

**REPORT TO THE
AUSTRALIAN POLITICAL
EXCHANGE COUNCIL**

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STUDY TOUR TO THE UNITED KINGDOM

APRIL/MAY 2005

INTRODUCTION

My study tour was well-timed, coinciding with Prime Minister Blair's decision to call a General Election for 5 May. Being present in the United Kingdom during this period gave me the opportunity to not only develop a greater appreciation of the many fundamental institutional similarities between the political system of Australia and that of the United Kingdom, but also to experience first hand the significant differences, particularly with respect to the administration of the voting system, and the structure and priorities of the election campaign waged by political parties.

During my visit I met key strategists and decision makers within the Labour Party, Conservative Party and Prime Minister Blair's Office. I also visited a number of key marginal (or battleground) constituencies. Considering the understandable pressures on these individuals as a result of the election campaign, I am most grateful they made the time to meet with me.

BACKGROUND

On May 5, Prime Minister Tony Blair achieved an electoral outcome no other Labour leader has ever been able to realise – a third consecutive majority Labour Government.

Labour went into the 2005 General Election with a House of Commons (lower house) majority of 166 seats, having won large landslides in both the 1997 and 2001 general elections.

The Conservative Party entered the campaign confronting an up hill battle if it was to win office. Its share of the popular vote had remained anchored in the low 30's for much of the past decade largely as a consequence of the Party's inability to shake off the public's negative perception about its past performance in office (1979-1997). This task was made even more difficult by the fact that its leader for the 2005 election, Michael Howard, was a senior minister in that previous Conservative government.

The third major political party in the House of Commons, the Liberal Democrats, entered the campaign confidently with the objective of winning a substantial number of new seats and replacing the Conservatives as the "official" opposition. Hence their campaign slogan: 'The Real Opposition'.

The focuses of the campaigns waged by the two major political parties, while differing greatly, were nevertheless predictable:

- The incumbent Labour Government was keen to campaign on its economic record and program of investment for public services, and to contrast that record with the performance of the previous Conservative government on issues such as interest rates, the National Health Service and police numbers. This strategy was epitomised by their campaign slogan: 'Forward Not Back'.



Cover of the Labour's Party's 2005 Manifesto

A minor setback to this strategy occurred within days of the election being called when MG Rover, the last British owned car manufacturer, collapsed with the loss of 5,000 jobs. By rushing to Birmingham to announce a £150 million assistance package, the Prime Minister and his Chancellor, Gordon Brown, hoped to soften the blow to the affected workers as well as their election campaign.

- The Conservatives, on the other hand, attempted to rally public support by focussing on a number of 'emotive' issues under the slogan: 'Are you thinking what we're thinking?'. These issues included gypsies, hospital hygiene, school discipline, council taxes, truth in government and most controversial of all, levels of immigration. They also attempted to voice public dissatisfaction with the pace of improvements occurring within public services, particularly the National Health Service.



One of the slogans from the Conservative Party's 2005 Manifesto

It is worth noting that there was an Australian influence on the Conservative's election strategy. In October 2004 Lynton Crosby, former director of the Australian Liberal Party, was appointed the Conservative Party's campaign director. This appointment attracted significant comment within the British media and many believed that the Conservative's deliberate focus on a small number of emotive and controversial issues, such as immigration, was masterminded by Crosby following the success he had had with a similar strategy during the 2001 Australian election. This led *The Times* newspaper (27 April) to claim that the Conservatives were using "Aussie Rules". The apparent aim of this strategy, which became known as the 'dog-whistle' strategy, was to galvanise the Conservative Party's electoral base.

As an observer of the campaign, I was struck by the similarities between the language and tactics used by Michael Howard in 2005 and those used by John Howard in 2001.

Both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats attempted to capitalise on widespread community unease about Prime Minister Blair's decision to commit Britain to the US invasion of Iraq. This issue came to dominate the last week of the campaign following the leaking of the Attorney-General's pre-war advice casting some doubt over the legality of any military action against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. It is worth noting the Liberal Democrats were the only major political party to have consistently opposed the UK's involvement in the war.

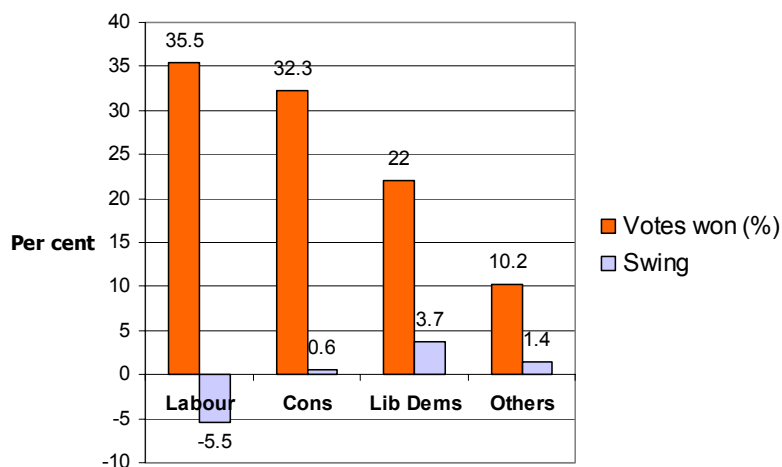
However even before this leak, Labour was well aware of its vulnerability on the issue in both Muslim and white middle class communities and the negative impact it was having on the trustworthiness of the Prime Minister. To minimise the electoral fallout, Robin Cook, a former minister who resigned from Prime Minister Blair's Cabinet over the war, was conscripted to campaign in marginal electorates across the country in support of Labour's re-election.

During my study tour I had the opportunity to attend one of Mr Cook's many public meetings and hear him argue that while people should not resile from their opposition to the war, they should nonetheless continue to support the Labour Government because of its domestic achievements.

All parties were concerned about voter turnout. In 2001, turnout declined to just 59%, the lowest figure since 1918. Early polls in the campaign suggested even fewer would participate in the 2005 General Election, meaning that the parties would have to work harder than ever to convince people to turnout and vote. This is an issue I will return to later in my report.

Despite unease over the Iraq war, questions concerning the trustworthiness of the Prime Minister and dissatisfaction with the scale of improvements in public services, the Labour Government was returned with a comfortable majority of 67 seats, down by 47.

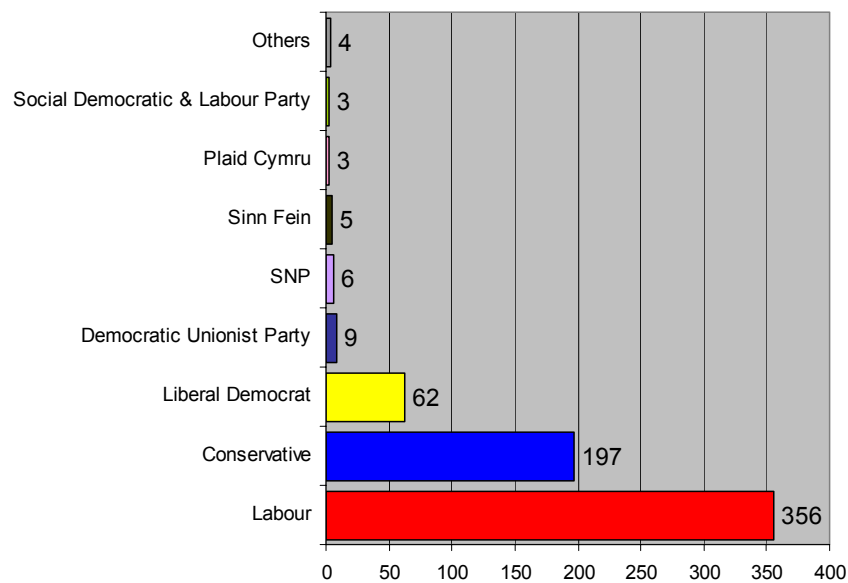
Popular Vote - 2005 General Election



For the Conservatives, the much hoped recovery in their electoral fortunes failed to materialise. The Party only managed to increase their share of the vote by 0.6% to 32.3% and win an additional 33 seats in the Commons.

While the Liberal Democrats recorded their best share of the vote (22%, up 3.7%) since its Liberal predecessor won 59 seats in 1929, they fell far short of achieving their stated objective of becoming the official opposition. Furthermore, much of the improvement in their vote can be put down to the support of previous Labour voters hostile to Prime Minister Blair's decision to back the US invasion of Iraq.

Distribution of seats following 2005 General Election



In my view, as was the case in the 2004 Australian election, the single most important factor in the outcome of the 2005 British election was economic management – a policy area where the Labour Government enjoyed a 17 point advantage in the polls. The 2005 British election was a further demonstration of the electoral strength of an incumbent government that is presiding over strong economic growth, relatively low interest rates and historically low rates of unemployment.

Anyone interested in campaign strategy, like myself, cannot afford to ignore the simple reality: the state of the economy is the key determinant of public mood and any political party that seeks to govern must first and foremost articulate an economic program in which the electorate has confidence.

Put simply, the outcome of the 2005 British General Election reinforced the words in that often repeated mantra: 'It's the economy, stupid'.

THE AUSTRALIAN AND BRITISH POLITICAL SYSTEMS

As well as an appreciation of the priorities of the British electorate, my study tour gave me the opportunity to develop a better understanding of the British electoral system and the campaign techniques employed by the political party machines.

As I mentioned earlier, while there are many institutional similarities between the political systems of Australia and the United Kingdom, both being constitutional monarchies with Westminster-style parliamentary systems, what I found most interesting were the differences, particularly with respect to the administration of the voting system, and the structure and priorities of the campaign waged by political parties. These differences provide lessons, both positive and negative, for students of democratic politics.

The voting and electoral systems

1. Simply majority voting versus preferential voting

Members of the House of Commons are elected by a first-past-the-post voting system. Under this system, also known as Simply Majority voting, voters place a cross on their ballot paper against the name of the candidate they most want as their local representative. The candidate who secures the largest number of votes is elected – there is no requirement to secure an absolute majority, merely a simple majority.

Like all voting systems, first-past-the-post voting has strengths and weaknesses. When compared to the preferential voting used during Australian federal elections, first-past-the-post voting is easy and quick to count and produces very small numbers of informal votes. The disadvantages of this system, again when compared to preferential voting, are that a winning candidate may secure only a minority of the vote, with a majority of voters not wanting that candidate to be their member of parliament; furthermore, minor parties and candidates can find it difficult to win against the combined weight of major party candidates.

Having now had the opportunity to observe first-past-the-post in practice, my support for preferential voting has only strengthened. The system Australia has adopted ensures that only a candidate with the support of an absolute majority of the electorate can win, eliminating the possibility of minority winners. In other words, the winning candidate is the "most preferred" or "least disliked" candidate. Even more importantly, preferential voting systems allow voters to support minor parties and independent candidates, comfortable in the knowledge that their preferences may be used to decide the winner. Under first-past-the-post, support for minor parties or independents is largely a wasted vote.

2. Supervision of the electoral system

The second and most surprising difference between the two electoral systems is that the UK, unlike Australia, does not have a comprehensive, independently monitored national roll of electors. Instead each local government authority (i.e. council) is responsible for compiling the list of eligible voters living within their boundaries. These lists are not collated or checked against one another to ensure the same person is not enrolled in multiple locations at the same time.

Furthermore, while the UK does have an Electoral Commission, this body has very little to do with the day-to-day conduct of the election across the UK's 646 electorates. The Commission's purpose is largely limited to an advisory role and the monitoring of financial donations to the political parties. The responsibility for the day-to-day conduct of the election again rests with under-resourced local government authorities which, it must be remembered, are run by one political party or another.

In my mind, this lack of a professional, independent body to administer all facets of the electoral system can lead to declining public confidence in the integrity and fairness of the entire process. The administration of the postal voting system over recent years provides some credence to this view. In an attempt to increase turnout the electoral law was changed in 2001, making it easy for voters to obtain a postal vote. However, it appears these changes created new opportunities for "over enthusiastic" party officials to engage in electoral fraud. In fact, following the 2004 local government elections a number of Labour councillors were jailed when it was discovered that they obtained thousands of postal votes through various unhandred means, including bribing corrupt postmen to hand over sacks of postal ballots, tricking voters into parting with their forms and even paying children to steal postal ballots from letterboxes.

Concerns about the integrity of the postal voting system were further heightened during the 2005 General Election when a *Sunday Times* study of 444 constituencies revealed that since 2001 the number of applications for postal votes had soared. For example, in the constituency of South Tyneside they jumped from 3,351 to 38,500; in Wakefield they went from 3,000 to 45,000. By the deadline for applications, nearly 6.5 million people – or 15.5% of the British electorate – had opted for a postal vote. Not surprisingly marginal constituencies recorded the largest increase in the number of applications.

In the wake of widespread public anxiety and media commentary, this explosion in the use of postal votes is likely to make future changes to the electoral laws inevitable. When approaching these changes, I believe the British Government would greatly benefit from an examination of the institutional arrangements Australia has put in place to administer the electoral system, and in particular, the structure and functions of the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). The AEC is far superior to anything currently operating in either the UK or the United States.

3. Restricted versus unrestricted television advertising

During British general elections political parties are not allowed to advertise on free-to-air television. Instead during the course of the campaign they are given approximately five 5-minute spots, also known as Party Political Broadcasts, to promote themselves and/or attack their opponents. All free-to-air TV stations (both public and commercial) are required to televise these political broadcasts.

Given that these broadcasts are the only opportunity political parties have to communicate their key messages via the mass-medium that is television, their production has become increasingly professional and polished. As an example of this, the Labour Party's first broadcast during the 2005 General Election was directed by Oscar-winning director Anthony Minghella.

Billboard posters and newspaper advertisements are also widely used by UK political parties to communicate their political messages to the widest possible cross-section of the electorate.

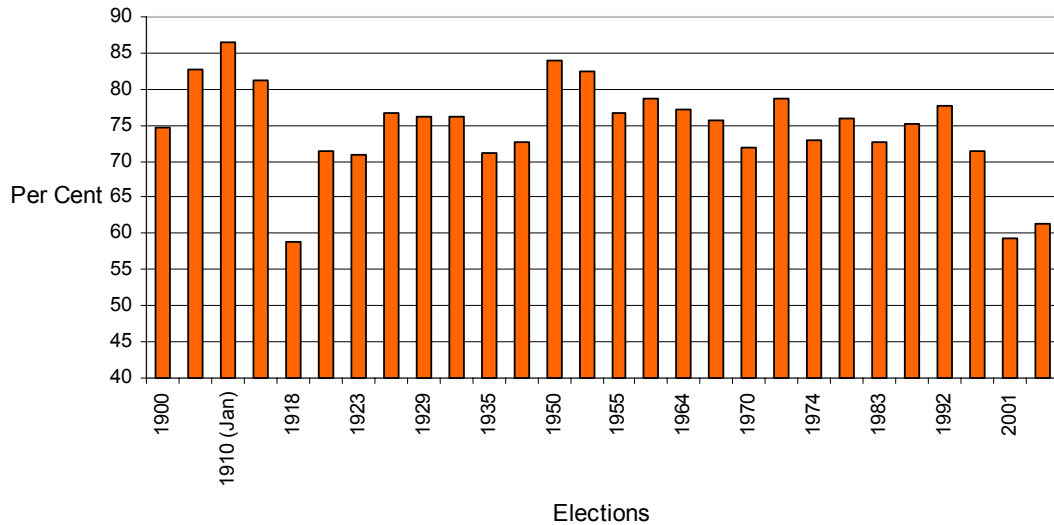
While Australia currently does not have similar limitations on the use of free-to-air TV, I nonetheless believe there is strong merit for considering the UK approach. Given the escalating cost of buying television airtime, the use of this mass-medium to convey a political message is largely limited to the major political parties. A UK-style restriction on television advertising would help remove this disadvantage against minor parties, allowing political debate to take place on a more level playing field.

4. Compulsory versus optional voting

Finally, unlike Australia, voting in British elections is not compulsory. In light of the voluntary nature of voting in the UK, many media commentators and political leaders were expressing concerns throughout the 2005 General Election regarding likely voter turnout (i.e. the proportion of the electorate that casts a vote). This apprehension was not without foundation. As I mentioned earlier, only 59% of the British electorate bothered to vote in 2001 General Election – 12 percentage points below the 1997 figure and the lowest participation rate since 1918. Polls published early in the campaign suggested even fewer voters would participate in 2005.

While the party leaders were mainly concerned about the impact turnout would have on their particular party's fortunes (i.e. many believed a lower turnout would disproportionately harm the Labour Party), political commentators regarded it as a yardstick against which the health of British democracy could be measured.

National Turnout



By the time polling booths closed on May 5, 61.3% of the electorate had voted – up 2.1 percentage points since the 2001 General Election.

However, this national turnout figure conceals significant variations between electorates. While turnout in marginal electorates was as high as 80%, only about a third of voters in safe Conservative and Labour electorates bothered to cast a vote.

Furthermore, considering the Labour Party secured a majority in the House of Commons with the support of less than 1 in 4 voters (22%), it is debatable whether the government it has subsequently formed truly reflects the will of the British people. In other words, with the support of such a small minority of the electorate, does Blair's Labour Government have the legitimacy to govern?

Given these issues it is not surprising that the slight improvement in turnout achieved in 2005 has done little to stop a growing number of critics calling for a radical overhaul of Britain's electoral system. In particular there is strong support for replacing first-past-the-post voting with proportional representation, which according to its advocates would encourage greater voter participation and more suit the reality of a three party contest.

My visit to the UK has only strengthened my support for compulsory voting as practised in Australia. Compulsory voting not only has an educational effect within the electorate, but more importantly, if democracy is government by the people, then I believe it is every citizen's responsibility to participate in the process of electing their representatives.

The campaign of the political parties

As well as developing a much more complete understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of Britain's electoral system, my study tour gave me an opportunity to closely observe the campaigning techniques employed by the political parties and meet key party officials and strategists.

Many of the communication techniques and tools employed by Britain's political parties are already used by their Australian counterparts, including: direct mail, focus groups and opinion polling, text messaging, telephone canvassing and professional media management.

Nonetheless during the 2005 General Election new communication techniques, largely imported from the United States, were being extensively used – techniques I have no doubt will become an essential part of campaigning in Australia over coming years.

These techniques, which make use of the ever increasing coverage of the Internet as well as information technology developed by the mass marketing industry, aim to improve the capacity of the political parties to more effectively identify their supporters as well as tailor the message they send to potential supporters.

Essentially these new techniques are viewed by the political parties as new opportunities to talk directly to voters without their message being filtered by the traditional mass media. At the beginning of the campaign, Labour's election coordinator, Alan Milburn, summed up how these new techniques would shape his party's campaign:

"We will be speaking through journalists as usual but direct communication will be the rule, not the exception in this campaign. ... This time we want direct communication everyday."

(Source: *The Times*, 6 April 2005, p2)

Equally, UK political parties have embraced these new communication techniques as part of their efforts to identify the swinging voters in key marginal electorates who largely determine election outcomes. Party officials I spoke with believe this group of voters totalled just 800,000 – less than 2% of the UK electorate.

- Campaigning and the Internet

For a number of years now, political parties around the world have recognised the potential of the Internet as a means of mobilising volunteers, disseminating policy details and communicating directly with voters.

However the 2005 General Election highlighted for me the significant capacity of the Internet to generate campaign funds by making it easy and quick for people to make political donations.

For example, Labour's General Secretary sent an email to some 80,000 people asking them to donate to the Party's campaign fund. Within 24 hours this email had generated more than £51,000 for the Party's coffers.

Large sums of money were also raised over the Internet during the 2004 US Presidential election by the main candidates and their supporters.

In addition Britain's political parties were keen to tap into the growing enthusiasm amongst Internet users for 'BLOGS'. These web-based communities, which are quickly becoming the new "word of mouth", give party strategists the opportunity to propagate their party's key messages amongst users and obtain a unique insight into people's views on the progress of the campaign, policy announcements and the leaders.

Between 1998 and 2003 the proportion of Australian households with Internet access increased from 16% to 53% (Source: ABS, *2005 Year Book: Australia*, p645). Given this rapid take up of the Internet by Australians, mastering the potential of this new communication tool will become as critical to a political party's success as a well produced television advertising campaign. Unlike previous communication tools, the Internet provides a political party with a cost-effective way of engaging in a two-way dialogue with the electorate.

- Campaigning and the mass marketing industry

During the 2005 election both Labour and the Conservatives started using computer software designed to predict the voting intentions of voters by analysing data ranging from postcodes to reading and shopping habits. Officials from the Conservative Party told *The Times* newspaper (6 April 2005) that their software, Voter Vault, could predict an individual's propensity to vote for them 70% of the time.

The purpose of the software is to allow a political party to identify where its core and potential supporters are living, and to target its local campaign activities – such as direct mailing and doorknocking – to those neighbourhoods and streets where they will be most effective at garnering votes.

This technology is not new having been used by the mass marketing industry and large corporations for many years to sell their products. However, it was only during last year's US Presidential election that the technology's potential as a campaigning tool was first tested.

From my discussions with party officials in the UK, much work is still required to adapt the software for use within the political system. Nonetheless I have no doubt that over coming years this technology will be used during Australian elections.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I would like to thank the Australian Political Exchange Council (APEC) for the opportunity to embark on a study tour of Britain, particularly at a time when that country's political leaders and public were engaged in the democratic processes of a general election. The knowledge and experiences I gained on this study tour will be invaluable to my ongoing involvement in politics.

Finally, I would like to thank all the staff in the APEC secretariat for organising the details which made my trip possible.