

WHAT WERE THEY THINKING? VERY FEW LESSONS FROM THE 2010 ELECTION

Another lesson in how not to win

A previous article, “*When You Really Must Win: Lessons From The Hustings*”, drew a number of lessons from the 2008 Australian Federal Elections and the US Presidential Primaries, in terms of analogies between successful campaign strategy and successful tendering. It would now be timely to provide an update on that theme, drawing on the 2010 Federal Election; however, as revealed below, there seem to be few lessons to draw from that debacle, and this article is correspondingly brief.

How did it come to this?

It was Labour’s election to lose, with supposed advantages including one-term incumbency, Australia’s first female Prime Minister and high regard globally for its response to the GFC (balanced, admittedly, by some local derision regarding its execution. But (unless one counts a cobbled-together minority government as winning), lose it did.

And it cannot really be said that this was due to a strong Liberal campaign. The entire election seemed to be typified by blandness, meaningless slogans (“Moving Forward”. Really? To where?), negativity, risk aversion and focus on a number of voters in a few seats in NSW and Queensland.

Where were the overarching visions, the comprehensive policy platforms, including long-run economic and social reform, to continue and build on the post-1983 vision of a competitive nation, or coherent policies and programs to tackle Australia’s infrastructure shortfall and declining productivity, or policies and debate about how to manage the (let’s face it) windfall of the China boom and all its implications?

In the end, the main parties’ focus on or obsession with their competitors, and the fear of making a misstep, saw the adoption of similar and fairly ho hum policies and bland campaigns – and, as it turns out, an unexcited and turned-off electorate.

There has been a tendency to blame the result on the voters – on the relatively high level of informal voting, over 14% in some seats. However, rather than assume that voters have suddenly become twice as stupid in the last three years, an alternative might be to consider that, faced with a choice between two alternatives, each with an untested leader, barely-formed visions and a focus on negativity, many voters were voicing their rejection or lack of interest in any of the political offerings and politicians.

The decision was that neither party was seen to be fit to govern. A similar outcome if this had been a tender rather than an election may well have been a re-tendering process. Instead, in this case and continuing the election/tendering analogy, we are left with a hastily constructed consortium with no guarantee of continued successful performance (and the chance of a “re-tendering process” anyway?). On the other hand, the extraordinarily low expectations set by the campaign will mean that quite ordinary achievement or progress may be sold as success.

Lessons:

Given the above, it is not really possible to draw many useful lessons for tendering from this election, other, perhaps, than the following:

Develop a compelling offering and theme, projected in a cohesive manner throughout the tender. (Contrast this with the negativity of both campaigns and the concentration on issues which were thought to be of great concern to a few marginal seats, and little sweeteners in those seats).

Avoid over-negativity: while contrasting oneself with the competition has value in some tenders and if done judiciously, there does also need to be something in the pitch other than “Don’t choose them”.

Perhaps the 2013 (2011? 2012?) election will provide more fodder than this one.