

News and Features

Lessons for Nelson in unlikely election win

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2

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THE beleaguered Liberal leader Brendan Nelson should have had a note-taker at yesterday's rare public address by **Lynton Crosby**, the backroom political operative who engineered John Howard's election victories.

Crosby recently helped the Tory pin-up Boris Johnson become the unlikely victor in the contest for Mayor of London, so it was a rapt audience at the Australian British Chamber of Commerce that lapped up his five cardinal rules for success.

Crosby's golden rule No. 2 might have rung most loudly in Liberal ears.

"Always be true to yourself," Crosby warned in a punchy speech. "The worst criticism of a politician is when people say, 'I don't know what he stands for'.

"A politician needs to demonstrate a compass, a set of beliefs and values that guides him or her, so that in a storm the way ahead is clear. People may not agree with the direction, but they will expect politicians to know their minds."

Although he was talking about lessons distilled and applied during the Johnson campaign in London, it was hard not to infer an oblique reference to the political stage closer to home.

Crosby is a former federal director of the Liberal Party and together with his business partner, the pollster Mark Textor, was seen as vital to Howard's long winning streak, which came to an end in last November's federal election.

Flip-flopping on key policies has been the main criticism of Nelson since he took over leadership of the Liberals, his zigzags on climate change being the most recent example.

But when pressed on whether he would offer advice to Nelson, Crosby declined, instead focusing on what he saw as the emerging weaknesses in Kevin Rudd's message.

Labor, he said, had campaigned as if it could do something about petrol prices, the cost of living and interest rates but "people are starting to believe that Kevin Rudd is all talk".

The other elements of Crosby's five golden rules were: keeping political messages "simple, clear and relevant"; understanding what motivated people through extensive research; knowing "your base, your swing and those you will never persuade"; and "never stop campaigning".

"In any campaign you have your base, your swing and your enemies," he said. "You have to lock in your base, persuade your swingers, and neutralise your enemies."

Crosby's role in engineering Johnson's recent victory had him dubbed the "outback Rasputin" in some circles but has made him a hero with British Conservatives, who see it as a strong portent for success at the next general election.

Johnson had been cast as a talented but foppish buffoon by the British press.

Crosby put him on a tight leash, got him focused on demonstrating competence and developed a voter

recruitment plan that became known as the "doughnut" strategy, targeting London's Conservative-leaning outer suburban ring where voter turnout had historically been low.

Crosby forecast an early and grisly political end for the British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, saying there had been an almost "venomous" turn of popular sentiment against him.

- * Keep political messages simple, clear and relevant and don't bamboozle people
- * Always be true to yourself and play to your strengths
- * Know your base, your swing and those you will never persuade
- * Understand what motivates people and do your research, discovering not just what people think but how people think
- * Never stop campaigning

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