



Power, dissent, equality: understanding contemporary politics

What is spin?

Narrator: Spin seems to imply that the political communicator crosses the boundary that separates honest communication from manipulative embroidering and lying. Spin refers to the darker side of political communication. Seeking favourable coverage seems to slip into dishonestly tweaking, controlling and staging of information. For the purpose of retaining a positive coverage, and protecting policies and personalities from criticism.

Male: That seems indeed to be what's at the heart of the negative connotations of Spin. Or as you call it, a dark side of political communication. But it's not always easy to know when political communication slips. From merely defending one's position, or presenting a policy, into Spin. Spin seems to be used to indicate that someone breaches the rules of what is acceptable in political communication and crosses a boundary. Or one doesn't want to call the person who communicates a liar. So one uses Spin instead.

So maybe we can discuss this a little bit by means of a concrete example. And a good example is related to the politics preceding the war on Iraq, in March 2003. Now there was a political struggle going in the United Nations, over whether or not a second resolution would be accepted. The second resolution would sanction the use of military force against Iraq. Now this called the second resolution, because there was another resolution, called 1441. Which allowed for serious action if Iraq breached the prohibition of developing weapons of mass destruction.

Now for some countries, the second resolution was needed, if military action was to be legal. A lot of countries thought that the legality was not a question. Because on the base of the first resolution, the 1441. One could already go for military intervention. But it would be good to have a second resolution, to give it some extra moral support for military action. Now, that all came to a halt when the French President, Chirac, made it clear that France would use its feet of power to block the second resolution.

Frenchman speaking here..

Narrator: France's position tonight he said, is that whatever the circumstances we will vote 'No'. Because we think there is no place for war in achieving the target that we have fixed of disarming Iraq.

Male: Now that actually means that the resolution is dead. It has no chance to be accepted. Resolutions can only be passed, if the five permanent members of the Security Council do not veto them. Now this statement is a rather dry statement. That doesn't say much more than that France will use its veto because it does not see the need in the present circumstances to use military force, to get Iraq to comply with the resolution 1441. Now let's listen to the reaction to this announcement in the United Kingdom.

Female: Downing Street didn't bother to moderate its language. It said that France's decision to use its UN veto, whatever the circumstances has injected poison into the diplomatic blood stream. The Prime Minister's official spokesman pointed out that France had this morning rejected Britain's compromised proposal of six tests for Saddam Hussain, even before the Iraqi's. Earlier the Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw also launched an angry attack on France.

Jack Straw: What I however, I find extraordinary, that without even proper consideration, the French government have decided that they will reject these proposals. Adding to the

statement that quotes whatever the circumstances France will vote 'No'. When we negotiated resolution 1441, we not only placed obligations and responsibilities on Saddam Hussein. But we also placed obligation and responsibilities on members of the Security Council as well.

Male: The Prime Minister today told me that although they continue to try and seek a second resolution in the UN, and will continue to do so. That a second resolution is now probably less likely than at any time before. He made the reason for this as the fact that the French have been completely and become completely intransigent. And have literally threatened to veto almost anything that is put forward to the UN Security Council. That and to a lesser extent, the Russian's, has meant that underlying nations are finding it difficult to make a decision. Because if it's going to be vetoed anyway, they're saying 'So what.' So, that means essentially that military action has become more likely.

Female: There are several issues here that indicate that information is being spun. Rather than the person simply angrily reacting to a disappointing statement. Or simply asserting that France binned any possibility for a second resolution. And that therefore the military enforcing of resolution 1441 will not get this extra legitimacy that the UK was hoping for. First the language is very colourful, if not derogatory. I mean that phrase 'Poison in a diplomatic blood stream'. Secondly, linking the French veto to a higher chance of war is incorrect. The second veto was going to sanction the use of force. That means the question was not one of whether one should go to war or not. But about whether or not one should get a new resolution to sanction going to war.

Male: And there is a third characteristic in these statements as well. Which is embroidering of information. Because they seem to get the impression that France is something illegitimate. Or that United Nation doesn't work properly. But actually a great power like France. One of defeated powers, they can use their veto. That's the way how the Security Council is conceived, and how it works. It protects the interests of the five great powers that were victorious in the Second World War. There is therefore no need to completely discredit the United Nations. Except in a context maybe, where the British government finds itself in a very uncomfortable position. When it's bound by the second resolution. As this extra support it needs to go to war. While it creates a whole expectation, that one can not go to war, unless there is a second resolution. So this crediting the United Nations, and blaming France, as if it was the only country responsible for sinking the resolution. Is not correct information to some extent. It gives a twist to the way the events are represented. In such a way, that the government in the United Kingdom seems to have done everything it could to get an extra support for the war on Iraq. But actually, it has now to go without a second resolution. Because ultimately the UN is not a workable institution.

Female: There is a certain cynicism in the way this announcement of the veto is presented. It at least borders on dishonest presentation. The presentation is made conspicuously dramatic. So as to deflect attention away from the embarrassing developments that could undermine the credibility of the Prime Minister and the British government at home.

Male: And that's at the heart of why Spin always raises questions of trust. Because Spin refers to political communicators as manipulators. That are more concerned about their own credibility, than the common good. And they are prepared to seriously distort sometimes information for that purpose.