

Australian Political Exchange Council

Individual Study Trip Visit Report

Visit to the United Kingdom

13 April – 10 May 2005

Simon Morgan

The Liberal Party of Australia

Introduction

From April 13 to May 10 2005, I had the opportunity to visit the United Kingdom to observe several aspects of that country's General Election campaign.

My trip provided me with a tremendous opportunity to gain a deeper knowledge of the British political system and electoral processes, as well as the chance to witness first-hand campaigning techniques that could be adapted to the Australian context in the future.

While Australia draws on Britain's Westminster traditions, I was struck not by similarities but rather by the enormous difference between the two countries in terms of the approach taken to election campaigns – by political parties, by the media and by voters.

For much of my visit, I was based at the Conservative Party's Campaign Headquarters in central London. I was fortunate to be able to meet at length with Conservative Party personnel who had responsibility for various aspects of the campaign including media monitoring, communications, fundraising, political research, candidate liaison and issues management.

Most political commentators in Britain felt that the 2005 campaign was the most interesting and hard-fought contest in over a decade.

In particular, the media appeared to be captivated by the Conservative Party's focus on running a large number of carefully targeted campaigns in key marginal electorates. While this has been normal campaign practice in Australia for many years, it appeared to be the first time the approach had been applied in a coordinated way in Britain.

Background to the Campaign

Tony Blair's Labour Government went into the election with a commanding majority of 167 seats in the House of Commons. This was generally seen by most commentators as too large for the Conservative to overcome in a single election and it was assumed by most that Labour would win the election. The main focus of speculation during the campaign was over how large Blair's majority would be, rather than if he would have one. There was also considerable speculation over the impact Tony Blair's decision to support the Iraq War would have on Labour's vote. There was a widespread view that a large number of traditional Labour supporters would either support the Liberal Democrats, or simply choose not to vote at all.

Since suffering its second successive defeat in the 2001 General Election, the Conservative Party had been through a very difficult period. The man chosen to lead the Party following 2001, Iain Duncan-Smith, had been forced to resign as Leader following a collapse in support. Michael Howard, a man with significant Ministerial experience in the Thatcher and Major Governments, was chosen to take over in the latter part of 2003. Although he had only had 18 months in the job at the time of the election, Michael Howard was credited in most quarters with having rescued the fortunes of the Conservative Party – putting an end to the Party's infighting and focusing on the issues that mattered to the public. While the Conservatives continued to lag behind Labour in almost all the opinion polls, the general view was that Labour would at least have a fight on their hands – something that had been lacking during the previous two general elections.

The Liberal Democrats believed they had an opportunity to make significant gains at the 2005 general election. The Party had become strongly identified with opposition to the Iraq War over the preceding years and they believed they could draw support from both anti-war Labor supporters who were disillusioned with Tony Blair's support for the Iraq

action, as well as Conservative Party supporters who were disillusioned with their Party's performance in Opposition.

The Issues

The election campaign was dominated by four main issues: health (with a particular focus on the cleanliness of hospitals and waiting lists), immigration (with a consensus among all parties that there was a need for tighter control, but disagreement over the best way to go about it), crime (again, a consensus on a need to do more, but disputes about what was appropriate), and the issue of 'trust' (this issue grew out of controversy over Britain's role in the Iraq war).

Well in advance of the election, the Conservative Party's leader, Michael Howard, had announced that if elected he would undertake significant reform of Britain's immigration system – and in particular crack-down on those persons whose asylum claims had been rejected and were living in Britain illegally. To an extent, the Conservative Party succeeded in capturing the initiative on this issue, and ahead of the election date being formally announced the Blair Government co-opted much of the Conservatives' approach to immigration in an effort to neutralise immigration as a campaign issue.

Naturally, immigration is an issue can arouse passionate feeling on both sides of the argument. Accordingly, there were allegations of "racism" thrown by some opponents of the Conservative Party's policy. However, on the whole, the debate was remarkably civilised and well handled by all sides considering the sensitive nature of the issue.

The other issues which dominated the campaign were health, law and order and, to a lesser degree, education. The Conservatives appeared to make significant progress by highlighting instances where criminals received sentences for serious crimes that were far below those the community considered appropriate. Michael Howard was able to contrast his record as Home Secretary, when crime in Britain fell significantly, with increases in crime rates under Labour.

Similarly, there was widespread public concern over the MRSA hospital ‘superbug’, which the Conservatives were successfully able to connect with concern over a general decline in the cleanliness of the nation’s hospitals. To counter this attack, Labour made a concerted effort to suggest that the Conservatives would make the problem worse by slashing public service spending if they were to form a Government and this would impact on hospital staffing levels.

In the second half of the campaign, education issues appeared to take on a larger profile, due largely to Labour’s decision to spend almost a week of their campaign focusing heavily on that one issue. Labour Ministers talked extensively about improvements in education during their period in office and sought to contrast their record with a perceived lack of education funding and other problems that had emerged during the previous Government’s term in office. The Conservatives launched a strong counter-attack highlighting a lack of discipline in schools and the need to improve literacy standards among students.

The “Iraq factor” was ever-present during the campaign, and was used by both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats to paint Prime Minister Blair as untrustworthy. Iraq dominated the middle stage of the campaign, when the legal advice prepared for the Government over the legality of the Iraq invasion was “leaked” to various media outlets. While this meant Iraq consumed the front pages of newspapers for several consecutive days, at a crucial point in the campaign, it did not appear to make any sustained difference in support levels for any of the parties in the various opinion polls. Some commentators suggested this was because the public had made up its collective mind about Iraq long before the campaign began and wanted to focus on other issues.

Approach to Campaigning

There was much similarity between the organisation of the Conservative Party’s central campaign and the organisation of central campaigns in Australia. No doubt this was due

to the Conservatives having Lynton Crosby, an experienced Australian campaign director managing their campaign. From my discussions with those who had worked in Conservative Central Office during previous campaigns, I gathered that campaigns in the past had operated in a radically different and less efficient manner.

The Conservatives ran carefully targeted campaigns in key marginal seats, focusing on local issues and promoting local candidates. In contrast, it appeared that Labour and the Liberal Democrats ran more of a broad-brush national campaign. As a result, the Conservatives were able to win seats from Labour that many had thought were out of their reach. This appeared to take a number of election night pundits by surprise.

In the final week of the campaign, Tony Blair made a number of impassioned pleas to Labour voters in marginal seats to vote for him, imploring people to ignore the opinion polls that showed his Party well ahead. According to media reports, Labour were worried that the Conservative's decision to run more focused local campaigns was paying dividends - and the results in several seats proved that this fear was well founded. The Conservatives' success means all three parties are likely to adopt this approach to campaigns in the future.

I also had an opportunity to spend several days traveling with a number of Shadow Ministers and with the Leader, which allowed me to get a feel for the campaign outside central London. The highlight of these trips was my visit to Birmingham, where I attended a forum on the MRSA hospital 'superbug', at which Michael Howard met with victims and discussed the difficulties they faced as they struggled to recover from their illnesses.

During my stay in Britain, I visited metropolitan, regional and rural electorates. I found the approach to campaigning among the local teams was remarkably similar in all three electorate types. There was a heavy emphasis on canvassing (or door-knocking) voters to ascertain their voting preference. This is due to Britain's non-compulsory voting system (discussed later in this report) and the need to identify supporters in the constituency.

In my experience, candidates in Australia generally door-knock to introduce themselves and discuss issues with constituents. The approach taken by many of the campaigns I visited was more forthright than I was used to, with people knocking on the door and asking residents almost immediately which party they intended to support on election day. To my surprise, the vast majority of people were only too willing to advise not only their own voting intention, but that of all other members of their household as well.

Non-Compulsory Voting

This was the first occasion on which I had experienced election with non-compulsory voting. I was particularly interested in observing how this impacted on the type of campaign the political parties ran and whether the general public would be less engaged in the campaign given that they aren't compelled to take part in the electoral process.

During my visits to seats during the campaign, I was fortunate to meet with a large number of candidates and local Conservative Party association chairmen. I was somewhat taken aback at the amount of time and level of resources local campaigns must allocate to making regular contact with their own supporters, reminding them that the election is approaching and how important it is to vote.

Indeed, during the last week of the campaign, the leaders of all three major parties traveled up and down Britain urging their supporters to vote. There was comparatively little media discussion about the merits of individual policies in the final week, as the focus turned to speculation about what percentage of the electorate would turn out to vote and what impact turnout levels would have on the final result.

Prior to visiting the United Kingdom, I did not have a particularly strong view one way or the other on compulsory voting. However my experience in Britain has made me a much stronger supporter of Australia's system of compulsory voting.

While there are valid points of view on both sides of the debate, I feel that the resources political parties operating with non-compulsory voting are forced to devote to ensuring their own supporters vote actually detracts from the democratic experience. While it may sound idealistic, campaigns should be about who or what to vote for, not about whether or not to vote.

If candidates and their campaign teams are compelled to spend their time convincing people to participate in the election, it means there is less time to actually discuss the issues and debate the merits of policies. I believe the Australian system, where the campaign is a mechanism of persuasion, is far preferable to a system where public debate about issues and policies is subordinate to discussion over whether or not it is worth participating in the process at all.

The Media

With three 24-hour news television channels and a large number of national daily newspapers (on top of many more regional and local newspapers), the British people are spoiled for choice in terms of election coverage.

I was fascinated by the partisan approach taken to the reporting of election issues by British newspapers. While Australian newspapers generally advise their readers in terms of which Party they feel is the best choice, this is generally done in an editorial one or two days ahead of the election.

In contrast, I found British newspapers openly stated their preferences at frequent intervals. While some newspapers are well known for their longstanding support of one of the major parties, others attempted to keep the electorate in suspense for a least part of the campaign. *The Sun* tabloid came up with a novel way to declare its support for Labour. Capitalising on the publicity surrounding the recent papal election, the newspaper erected a temporary chimneystack on the roof of their offices and had red smoke billow from it.

I was also struck at the importance of ‘the daily press conference’ given by each of the three main Party Leaders and the way their content effectively set the agenda for the day. While press conferences are a common feature of Australian campaigns, they are far less regular and structured than what I observed in Britain.

It was also fascinating to observe the media’s coverage of the results on election night. While the Australian media generally cover election results on a seat-by-seat basis, the British media continued to focus on the national contest and had their computers programmed to predict final numbers in the new Parliament based on a uniform national swing.

Consequently, when the swing to the Conservatives in London was far greater than the swing to them nation-wide, it caused great confusion about the overall outcome for a couple of hours early in the coverage, with predictions ranging anywhere from a Labour majority of 90 to a hung Parliament.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the 2005 UK General Election resulted in a third term for Tony Blair – making him the first Labour Prime Minister to win three consecutive terms in office. However, Labour’s House of Commons majority was sharply reduced, down from 167 to 66 seats. The Conservative Party won an additional 33 seats, while the Liberal Democrats won an additional 11 seats in the House of Commons.

In the immediate aftermath of the election, there were two major issues arose that I found significant:

- 1) Discussion about the Labour Party leadership:** Although Tony Blair won a third term, there were loud calls from within his Party for his resignation almost immediately. There was a perception that Blair had “failed” because Labour’s

majority had been slashed, and Blair was compared unfavourably in some quarters with the Conservative leader Michael Howard who, in the wake of his Party's defeat, had immediately announced his intention to resign.

2) Debate about the UK electoral system: In the wake of the election, several media outlets began to highlight aspects of the electoral system which appear to heavily favour the Labour Party and artificially "inflate" the number of seats Labour win relative to their share of the national vote. This discussion is on-going, with calls for an independent inquiry of some description to be held which could make recommendations for reform.

It was fascinating to observe first-hand an election that used a different voting system to the one I am used to working with and particularly interesting to note the more overtly partisan nature of newspaper coverage of the election issues.

I am particularly grateful to all the staff at the Conservative Party's Campaign Headquarters for the time they took in showing me the different aspects of the campaign and allowing me to work with them during such a demanding time for them. I also thank the various Shadow Ministers and their staff for allowing me to travel with them to various campaign events.

Finally, I thank the Australian Political Exchange Council for affording me the opportunity to undertake this visit. I cannot recommend the experience highly enough for anyone who is genuinely interested in learning more about the political system of another country.