

# ADVERTISING FOR A CHANGE

## Interview with Johnny Wright

Traditionally the Left has viewed advertising as the devil incarnate. But the success of the GLC's *Say No To No Say* campaign in capturing Londoners' imagination seems to show that the Left should take advertising seriously. Johnny Wright of Wright and Partners and now of Ayer Barker has suffered from this distrust but still argues for advertising as a serious tool for change. Here he talks to Brian Hipkin and reflects on his work on the Labour Party's 1983 general election campaign and on advertising in general.

*Can we turn firstly to the Labour Party campaign. How did your agency come to handle the Labour Party account?*

It started with an article in *Campaign*, our trade magazine, which ran a profile of me in May 1981. In the course of the article there was a one liner that said that I was a supporter of the Labour Party. The Labour Party then came to see us and we did a bit of to-ing and fro-ing with the publicity director who was then Max Madden. Max appointed us to work on the local elections in early May 1982 and we did a poster campaign. In some ways this was probably the best work we did for the Labour Party; it was properly done, we had time to do it and it was properly researched. Unfortunately it went up on April 2 which was the same day as Galtieri went into the Falklands so as a news item it didn't quite make it. I think it was well received by the party but it was impossible to say whether or not it had any effect on the general public.

Then a few months later Max Madden left and in due course was replaced by Nick Grant. Nick came from COHSE, he didn't have much advertising experience and obviously no experience to help steer us through a general election. Of course Michael Foot, Jim Mortimer and many of the other key people organising the Labour Party during 1983 also lacked this experience. Then in May Thatcher called a



general election which I think most people expected. What followed was the most frenetic period of my life or the life of anybody involved in our agency. We produced something like six full page press ads, 2 48-sheet posters, 14 quarter page ads, plus back up materials such as car stickers, window stickers and lapel badges and so on, and many of these were produced overnight. We also produced 105 minutes of broadcast time, 5 10-minute television party political broadcasts, 4 10-minute and 3 5-minute radio slots, and all this with an agency of 20 employees is quite incredible. I find it incredible to this day that we survived that period, physically as much as anything else.

We began to see some of the internal problems of the Labour Party. The campaign was changed marginally - we think for the worst - from *think positive/vote Labour*, to *think positive/act positive/vote Labour* which was clumsy and not a great line. People have accused us of producing a boring campaign anyhow. I find it very difficult to look at it objectively. One thing we do know is that the basic theme which was researched very well, certainly touched a chord with the electorate. Ironically, it's also proceeded to win some adver-

tising awards which makes us feel warm but is irrelevant to the general scheme of things.

*What was your relationship with the Labour Party as a client like?*

As it became very clear that Labour were probably going to lose the election, to lose disastrously, we, amongst others, came under a degree of criticism a great deal of which was based on prejudice. This takes us back to one basic problem which the Labour Party has to face up to, which is the role of advertising, not just for the general election but for the party as a whole. We found them. . . not difficult to work with on a personal basis, but unsatisfactory to work with because they wouldn't involve us in all the strategic discussion which agencies have to be involved in if they are going to work with *any* client successfully. On the whole it is true to say that the further left the Walworth Road employee was the more 'anti' they were. On the NEC there was certainly a degree of hostility and Dennis Skinner described us as 'the dregs of the advertising industry', which we felt was probably a compliment but we're not sure. I understand they are now going back

to considering not using an agency next time but using a team of committed helpers, which will be disastrous because you need the machinery to produce the work.

We used to find it somewhat annoying when we worked literally through the night to change something and we would find the Walworth Road people swanning into the first meeting in the morning and starting off with yet another criticism. But that's something you live with. I wouldn't have missed it for the world, it was easily the most interesting advertising experience I've ever had or probably ever will have. And I think that certainly goes for all the people who were internally involved.

Interestingly enough, the Tory Party never had a campaign theme, in fact they didn't run a campaign they wrote a series of very hard hitting one-off ads, things like Foot Pump and the Communist Manifesto and so on. . . They all had nothing to do with each other, they were all tactically very finely tuned to a specific group of people or specific issue. I think the Labour Party would do well to look at the way they developed a tactical campaign rather than a strategic campaign. We started work on the general election about five weeks beforehand and that's not enough. We wouldn't think of launching a new brand of washing-up liquid or a can of soup in anything under nine months to a year and that's rather more trivial than advertising a major political party.

*Did you see yourself during the campaign as being in competition with Saatchi and Saatchi or being in competition with the Tory Party?*

Oh with the Tory Party, the other agency was irrelevant. I know a lot of people at Saatchi very well, particularly Tim Bell who was master minding it and indeed I talked to him two or three times during the campaign. There was a mole at Saatchi so we knew what they were doing and we actually destroyed all the stuff that we were being sent and never released it. It wouldn't have done anybody all that much good but I have infinite respect for them as an agency. Apart from their success, they also do produce good work.

*Groups such as the GLC and ILEA and the Spastics Society are increasingly turning to creative agencies to mount campaigns for them. What do these campaigns achieve both for the clients and for the image of the advertising world itself?*

Well certainly visibility. People are much more aware and conscious of the GLC and what it stands for and what it's trying to do. If you look in the charitable area, this agency handles *Save the Children Fund*; Wright & Partners in fact are still handling the UNICEF account and there is no doubt that we have been able to build fund-raising through the use of creative advertising, rather than just saying fill this coupon in and help support UNICEF. One of the ads that we've just produced for UNICEF, the African emergency in fact, got one single cheque of a million pounds. It was from the Government: the minister in question saw the ad and said we have to have more support for UNICEF. In a week they just sent a million which is probably the most successful single ad that's ever run anywhere in the world.

The effectiveness of things like the GLC campaign are much more difficult to measure but I suspect that the total campaigns that have been conducted have made a lot more people of all political persuasions more supportive of the GLC than they were two years ago. I suspect most people have moved from being indifferent to supporting it rather than from anti to pro. Just the very awareness is heightened. The arrival of Big Brother government is frightening people.

*You've been involved in advertising left issues, do you think that generally they are harder to get across than conservative or right-wing issues?*

That's very difficult to answer. One of the roles of advertising in this area is that you are talking to your own supporters almost as much as you are to the other side. I think that's probably the key role of political advertising. I don't actually believe that political advertising does very much in the way of persuading or changing people's minds or attitudes.

One of the problems of my being involved with the Left (I use that term in a broad sense) is that internally there is more suspicion of us as a body of people and of the work we do and the role of that work. It varies from downright hostility to advertising as being a tool of capitalism to those who think that it is a way of informing people which is what the basic function is. But there are, I am glad to say, a number of people and I think Neil Kinnock is certainly one of those people, who recognise it as a means of fast and controlled communication with the electorate. These are power-

ful tools, they are also the tools of the opposition used effectively and whether you like it or not you will be judged on that as a measure of how you appear to the public. I don't think advertising has ever won or lost an election and I can't see it ever doing so. However, there have been one or two memorable advertising moments, mostly initiated by the Tories. I would guess that it is more difficult to handle the Left than the Right because of the sort of people who are involved in the Tory Party, like Nigel Lawson and Cecil Parkinson. I am sure they arrive at decisions with far less pain and far more quickly than we would be able to.

*Can we move on now to look more generally at the advertising market. The Advertising Standards Authority have the slogan 'Legal, Honest, Decent and Truthful' as a checklist. Some people have argued that adverts can be misleading, they often fail to present an accurate picture of ordinary life - women, men, ethnic minorities etc. Much has been made recently in the advertising press and the Guardian for example of the new 'imperfect' family in J. Walter Thomson's Oxo adverts. This is meant to be as a result of pressure from women but some people would say that it still sees women serving the interests of the family. What is your reaction to these so-called new progressive images?*

Well one thing is a fact about advertising: it doesn't lead, it comes along after the fact and usually some time after. I'm sure if you look at Oxo Katie ads from 1960-65, 1970-75 and in 1980, you would see a change and it would be reflecting, two or three years behind, the changes in society. This is I think a totally healthy relationship, and, I'm sure it is always some way behind which is why it comes in for criticism. Having said that there are of course exceptions where there have been insulting ads. Not only are they few and far between but they are fewer and further between than they used to be. But I think sometimes there is a degree of insensitivity by manufacturers particularly and to a lesser extent by the agencies. But the key thing to remember is that advertising comes along behind and it doesn't change attitudes, it reflects them.

*Women do appear in adverts, albeit in stereotyped ways, but blacks as ordinary members of society, don't really seem to be there. The only two black people currently in television adverts are Lenny Henry with the*

*Smiths' Square Crisps and the rather anonymous black cashier in the Bold 3 advert. Why do you think blacks are invisible in adverts?*

I would suspect that both agencies and manufacturers are nervous of using minorities. I don't think it's a racist thing. . . I don't think it's racist in the sense of not allowing black people to appear. It's never cropped up as an issue where I have been involved. I suspect that if you talked to Proctor & Gamble who make Bold 3 they will say that 5% of the population in this country are black and therefore we will reflect that across our brand. We have 107 people in our commercials and we will have two blacks. That's the way they operate.

*Advertising raises a number of moral issues - cigarette advertising, for example, the Benson & Hedges style of cigarette advertising. Many people believe that agencies dealing with such accounts are glossing over the moral issues.*

I think the Benson & Hedges advertising is brilliant communication. There is a theory that the campaign has been developed all along in the belief that in time they will not be allowed to advertise at all and they will be able to put up the same sort of surreal posters without showing cigarettes at all. If that's true I think it is a very smart piece of forward thinking. But I detest cigarette advertising, I wouldn't work on it myself.

*Many people involved in community and left organisations have been very suspicious of advertising. What would you say to reassure them?*

Advertising's basic job is to inform and persuade; the use of advertising to reach people is provenly effective in all sorts of ways and not in just flogging what many people see as unnecessary consumer goods. For people on the Left to be suspicious of advertising *per se* is unwarranted unless they do not want to communicate because it's one of the best ways of communicating and it is controllable. To refuse to use advertising as a weapon, I think, hands it to the opposition. It so happens that the opposition use it well and I think the sooner that the whole of the Labour Party takes a very real commitment to using the right sort of weapons against the Tories the better. Otherwise we'll face 1988 as we went through in 1983 - with underprepared, wrongly-used resources - and we will lose badly.