

# The Politics of Image



**A Speech by Dr. Michael Frendo  
President of Malta's Foreign Affairs Commission to open  
CEPIC Congress, Malta, 4 June 2008**

Mr. President,  
Ladies and Gentleman,

1. Every good politician (if I am allowed to use that adjective for politicians) knows that a picture in a newspaper front-page is worth many speeches and much printed text. The story is in the picture and a picture is easily and quickly seen and absorbed. An article or a reported story without a picture is often skimmed over, if at all, by the reader and all the effort is often lost.

2. We live in a society of images and as society develops further and as we struggle with one important dimension of our lives – time – while also struggling to adapt to being constantly bombarded with information, we seek to short-cut the system and get our information, form our opinions, make up our minds by absorbing images, often shaping perceptions which are stronger than reality.

3. Democratic politics are no longer the realm of those who take an interest in the subject. Ultimately the logic of politics is numbers and therefore no politician can ignore the emerging technologies which carry a message to people. Beyond the press and media, the internet, and new realities such as Facebook or so many other points of meeting in cyberspace are providing image, forming opinions, determining votes and power.

4. Jon Simons in his speech on "The Power of Political Images" (Jon Simons, Department of Communication and Culture, Indiana University, Bloomington, Prepared for delivery at the 206 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 30th-September 3rd 2006. Copyright by the American Political Science Association.) quoting Bernard Manin (Bernard Manin, The Principles of Representative Government [New York; Cambridge University Press, 1997], p. 232) makes an incisive observation: "Whereas in earlier forms most political discussion took place in parliaments and in and between political parties, in the current form much more of it occurs in public arenas and forms of political communication defined by mass media. Manin calls this form of representative government 'audience democracy' because the electorate 'responds to the terms that have been presented on the political stage' by politicians who succeed as 'media figures'. These figures 'constitute an elite endowed with positively valued characteristics that distinguish them from the rest of the population', such that the alleged crisis of democracy is 'nothing more than the rise of a new elite and the decline of another', namely political activists and party bureaucrats".

5. In this 'audience democracy', the image has become all-powerful. The conservative politician has to have de rigueur the picture with his wife and family. Leaders are groomed for the image, their height enhanced, their look bettered, their diet controlled: image has become a leading issue in being accepted by the public as one of them and yet as a leading one of them. Visual image has become a foundation stone for that image understood as reputation, trustworthiness and credibility, character, personality.

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6. Are these the tools of dictatorships? Certainly Fascism and Nazism, and dictators in history, have placed a strong emphasis on image. The image of strength with choreographed performances by huge amounts of people moving in unison with purpose and with precision which provides the image of strength and determination. The public displays in today's North Korea with millions of people forming part of the show are vivid examples of this reality today. In dictatorships, of course, there is full control of image which is transmitted to the receiving public. This is certainly not true of democratic societies where the image of politics is often transmitted by independent media and therefore outside the control of the person depicted in the image or the governing power. No better example of this can be given than the Abu Ghraib photographs of Iraqi prisoners being tortured.

7. These were pictures of enormous political importance with significant political consequences. They competed in the public mind with other images seen on the national and international press and media such as the symbolic and emotional toppling by common people of Saddam Hussein's statue in Baghdad which told another side of the story. The forcefulness of pictures, of images, is shown by the reaction to the Abu Ghraib image revelations which reflected written reports which had been circulating previously about the occurrence of such incidents. Ironically these were pictures taken by the perpetrators themselves! (Susan Sontag, Essay on the photographs of the torture of prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison)

8. Images themselves are powerful political statements. Visualise the image of the Mahatma Gandhi arriving accompanied by a goat at 10 Downing Street or collecting sea water after walking for miles in a public manifestation to contest regulation of the production of salt. These are powerful images which, even with the limitations of rapidity of communication at the time, are imprinted in people's minds leaving popular imagination and the ever-powerful word of mouth to do the rest.

9. In Europe today, the politics of image demands that images transmit feelings and judgements about the politician being depicted: hard-soft, firm-weak, warm-cold. Similarly, in what could be seen as a somewhat analogous political culture, in the American presidential nomination race, we have seen that the naturally warm candidate whose warmth is established beyond doubt will emphasize images and words which show forcefulness, determination and strength of purpose while the somewhat wooden staid candidate will emphasize images and words which show concern, warmth and understanding. It becomes the politics of having the picture showing you with powerful gesticulation, jogging, dancing, laughing heartily, embracing, bearing a concerned look. Images carry messages which give confidence and draw in those crucial votes in democratic elections. As Arthur Miller says in "The Death of a Salesman" through the character of Biff Loman: "Everyone loves a kidder, but nobody lends him money". Gravitas is important currency in the politics of image.

10. As in the case of the salesman, the politics of image is not only left to democratic politicians. They are also the currency of country branding or of legitimate lobbyists, non-governmental organizations and of the scourge of our times, terrorism. The image of a ripped off bus or of a person being assisted out of a tube station wearing an impersonal protective thermal mask stick as much to our minds as the Greenpeace activist hanging from a building unfurling a banner with a message. Country branding also requires images which show it in a positive light. In his article appearing in the prestigious 'Foreign Affairs' journal, entitled "The Rise of the Brand State: The Postmodern Politics of Image and Reputation" (Foreign Affairs, October 10, 2001), Peter van Ham gives the example of Belgium where "Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt had hired a team of image-makers to



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rebuild the country's reputation after years of scandals involving government corruption, child pornography, and dioxin-polluted chickens. In an attempt to clear the air, Belgium has decided to introduce a new logo and hip colors and will sport the cool Internet suffix ".be" as its international symbol. The overall aim of the campaign is to emulate Virgin, which, according to one Belgian advertising expert, "isn't big, but you see it everywhere you look." In such a campaign, of course, the visual image remains paramount.



11. Visual Images also freeze stolen moments which in themselves are of lasting significance: the Pontiff profound in prayer oblivious of all around him; a weeping Margaret Thatcher as she leaves office; the deep green eyes of the young Afghan girl on the National Geographic cover; the toothless smile of the African boy surrounded by misery. Images are in themselves political statements of importance and it is wrong to present images only as an illusion which deceptively fashions the mind of the masses.

12. The power lies in that people read the picture not the text.

13. But images can also lie as when the British tabloid, the Daily Mirror, lost its Editor after carrying a picture of a British soldier urinating on a prisoner in Iraq only to find out fifteen days later that it had been hoaxed. That case, as others, raises the question of how images have come to define reality even if they are unreal creating uncertainty in establishing credibility and truth in media messages.

14. In Plato's allegory, a number of prisoners are chained in a cave, unable to turn their heads. All they can see is the wall of the cave. Behind them burns a fire. Between the fire and the prisoners there is a parapet, along which puppeteers can walk. The puppeteers, who are behind the prisoners, hold up puppets that cast shadows on the wall of the cave. The prisoners are unable to see these puppets, the real objects that pass behind them. What the prisoners see and hear are shadows and echoes cast by objects that they do not see.

15. Are we then all victims of Plato's cave allegory? Are we prisoners who are not allowed the view of the real thing only to mistake the shadows on the walls of the cave as depicting the real thing? Are we condemned to accept appearance for reality? Has the politics of substance been overcome by the politics of image?

16. That does not necessarily mean only the politics of visual images. While visual image remains the most powerful medium to imprint a message in the popular mind, images are also transmitted by the use of words as I have been doing for the past few minutes. One example is illustrated by Peter van Ham who declares that "Like branded products, branded states depend on trust and customer satisfaction. We talk about a state's personality in the same way we discuss the products we consume, describing it as "friendly" (i.e., Western-oriented) and "credible" (i.e., ally), or "aggressive" (i.e. expansionist) and "unreliable" (i.e., rogue). This preference for style over substance is increasingly shaping Europe's political landscape." (Foreign Affairs, October 10, 2001).

17. In conclusion, politics and image are intrinsically tied together and have always been so from the Roman emperors to modern day Presidents and Prime Ministers when, at all times, the politics of image was an accepted tool in governance. Inasmuch as the media thrive on political images so do politicians exploit the media for their own ends. A politician complaining about the media is a sailor complaining about the sea. What is different today is that image is transmitted globally in real time reaching audiences exerting influence on people's minds, inciting them, calming them, exhorting them to action. The published images of the Danish cartoon on the Prophet Mohammed are seen, even years

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later, as a reason why terrorists targeted the Danish Embassy in Pakistan just yesterday. The politics of image, audience democracy, audience politics demand a responsibility from the producers and carriers of images which is far greater than the act itself.

18. That responsibility represents an important element of your Congress today. As I heartily join the Minister of State for Tourism in welcoming you warmly to this country where we want traditional hospitality to be intrinsic to our image, I plead the case for treating with care and respect the tremendous strength and power of the visual image. It is more than ever a determining factor in politics today.

19. Thank you.



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