



Thought leadership: Edition 3

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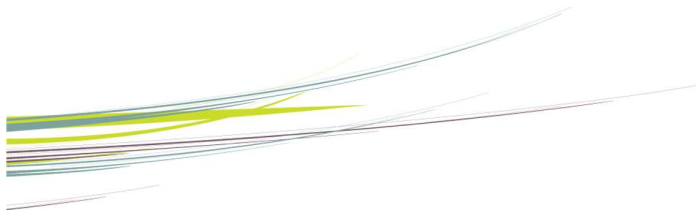
## POLITICS

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On 5 November 2008, world history was made as Barack Obama, an African-American politician, became the 44<sup>th</sup> elected President of the United States of America.

What communications lessons can be learned from his success? And will the UK ever see a Black or Asian Prime Minister?

MCC takes a closer look at the views of four leading media commentators.



## Introduction

America has elected its first African American President, something thought to be unachievable in a nation with a strong history of racial prejudice and inequality towards black and other immigrant communities.

The winning communications strategy which no doubt will be studied time and time again in years to come broke new ground for American politics. But how did the Obama strategists do it? And could we see the same historic shift in politics take place in the UK?

The news triggered a flurry of our UK media commentators asking the question whether the UK would ever see a black, Asian or minority ethnic Prime Minister. The response came with cries of restricted progress for black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) people within the political realm, because of institutional racism, inequality and discrimination. But Britain, with its high brow, intelligent, tolerant and accepting culture with values of fair judgement, equality and justice is said to be changing.

Or is it?

## A question of the Obama factor

Obama, in today's uneasy social and economic times, represented not only an ideological shift within American politics from a formerly Republican majority to winning Democratic favour, but also perhaps the greatest, most significant image of change to society's way of thinking too. Obama confronted and set to rest many of the negative stereotypes of black men, black families and the black community. A Harvard graduate, with charisma, a successful professional career, a solid family unit and political prowess presented the foundation for a Democratic candidate comparable to any other party nominee that came before (Katwala, guardian.co.uk, 2008; Gibb, Times Online; 2008).

But what was it that made Barack Obama appeal to the people of America and the world?

## “Yes We Can” in America, but how?

### Campaigning and the communications approach

#### People

The question of Obama's success is neatly summed up by Philip Sherwell (2008) of The Telegraph, describing the Obama strategy as one based on **“people power”**. The Obama campaign employed a grassroots strategy that saw a radicalisation in the political campaign machine. Strategists deployed an approach which was **all about ‘you’** as opposed to ‘I’. Initiatives such as ‘Artists for Obama’ engaged citizens from the outset, gave ownership to people and culminated in the well known Obama brand images visible today.

## Education

Sherwell cites that the Obama campaign was also spearheaded by a strategy towards educational campaigning. This came in the form of **“Obama University”**, a knowledge drive to train supporters in strategy, planning and fundraising. **Camp Obama** was also created for young volunteers to learn techniques for grassroots campaigning, lobbying and organising. The result, according to Sherwell was **“a political network that reached even the smallest towns in all 50 states and several overseas territories”**.

Sherwell suggests that it was this inclusive strategy that saw Barack Obama beat Hilary Clinton in the Democratic candidate race.

## Digital

Peter Riddell (2008) of The Times alludes to the grassroots “people” approach being adopted in the strategy to mobilise the online American electorate. Recognising the value of the online community, Riddell points to the Obama political camp employing a **strategy of mass engagement via the internet**. By setting up a website and social networking site, the online campaign saw Barack Obama’s profile rise nationally amongst the often untapped online American community and also generated international support. Obama’s campaign machine made the future President amiable and engaging to people operating in the digital realm that saw volunteer recruits, nominal donations made and increased registration and voter turnout (Riddell, The Times, 2008). In fact, Obama’s **facebook group has 2million** supporters alone which not only allowed the campaigning team to penetrate policy messages, but also enabled supporters to share their views.

Listening was a large part of the campaign ethos as was tackling rumours head on. When people googled ‘Barack Obama is a Muslim’, the first site they were driven to was one created by the Obama team which **informed people of the facts**.

## Touring

The apparent ethos of inclusion was not only evident in the digital strategy, but also along the campaign route. By touring traditionally Republican states, swing states and areas not commonly on the campaign trail, Obama challenged long-standing political allegiances and encouraged greater Democratic support. **The Obama campaign had succeeded in mobilising the perceived politically immobile youth voter, ethnic voter, sceptics and cynics**.

Barack Obama connected with the people on all levels, but were people voting for a black man in a bid for change or a heavyweight politician? Did greater ethnic representation in the voting demographic happen because people felt some sort of loyalty to support Obama because he comes from an African heritage or because they believed in his message? This was, is, and perhaps forever will be the global debate on America electing its first black president.

The question for this country is can we expect a similar future in the UK?

## Will the UK eventually see a Prime Minister from a multi-cultural background?

Some might suggest that racial prejudice in the USA is less harshly judged in the UK. The history of some ethnic migrants settling in the UK is much shorter than that in America and the population figures are smaller when compared to the millions who reside stateside. This clearly indicates that there's a much smaller pool to fish from when looking for a top ministerial appointment.

For Trevor Phillips, Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, this is part of the reason why we may never see a "British Obama". Phillips goes as far as to say that even if Obama was here, he would be surprised if he managed to break through the 'institutional stranglehold on power within the Labour party' (Irvine, The Telegraph, 2008). Pointing to two generations of African-Americans suffering at the hands of a legacy of slavery, racism and racial discrimination, for Phillips the shame of the past in the UK is not the same. In the US, he believes, African-Americans have brought 'centuries of white guilt to bear with devastating impact' over the last two decades (Strange, TimesOnline, 2008).

Phillips asserts that in the UK, **the system is designed to prevent even a worthy British candidate with the right credentials** from progressing within the UK's political system. Phillips claims there to be discrimination in the opportunities for BAME people because "the parties and the unions and the think-tanks are all very happy to sign up to the general idea of advocating the cause of minorities but in practice they would like somebody else to do the business. **It's institutional racism.**" (Irvine, The Telegraph, 2008).

However, in an interview with Chris Irvine (2008) of The Telegraph, Phillips does allude to an air of progress in the UK, commenting that 'Britain is less racially divided than in the US', with Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (2008) of The Independent illustrating a declining prominence of race in party politics. For Alibhai-Brown, the reason for the diminishing importance of race in Britain is down to **two problems: 1) the nation has had enough of political correctness and 2) tackling racism is no longer at the forefront of the political agenda**, with government policy and resources pushing forward with plans to challenge social cohesion and exclusion.

This idea is echoed by Conservative MP Dominic Grieve, when he comments in The Guardian that "the idea behind [multiculturalism] was [to] create the melting pot, but the melting pot needs the ingredients of people's confidence in themselves as they come together" and furthers that "if there isn't this there I think we've done ourselves huge damage" (Watt and Glover, The Guardian, 2008).

Perhaps this is just what we are seeing today. The vast cultural mix of Britain may just be showing us that government strategies to build a cohesive, inclusive and sustainable community **may finally be resulting in people of different racial backgrounds becoming so at ease with their British identity, that a person's modern identity is plural**, encompassing both race and other wider social aspects aligned with generating greater integration and acceptance.

This does not necessarily mean that cultural background is any less important or compromised, but that people from different cultural backgrounds living in the UK are

comfortable with who they are and with redefining and reaffirming their position within society.

Nowhere more is this apparent than in the noted integration that is rising within British political parties. Challenging the traditional notion of 'white, male and middle class' as a pre-requisite for political party membership, change is occurring in the political realm. The Conservative Party, The Labour Party and The Liberal Democrats have all made deliberate efforts to change party representations of race (Watt, The Guardian, 2008; Katwala, guardian.co.uk, 2008). However, despite progress being made, statistics show that **“there are 15 non-white MPs when there should be 60 in order to reflect the ethnic mix of the country”** (Katwala, guardian.co.uk, 2008; Alibhai-Brown, The Independent, 2008). This shows that although there is **a growing visibility of black and Asian MPs**, there may still be barriers to entry that prevent more proportionate representation. One of the restricting factors, according to Mark Austin (2008) of The Mirror, is due to the complexities of the UK parliamentary system making it less easy to rapidly emerge as a political leader. For Austin, **the route to the top is a “long road”**.

**But advancement is forthcoming.** Figures such as the Baroness Scotland, Baroness Amos, Sayeeda Warsi MP, David Lammy MP, Dawn Butler MP have all broken ground in the political sphere. In addition, representatives such as Priti Patel, Shailesh Vara, Chuku Umunna and Sadiq Khan MP are noted as stars in the future of British politics. The new wave of involvement in the political process, it would seem, is bucking the trend of it being difficult for black and Asian people to succeed in British politics (Katwala, guardian.co.uk, 2008; Watt, guardian.co.uk, 2008). However, caution remains that ethnic representation and engagement in real political activity should not be in predictable constituencies with high ethnic representation, or in unwinnable seats, but those political territories that are competitive thereby demonstrating party confidence in the candidate with the right credentials to take the given party forward. In this vein, success **should not be based on race, but credibility, political competency, presence, integrity and ‘people power’**.

A real and committed shift in political thought in this direction may well see a Prime Minister from a multi-cultural background in our lifetime.

## Leader's Opinions

MCC spoke to leading figures in the media and political world to get their views on the Obama effect.



### **Henry Bonsu, Content Editor, Colourful Radio**

Henry Bonsu has worked in media for nearly twenty years. As a researcher, producer and commentator for the BBC, Channel 5, Sky News and Iran's Press TV, Henry has also featured in The Times, Mail on Sunday, Daily Express, The Voice, New Nation and the London Evening Standard with his views on politics and cultural identity. Henry is now Content Editor of Colourful Radio a cross-cultural music and speech radio station on Sky Digital, online and soon to be on DAB.



### **Colin Byrne, CEO Europe, Weber Shandwick**

Colin Byrne is one of the UK's most senior strategic PR practitioners with over 20 years' experience in media relations, corporate and political communications and issues management. He has managed national and international press offices and advised senior business, public sector and political leaders on reputation management, media and presentational issues.



### **Lola Adesioye, Journalist**

Lola Adesioye is a socio-political commentator with a specific focus on black culture, society and politics in the UK, US and Africa; race and diversity and black/urban music. Now based in the US, Lola is a regular contributor of features to major print and online publications including: The Guardian, Comment is Free section, TheRoot.com (owned by the Washington Post), and The Huffington Post.



### **Kevin Hooks, Senior Vice President, Axis Agency**

The Axis Agency is Weber Shandwick's multi-cultural arm in the USA. Kevin Hooks heads the Axis Agency's African American marketing team. His experience crosses a broad spectrum of consumer disciplines including entertainment, retail, promotions and grassroots activation.

### **What percentage of the public support for Barack Obama is due to his race compared to his policies?**

**Henry:** “This is unquantifiable, but I'd say a significant degree of the public support for Barack is based in his fresh appeal, which is linked to his youth, and yes, his ethnic origin. As he said himself, he didn't look like the regular Presidential candidate. Some of his policies lacked detail, but that didn't seem to matter to the people, because he, not his opponents, seemed like the genuine change candidate.”

**Colin:** “Democrats feared that race might be one of those unspoken issues that voters preferred not to raise with the pollsters. In the end their fears were largely unfounded. What percentage? Who knows. In some Southern states it might have been a factor for a small minority.”

**Lola:** “The majority of Americans who voted for Barack Obama, I believe, did so because they were desperate for a major shift away from the policies of the Bush administration and that is what Barack offered. It just so happens that he - as a black man who has been able to get so far - is the embodiment of the change and hope that he has been calling for.”

**Kevin:** “Change Has Come - Barack's largest support came from those who agree with his policies (perhaps 80 percent). I would add that although African Americans voted for Barack in extremely high numbers the fact that he was Black was not as important as the fact that he was transformative and credible.”

### **What effect will Barack Obama being the US President have on the UK political agenda?**

**Henry:** “Barack is already having an effect on the UK political agenda. Last week's Prime Ministers Questions were dominated by his shadow, with each party leader trying to wrap himself in the message of seriousness, change, or support for the taxpayer. The main parties are now engaged in a bout of soul-searching, wondering how they can energise the electorate, and find their own Obama.”

**Colin:** “It will have a huge effect on the US' standing in the UK and the world, particularly on issues like climate change.”

**Lola:** “I don't think it will have much effect. It may make us think more about the state of race relations in the UK and encourage us to reflect upon the potential of ethnic minorities to achieve such high positions, but practically I doubt it will have much impact. It's more likely to affect the political agenda on an individual or grassroots level than on a large scale, establishment level.”

**Kevin:** “Barack understands that we live in a Global Society and cannot isolate ourselves from the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The UK political agenda will most certainly be impacted by the ideals and approach to Governance that coincides with this belief system. The agenda's most immediately impacted will undoubtedly be the management of the economic crisis and the war policy. Moving forward this will touch all parts of our world community and those who would hope to lead it.”

## **What are three key learning points that UK political leaders should take from the Obama campaign?**

**Henry:** “1) Start from the ground up. Obama raised over \$600 million - the majority from small donations given by ordinary people. 2) Find a message that resonates with the zeitgeist. The American people were sick of business-as-usual, and Obama addressed that better than anybody. 3) There should be no no-go areas. Obama went into the heart of Republican America and won states that had been in Republican hands for over 40 years.”

**Colin:** “1) Go to people where they are, don't expect them to come to you. That was the core of Obama's internet strategy. 2) Don't just schmooze big campaign donors who might have reputational baggage, raise lots of money from lots of ordinary folk via the Internet. 3) Have a vision, not just a plan.”

**Lola:** “1) Effective campaigns are about the people, not the person running for office. When people are empowered by a leader, they will willingly put their time, energy and money into supporting that leader because they believe that person speaks to them and their interests. A vote for the leader, therefore, becomes a vote for themselves. 2) Campaigns must have a clear and consistent message, which is reflected in the leader. Firstly, Obama, as a black man who is calling for unity, represents change. Secondly, dirt didn't stick on Obama because he has integrity and because he ran a clear, values-based campaign which was true to, and based upon, who he was and what he truly believed in. He himself was the embodiment of his message. 3) People do not care much for old politics which emphasise divisions and disunity or talk about 'us' versus 'them'. As cynical as people are these days, there is a part of us that still hopes for a life in which we are equal and fair and united regardless of race, class or creed.”

**Kevin:** “1) The world is inextricably bound together and that should inform all of their decision making. 2) Technology and new media has ushered in a new era in politics that have inspired young people and minorities to believe that they can make a difference. Embrace new media and technology in your approach to governing. 3) The world narrative is changing and people are reconstituting, reconstructing and rethinking what their “Great Society” should look like. Now is the time for ideas to be fostered and differences to be celebrated. All people especially in the UK are demanding the change they want. It is up to the political leaders to facilitate that change or risk being left behind. I am reminded of Martin Luther King Jr. saying, “change does not come on the wheels of inevitability...but comes through continuous struggle...and so we must straighten our backs and work for our freedom...” That is the mentality of your constituency. Take heed.”

## **Would the American style of political campaigning work in the UK? Why?**

**Henry:** “No. Because the system here is based on parties, not people, which would strangle the charismatic newcomer, and turn the message into something bland and meaningless.”

**Colin:** “UK political parties cherry pick US campaign techniques all the time. Obama's online myth-busting strategies were a digital version of Clinton strategist James Carville's rapid rebuttal techniques, which Blair's team borrowed wholesale in the mid 1990s. The

whole package may not work, but elements will. Both Brown and Cameron are already studying Obama's online campaign tactics."

**Lola:** "I think there are things we can learn but we'd have to adapt them for the UK. Firstly, the UK is a much much smaller place than America, so a 2-year campaigning period would be far too long for such a small place. However, a potential Prime Minister would do well to visit each town and city and to spend time really getting to know people within those places and energizing his base within those places. Secondly, the UK is a lot more resistant to, and cynical about, the marketing element that is involved in American politics: the schmaltz, the big TV ads, the TV appearances, the magazine appearances etc. However, Tony Blair did usher in more of that thing, by associating himself with musicians and so on, so to a lesser extent, the 'identity politics' part of American campaigning (e.g. associating a candidate with a certain 'coolness') could work in the UK - but within reason."

**Kevin:** "Probably not. It is too expensive and requires too much narcissism on the part of the candidate and the electorate."

### **Is the UK ready for a black, Asian or minority ethnic Prime Minister?**

**Henry:** "No, most black and asian politicians have neither the supporter base, nor the broad appeal that would persuade the parties that they would be a vote-winner."

**Lola:** "No."

### ***Could the UK see a Prime Minister from a multi-cultural background within the next 20 years?***

**Henry:** "Possibly, yes. Probably half-Polish!"

**Colin:** "In a UK dominated by negativity around politics and race, perhaps – sadly – not right now. In the next 20 years? You bet."

**Lola:** "Possibly. However, I don't think this is the right question. We currently do not have any black or minority candidates in senior ranking positions within the cabinet... How about we get there first before we start thinking about a black PM? Unlike in America, politicians in the UK have to follow the hierarchy and work their way up through the political system. No black/minority person is likely to ever become a PM unless they are able to get further up into more senior cabinet positions first..."

**Kevin:** "I am not sure whether or not the UK is "ready" or whether or not it will happen within the next 20 years but the signs will be self-evident. It took the US 44 attempts over 200 years to finally elect someone other than a White male to the presidency. The UK has broken one glass ceiling with Margaret Thatcher and I would hope that more ceilings will shatter in the next 20 years."

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