



HOME	NEWS	SPORT	ARTS	BUSINESS	PROPERTY	MAGAZINE	ARCHIVE
------	------	-------	------	----------	----------	----------	---------

COMMENT

PRINT E-MAIL

'You will not win your seat through media. You will win your seat through local, grinding work'

Political Correspondent Conor McMorrow explores the style v substance dilemma facing politicians with a little help from the top PR guru

Perception is everything in modern politics. Journalist Eamon Dunphy summed this up recently when he compared Fine Gael leader Enda Kenny to the most lauded of our former taoisigh, Seán Lemass.



Well, Aine: Conor McMorrow is put through his political paces by Terry Prone

Discussing the way Kenny's (and all of our political leaders') communication skills are under constant scrutiny, Dunphy said: "If you look through history you will see that Clement Attlee was a great prime minister. He had no charisma and no communication skills yet he was a great prime minister. If Seán Lemass was living in the modern era he would be in a similar position to Kenny."

Unlike the Lemass era, a lot of modern politics is now about style as much as substance. You only have to look at US president Barack Obama as a case in point. Whether you think he is a 'windbag' or you believe he is the most exciting politician for generations, few could argue that he is a superb communicator.

Communication is also paramount in modern Irish politics. And such is the importance placed on it that most political parties employ PR gurus to train their TDs and senators.

In recent weeks the Sunday Tribune contacted a number of the experts who train Irish politicians, and asked them to bring our readers through the keyhole to capture a glimpse into the making of a modern-day politician.

The **Communications Clinic**, run by Terry Prone and her husband Tom Savage, offered a behind-the-scenes look. It currently holds a number of lucrative contracts with Irish political parties. The couple work with the current crop of Fine Gael politicians; Prone, formally the chief **communications** adviser to the Minister for the Environment, has advised nearly every taoiseach since Jack Lynch.

Last week, I played the guinea pig. I arrived at the **Communications Clinic** on Wednesday, playing the part of a journalist who had decided to give up my day job in the Dáil press gallery and stand for election as an independent in a Dublin constituency.

Shown into a room by one of Prone's staff, I am told to take a seat as I await her arrival. I sit at one end of a large wooden table and notice a TV camera is focused on me from the other end of the room. When Prone arrives, she tells me that we are going to start the day with a fictitious "Morning Ireland-type interview", which will be recorded by the camera for us to watch back and analyse afterwards.

Prone plays Aine Lawlor and I play the wet-behind-the-ears general election candidate who has left journalism to try and change the world after I win a seat in Dublin Central.

After a five-minute grilling, where I stumble through a number of answers about how I am going to offer the people of Dublin Central something completely different, the interview finally ends.

Immediately afterwards, Prone plays the video of the interview on a large plasma screen TV and tells me where I went wrong. I quickly feel empathy with Joe Jacob. In 2001, the junior minister with responsibility for nuclear safety did a disastrous interview with Marian Finucane. The interview was about the iodine tablets that were distributed by the government in the wake of 11 September, amid fears of an attack on Sellafield. Jacob knew nothing about the national emergency plan but tried to 'wing' the interview. The result was cringe-inducing.

From viewing the footage of my interview with Prone, it is clear that I know as much about my election manifesto as Jacob knew about the iodine tablets.

In the same way TDs, senators and aspiring candidates are coached for elections, Prone talks through a lengthy series of 'dos' and 'don'ts' for the modern politician.

She starts with some tips on "physical positioning and clothing". She believes that it makes up a tiny percentage of what matters but it cannot be overlooked. She remembers preparing a politician for RTE's Prime Time a number of years ago and forgetting to talk to him about his clothing.

Before the interview, he put on his best suit, which had been bought when he was three stone lighter. Prone winces as she recalls: "Throughout the entire programme he was strangling on his waistband and when Miriam [O'Callaghan] thanked him at the end for appearing, he leaned back on the chair and undid the top of his trousers. I realised from then on that I need to talk to people about what they wear."

Rookie politicians are given a few rules about their clothes. One of these is that "if you are going onto the Vincent Browne programme you will not wear anything blue". It turns out the elaborate red set is fiction. It is actually blue and if you wear a blue shirt "the red will be reflected onto it".

Advertise here
Click to create

POPULAR

1. Me And The Big C
2. FG agrees to €5bn cuts in bid to distance itself from Labour
3. Wing-and-a-prayer tactics could see Spurs crucified by the kings of Europe
4. Censored: details of Dempsey's trip to London 'not in public interest'
5. Can Bank of Ireland keep the wolf from the door?
6. 'What Michael Clifford described bore no relationship to my Dáil week'
7. Quinlan faces huge pain over mansion on the French riviera
8. Getting its sums wrong: state overpaid €170m for school sites...
9. Masked IRA man's map leads to body in Louth
10. FG set to launch plans for radical reforms in public service bodies

Share this article

- del.icio.us
- digg
- Facebook
- Google

Search

RSS Feeds

Subscribe to The Sunday Tribune's RSS feeds. [Learn more.](#)

- Latest Articles
- News, Business, Sport or Arts

Then comes the "Two Ps and a P' rule. Prone explains that this means "... two plains and a pattern or two patterns and a plain... You need to wear a plain jacket, a plain shirt and a bright patterned tie or a pin-striped suit, a stripy shirt and a plain tie."

Looking up at the plasma screen, where she has paused our earlier interview, she tells me: "You are wearing three plains, which convey an overwhelming image of dullness to the camera. Your three colours are too close together and as you don't have a contrast colour at the neck – our eyes are not drawn to your face." This politics gig is a cruel business. When I question the importance of clothes, she responds with a story about the late independent TD Tony Gregory, who famously never wore a tie.

"If you are talking to middle-class floating voters then you must wear the suit and tie and look respectable.

"Tony Gregory never wore a tie. He was constantly at war with the superintendent in Dáil Éireann over it. But it was thought-out. Gregory had an acute understanding of semiotics – the messages that are sent to people and the understanding created, even without words."

After talking through the clothing issue, Prone gives another warning – "always be conscious of what is in the background when filming".

When she worked with Albert Reynolds some years ago, she was filming a Fianna Fáil party political broadcast with Reynolds seated in front of a bookshelf. "Just as we were about to start filming, I spotted a book called something like The Joy of Sex sitting in line with his left-hand shoulder. It's amazing the things that get into backgrounds."

She also warns politicians to be wary they are not photographed beside an 'Exit' sign. A photo taken during a general election campaign of a TD sitting below an 'Exit' sign is sure to cause embarrassment if it is splashed across newspapers the following day.

Addressing the issue of the would-be politician getting nervous in a studio ahead of a Late Late Show appearance or giving a speech on the hustings, Prone says nerves "are a good thing. It shows there is adrenalin flowing through your body... Adrenalin is the fight or flight hormone. So welcome it!"

She also stresses the importance of preparing for interviews with broadcasters like Mary Wilson and Matt Cooper.

"When Mary Wilson has done her introduction and asked the first question, the interviewee has between 30 and 45 seconds to respond. That's the window. If you are not riveting within that period, then you will lose listeners. They may not switch over to Matt Cooper or George Hook but they will start to think to themselves 'do I need to pick up bread on the way home?'

"You have to put the single most interesting thing you want your listener to hear in those 30 to 45 seconds. Most of the time the first question is 'what's the story here?' You need to remember that you are not talking to Mary Wilson, you are talking to the people behind her in Dublin Central."

"You need to realise that you are the expert on your constituency. You live there; you know what sort of people live there and what their concerns are. You are the content master. Cathal Mac Coille or Seán O'Rourke or Matt Cooper do not want to bounce all over you, firing questions at you and hear short yes or no answers. A politician should never answer a question with a 'yes' or 'no'. That's for a garda interrogation. You should answer with a 'Yes, and here's why...' or 'No and the worst example of this is...'"

It is paramount that a politician knows their audience. They have to be aware of the age of the listener, their class and if they are employed or unemployed. "There is no point in you broadcasting to an illiterate 18-year-old constituent through Morning Ireland as they will not be listening. You need to know your audience," Prone warns.

It is also important not to use category headings such as 'job losses', 'high unemployment', and 'stimulus package'.

Prone explains: "These headings are used so frequently that they kind of slide off our minds, leaving no trace. You need to give little nuggets of information. So that people will say 'Do you know what I heard on Newstalk this morning?' People won't remember if you just talk generally – we need pictures, stories and examples.

"In order to be memorable you have to give single examples. Don't use cosmic stuff about thousands of people. Find out how one person suffered and give us something we can visualise and imagine. Everybody wants motherhood and apple pie, more employment, some kind of a stimulus for the economy. But what makes you different?"

Then comes Prone's tip on "predictable stinkers". These are the questions the interviewer will use to cut the politician off at the knees. "You have got to work out what the predictable stinkers are because once you have them worked out they are welcome as you have prepared for them."

After warning budding politicians about "stinker" questions that come from interviewers like Seán O'Rourke, Prone goes on to explain that a politician should view O'Rourke as a telephone. "I don't want to hear you on the News at One with Seán O'Rourke saying 'Seán this, Seán that". You are not broadcasting to Seán O'Rourke. He is not your market. He is a telephone that connects you to the public. You don't get intimate with a telephone so you don't do this creepy thing of using the person's name all the time. Once or twice is enough."

And what happens if you 'go blank' live on air or in front of the parliamentary party? "It happens everyone," Prone says. You are in the middle of an answer and then you lose your train of thought and you don't know if it is Christmas or Tuesday. What you simply say is 'Brian, I completely lost my train of thought. What was it you asked me again?' It is their job to rescue you and they always will."

In 2000, the British tabloid media had a field day when then prime minister Tony Blair's 16-year-old son Euan was arrested for being "drunk and incapable".

Prone warns each politician to "decide where the line of privacy lies" for them. "If you have children, be careful about them. Be very careful about the Christmas cards with children on them. Once you put your children in the public eye, you may end up with the Tony Blair situation. If your children are kept out of it from the word go they are safer."

In comparing the impact of TV and radio, Prone believes TV will make a politician's constituents recognise him or her but "you will not win your seat through television".

"You will win your seat through radio. Radio is the attitude-and behaviour- change medium. All of the research indicates that the pick-up and memory of radio is much better than television. Television polarises people on pre-existing lines of prejudice.

Radio is a one-to-one medium. You hear it in the car. You hear it in the kitchen. It's just you and the radio."

Prone gives the same level of coaching to opposition and government TDs as they both have "to be interesting, understandable and memorable. They have to justify the precious air time they have been given."

However, she says that "it's amazingly easy to train an opposition politician as long as you are able to issue press releases that have great attacking headlines and if the media know you are competent they will use you.

"Once you are in government, you tend to get meshed in the complexity of what you know and you are not sure what you can or cannot say."

Prone currently coaches politicians over a two-day period and the courses are focused mainly on media performance techniques. But she pragmatically adds: "You will not win your seat through media. You will win your seat through local, grinding work."

After going behind the scenes in the politician factory, I came to the conclusion that there is a lot to be said for being a hurler on the ditch, or in the Dáil press gallery.

Political rules

* Form a '10-Group' around yourself. This is the core group of 10 people in your political machine who will "die for you". Examples are Bertie Ahern's 'Drumcondra Mafia' or Finian McGrath's well-oiled machine.

* Be prepared for the "predictable stinkers" – the tough questions that you should anticipate before a media interview

* If you don't know the answer to a question, you can say you don't know it or you can prove you don't know it! You are better to say "I am sorry I don't have a clue" than try to wing it.

* Follow the "Two Ps and a P" rule when dressing. That is either two plains and a pattern or two patterns and a plain. You need to wear a plain jacket, plain shirt and bright patterned tie or a pin-striped suit, stripy shirt and a plain tie.

* Never go canvassing doorsteps during a major sporting event such as an international soccer match and never knock a door after 9.30pm. You won't be welcome.

* Keep your children away from the limelight. Never send out Christmas cards with a picture of you and your children on them.

* Remember nervousness is a good thing. It shows that the adrenalin is flowing through your body. Adrenalin is the fight or flight hormone. So welcome it.

October 17, 2010

Post a comment

Name (Required, published)
Email address (Required, not published)
URL (Optional)

Comment

Comments are moderated by our editors, so there may be a delay between submission and publication of your comment. Offensive or abusive comments will not be published. Please note that your IP address (109.255.122.231) will be logged to prevent abuse of this feature. In submitting a comment to the site, you agree to be bound by our [Terms and Conditions](#)

[Contact us](#) | [Terms & Conditions](#) | [Copyright Notice](#)
Website by Maithú™