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The party animal bites back

Alice Thomson

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Australia's leading political tactician has no regrets about his role in the recent British election, writes **Alice Thomson**.

HE IS the wizard of Oz. During the election campaign he used to stand behind the curtains at press conferences directing operations. He never talked to journalists, no one ever saw him on television but everyone assumed that the Tories' Australian campaign manager, **Lynton Crosby**, was pulling all the levers.

He was credited with many great and evil powers, with revitalising the Conservative Party, with demonising asylum seekers, with forcing Gordon Brown to hold hands with Tony Blair.

All three parties were afraid of him. He certainly showed the Tory lions, scarecrows and tin men that they had a brain, and helped them to be brave. The party proved it had a heart again when it mourned the loss of Michael Howard (Dorothy) who decided to go back to Kansas.

But was Crosby really a wizard, or just a backroom boy? It's almost impossible to find him: he hates giving interviews, never answers his mobile phone, and he's returning to Australia this week.

Finally I receive a message, "Lynton, 3.30pm, 51 Buckingham Gate". He meets me in the foyer of a discreet hotel, puts his riding boots on the chair and orders mint tea (not so Aussie after all, even if he does say "Thanks mate").

"I am no wizard," he says. "My job is to support the leader. Alastair Campbell [Tony Blair's spin doctor] likes everyone to think he's got mysterious powers, but to me the leader is boss. I was just here for assistance and advice."

Crosby's detractors hold him responsible for raising issues such as gypsies, abortion and jobs. "Most people don't have a clue about my ideas," he says. "I'm at the more moderate end of the spectrum." His tactics have been amazingly successful in Australia where the 48-year-old has helped the Liberal Party win four elections in a row.

He has given advice from Fiji to China. "It's all weirdly similar. People everywhere have the same aspirations, hopes and fears."

Did he see it as a personal failure when the Tories lost? His only other setback was when he failed to win office in Queensland at the start of his political career.

"I always play to win; I don't want an honourable draw or a distinguished loss," he says. "But having said that, the Tories did have a few problems to overcome. The party had suffered two significant defeats. It takes time to rebuild. And they are back in the game."

The Liberal Party was out of power for 13 years in Australia before Crosby helped the other Howard to win back power. "Everyone said we were doomed, it was the same here. Even the Tories had lost

their self-belief, but it's clear the voters haven't written them off. So the result was encouraging but not my ultimate desire," he says.

Crosby has been in Britain for six months, living in a hotel, eating at London gentlemen's clubs, "not all spotted dick and custard, bloody good food really", visiting marginals, and reading The Guardian - "only because it's free in the hotel".

He has sat in on dozens of focus groups around the country, listening to voters discuss everything from Posh and Becks to pints and birds. He has read biographies of everyone from Churchill to a remaindered copy of an Enoch Powell biography he found. "I didn't want to be some Aussie clown who didn't know what was going on," he says.

Just before the campaign started, he thought the Tories had a real chance. He has spent the past week analysing the results. "In the last week Iraq was a problem," he says. "People remembered why they had lost trust in Tony Blair but they couldn't see any real difference between the Tories and Labour so we lost out on that."

He believes there was nothing the Tories could do to stop Blair and Brown licking ice-creams together. "But we couldn't get Michael Howard and Kenneth Clarke to share hot dogs or everyone would have said we'd lost faith in the Tory leader."

He says Howard was not the problem. "Our research showed that voters on the doorstep did not think 'Dracula'. What you see is what you get with him. He looked serious and competent. He never fluffed it."

Another rumour Crosby wants to dispel is the use of dog whistle politics. "Of course we didn't use a bloody dog whistle, or send secret signals to particular groups. Everyone could hear what we were saying to voters, it was more like a foghorn, persistent and resonant. We ran ads on all our main issues, we sent letters to millions of homes. And we weren't just appealing to our core vote, we'd already got that."

He believes that the Tories could have done more rather than less on immigration. "Michael only gave one speech and one press conference on it in 34 days. In the last few days we were still finding voters who said, 'Why haven't you mentioned immigration? We'd vote for you if you did'.

"One man's opportunism is another man's responsiveness. Michael Howard never said there should be no immigration but there is a right way to come to this country and a wrong way."

He says he almost choked when he heard Blair's speech on the day he won his third term. "It could have been a speech by Michael Howard - all that stuff on immigration, yobs, cleaner hospitals and discipline. It's all ours."

But it all sounded so negative. "This is a fantastic country; our campaign didn't put me off. I had to go to hospital here for a night and the Aussie nurse was great - though she was shocked by the conditions.

"The problem now is that voters no longer believe that Mr Blair can put it right."

He was surprised by the viciousness of the Labour campaign. "That Fagin poster was racist. I hadn't encountered that kind of anti-Semitism before."

When Labour started talking about "the Aussie Question" and told him to go home, he was amused. "They've got Aussies on their own team and we've given you Kylie and Home and Away." He hated it more when Blair started discussing his sex life. "I regret I didn't nick a Qantas sickbag. Blair's middle name is Lynton, but he's not an Aussie. He's not a straight talker."

But Australian politics is far tougher; British politicians are wussie Poms. "Politicians here like to pretend they are gentlemen but they are as aggressive as any Aussie. They are fighting to govern the fourth-richest nation in the world."

Some people thought the Tories went too far with their poster asking: "How would you feel if a bloke on early release attacked your daughter?"

"You don't run ads for people to like but to send a message," Crosby says. "You have pictures of furry animals if you want to be liked." Calling Blair a liar, admittedly not Crosby's idea, was also pretty blunt.

"A Labour Party political broadcast called Mr Major a liar 12 times in 1997." But they could have been more humorous. "Piss-taking is a potent weapon but it's quite difficult to be funny about MRSA [golden staph] and Iraq."

In Conservative headquarters Crosby was one of the few to know that Howard was going to retire if he didn't win.

'It was understandable.' Was it the right decision? "He's done it, so the party will just have to get on with it."

His advice to the Conservative Party now is simple. "Voters won't be interested in ideas or policies at the moment. It's all about how you conduct yourselves. You've got to look unified, disciplined and dignified."

Discipline is a favourite Crosby word. "The Tories can't be seen as self-obsessed; they need to look as though they care about other people," he says. "They can't be confused, divided or have hidden agendas or plots. In 1997 they became a shambles. They've got to show they are ruthless, determined and responsible."

This weekend, Crosby will fly home but before he leaves he wants to go on the London Eye and see Mary Poppins. In many ways he sees himself more like Mary Poppins than the Wizard of Oz. He is there to instil a bit of care and discipline in the party. "If they want me, I'm sure I'll come back," he says. "But I won't say who for."

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