

THE CONVERSATION

Fattened pigs, dog whistles and dead cats: the menagerie of a Lynton Crosby campaign

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Campaign strategist Lynton Crosby has become something of a folk-devil for sections of the British and Australian media. Reuters/Stefan Wermuth

Is Lynton Crosby, election guru and favoured strategist for right-wing political candidates from Wentworth to Witney, up to his old tricks again?

As the Australian election race enters its final stages, and with many polls predicting a very tight finish, some parallels with the Conservative victory in the 2015 UK general election that Crosby masterminded can be seen – particularly in relation to the “risk” of a power-sharing government.

Crosby has become something of a folk-devil for sections of the British and Australian media. He is the manipulator with the Midas touch, who has a reputation for tapping into

those ideas and prejudices that coarsen public life but are seemingly widely held and a ballot-box boon.

In an age of economic insecurity, linking immigration to threats to personal welfare is a key means by which Crosby reaches those parts of the electorate who can be attracted to populist conservative platforms.

In many ways Crosby's oeuvre is one that melds well-understood elements of political campaigning (messaging – and for Crosby message matters most – triangulation and targeting) with a relentless focus on those who will decide the outcome, and finding the hot issues and emotive appeals that will mobilise those target voters to come out and vote.

But how does this work in practice?

Fattened pigs

The era of the constant campaign means that the groundwork to secure core voters and attract potential swing voters starts well before the official election campaign.

This is about long-term political strategy and positioning. The portfolio of politicians Crosby has worked for reflects his personal affinity with right-wing candidates and causes. This is the essence of what Crosby believes in, and it animates his campaigning strategy.

Establishing in the public mind that conservative parties are most trustworthy in terms of managing the economy is a favoured theme, but one that needs to be cultivated over the long term.

The conventional political wisdom that you can't fatten a pig on market day captures the necessity of laying the political foundations for an election campaign over the medium-to-long term. It simply cannot be done reactively or retrospectively during the campaign.

Dog whistles

An election campaign hinges on the choices offered to the electorate. Crosby is clear that the job of campaign strategists and spin doctors is to frame the choice for the public, to "help" the public think and understand that their vote "buys" something in an election.

This includes developing a compelling narrative about one's own campaign – but, equally, it is about opponents and their policy platforms. Reinforcing peoples' perceptions seems to be Crosby's particular speciality. Emotional and resonant messaging is a most effective tactic which recurs in Crosby-designed campaigns.

One means of achieving this is by using dog whistles – language that is likely heard by particular target groups in specific ways and producing largely predictable results. Most concern has been expressed in relation to Crosby's willingness to use immigration as a political weapon.

Crosby's strategy is to differentiate between broadcast and narrowcast messages. The former is the overarching narrative and broad campaign theme. The latter resembles dog-whistle appeals, messages cast and framed to be audible – or speak to – target voters in particular segments, sectors or demographics.

Because of Crosby's focus on swing voters, it is unsurprising that commentators have picked up on the dog-whistle features of his campaigns.

Dead cats

Crosby professes a preference for positive electioneering, but recognises there is a place for

negative campaigning – by which he means holding your opponent to account.

It is important that presidential or prime ministerial candidates don't carry key negative messages – that is the job of others in the campaign team or selected surrogates.

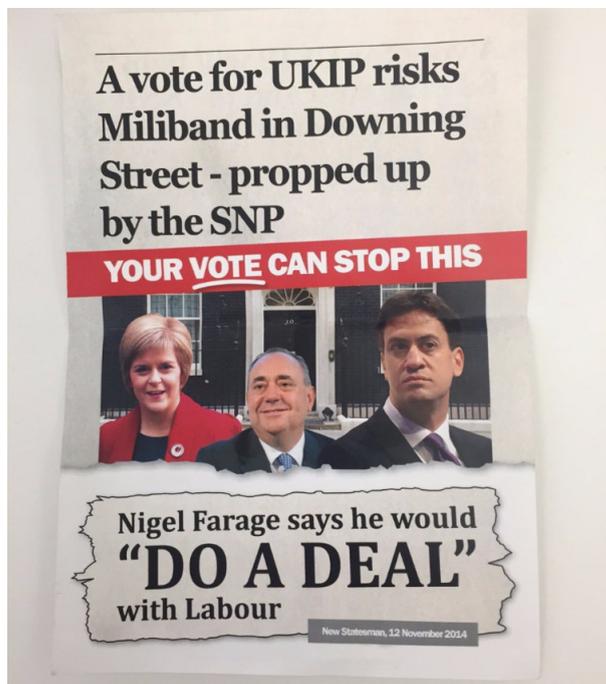
So, think of Peter Dutton's comments on refugees in the Australian campaign, or previously Michael Fallon (then-UK defence secretary) suggesting Ed Miliband would stab Britain in the back on nuclear deterrence in the same way he stabbed his brother in the back during the Labour leadership contest.

While the content of Fallon's attack was in essence nonsensical, it served a useful purpose in deflecting the media agenda away from the emerging focus on tax avoidance and the social consequences of austerity, from which Labour had managed to make notable political gains.

The dead-cat ploy, according to Conservative MP Boris Johnson's insight into Crosby's modus operandi, is to get everybody talking about something that is shocking, disgusting or deplorable – something that is defined by its quality of being talk-worthy and attention-grabbing (the dead cat that has just been thrown onto the dinner-party table – guests may be repulsed and outraged, but they are compelled to talk about it).

Tone is apparently very important when a campaign goes negative – it must be neither personal nor hysterical.

Despite basking in the afterglow of successful election campaigns, it would be remiss to ignore that hysteria and personalisation were qualities that could easily be attributed to the Crosby-inspired attacks on Ed Miliband during the 2015 UK election, and the manufactured threat of a left-leaning Scottish National Party (SNP) holding the balance of power in a hung House of Commons.



The UK Conservatives ran a scare campaign on the possibility of coalition government. BuzzFeed/UK Conservatives

What for Australia's 2016 campaign?

Perhaps the key parallel is to look at how the Liberals are framing the possibility of a power-sharing government.

The Tories successfully planted doubt in the minds of English voters that a left-leaning SNP might hold sway over a Labour government. It used pretty crude billboards, campaign broadcasts and supporting media appearances by party spokespersons to suggest the potential risks of coalition government might be something the electorate should consider before casting their vote.

It would also be healthy to adopt Crosby's scepticism about media-driven opinion polls. For Crosby, these polls are too simplistic to be useful for campaign strategy. Polls are at best navigational tools, and campaigns should not be too swayed by the vicissitudes of media reporting of public opinion.

Campaigns boil down to finding out who will decide the outcome (swing and uncommitted voters, not the media commentariat), where they are located, what matters to them and how they can be reached using emotive messaging to help them make the right choices in the ballot box.



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