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# Lynton Crosby: David Cameron's Lizard of Oz

The Tories' election strategist is a master of 'dog-whistle' politics, honed in his native Australia, but concerns about his lobbying business are putting the prime minister on the spot



- - [Debra Jopson](#)
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Fixer in a fix: Lynton Crosby'. Photograph: Stuart Clarke/Rex Features

The Conservatives' election strategist, [Lynton Crosby](#), aka the Wizard of Oz, may have a new nickname if he can slink through the controversy over whether he has influenced government policy in favour of his company's clients. One irreverent Australian columnist has suggested that the "Lizard of Oz" may now be more fitting, given that the Aboriginal meaning for Kadina, the country town north of Adelaide where Crosby grew up, is "Lizard Plain".

Will Crosby become roadkill, as David Cameron struggles to counter Labour claims that the lobbyist has improperly succeeded in having plain packaging for cigarettes dumped and restrictions on [alcohol](#) curbed? Certainly, both Labour and the Australian Labor party would love to see this 57-year-old spin doctor swept aside, as the allegations of conflicts of interest against him grow.

Through his business activities, Crosby has been seen as an enemy to those who advocate for the rights of asylum seekers, Gypsies, indigenous people, women seeking abortions and gay marriage activists. Indeed, because of his marketing methods, it could be argued that he has helped to push politics in the western world to the right.

Cameron has ducked direct questions about whether he ever discussed his government's plans to end branded cigarette packets with Crosby, whose London communications and campaigns company counts tobacco giant Phillip Morris among its clients.

Labour has also claimed that Crosby [chaired a tobacco industry strategy meeting](#) last year aimed at persuading the government to shelve its plain packaging plan. Cameron said Crosby has never lobbied him on "anything".

A further claim is that Crosby, whose company in [Australia](#) represents drinks industry interests, improperly influenced the British government to jettison a minimum unit price for alcohol.

It also reached British ears that his company, [Crosby Textor](#), lobbies for the Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association, which promotes fracking. Since Crosby became Tory election strategist last year, the government has dished out tax breaks for the oil and gas industry. Fracking opponents have alleged a link.

While Crosby may be uncomfortable that the messages surrounding him have skittered out of his reach, this farmer's son from the South Australian cereal fields is unlikely to change course. The man getting £200,000 to steer the Tories to the 2015 polls has a firm view of his place on the planet.

He has [modestly posted](#) Lord Marland's description of him as "the best [campaign] manager in the world" on his company's website. That and former Mississippi Republican governor Haley Barbour's comment to George W Bush when introducing Crosby at the White House: "Meet Australia's Karl Rove." His Twitter account profile picture backdrop features a glowing handwritten letter from London's mayor, Boris Johnson, whom he helped to two election victories.

There is no mention of the Copper Coast, or the Yorke peninsula, the boot-shaped leg of land at the bottom of Australia, where he was born into a conservative Methodist family who left the farm for Kadina township when Lynton was a boy. When he was aged 18, they made their way with him to Adelaide, the "city of churches", 140km to the southeast. There, Crosby gained his economics degree, went on to work as a market analyst for Golden Fleece Petroleum and met his wife, Dawn, who trained as a primary school teacher.

Thirty-four years ago, he became research assistant for an Australian Liberal senator and it has been the power game for him ever since, interwoven since 2002 with a parallel role in the "strategic polling company" he set up with the pollster Mark Textor.

Crosby rarely gives interviews. We know he loved debating at school, he enjoys steak, a good red and the theatre, and visits his two daughters and grandchildren in Australia. But there are few clues as to what drives his political passion, apart from loving to win.

For a company that pries into people's beliefs and tries to change the way they think and behave on behalf of political parties, corporations and interest groups, Crosby Textor is no paragon of transparency. We must turn to Australian public records to find the big business interests it represents. Apart from the petroleum products industry organisation that represents coal seam and shale gas developers, New South Wales records show it also represents the Distilled Spirits Industry Council of Australia, which opposes the use of minimum pricing for alcohol and wants the Australian government to repeal a tax on "alcopops", saying it does not reduce underage drinking.

Other Crosby Textor clients include Jamie Packer's Crown group, which recently got the green light from New South Wales's conservative government for a controversial skyscraper to house Sydney's second casino.

With Crosby, there is a kind of shadow puppet play. Although he performed a very public role as Australian Liberal party federal director between 1997 and 2002, it took some time to see his hand in the way opinions unfolded in the electorate. He famously helped the former Liberal prime minister John Howard, a master of division, to four national election wins.

Crosby and Textor, along with a willing Howard, have been attributed the dubious distinction of introducing "wedge" politics into Australia.

The wedge is all about splitting groups away from the opponent's party by sending messages on issues that stir the emotions, such as race, immigration or taxes.

Howard and Crosby used a Queenslander, Pauline Hanson, to assist during the 1990s when "battlers" felt threatened by Aboriginal gains of land and other rights.

The Liberals endorsed Hanson for a seat in the March 1996 election lead-up, then had to dump her over criticisms of government support for Aborigines. She then won the seat for the rightwing [One Nation party](#). In her maiden speech, Hanson said that "mainstream Australians" experienced "reverse racism". Knowing she was tapping a deep vein of fear in the electorate, Howard, the Liberal prime minister, refused to criticise her and instead attacked political correctness, saying people could now speak freely. They did. An era notable for an outpouring of racist sentiment followed.

Crosby is, as Britain has learned, a master of "dog-whistle politics". As the *Economist* explained the practice: "The intention is to make potential supporters sit up and take notice while avoiding offending those to whom the message would not appeal."

Australians have seen last week how, over time, the powerful campaign methods that Crosby honed and Howard embraced, can work such chemistry in the electorate that the conservatives' opponents eventually bow and change their own policies. The rules have shifted dramatically for

asylum seekers who take their chances in leaky Indonesian boats to try to reach Australian shores, a touchstone for a fraught debate that Crosby exploited to the conservatives' benefit.

He was a helmsman for the 2001 federal election campaign, which plucked victory from troubled waters following two incidents known as the Tampa and "children overboard" affairs.

In the first, Howard's government flouted international maritime law by refusing permission for the Tampa, a Norwegian vessel carrying shipwrecked Afghan asylum seekers to enter Australian waters. The government later passed a law declaring that it alone had the right to decide who entered Australia.

In the second affair, a month before polling day, Australian authorities intercepted a boatload of distressed people bound for the northern shores. Howard and two of his senior ministers inflamed already high emotions within the electorate by claiming that, on this boat, asylum seekers had threatened to throw their children overboard. A subsequent Senate inquiry found that this was not true, but in the meantime, Howard snatched the election from a hopeful Labor's grasp.

In his National Press Club victory speech, Crosby said any commentators who saw the Tampa as the "earthquake" issue that decided the election result were wrong. It was just not that high on the voters' checklist. However, thanks to coalition pressure, it was and it still is.

And now Labor feels that with the popular [Kevin Rudd](#) newly restored to the prime ministership, it has a chance to defeat the Tony Abbott-led coalition at the next election, to be held within months. But the dog-whistling and wedging by Abbott and his ministers as boats continued to arrive and people to drown led Rudd on Friday to head off a future "Tampa affair". All asylum seekers arriving by boat from now on will be sent to Papua New Guinea and will never be resettled in Australia, [he announced](#).

Australia's conservatives will be watching with interest how events unfold for Crosby in Britain. They may wish for him to somehow be freed up – to help them again.

**Born** 1956, Kadina, Yorke peninsula, South Australia.

**Best of times** November 2001. Steered the conservative Liberal-National party coalition to victory in Australia's federal election with a strategy emphasising border security.

**Worst of times** July 2013. Liberal Democrat members of Britain's coalition government have called for the prime minister to sack him as Tory election campaign strategist because of alleged conflicts of interest with his other clients.

**What he says** "If you let us down, we will cut your fucking knees off." A reported comment to Boris Johnson

**What others say** "Strategically, he has no peer. He's a political genius ... and a tough political operator." Ron Walker, former treasurer of the Victorian Liberal party