

# PublicFinance

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## Opinion

Helen Disney



# Winning hearts and minds

**Promises, promises.** The pseudo-launch of Labour's manifesto around last weekend's spring conference could not have been more aptly timed. How well the government's pledges chimed with those of the half-hearted lovers all around Britain whose Valentine's messages were more about saying what their partners wanted to hear than about expressing any real commitment.

Party manifestos are about as meaningful as those cards, and over the years, as the political landscape has shifted, don't they seem to get blander still?

Apart from the commitment to introduce ID cards, this weekend's opening gambits sounded pretty vague: 'modern schools', 'your family treated better and faster'. What does it all mean?

On the other hand, why wouldn't smart politicians play it this way - surely the blander the promise sounds, the easier it is to keep?

It only takes a quick glance back over past manifestos to see why political parties like to keep their options wide open. Not many Labour ministers now talk about Robin Cook's ill-fated 'ethical foreign policy'. And what happened to 1997's promised referendum on the single currency, the 'greening' of every

government department or the completion of House of Lords reform?

It's all a far cry from the grandstanding manifestos of the old days. The Attlee government's 1945 manifesto promised nothing less than public ownership of the Bank of England, as well as the fuel and power industries, inland transport, the iron and steel industry and the nationalisation of land. There would be 'jobs for all' and the government would undertake to buy and distribute free or cheap food to everyone who needed it.

It's a staggering reminder of just how much the role of government has changed in the past 60 years. Is the blandness of modern manifestos merely a sign that politicians recognise the limits of their power these days and that they realise policy priorities must change with changing economic and global circumstances? Partly so. But that's not the whole story.

The shifting of the political centre ground to delivery rather than ideology has left the three main political parties in a dilemma. They need to demonstrate enough concrete policy ideas to make them credible as a party which, given the chance, could push through effective public service reform. Give too much

away, however, and you risk your best ideas being adopted by those already in power or else being ridiculed for being too unrealistic and ambitious.

It is no coincidence that, at a glance, the parties' proposals seem so similar - although the official manifestos have not yet even been published, of course. Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats will all speed up treatment on the NHS, promise to offer greater choice, place a higher emphasis on national security and pledge to cut administrative and bureaucratic costs in the public sector.

Dig deeper, however, and there are real differences between the parties on immigration, civil liberties and funding the NHS and universities.

Bizarrely, the party of the market, the Tories, now oppose university top-up fees, while Labour has become the toughest of the tough on terrorism and national security.

The Liberal Democrats are rapidly trying to position themselves as the 'real opposition', with populist proposals to scrap university tuition fees, provide free care for the elderly and abolish the council tax.

The parties have also taken different attitudes to the early stages of campaigning, with Labour and the Tories already exchanging some

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heavy blows, while Charles Kennedy tries to pursue a 'positive message'.

The saving grace of the manifesto process is that it allows party strategists and leading lights to enter into a dialogue with themselves, before the campaign proper really begins, about where they are going and what their priorities are going to be for the next five years. This is a necessary and healthy activity for any organisation and especially for one, like a political party, which relies very heavily on external communication.

Manifestos send signals, particularly to the party faithful, who are probably one of the few groups who actually read them, other than journalists and policy wonks. They act as a rallying call to the troops who must spend the next three months knocking on doors and handing out leaflets. There's a feel-good factor there, which can't be ignored, however banal and unconvincing these documents may seem to Joe Public.

This electoral love-in might appear as trite as the fluffy red hearts and pink balloons we see every Valentine's Day, but, manifestly ridiculous as it may seem, don't expect to hear a party promising anything as potentially popular as scrapping the manifesto any time soon.