

## Foreigners and Politics - the british experience and elections

*London Report 4 from TJ Ryan Foundation Executive Director Professor Roger Scott, April 2014*

Throughout the week, the *Telegraph* and the *Independent* both have front page stories about foreigners and politics. Three different themes on the front page of the *Telegraph* midweek: the muslim foreigners who were inspiring deep intolerance among religious extremists of all persuasions, the foreigners from across the border in Scotland who visited Carlisle on St George's Day to promote the case for independence in next year's referendum, and the foreigners abandoning a dream of Spanish sunshine, including 90,000 Britons scuttling home. (The same lemming-like attitude is affecting expatriate German and French populations, driven out by rising costs of living, very widespread unemployment and uncertainty over property values). As usual, the sports pages at the back were full of foreign names as well, playing for English clubs and denying opportunity for local lads.

The main story in the *Independent* was about the recruitment of an Obama spin-master called Alex Axelrod to ensure that the Labour Party would be able to resist the sort of "smear" campaign which had once before finished Neil Kinnock in 1992 and threatened Ed Miliband this time around. The headline in another newspaper read **"Tackling weirdness of Miliband is first task for Labour's US strategist."**

Axelrod was credited with the Obama campaign revitalisation linked to a relentless focus on the need to raise living standards of hard-working people and instead "soak the rich". It also inspired the Democrats because of its "innovative, inclusive campaigning which combined community organising with massive digital engagement." Queenslanders will hear and see more of this as the parties gear up for the next state election.

Inside the *Independent* and elsewhere there was also detailed coverage of the continuing investigation of various employees of a foreign newspaper owner. These witnesses shared a common failing of amnesia but were united in contradicting each other about their knowledge of more salacious aspects of their own and other people's behaviour.

By contrast, *The Times* continued its deafening silence on such matters, apart from endorsing the sacrosanct role of the Press from any form of external regulation. It also focussed on the potential campaign strategies of all the parties. Its leader on Anzac Day was headed "Lipstick on a Pig" and referred to the front page story reporting in detail on the three foreigners recruited to "spearhead" the election campaign of each of the three major parties: Axelrod, a South African named Ryan Coetzee helping the Liberal Democrats and our own redoubtable Lynton Crosby.

Each strategist faced different challenges - Crosby's was described as struggling to make headway in the vital electoral plains of the north of England and "its serious blue-collar problem which was also an urban problem." Axelrod's was a problem familiar to the ALP and specifically Queensland "the stubborn fact that Labour, rather than the Conservatives, still take most of the blame for austerity for being in charge when the economy tanked." In Queensland as in Britain, the problem is complicated by the print media continuing to endorse this explanation in defiance of actual facts. For the Liberal Democrats, the strategic situation is even more parlous after giving up its leftist and greenish claims by deciding to form a coalition with the Conservatives and submitting to their austerity programs. Liberal Democrats are now languishing in single-digits in opinion polls and their leader is regarded as a pariah inside his own party.

But the strategic conundrum identified for the antipodean alien is the need to hold onto the floating centrist voters who put Cameron in power, however narrowly, while tempting back the voters who have deserted on the right to the United Kingdom Independence party ("UKIP"). There is a touch of the Clive Palmer in the UKIP leader's eccentric celebrity quality, but his attitudes to race and migration make him less of a PUP, more a rather nasty attack dog. Nevertheless the strong polling for UKIP suggests the policies he articulates strike a chord among voters willing to leave the Conservatives and it is UKIP which will be the third force in contention (if it polls as well as currently indicated) in forthcoming European elections.

"The lipstick on the pig" title on *The Times* leading article was explained in the subscript : "The three main parties have all hired foreign strategists to help to define their election campaigns. Not even the best can change political facts." The presence of the foreigners is seen as ironic because immigration is bound to feature heavily in the campaign. The common feature of all three parties' campaign is seen to be the attraction of negativity as it is easier to get voters to agree about what they don't like than try to get them to adopt a common cause.

But, for British Labour and the Queensland ALP, negativity will not be enough in their current circumstances. As the Times says, "voters are not stupid" (although the Murdoch press does its best to mislead them).

*"All three of the political strategists are experienced enough to know that a message only works if it connects with a truth. Political strategists do not create the truth; they can only sharpen it ... it is important not to make a fetish of the ability of foreign recruits to change the weather. Some political facts are unavoidable and strategy is, as the Clinton aide James Carville memorably phrased it, no more than putting lipstick on a pig."*