was much less important or much less evident then than it is now, and I think that there's another element in this too, another factor in it, is that one of the things that one notices about spin is that it's very rarely carried out by the principal actors. The fact that we have 'spin doctors', as they're called, is very interesting I think. There are people who appear to have special skills, it's almost as though the message has been given to us at one removed from where it originated from; that might be another part of spin too, you very rarely get the politician doing the spinning, you'll get someone else doing the spinning for her or him, and this is another feature of the contemporary political world which twenty years ago perhaps we didn't have, these armies of advisers, consultants, spokespeople and so on. I think that the factors that have contributed to spin which have given it a foundation as it were are very much now nailed down in our political culture, particularly in the media culture, so my sense is that this isn't going to go away and it's something that politics courses in the future will not be able to avoid.