

FINANCIAL REVIEW

Discretion a virtue for PM's pollster

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Centre stage ELECTION 2004

Liberal pollster Mark Textor hesitates when asked about the secrets of his success (so far). "Oh God, mate, I'm not into self-analysis," Textor told The Australian Financial Review yesterday.

"I don't want to comment on that. In my position at the moment, it's difficult to make comment because the best adviser is a discreet adviser."

But Prime Minister John Howard has said privately that Textor is the best he's seen in 30 years in politics. And the PM is perhaps Australia's keenest student of polling.

Textor is the son of a Northern Territory copper. He took an economics degree at ANU and did a cadetship at the Australian Bureau of Statistics before working for then chief minister Marshall Perron. The advantage of having the Territory as a training ground is that, even now, it has just over 85,000 voters or about 3400 per seat, which means it's possible to get up-close snapshots of the electorate.

Textor also worked with another NT chief minister, Shane Stone, who has been federal Liberal president since 1999.

In the early 1990s, Textor was sent to the US by then federal Liberal director Andrew Robb to work with Ronald Reagan's pollster, Richard Wirthlin, on congressional and gubernatorial elections. After returning, Textor worked for the Wirthlin group before starting Crosby|Textor, a market research and strategy group, with former federal Liberal Party director Lynton Crosby.

Multimillionaire Robert Champion de Crespigny is the non-executive chairman of Crosby|Textor and has been wrongly cited as its majority owner, after holding most of the shares when it was started.

De Crespigny joked this week he was happy to be named as "the brains" of the outfit, but that Crosby|Textor were the major shareholders. Textor advised Howard on the victorious 1996, 1998 and 2001 federal elections.

He has also worked for the conservatives in Kiwi elections and claims to have "masterminded" the victory of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase in Fiji, while Crosby has reportedly worked with Tories in the UK, Republicans in the US and the KMT in Taiwan.

Labor has accused Textor of introducing push-polling to Australia the US practice of using a telephone poll to drop unflattering and often wrong details about opposition candidates during the 1994 NT election.

After a 1995 federal byelection in Canberra, a Labor candidate sued the Liberal Party over push-polling and later won an out-of-court settlement.

Textor and Robb later apologised.

Labor has also alleged in the Senate that NT taxpayers paid \$35,000 for a research project linked to Textor, which was passed to the Country Liberal Party for \$3700 for use in the 1990 election campaign.

For their part, the Liberals have argued that Textor is targeted because of his ability and success. He's also had campaign failures, such as Kerry Chikarovski's wobbly tilt at dethroning Bob Carr at the 1999 NSW election.

Textor uses quantitative polling to target and track key issues among voters, but much of the material for campaigns down to the words used by party leaders comes from qualitative research in focus groups.

Howard's use of the key word "trust" on day one of the campaign is likely to have come from focus groups, along with Labor leader Mark Latham's "ease the squeeze".

Crosby said yesterday that only about 20 per cent of Crosby|Textor's work was political, with most coming from big corporations, government bodies and industry groups.

"Our political heritage has shown us how you can influence behaviour and we've tried to take that skill . . . it can be shareholders, it can be analysts, it can be customers, it could be the public in the broadest sense."

The company's website argues that knowing what people think is one thing, but "taking this knowledge and using it to influence the way people behave to achieve your goals is another".

"At Crosby|Textor we believe in helping you leverage both existing and potential perceptions to change behaviour and advance your objectives."

And the best adviser is a discreet adviser.