

NEWS RELEASE

September 2010

Lord Ashcroft publishes election analysis

Lord Ashcroft is tomorrow publishing his analysis of the general election. This is entitled, *Minority Verdict: The Conservative Party, the voters and the 2010 election*.

Drawing on his unique perspective as the man responsible for the party's target seats and polling, the 133-page book gives Lord Ashcroft's view of the Conservatives' progress since their third defeat in 2005, the reasons for the party's failure to win an overall majority in 2010 and David Cameron's decision to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats.

Minority Verdict follows Lord Ashcroft's influential analysis of the 2005 election campaign, *Smell the Coffee: A wake-up call for the Conservative Party*, which called for the party to modernise and re-engage with voters having come to be seen as untrustworthy and out of touch.

Lord Ashcroft said: "There has been speculation as to my view of the Party's performance in the election and of David Cameron's subsequent decision to forge a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. By putting an end to speculation, *Minority Verdict* sets the record straight. This is a record of what I really thought at the time, and what I think now. And if there is to be a public debate about this subject, *Minority Verdict* represents my first and only contribution to it. I do not intend to comment beyond what is contained within its pages."

ENDS

Notes to editors:

1. *Minority Verdict* is published by Biteback Publishing Ltd.
2. An executive summary of *Minority Verdict* is attached.

Executive Summary

September 2010

Minority Verdict

The Conservative Party, the voters and the 2010 election

The result of the 2010 election was closer than many had expected – closer than Conservatives had hoped for. Many people, including me, were disappointed.

The Conservative Party faced a shambolic government, an unpopular Prime Minister, a recession, a huge budget deficit and an overwhelming national desire for change. A year before the election the Conservatives were 20 points ahead in the polls, yet they failed to win an overall majority. Surely this had been an open goal. How could they come so close to missing?

Minority Verdict attempts to answer this question – both why the Conservatives did as well as they did in 2010 and why they did no better. The book also gives an account of my own involvement in the target seats campaign and offers a view of David Cameron's decision to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Having offered my view here, I do not intend to comment any further on the 2010 election. Analysing a campaign in the light of the voters' verdict is a worthwhile exercise – an essential one, in fact, for parties that want to win. But no useful purpose is served by prolonging the debate. Once the evidence has been examined and conclusions have been reached, it is time to move on.

My motivation for writing *Minority Verdict* is not to condemn the campaign, still less the individuals who worked on it, whom I regard as friends and colleagues. The book is not a hatchet job nor an explosive insider account. After all, as Deputy Chairman I was part of David Cameron's team; I am not about to start criticising other members of that team who worked so tirelessly to put him into Number 10. But it would be a pretty thin account of our campaign that did not offer some thoughts on why our result was not better than it was. As with *Smell the Coffee*, my study of the 2005 campaign, I want to help learn the lessons that will lead to the Conservatives once again being elected to govern with an overall majority.

To see the election result simply as a failure is to underestimate the scale of the challenge the Conservatives faced at this election – and also, it must follow, the scale of what they achieved. The Conservatives had never before managed to return to government from a position as weak as the one they faced in 2010. I think the Conservative Party can be proud of the result. We added nearly 2 million votes to our 2005 total, an increase of nearly 22 per cent, and gained more seats than at any election since 1931.

There is clear evidence that the Conservative Party's target seats campaign made a decisive difference to the outcome of the election. We won 32 seats that needed a swing higher than the 4.9 per cent national average we achieved from Labour, or the 1.4 per cent from the Liberal Democrats. Without these, Labour would almost certainly still be in government as the largest party in the House of Commons. In our core Battleground target seats we

achieved swings well above the national average both against Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

Yet in 2008 and 2009 nearly all published polls showed a double-digit Conservative lead. Why did these figures not translate into a thumping majority? The key lies in the gap between the change people wanted and the change people thought we were offering. Going into the election, many voters had little clear idea of what we stood for or what we intended to do in government. At a national level, too much of our message was focused on unnecessary and counterproductive attacks on Gordon Brown and Labour, which meant that voters were not clear about our own plans. We did not make as much progress as we should have done in transforming the party's brand nor in reassuring former Labour voters that we had changed and were on their side. This in turn gave Labour's scare campaigns about Conservative plans more resonance than they would otherwise have had and meant that, for many, voting Conservative was a much harder decision than it might have been.

The blend of opinion towards the Conservative Party that developed in the first year of David Cameron's leadership set the pattern for the parliament. There was a tentative hope that the attractive new leader really did represent the prospect of a better government offering real change. This, though, was tempered by suspicions about lack of substance, concerns that the party was for the better-off rather than ordinary people and a residual fear that the change had been merely cosmetic. How, or whether, these doubts were resolved would determine the outcome of the election. This election was about the Conservatives, not Labour.

It is important not to draw the wrong conclusions from the failure to win a majority. Some have argued that we would have done better if we had talked more about immigration, but this is nonsense: the Conservatives had an insurmountable lead on the issue, which did not translate into votes. Others have suggested that we did not achieve a majority because we failed to nail Labour on their record – but people already wanted change; the question in voters' minds was over the alternative.

The televised debates changed the narrative and rhythm of the campaign. Voters who had been reluctantly concluding that they were going to have to grit their teeth and vote Conservative now found that a more palatable alternative also seemed more credible than they had previously thought. The impact would have been much less if we had already been where we should have been in the public mind. The debates were arguably a tactical error which exposed a strategic problem: three weeks before the election the market was still wide open for a party of change. Nick Clegg was only able to appropriate the territory of "real change" because we did not dominate it ourselves.

We may not have won decisively, but we did win two million more votes than in 2005, we did become the largest party in the House of Commons, we did gain more seats than at any election for 80 years and we returned to government having suffered three disastrous defeats in a row. Why did this happen? Because David Cameron smelt the coffee. He recognised the need to change the Conservative Party, both in reality and in the eyes of voters, and he did so – in the teeth of furious opposition from some supposedly Conservative supporting bloggers, commentators and even some MPs. The fact that there is more to do on this front does not take away from what he achieved.

David Cameron's decision to form a coalition with the Liberal Democrats was the right one both for the country and for the Conservative Party. It is only in government that the Conservative Party can complete the rehabilitation of its brand – that it can show doubtful voters that it really is on the side of ordinary people, that it is competent to run the economy and that it can be trusted with public services like the NHS. The offer to work with the Liberal Democrats – and the way David Cameron and his team conducted themselves in the uncertain days after the election – were dramatically at odds with the public view of politicians as childish partisans.

Of his many qualities, the one which will serve David Cameron best as Prime Minister is his judgment. From the day he was elected leader, he has in the main made the right calls when it mattered most. In doing so he has rescued the Conservative Party. There is more to do, but since December 2005 the party has been heading in the right direction and at the time of writing it still is. Had David Cameron not grasped what needed to be done, the Conservative Party would be contemplating at least five more long years of opposition.

Michael A. Ashcroft
September 2010