

Putting the dirt back into politics

US Democrat Bob Mulholland introduced Labour to the Excalibur computer system, and they haven't looked back since

Ed Harriman
Thursday May 31, 2001

Guardian

Bob Mulholland is the US Democrats' leading dirty trickster. He's been an informal adviser to Millbank for years. Mulholland is widely hated by American Republicans, especially in his home state of California. "That guy's brought political discourse down to a new low level," Mike Madrid, former political director of California's Republican party recently told me. He thinks that Mulholland is totally cynical, destroying opponents personally and driving down voter turnout. "Total scumbag," said one of his colleagues.

You might say that with Republicans carping like that, Mulholland must be doing something right. But no, Labour wants him kept in the closet.

Which is a pity. Because Mulholland has played a key role as Labour has remodelled itself on cut-throat US politics. He's also shown them the black arts of how to rubbish opponents with their powerful Excalibur computer, about which Millbank is so secretive.

I happen to know and like Mulholland, a Vietnam vet who has a refreshingly visceral commitment to democratic elections. As he's fond of saying, "If there's no knives and guns and it's legal, then what the hell, that's politics." He showed up at the press conference of a California Republican running on a "family values" platform with a large photograph of the guy in a strip club. He threatened to expose the sexual delinquencies (there were many) of Republican members of the judiciary committee who were impeaching Bill Clinton. He dreamed up having Bob Dole followed around by Democrats dressed as walking cigarettes - "Mr Puff" - in 1996 so Dole couldn't shrug off his support from the tobacco industry.

For Mulholland, who is fiercely loyal, it's all good fun and keeps the juices running. He calls it the General Patton school of campaigning. Get in your opponent's face and keep shooting. As he says, "people don't remember the good things about your guy. They remember the bad things about the other guy. That's what sticks. You gotta go negative to win."

What this means is simple. You dig up everything you can on your opponent - a divorce, bankruptcy, child support problems. Then you throw it at them.

Pundits who prefer to believe that British politics is still the sport of gentlemen don't like to admit to Mulholland's role, even though he is a member of the Democratic National Committee and party spokesman in California. Yet his contribution to reinventing the Labour machine - and with it the creeping Americanisation of British politics - has been substantial.

Margaret McDonagh and Alan Bernard first came to see Mulholland after the 1992 election defeat. The meeting was set up - ironically - through the US embassy in London. George Bush was then president. McDonagh was then Labour's deputy secretary and Bernard, who now works for the Football Association, was head of campaigns. More meetings followed.

Mulholland believes UK political culture used to be too polite. Candidates took hours responding in turn to each other's press conferences. So he told McDonagh that you have to come back hard, as Mulholland puts it, "right in the guy's face, interrupt his press conference". Then you make the news. You get the headline.

But Mulholland did more. In 1995, a Labour team which included John Carr, a computer consultant, met him in California. He explained how important the Democrats' new computer had become. As the CIA and the Czech secret police were using it, he felt it must be good. It also revolutionised his dirty tricks - "comparison politics" - operation. He didn't have to send researchers out on the street to dig up dirt on the opposition. Computers meant they could collect it sitting at a desk and pull it all together. Which means that today you

can hit your opponent, faster, harder.

The Labour team went to San Diego and visited the computer programme manufacturer, then called Excalibur Technologies.

Then Millbank set up its now well known Rapid Rebuttal Unit under Alan Bernard. Since then Mulholland has made several trips to Britain, some off his own bat, others arranged by the Labour party, to address activists, offer advice and share trade secrets.

One of the San Diego Americans who saw the Labour delegation told me Excalibur can handle huge amounts of unstructured information from over 200 different formats. Which means that Labour today can download and scan information about anyone it wants to, from just about any source, to build personal files on those people which it can then access and retrieve instantly.

According to him, someone in Millbank finally leaked it because they felt a progressive party shouldn't be hiding these sorts of thing which are, after all, perfectly legal.

The company says their customers include MI5, MI6, the Ministry of Defense, GCHQ and several intelligence agencies on the continent. As far as they are aware, Labour is the only political party outside the US that is using it. Furthermore, having already fed millions of pieces of information into it about individual Tories, journalists and anyone else of particular interest, Millbank is now trying out a more advanced system - Electronic Filing System and Retrieval Ware. This will enable it to capture and store even more crudely formatted material as well as multi media. It's a perfect tool for collecting dirt to smear opponents, what Mulholland calls "comparison politics".

But what about the Tories?

Shortly after Labour made the trek to San Diego, the Tories got interested and bought an Excalibur system. But after the 1997 election they more or less mothballed it. Today they use a newspaper clippings service and monitor television. This is hardly comparable to Excalibur's massive up-to-date data base instantly retrievable files on tens of thousands of individuals. The Tories say they don't need it. Maybe they can't afford it.

Civil libertarians may fret about Labour's power to collect secret dossiers. But Mulholland couldn't be happier. He thinks Labour has learned its American lessons, and that it's now an extremely sharp operation. They don't really need him any longer.

Guardian Unlimited © Guardian Newspapers Limited 2006