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Pollsters provide rare glimpse into campaign tactics

Liberal Party campaign strategist Mark Textor from Crosby|Textor told delegates at the Australian Market and Social Research Society's 2004 conference that he had picked up a strong late swing in the polls, revealing that the Liberal campaign was deliberately timed so that the public considered what the party deemed to be the serious issues as the country moved closer to election day.

Former Labor Party pollster Rod Cameron, who called himself an 'armchair dilettante these days', said he thought Howard was going to win because Labor hadn't solved its economic image problem, which he argued had no substance. He also said he believed the Tasmanian forests policy was an act of political suicide. He attacked the credibility of Greens leader Bob Brown and concluded by saying, 'there weren't any votes to win with the forestry decision'.

Newspoll managing director Sol Lebovic was more reserved, simply saying that there was no evidence Labor was going to win the election and that this was based on his marginal electorate polling that showed the Howard Government was ahead in these key seats throughout the campaign. In national polling John Howard also led Mark Latham by two to one throughout the campaign on the question of who voters thought was more capable of managing the economy. Newspoll figures also showed John Howard was consistently ahead on national security.

All three also agreed that there was little evidence that so-called 'swinging voters' had a major impact on elections these days.

Mark revealed his polls don't show the huge number of undecided voters some published polls did, and that 'if you push them with a follow-up "leaning questions" you can get it down to only a few percent'. He said he preferred to measure the quantum of 'soft' voters within each party's vote, which was a more meaningful number.

Rod said that the notion of 'undecided voters' has been used as an excuse by some pollsters to fudge the results.

'There's less commitment [to one or other of the major parties] but there isn't greater indecision.'

Sol added, 'They don't exist. We had only two percent at the end. One media report showed 20 percent undecided. But commitment to the vote was no different in this election than it has been in the past.'

Mark provided a rare glimpse into the Liberal Party campaign headquarters. He said the recorded telephone messages from John Howard might have attracted negative publicity during the campaign, but they proved effective and predicted they would be used in future elections. Recorded phone messages also came from Treasurer Peter Costello, local candidates and even local candidates' wives. They were conducted in 'statistically significant' numbers.

Crosby|Textor conducts national polls with 'very large' samples every night, with rolling data from 20 or 30 seats being constantly processed. With polling and media teams working on 24-hour cycles, Mark said the six-week campaign felt more like 16 weeks.

'The cycle of responses is so quick in terms of the data, you're making campaign and budget decisions by 9am the following morning. It's been the speed of these things that has been the most remarkable to observe.'

Sol and Mark both agreed that Mark Latham's announcement that Labor would bring the troops home from Iraq by Christmas was a turning point in what had been one of the 'longest honeymoon periods in history' for a new leader. (Rod vehemently disagreed.)

Mark explains, 'Good public opinion polling is about asking people to think about the consequences of a proposal, not just its apparent popularity. People know we live in a complex world and when someone comes up with a simplistic answer, they doubt he's up to it.'