

Reports and Surveys

A Good Place to Bury Bad News? Hiding the Detail in the Geography on the Labour Party's Website

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But actually, he thought as he re-adjusted the Ministry of Plenty's figures, it was not even forgery. It was merely the substitution of one piece of nonsense for another. Most of the material that you were dealing with had no connexion with anything in the real world, not even the kind of connexion that is contained in a direct lie. Statistics were just as much a fantasy in their original version as in their rectified version.

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)

The fictional Winston Smith in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* worked in the London skyscraper that housed the Ministry of Truth. He spent his working days rewriting history in 'Newspeak' so that it favoured 'the Party'. Among the more menial of his tasks was the substitution of one set of statistics for another to show how well the party was running things. Winston did not see this substitution as forgery. It was just a part of his job.

This article examines the work of a contemporary Winston Smith who, in the service of a governing party today, has the job of substituting statistics to put that party in a good light. We do not know the actual identity of this person or persons, although they almost certainly work in George Orwell's original setting of London. There, however, the similarities with the dark secretive world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* cease. What is different about the contemporary Win-

ston Smith is that their substitutions are available for anyone to see and are relatively easily uncovered on the party's website. The fact that they have not been revealed until now is testimony to our expectations of campaigning behaviour on the part of political parties. It is also, probably, testimony to how few people actually directly use sources of this kind. However, we suspect (but cannot easily prove) that what is put on websites like this is much further disseminated through being reproduced by party agents in local campaigning literature, released to the local press and fed into general local political debate. What was the stuff of fiction in 1949 is commonplace 'spin' in 2002. Here we examine how it is done, what the contemporary rules of political statistical manipulation are, and how even figures manipulated to show the work of a party in a good light can be used to cast doubt on their claimed achievements. We conclude by considering the implications of this development for political campaigning.

Our contemporary example of political statistical manipulation concerns the Labour Party, which won the British general elections of 1997 and 2001. Our evidence is drawn directly from the statistics on 'What Labour's done in your constituency' made available on the Labour Party website—available to all and drawn, the party claims, from data in the public

domain. Although this example may appear to be a parochial British one, the methods of statistical manipulation used by the Labour Party could be used by any political party worldwide, were similar data on their country available. The methods that Labour have adopted allow a picture of general social improvement to be transformed into a picture of universal improvement. They produced a set of thousands upon thousands of apparently relevant performance indicators, every one of which the party can claim illustrates the success of its policies. In fact, what drew our attention to this sleight of hand in the first place was the impression gained that everything appeared to be getting better everywhere. According to the Labour party's figures Britain is fast approaching some kind of social statistical utopia. How can that be—and why make such staggering claims?

New Labour in Britain

'Things Can Only Get Better' was the theme tune of the 1997 British general election. Use of this song by the Labour Party (and of its successor in 2001, 'Lifted', by the Lighthouse Family) has been the source of much cynicism in the British press, and analogies have been made between the sentiments of the song—'Learn to talk like me and be an angel too'—and government evangelical spin over recent years. A kinder interpretation of Labour's choice of music would be that it simply reflects their enthusiasm to do a good job. However, New Labour appear to have set their definition of 'a good job' as improving all aspects of the lives of everyone in Britain everywhere, all at the same time. They have set numerous targets to this effect, ranging from hundreds of local best performance targets to national headline targets such as for the abolition of child poverty by 2020. While many of these targets are laudable, they would

have often been viewed in pre-New Labour times as contradictory. Unlike Old Labour, New Labour has no problem with the soaring fortunes of the rich (as the Prime Minister made clear in an interview the day before the 2001 general election). In New Labour's rhetoric, if the party works hard enough, things can only get better for everyone, from rich to poor, from north to south, year on year on year.

To prove that things have got better New Labour have created a database: mimicking the words of the song, they now know us and can measure (given a little bit of manipulation) how our lives have improved under their administration.¹ One interpretation of New Labour statistical spin would be that it is necessary to carry your view over against a hostile press, particularly during election campaigns. It is also a very effective campaigning strategy to avoid alienating any particular section of society. However, there are indications that, following the 2001 election, the Labour government's sensitivity to the reporting of bad news has hardened. The now infamous advice from a government special (i.e. political) adviser in the Department of Transport that 11 September 2001 would be a good day to bury bad news led to speculation that there was a general policy of burying bad news and, as we show in this paper, of making sure that you do not generate it in the first place.

When we first saw the local area statistics on the Labour Party website in the run-up to the general election of 2001, our view was that this was simply a campaigning strategy and that the statistics would disappear from the site after the election. A year later, the site is still active and the data are being expanded and updated, with the continuing desire to show that everything is getting better, everywhere. And rather than appearing to be a necessary series of occasional white lies, it is beginning to look as if the provision of this distorted picture of

the local geography of Britain is a longer-term party strategy. The website grows as membership of the Labour Party falls. The website contains more and more local statistics as both the local membership and the local knowledge of Labour party activists diminishes. We end this paper speculating over whether these trends are moving us nearer to the day of the 'robo-activist'—part campaigner, mainly computer—who will bore voters into yet further depths of apathy as it showers them with fixed statistics. First, however we begin with the more mundane content of the Labour Party's website.

The Labour Party website

In the months leading up to the 2001 general election the Labour Party's website (<http://www.labourparty.org>) included a set of statistical indicators for each of the 641 parliamentary constituencies in England, Wales and Scotland.² These constituency profiles—separately accessible by either clicking on the name of the relevant constituency or simply typing in your postcode—were designed to indicate how conditions had improved in each local area under Labour. If they had not improved, then the source of the data being shown was changed, as we illustrate below, to make them improve.

The profiles of each constituency were arranged in seven categories for England, five for Wales and four for Scotland. These categories contained twenty-eight different quantified indicators of Labour's policy successes:³

Economic stability

- 1 Average decrease in annual mortgage repayments relative to situation under Tories.

Families and children

- 2 Families are better off because of tax and benefit changes.

- 3 Number of families benefiting from record rises in Child Benefit.
- 4 Number of low- and middle-income families benefiting from the Working Families' Tax Credit.

Pensioners

- 5 Number of pensioners benefiting from 'this year's record rise in the basic state pension'.
- 6 Number of over-60s receiving the Winter Fuel Payment.
- 7 Number of over-75s getting free TV licenses [*sic*].

Rebuilding the NHS

- 8 Funding for local health authority in 2001/2.
- 9 Funding for local health authority in 1996/7.
- 10 Waiting lists in local health authority 'now'.
- 11 Waiting lists in local health authority in March 1998.
- 12 Increase in number of qualified nurses in local health authority.

Standards in schools

- 13 Increase in real terms spending per pupil 'now' compared to 1996/7.
- 14 Number of 5–7-year-olds in constituency taught in classes of over 30 in 1998.
- 15 Number of 5–7-year-olds in constituency taught in classes of over 30 in January 2001.
- 16 Number of infants in constituency benefiting from pledge to cut class sizes.
- 17 Percentage of 11-year-olds in county reaching the required standard in reading and writing 'now'.
- 18 Percentage of 11-year-olds in county reaching the required standard in reading and writing in 1998.
- 19 Percentage of 11-year-olds in county reaching the required standard in maths 'now'.

20 Percentage of 11-year-olds in county reaching the required standard in maths in 1998.

Economic stability and making work pay

- 21 Number of people on the dole in 1997.
- 22 Number of people on the dole 'now'.
- 23 Number of young people who have benefited from the New Deal for Young People.
- 24 Number of young people who have found work through the New Deal programme.
- 25 Percentage fall in long-term youth unemployment since Labour came to office.

Cutting crime

- 26 Percentage rise in crime between 1979 and 1997 under the Tories.
- 27 Percentage fall in crime since 1997.
- 28 Increase in police force numbers.

For Wales, no information was given about the NHS or education, whereas for Scotland, no information was given on the NHS, education or crime: in both cases, this was undoubtedly because those policy areas have been, since 1999, the domain of the devolved institutions (the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly) and so the UK government was not accountable for their performance (though it is doubtful how many of the electorate were aware of this).

It is extremely unlikely (if not impossible!) that all of the above indicators have improved for all constituencies. However, the Labour Party reported them in such a way as to make it appear that they did. For example, if an indicator had not improved for one timescale then the timescale was changed for that constituency to one during which conditions had improved. Indicators are also reported at different spatial scales. If conditions hadn't improved at the constituency scale, for example, then a larger scale was deployed at which things had

improved: in the case of crime figures, for example, for some constituencies indicators are given which are averages for the whole of England and Wales if those constituencies are in police force areas and regions where crime had increased. Thus, on the Labour Party's website crime had fallen under Labour everywhere and police numbers had similarly risen everywhere, even though to show this both the spatial and temporal scales had to be altered to ensure universal improvement.⁴

Manipulating scales: temporal and spatial

Some geographical statistics are only available at scales above that of the constituency, and so we have not criticised Labour for reporting these at higher scales. For instance, literacy estimates are only available for whole local education authorities, so we do not criticise Labour for reporting them at that scale.⁵ By manipulation, we mean reporting figures at a mix of scales in such a way as to produce a better picture—or where they could be produced at a lower scale and have not been.

Some of the indicators are reported at the national scale only in every constituency (i.e. the same figure is reported for every constituency). These are: (1) average decrease in mortgage payments under Labour; (2) how much the average family with children is better off since 1997; and (13) the increase in average spending per pupil since 1996/7.⁶ Several of the indicators simply report figures that reflect the demographic profile of a constituency, such as (3) number of families benefiting from increased Child Benefit; (4) number of low- and middle-income families who benefit from Working Families' Tax Credit; (5) number of pensioners who benefit from the rise in the basic state pension; (6) number of over-60s receiving Winter Fuel Payment;

and (7) number of over-75s getting free TV licences. In a few of these cases the figures are misleading as it is households, not individuals, who qualify and so figures for those constituencies where household sizes are larger will be distorted—but not greatly so.

The following paragraphs give examples of where indicators have been reported for different time periods and different spatial scales.

Constituency-specific figures are reported for each constituency for indicators 23–25 relating to the New Deal and long-term youth unemployment. However, for indicators 21 and 22 (dole figures), figures are reported for constituencies except in three cases, where those for the standard region in which the constituency is situated are deployed: Bosworth, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Stoke-on-Trent South. Actual unemployment counts by constituency are available from the House of Commons Library, and these confirm that unemployment had risen in those three constituencies, thereby casting doubt on some other aspects of the unemployment data presented by Labour—but here we are just interested in the obvious manipulations. Depending on exactly when the start and end months are set, unemployment rises in different sets of constituencies. It is fair to say that unemployment has in general fallen almost everywhere; given that that is the case, it would be most honest to say that unemployment has remained almost stable in the few places where it has not fallen, rather than try to make it appear otherwise.

Figures for the increase in NHS funding (indicators 8 and 9) are health-authority-specific in all cases. The figures for waiting lists (indicators 10 and 11) are also health-authority-specific for all constituencies, but data are based on two alternative time periods: the decrease in waiting lists is reported since either 1997 or 1998, presumably depending on which provides the better picture. For indicator

12 (increase in nurses), figures are reported for region (a larger spatial unit) as opposed to health authority for 168 of the 529 constituencies in England; the number of nurses increased across all regions, but not across all health authorities within some of them.

Indicator 16, the decrease in the number of 5-, 6- and 7-year-olds in class sizes over 30 since 1998, is reported as a constituency-specific figure in all cases except one: Hammersmith and Fulham, for which figures are reported for England and Wales, because they did not decrease in that constituency. Literacy and numeracy standards for 11-year-olds (indicators 17–20) are education-authority-specific in all cases—which in the largest such areas (mainly the counties and the largest cities) means that the same figure is reported for up to 20 constituencies. Admittedly the data are only available at this level, but the website does not make any of its degrees of spatial averaging particularly clear (how many voters know how large an education authority is?)—and of course, as the annually published league tables for all individual schools show, a lot of other data are available that could be collated at the constituency scale and so demonstrate to voters what changes were taking place in ‘their’ constituencies.

Indicator 26, the increase in crime under the Tories (1979–97), is reported for police force area in all cases. The decrease in recorded crime since Labour came into power in 1997 (indicator 27) is reported at two spatial scales. For 376 of the 569 constituencies in England and Wales, crime reduction figures are reported at police force area level; for the remaining 193 constituencies, figures are reported for England and Wales as a whole. Crime fell in England and Wales overall, but in only two-thirds of the police force areas. For indicator 28, the increase in police numbers, figures are variously reported for both two different spatial scales and two different time periods. Of the 569

constituencies in England and Wales, 507 report an increase in police numbers at police force area level, with the remaining 62 constituencies reporting figures for the region in which the constituency is situated. Of the 507 constituencies that reported figures for police force area, 190 reported figures since 1997, with the remaining 317 reporting figures since 2000. All constituencies that reported figures for region were reported as having an increase in police numbers since 2000.

Measuring change

The above examples are the most obvious temporal and spatial scale manipulations that were made to the data by the Labour Party. We could have considered the initial choice of statistics, or the initial choice of base and end years. Instead, we next look at what the statistics tell us about how Labour sees its performance to have been geographically distributed. In this, we present the data as Labour itself did but also, where relevant, manipulate them ourselves. With a number of the indicators, the website provides some measure of change, either absolute or relative, but in many cases fails to provide both; in others, data for two dates are provided, but with no indication of the amount or rate of change. We have calculated change indicators in such cases, as follows:

Rebuilding the NHS

- C1 Change in the funding for the local health authority, in £m.
- C2 Percentage change in the funding for the local health authority (as a percentage of the initial figure).
- C3 Change in waiting lists in the local health authority, in number of patients.
- C4 Percentage change in waiting lists in the local health authority (as a percentage of the initial figure).

Standards in schools

- C5 Percentage change in the number of 5–7-year-olds taught in classes of 30+ (as a percentage of the initial figure).
- C6 Change in the percentage of 11-year-olds reaching the required standard in reading and writing (in percentage points).
- C7 Percentage change in the percentage of 11-year-olds reaching the required standard in reading and writing (as a percentage of the initial figure).
- C8 Change in the percentage of 11-year-olds reaching the required standard in maths (in percentage points).
- C9 Percentage change in the percentage of 11-year-olds reaching the required standard in maths (as a percentage of the initial figure).

Economic stability and making work pay

- C10 Change in the number of people on the dole.
- C11 Percentage change in the number of people on the dole (as a percentage of the initial figure).
- C12 Percentage of those on the dole at the beginning of the period benefiting from the New Deal programme.
- C13 Percentage of those on the dole at the beginning of the period obtaining work through the New Deal programme.

Geographical variation on the road to utopia?

Suppose for a moment that we take the Labour Party's figures at face value. Most of them are not especially biased (i.e. they refer to the same set of areas and time periods). What picture do they give of how the supposed benefits of Labour rule have been spread across the country? The database was created by Labour in the run-up to the 2001 general election. Given

the care with which Labour's campaigns in 1997 and 2001 were spatially targeted, it is likely that although the party wanted to convince everybody everywhere that things were getting better, nevertheless there were some constituencies where this was more important than others—those where they needed to mobilise as much support as possible in 2001 in order to sustain their majority in the House of Commons.

To enquire whether Labour, through their choice of statistics, were putting a better light on their performance in some areas than others—something which the average voter accessing the website would not have the energy to do—we have divided the country into three groups of constituencies with regard to the 2001 contest. This creates a simple typology of the 641 seats:

- 222 seats which were held by the Conservatives and other parties following the 1997 general election. These were mainly strong Tory seats, very unlikely to be lost at the forthcoming general election in 2001: below they are labelled 'Con+Oth'.
- 154 seats which Labour had newly won in 1997, all from the Conservatives. These are labelled 'New Lab' below and were the seats that Labour needed to defend most in order to retain their majority in the House of Commons.
- 265 'Old Lab' seats that Labour had won in both the 1992 and 1997 general elections. These were seats that Labour could presume would be easily held again in 2001.

For the latter two categories we had to use estimates of whether Labour would have won the seat in 1992 as that election was fought on an earlier set of constituencies.

Given this threefold typology for whether Labour could win the seat in 2001 based on past electoral performance, how had Labour benefited these different constituencies more broadly defined ac-

ording to its own statistics? We take each set of statistics in turn.

Economic stability and making work pay

The average decrease in mortgage payments reported for every constituency by Labour was £1,200. Clearly, taking no account of variations in the size of mortgages by constituency or the number of households with a mortgage in each constituency makes the use of this national average of little value in most local settings. However, had the Labour Party broken this figure down they might well have found that the greatest benefit had been in the seats where they needed most extra votes—where house prices were generally higher (than in Old Labour areas) and where a higher proportion of the population had a mortgage rather than owned their property outright (as tended to be the case in demographically older Conservative seats). Thus in this case the Labour Party could have done more with the data to further their cause.

The numbers of people reported to be on the dole in each constituency fell for all three groups of seats (Table 1), as would be expected given that all statistics showed improvements save for the three constituencies identified earlier: at each date, unemployment was lowest in the 'Con+Oth' seats and highest in those classified as 'Old Lab'. The derived change indicators show that the absolute fall in the number on the dole was greatest in the 'Old Lab' seats; but in relative terms, at -38% it was greatest for 'Con+Oth' seats (our C10 indicator), while it was -36% for 'New Lab' seats and -30% for those in the 'Old Lab' category. So in relative terms the Labour government had performed best for people in seats held by opposition parties. The largest number of people to benefit from the New Deal programme was in 'Old Lab' seats; but relative to the number on the

Table 1: Average statistics by constituency type: economic stability and making work pay

<i>Web indicators</i> Type	No. on dole		New Deal		Youth Unemp.
	1997	'Now'	Benefited	Work	% decr.
'Con+Oth'	<u>1,964</u>	<u>1,222</u>	419	229	<u>78</u>
'New Lab'	2,354	1,496	776	378	<u>75</u>
'Old Lab'	4,249	2,991	<u>1,253</u>	<u>615</u>	71

<i>Derived change indicators</i> Type	Decline in dole		New Deal %	
	No.	%	Benefited	Work
'Con+Oth'	742	<u>38</u>	<u>34</u>	12
'New Lab'	858	<u>36</u>	<u>33</u>	<u>16</u>
'Old Lab'	<u>1,258</u>	29	29	<u>14</u>

Note: The type with the best performance on each indicator is underlined.

dole in 1997, the highest percentage of people to benefit from the New Deal (776 out of 2,354=33%) was in the 'New Lab' seats (change indicator C12), as was the highest proportion to have actually found work from the New Deal (378 out of 2354=16%; change indicator C13)—which the party presumably hoped would enable it to help hold those seats.

The largest decrease in long-term youth unemployment was in 'Con+Oth' seats (78%), closely followed by 'New Lab' (Table 1). Thus overall on 'economic stability' the Labour Party's figures show most benefit going to 'New Lab' constituencies and least to those in the 'Old Lab' category, with the third group not doing badly. The party was able to show that it was performing well in the parts of the country where votes were most important to it in 2001 in order to sustain its 1997 majority.

Families, children and pensioners

As with mortgages, the statistic on by how much the average family with children had become better off since 1997 was a national figure applied to every constituency. A disaggregated figure would probably find that wealthier areas had seen their families with children

become better off than those elsewhere, as income disparities rose in the period following 1997 (by 2000 the proportion of households living on below half average incomes had reached an all-time high, since such data were collected). For the two statistics in this group which have been disaggregated by constituency, the first (indicator 3: the number of families benefiting from Child Benefit rises) advantaged 'New Lab' areas most as they had the highest average number of families with children who gained from the universal increase in Child Benefit (Table 2). 'Old Lab' areas, unsurprisingly, had the highest number of low- and middle-income families who benefited from the Working Families' Tax Credit (indicator 4). This is the first of the indicators so far discussed that has shown 'Old Lab' areas benefiting most.

As far as the elderly are concerned, the crude way in which Labour have assumed that all pensioners benefited from the rise in the basic state pension means that this increase appears to be greatest in 'Con+Oth' areas, followed by 'New Lab' and then 'Old Lab' constituencies (Table 2)—simply reflecting the demography of these seats: 'Old Lab' constituencies have fewest old people.⁷ Both statistics from the 1991 census and the Labour Party's own estimates suggest that Conservative seats contain higher

Table 2: Average statistics by constituency type: families and children, and pensioners

Type	Families benefiting		Pension	Older people benefiting	
	Child Benefit	WFTC		Winter Fuel	TV
'Con+Oth'	10,599	1,311	<u>17,729</u>	<u>19,162</u>	<u>7,633</u>
'New Lab'	<u>11,263</u>	1,654	15,910	17,283	6,758
'Old Lab'	<u>10,650</u>	<u>2,040</u>	13,855	15,182	5,685

Note: The type with the best performance on each indicator is underlined.

proportions of older people. More convincing is a similar trend in disparities between the groups of constituencies in the numbers of over-60s receiving Winter Fuel Payment and the number of over-75s getting free TV licences. Thus Labour's own statistics on what it has done for the elderly suggest it has done the least where there are on average fewest elderly—in its heartland constituencies. Admittedly these constituencies will also tend to be smaller in population, but not small enough to reverse the geography of who benefits to favour its hinterlands.

Rebuilding the NHS

So where was the NHS being rebuilt the most? A simple reading of the Labour statistics suggests that funding increased

and waiting lists fell everywhere. However, ironically, at the start of the period average funding was highest in 'New Lab' areas, though by the end it was highest in 'Con+Oth' areas, according to Labour's statistics (Table 3). Some consolation for Labour voters might be that the longest waiting lists remained in the latter areas—but this is hardly surprising given the demography already mentioned.

The data in Table 3 can be used to calculate that the greatest rise in spending (both absolutely and relatively: C1 and C2), of £203m and 89%, occurred in 'Con+Oth' seats, with the lowest rise of £181m and 80% in 'Old Lab' constituencies. Waiting lists fell most in absolute terms in the 'Con+Oth' seats (C3) and relatively (by 19%) in 'New Lab' seats: they fell least in 'Old Lab' seats (by

Table 3: Average statistics by constituency type: rebuilding the NHS

Web indicators	Funding (£m)		2001	Waiting lists		Increase in nurses
	2001/2	1996/7		1997 or 1998	%1998	
'Con+Oth'	<u>431</u>	228	17,504	21,469	75	794
'New Lab'	<u>427</u>	<u>233</u>	15,094	18,616	61	774
'Old Lab'	406	<u>225</u>	<u>11,281</u>	<u>13,549</u>	32	<u>829</u>

Derived change indicators	Change in funding		Change in waiting lists	
	£m	%	No.	%
'Con+Oth'	<u>203</u>	<u>89</u>	<u>-3965</u>	-18
'New Lab'	194	<u>83</u>	<u>-3522</u>	<u>-19</u>
'Old Lab'	181	80	-2268	-17

Notes: The type with the best performance on each indicator is underlined.

In the Web indicators, %1998 indicates the percentage of constituencies for which data from 1998 rather than 1997 are used as the baseline.

17%). However, in three-quarters of the 'Con+Oth' seats Labour chose to use 1998 as a base year rather than 1997 to make the trend look better. This 'fix' was applied to only 32% of the 'Old Lab' constituencies. In short, if the figures give any impression of geographical variation it is that improvements were slowest in traditionally loyal Labour areas. Whether that is actually true is another issue—it was what the statistics presented by the Labour Party suggest that matters here.

Standards in schools

For these statistics, if the averaged statistics were to make any sense it was necessary to omit the constituency of Hammersmith and Fulham (a 'New Lab' seat), where figures are reported for all of England and Wales. Here the Labour Party had done part of the maths for its web readers, so the first three statistics in Table 4 show that the highest average number of 5-, 6- and 7-year-olds to benefit from not being taught in a class of more than 30 children was 910 in the

typical 'New Lab' constituency. In relative terms, however, there was virtually no difference between the three groups of constituencies (indicator C5).

The literacy and numeracy standards for 11-year-olds interestingly show the first indication of any process of polarisation being reversed in these statistics (or 'bringing Britain back together again' as the Prime Minister once termed it). The highest standards at both dates were recorded for the 'Con+Oth' areas and the lowest in the 'Old Lab' constituencies. However, the derived change indicators in Table 4 show that in both percentage point and percentage terms the rises in both literacy and numeracy standards have been highest in 'Old Lab' and lowest in 'Con+Oth' seats. The proportions initially reaching those standards were lowest in the 'Old Lab' areas, however, and this equalisation only narrows the gap from 8% and 6% respectively in 1998 to 6% and 4% in 2001. Nevertheless, these are the first statistics that the Labour Party chose to present on its website that actually showed a discrepancy between areas being reduced over time.

Table 4: Average statistics by constituency type: standards in schools

<i>Web indicators</i>				Percentage reaching standards			
Type	Classes under 30			Literacy		Numeracy	
	2001/2	1996/7	Change	1998	2001	1998	2001
'Con+Oth'	<u>867</u>	<u>68</u>	-798	<u>68</u>	<u>77</u>	<u>61</u>	<u>73</u>
'New Lab'	979	69	<u>-910</u>	65	75	58	71
'Old Lab'	925	<u>68</u>	-857	60	71	55	69

<i>Derived change indicators</i>		Classes under 30	Change in percentages reaching standards			
Type		30	Literacy		Numeracy	
		%	+	%	+	%
'Con+Oth'		-92	9	13	12	20
'New Lab'		<u>-93</u>	10	15	13	22
'Old Lab'		<u>-93</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>18</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>25</u>

Note: The type with the best performance on each indicator is underlined.

Crime

The crime statistics are the most difficult to interpret due to the variety of ways they have been constructed. What they indicate is that crime increased most in 'New Lab' areas under the pre-1997 Conservative administrations and then fell most in 'Old Lab' areas after Labour came to power (Table 5). However, in order to produce these statistics in such a favourable light, figures for England and Wales as a whole were substituted for police force area level statistics in between 31% and 36% of cases (depending on the category of seat). Thus, it is perhaps foolhardy to try to use these figures even to suggest what kind of impression of geographical diversity the Labour Party's statistics gave!

If comparing manipulated statistics on recorded crime levels were not bad enough, the statistics on the increases in police numbers had to be mangled in both space and time to produce a favourable picture everywhere for the governing Labour Party. The figures suggest that the average 'Old Lab' constituency saw a rise in the number of officers of 113, much larger than in the 'Con+Oth' seats. However, to achieve this impression in between 3% and 17% (depending on the seat type—see last column of Table 5) of constituencies the figures were reported

for the region the constituency was in rather than its police force area. More invidiously still, in between 60% and 79% of constituencies a base year of 2000 was used instead of 1997 to measure change (see penultimate column of Table 5). Such extreme manipulation of these statistics so as to ensure that no fall in police numbers was ever reported suggests that the geographical patterns shown in Table 5 are simply the result of those manipulations.

In summary

The best- and worst-performing constituency types assessed on the indicators provided on the web are given in Table 6; those for the derived indicators are given in Table 7. In Table 6 a '-' is shown for all three seat types if no variation is measured; otherwise, if the improvement has been greatest in that set of constituencies it is marked 'best', and if improvement has been least it is marked 'worst'. The overall pattern in the data as provided on the web by Labour shows the 'Con+Oth' seats performing best on 13 of the indicators, compared to 10 for the 'Old Lab' constituencies and just 3 for those categorised as 'New Lab'. 'Old Lab' areas were also more likely to perform worst on an indicator than were the

Table 5: Average statistics by constituency type: cutting crime

Type	% Crime change		%EW	Police incr.	%2000	%region
	1979–1997	1997–2001				
'Con+Oth'	110	-11	31	87	65	3
'New Lab'	111	-10	36	88	79	12
'Old Lab'	<u>99</u>	<u>-12</u>	36	<u>113</u>	60	17

Notes:

The type with the best performance on each indicator is underlined

%EW indicates the percentage of constituencies for which the data relate to England and Wales as a whole rather than the local police force area.

%2000–1 indicates the percentage of constituencies for which the baseline comparison is 2000 rather than 1997

%region is the percentage of constituencies for which data on the increase in police numbers is given for the constituency's standard region rather than the Police Force area.

Table 6: Summary of the best- and worst-performing constituency types: web indicators

	CO	Type NL	OL
<i>Economic stability</i>	–	–	–
1 Average decrease in annual mortgage repayments			
<i>Families and children</i>			
2 Families better off because of tax and benefit changes	–	–	–
3 Number families benefiting from Child Benefit	W	B	–
4 Number benefiting from the Working Families' Tax Credit	W	–	B
<i>Pensioners</i>			
5 Pensioners benefiting from rise in basic state pension	B	–	W
6 Number of over-60s receiving the Winter Fuel Payment	B	–	W
7 Number of over-75s getting free TV licenses [<i>sic</i>]	B	–	W
<i>Rebuilding the NHS</i>			
8 Funding in 2001/2	B	–	W
9 Funding in 1996/97	–	B	W
10 Waiting lists 'now'	W	–	B
11 Waiting lists in March 1998	W	–	B
12 <u>Increase in qualified nurses</u>	–	W	B
<i>Standards in schools</i>			
13 Increase in real terms spending per pupil 'now'	–	–	–
14 5–7 year olds in classes of over 30 in 1998	B	W	–
15 5–7 year olds in classes of over 30 in January 200.	B	W	B
16 <u>Number benefiting from pledge to cut class sizes</u>	W	B	–
17 % reaching the standard in reading and writing 'now'	B	–	W
18 % reaching the standard in reading and writing in 1998	B	–	W
19 % reaching the standard in maths 'now'	B	–	W
20 % reaching the standard in maths in 1998	B	–	W
<i>Economic stability and making work pay</i>			
21 Number of people on the dole in 1997	B	–	W
22 Number of people on the dole 'now'	B	–	W
23 <u>Number benefited from the New Deal for Young People</u>	W	–	B
24 <u>Number found work through the New Deal programme</u>	W	–	B
25 <u>Percentage fall in long-term youth unemployment</u>	B	–	W
<i>Cutting crime</i>			
26 The percentage rise in crime between 1979 and 1997	–	W	B
27 <u>The percentage fall in crime since 1997</u>	–	W	B
28 <u>Increase in police force numbers</u>	W	–	B
Total W	8	5	13
Total B	13	3	10

Key to types: CO: 'Con+Oth'; NL: 'New Lab'; OL: 'Old Lab'.

W: worst-performing type; B: best-performing type

Note: Indicators that indicate change during Labour's period in office are underlined.

Table 7: Summary of the best- and worst-performing constituency types: derived change indicators

	CO	Type NL	OL
<i>Rebuilding the NHS</i>			
C1 Change in funding, in £m	B	–	W
C2 Percentage change in funding	B	–	W
C3 Change in waiting lists, in no. of patients	B	–	W
C4 Percentage change in waiting lists	–	B	W
<i>Standards in schools</i>			
C5 Percentage change in number taught in classes of 30+	W	B	B
C6 Change in percentage reaching literacy standards	W	–	B
C7 Percentage change reaching literacy standards	W	–	B
C8 Change in percentage reaching maths standards	W	–	B
C9 Percentage change reaching maths standards	W	–	B
<i>Economic stability and making work pay</i>			
C10 Change in the number of people on the dole	W	–	B
C11 Percentage change in number on the dole	B	–	W
C12 Percentage on the dole benefiting from the New Deal	B	–	W
C13 Percentage on the dole obtaining work	W	B	–
Total W	7	0	6
Total B	5	3	6

Key to types: CO: 'Con+Oth'; NL: 'New Lab'; OL: 'Old Lab'.
W: worst performing type; B: best performing type

'Con+Oth' areas. These patterns in the data—not made apparent on the website, which gave no comparative material—do not suggest that Labour was favouring its 'Old Lab' heartlands (a cause of some concern within the party in the run-up to the 2001 election), let alone the areas where it won for the first time in 1997. Few of the indicators provide clear evidence of change between 1997 and 2001, however: most provide static pictures only. Indeed, only seven of the indicators really indicate change since Labour came to power; they are underlined in Table 6. In five of those cases, the 'Old Lab' areas performed best—and in all five the data were manipulated, with different spatial and/or temporal scales being deployed to present the changes in the best light. (Indicator 26 also shows change—but under the 1979–97 Conservative administrations.)

Turning to our derived change indic-

ators, Table 7 shows an even balance between the 'Old Lab' and 'Con+Oth' areas. The former (Labour's heartlands) performed best with regard to changes in educational standards—but then, they had furthest to go. The changes to the NHS—both in funding and in the improvements to waiting lists—advantaged the 'Con+Oth' constituencies, areas of the country where Labour had little expectation of electoral gains in 2001. Those same areas tended to come off best in several aspects of the New Deal programme.

To clarify the patterns of change across the constituency types—which presumably should be the bases for evaluating a government's success—Table 8 repeats the information for 9 of the web indicators and 8 of the derived change indicators, selected so as to avoid double-counting and using percentage change figures wherever possible (i.e. we have not included both the absolute change

indicator for numbers finding work through the New Deal programme—indicator 24—as well as the percentage change figure—indicator C12). This shows that overall, Labour policies were just as likely to favour the constituencies that they had little chance of winning in 2001 (the ‘Con+Oth’ seats) as those in its own heartlands (the ‘Old Lab’ seats). The former group benefited especially from Labour’s policies for pensioners and reducing unemployment, whereas the ‘Old Lab’ areas benefited from the anti-crime policies and the drive for higher standards in primary schools (though not from the comparable drive to improve

the NHS). Perhaps surprisingly, given Labour’s focus during the 2001 campaign on retaining as many as possible of the seats won in 1997, the ‘New Lab’ seats do not stand out as major beneficiaries of a wide range of policies. Of course, the party did not intend people living there to know that; they merely had to know that things had improved in their constituencies, which is what the data showed. Nor did the party want its core voters in the ‘Old Lab’ heartlands to know that they had lost out—in relative terms—in the provision for pensioners, rebuilding the NHS and making work pay, whereas voters in ‘Conservative Britain’ had not.

Table 8: Summary of best- and worst-performing constituency types: combined web and derived indicators of change, removing double-counting

	CO	Type NL	OL
<i>Families and children</i>			
3 Number families benefiting from Child Benefit	W	B	–
4 Number benefiting from the Working Families’ Tax Credit	W	–	B
<i>Pensioners</i>			
5 Pensioners benefiting from rise in basic state pension	B	–	W
6 Number of over-60s receiving the Winter Fuel Payment	B	–	W
7 Number of over-75s getting free TV licenses [sic]	B	–	W
<i>Rebuilding the NHS</i>			
12 Increase in qualified nurses	–	W	B
C2 Percentage change in funding	B	–	W
C4 Percentage change in waiting lists	–	B	W
<i>Standards in schools</i>			
C5 Percentage change in number taught in classes of 30+	W	B	B
C7 Percentage change reaching literacy standards	W	–	B
C9 Percentage change reaching maths standards	W	–	B
<i>Economic stability and making work pay</i>			
25 Percentage fall in long-term youth unemployment	B	–	W
C11 Percentage change in number on the dole	B	–	W
C12 Percentage on the dole benefiting from the New Deal	B	–	W
C13 Percentage on the dole obtaining work	W	B	–
<i>Cutting crime</i>			
27 The percentage fall in crime since 1997	–	W	B
28 Increase in police force numbers	W	–	B
Total W	7	2	8
Total B	7	4	7

Key to types: CO: ‘Con+Oth’; NL: ‘New Lab’; OL: ‘Old Lab’.
W: worst-performing type; B: best-performing type.

The goal of the party's website was to give 641 separate sets of messages, all of which were that 'things are getting better'.

In electoral terms, therefore, the Labour Party did not manipulate the temporal and spatial scale of its statistics so as to make a good impression in those constituencies where it most needed to retain support in order to sustain its government with a substantial majority—the 'New Lab' constituencies. In some policy areas the main beneficiaries were its heartlands, the constituencies that it wins even when performing relatively badly; but on many of the indicators, this reflected large gaps to be closed. In others, however—notably the NHS—its policies benefited those areas where its electoral prospects were poorest. But then, these differences were hidden from view, since no national league tables were published: everywhere was doing well under Labour, and that some places were doing better than others was excluded from the message.

Individual voters who followed the navigation signs on Labour's website to find out 'What Labour's done in *constituency x*' would not have been aware of the geography of Labour's performance between 1997 and 2001—nor would the candidates, party agents and other activists who logged on to get information to help in their campaigning and canvassing activities. They merely got the 'sanitised' data for that constituency, and were bound to get 'good news', since any bad news was not censored but rather manipulated through changing scales to translate it into good. Those accessing individual sites will not have obtained the national comparisons—which would have been time-consuming to assemble, as we have found; Labour's traditional supporters in the 'Old Lab' constituencies (including its activists) would not have been easily able to discern that their party's actions over four years in government had been much more to the advant-

age of those living in areas which in the recent past had not supported Labour (i.e. the more middle-class areas of the country)—and thus to ask whether 'their' party had really been serving 'their' best interests!

Conclusions

Since we began downloading the Labour Party local statistics their website has been greatly expanded. Now, for many of the statistical domains in many constituencies, you can click to another page that documents yet more of 'what Labour is doing in your area'. Often these pages refer back to other statistics—clicking for further information on crime, for instance, we are given yet again the statistics on employment and education as evidence of what Labour is doing to tackle what they call the underlying causes of crime in each area. In no case—as far as we can ascertain—has there been any attempt to correct any of the misleading statistics first placed on the website over a year ago. Instead they are being copied across to other places and to other sites. Local Labour Party sites are beginning to report them as fact.

It is fair to say that nothing presented on the Labour Party website is untrue in the strict sense of the word. It is just that the way in which the statistics have been put together—mixing and matching years and areas to present the best possible picture of improvement—is disingenuous overall. More importantly, once this practice starts, when does it stop?

The problem with the Labour Party's handling of social statistics is that manipulating a few figures in a few places in your original data analysis is not a sustainable strategy for the long-term reporting of political achievements. At some point mortgage rates will rise. Do you then remove that first statistic from your website, or continue to compare rates with those at the time of the previous election when you first gained power,

rather than showing the latest changes? What happens when unemployment does not continue to fall in most places most of the time? Do you move all the base years back in time to make it look as if the falls are continuing—or make the areas they relate to larger and larger in size? These are not fanciful suggestions. The steps required to make it appear that every constituency had seen a rise in police numbers illustrate that the Winston Smiths behind these figures were willing to go to such lengths to twist one particularly problematic trend into shape.

Have the statistics been fiddled in such a way as to show most improvement in the most marginal of seats? No; the methods used to create this website were not that sophisticated, although the decision to focus on the particular set of statistics that the website uses does tend to concentrate the attention on issues where 'middle England' might be most affected. That, however, is more likely the impact of having these people in the party's political sights more generally. The website is simply following party policy and priorities. The rationale underlying the website is that it should be shown that things *have* got better since Labour was elected in 1997, in all areas for all social issues. New Labour wishes to be all things to all men and women, and it wishes them to recognise its achievements (or what it claims are the party's achievements).

There is at least one further major problem with this approach, other than its sustainability. What if the opposition were to retaliate? There's no news like bad news. Currently neither the Conservatives nor the Liberal Democrats are up to the task of creating a comparable website, but it's not hard to imagine how well a 'things have only got worse' site could run (which was, of course, the basis for a Conservative poster campaign before the 2001 election). 'What Labour haven't done for you' might be the head-

line; type in your postcode to find out. From a count of animals slaughtered in your area (or 'region') due to foot and mouth, to parts of the tax bill that have risen by so many million million for people living in your area, to the number of vacancies for teachers and nurses, to the average number of delayed trains from your stations, to how many asylum-seekers have been settled in your area, and so on and on. How difficult would it be to do? Well, if the statistics were not available for constituencies you could simply fudge them, as Labour have; you need only include things that people think are bad news and then only those that have got worse—change the base year if they haven't—or just report the statistics at one point in time and then change the issue later. And where to get all these statistics? Try the National Statistics website for a start. All manner of numbers are available there at a very local scale. It does not, for instance, take a great deal of imagination to turn the count of children going to university from each local ward into a figure of how many thousands of pounds of students' debt each constituency's children are amassing due to tuition fees.

The Labour Party has a rapidly declining workforce on the ground in most parliamentary constituencies. It is seeking to replace them, in part at least, with virtual local campaigning through the semi-automated creation of local stories of success by a webmaster at a central location. These stories first appear on the web—in the run-up to the next election campaign, if you live in an area where your vote is needed you may receive them through the mail (perhaps even targeted to you—many websites now offer the opportunity to e-mail some information to 'a friend'). Then, if your vote really does matter, in the weeks before polling day some enthusiastic student may phone you to tell you just what Labour have done for you—how many police officers have been recruited, how

many thousands of pounds have been spent on health, or education—in your area. And, as they reduce their (government-induced) debts through sitting in the party's call centre watching as the computer scrolls the latest message across the screen for them to relay to the poor voter at the end of the telephone line, we get ever so slightly closer to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

It would not be so worrying if the party could admit that, just for one thing, in one place, at one time, things had *not* got better.

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Notes

- 1 In fact there is more than one database. There is a comparable one to the party's website on the open government site (<http://www.open.gov.uk>), where those who click on the government's annual report can obtain information on policy indicators for their area by typing in their postcode.
- 2 Of the analyses published to date of the 'cybercampaign 2001', one—C. Ballinger, 'The Local Battle, the Cyber Battle', in D. Butler and D. Kavanagh, eds, *The British General Election of 2001*, London, Macmillan, 2001, pp. 208–34—makes no reference to the

constituency pages on Labour's website; the other—S. Coleman, 'On-line Campaigning', in P. Norris, ed., *Britain Votes 2001*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 115–24—mentions their existence (p. 117) but provides no analysis of their use and/or impact.

- 3 This material is no longer on the website, which has been reconstructed to show a wider range of indicators for each constituency. We downloaded all of the material on the site at the time of the election for every indicator, and have permanent copies of the relevant text.
- 4 For each constituency in Wiltshire, for example, it was reported that police numbers had increased by 15 in the county police force area since 2000; few places in the county will have noticed that increase.
- 5 The raw data are collected at the school level, of course, and are used to generate league tables. The website could have reported changes at the nearest school to the enquirer's postcode.
- 6 The implication of this reporting of national data only is that either spatially disaggregated data are not available or—more likely—those that were available could not be manipulated to achieve the desired goal of showing improvements everywhere. (This, too, could have been part of the reason for excluding some of the indicators for Scottish and Welsh constituencies.)
- 7 In part, this is because working-class people have lower life expectancies than their middle-class counterparts, and in part because 'Old Lab' constituencies tend to be smaller as a result of population movements after redistributions, the last of which was undertaken using 1991 data.