Leaders of Britain’s political parties have long been treated like celebrities: in the late nineteenth century when William Gladstone visited Britain’s towns and cities he was welcomed like a pop star.

And, exploiting this popular interest, the parties have often sold themselves through their leaders, using them to embody their programmes. In 1945 the Conservatives even called their manifesto ‘Winston Churchill’s Declaration of Policy to the Electors’.

As politics has become increasingly mediated and - at the same time - people’s interest and knowledge of politics has declined, the emphasis on the leader has only increased. The Leaders’ Debates, which dominated media coverage of the 2010 general election campaign, are the latest manifestation of this process.

To the despair of serious students of politics, many voters now define their attitude to a party through its leader and what they imagine to be their personalities.

The Labour party elected Tony Blair its leader in 1994 because its members felt he would get the party back into office for the first time since 1979. Blair was young, not bad looking, well-spoken and with a respectable home life. While many in Labour’s ranks had doubts about his politics, he was too right wing for their tastes, he promised to get through to those Sun and Daily Mail readers who still clung to the Conservative party.

In his first years he was rarely pictured without his jacket off and tie casually askew. ‘I am a modern man’, he told an interviewer, ‘I am part of the rock’n’roll generation – the Beatles... colour TV. That is the generation I come from’. Blair embodied the claim that Labour had been transformed from the party of the 1980s Loony Left, one apparently dominated by trade union bosses, into a new party of the affluent, classless suburbs, of the future and of hopeful change.

That is how Blair’s face came to dominate the cover of the party’s 1997 general election manifesto. For many he was the Labour party.

And for a time this merging of Labour into Blair worked spectacularly well.

However, when Blair led Britain into the 2003 war with Iraq on grounds that proved to be false he became tainted, and Labour with him. So much so, in 2007 the party turned to Gordon Brown, a man who would show that just as leaders can lift up their parties so they can also drag them down. In 2010 the only party to plaster Brown’s image on its billboards was the Conservative party.