

Canada's Elections: PR Strategist Lynton Crosby Retained by Stephen Harper

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Lynton Crosby has a full schedule. He is the modern electoral PR hitman for parties in dire straits. He is hired to stir the pot of resentment and undermine hopes for change. His very existence suggests that democracies are shadows of their actual function, operating on traditional platforms of populism when required.

Those familiar with the Crosby portfolio should be aware about various hobgoblin practices he has been engaging in over the years. When he has the brief of desperation from governments in trouble, racial and immigration tensions will be fanned. The security state imperative will be encouraged. Sore spots will be scratched. When he has the ear of the aspirant in question, he will suggest a formula of divide and conquer, laced with a lingering sense of fear.

He cut his teeth on conservative politics in Australia, being the dark “architect” behind the return of the Liberal-National coalition after 13 years in opposition. The 1996 campaign that saw the election of John Howard remains his moment of triumph, unseating a visionary prime minister for what became, in time, the established mediocrity of Australian politics. Subsequent victories followed, and word got around on the political grapevine that Crosby was something of a magician.

Each election victory after that was characterised by extreme shallowness – knee jerk populism, a myopic vision, the politics of immediate gain. The political scene has not changed since, and one can almost sense that the reason Australia is a relative pygmy in climate change policies while being an enthusiastic participant in failed US-led interventions can be attributed, in part, to Crosby’s handiwork. In the Crosby galaxy, the now matters, an immediacy governed by sibilant public relations advisors without a care in the world about what public interest and the welfare of the good. Crosby, in fact, protects the welfare of political survival, a job he tends to accomplish well.

In 2004, the British Tories decided to make use of his services, hoping that another Howard, this time Michael, could mount a valiant effort against Tony Blair. The BBC ran with the headline of “Howard’s wizard of Oz.” Various other descriptions were offered for Crosby: the “master of the dark political arts” and the “Australian Karl Rove”. Crosby’s remarks on his appointment then are worth noting. “We had [former Australian PM] Keating running a very slick political machine. But the glitz and the glamour can only last so long. Ultimately you have to deliver.”[1] His strategy is that of whipping up hysteria in marginal seats, those where swinging voters will succumb accordingly and deliver a suitable bounty to the political punter. Thought is less important than base sentiment – he is interested in the approach of “getting the barnacles off the boat”.

That particular effort in 2005 proved to be a fizzer, lost in the ether of an electorate yet to be boiled by the prejudices against immigration and asylum. But Crosby, malodorously, hung around, accepting his Tory retainer with the intense conviction of the Inquisition. It initially paid dividends at the mayoral level, enabling a clownish, foot-in-mouth Boris Johnson to win two victories (2008 and 2012). Red London was rinsed in Tory blue.

Eventually, David Cameron succumbed to the allure of Crosby's black magic. Indeed, Crosby received a cool half million pounds to make sure that the dirt was spread through the electorate for the 2015 election. The winning result was largely attributed to him, vesting Crosby's strategy with the powers of a deity.

Now, Crosby is hawking his wares through the Commonwealth circuit, moving onto Canada, where he is advising the incumbent, Stephen Harper. It has been picked up that Harper's team has sporadically sought advice from the Australian strategist over the years. "We were fans of Lynton Crosby," gushed Harper campaign spokesperson Kory Teneycke, "before many people knew who Lynton Crosby was." [2] The appointment has made ripples. Would Harper, speculated David Beers, soften his image of the "ruthless, controlling, divisive character that many increasingly perceive him to be?" Or perhaps an option re-emphasising those attributes by bringing in the "political 'rottweiler' who specialises in fomenting wedge issues, abusive exchanges, and winning"? [3] The latter seems like a match made in ghastly heaven.

Crosby comes into his own when the gap between contenders for office seem close, but widening. In the context of this year's British election, his "cleverest trick of all" notes the *Guardian*, "was to make it look as if the Tory campaign wasn't working." While the commentators and pundits were frothing over Crosby's techniques, the "infantry" went about the business of netting the marginal seats. [4]

Crosby's very existence is symptomatic of a broader illness in democratic states, where weasel words and the internal polling mechanism of the advisor holds sway over progressive policies that drive change and transform sentiment. Nastiness pays, if only in the short term. He is the most direct of guns for hire, from being an advisor to Tory winning strategies, to disruptive pro-tobacco campaigns against unbranded cartons. [5] If the latter does not convince you of the contempt he holds for the commonweal, nothing will.

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Notes

[1] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/4000439.stm

[2] <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/10/canada-conservatives-lynton-crosby-election>

[3] <http://thetyee.ca/News/2015/09/11/Lynton-Crosby-Things/>

[4]

<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/may/08/lynton-crosby-wedge-politics-general-election-tories>

[5]

<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/05/questions-cameron-over-lynton-crosbys-links-alcohol>

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