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'Having a charismatic leader really helps'

Pollster David Talbot talks about Jacinda Ardern's authenticity, successful campaigning and a new, progressive narrative

Read this interview in German.

In 2017, Jacinda Ardern became Prime Minister of New Zealand after pulling off a last-minute election campaign centred around her personality. Is focussing on a charismatic leader how you ultimately win over voters today?

Having a charismatic leader really helps. Some of the policies that Jacinda Ardern took into that election campaign in 2017 were largely the same policies that Labour had taken into previous campaigns a number of times – capital gains tax for example. The way she had of communicating – not just the details of what of those policies were, but the "why" behind them – was part of what made her campaign so successful. When you have both style and substance, as I'd assert she does, that's a real recipe for success.

What makes PM Ardern a good communicator?

She has authenticity. She is real and relatable. What you see is what you get. And I think that really shines through when she speaks to both crowds as well as individuals.

How do you bring that out in a campaign?

You should always be playing to a candidate's strengths. In that campaign the team did a very good job of creating situations where there would be plenty of opportunity for her to meet people and for voters to experience that connection. Also, those situations got media coverage because of the unconventional nature of the situation: surprising new leader, renewed party momentum and so on.

Authenticity is a fragile good. Doesn't it wear off in the day-to-day political business?

I don't think it necessarily needs to. I do think that "authenticity" needs to be distinguished from "favourability". Favourability can and does wane over time, and often just because of the very nature of governing. When you become a leader and you start making decisions, the things that you decide will affect people. Some of those effects will be positive and some of them the voters will regard as disadvantageous to their interests.

Climate change is an example in New Zealand at the moment. Taking a stance to protect the planet was a key part of the Labour campaign, and now they face the difficult task of coming up with meaningful solutions that are felt to be fair overall in a country that relies heavily on agriculture for economic success. It's quite possible that, on this and other such decisions, a politician's personal favourability with some sectors may decline.

But I don't think that's the same thing as losing authenticity. Being authentic is often about taking a stand on core issues, arguing forcefully for them, and dealing with the repercussions. My research has shown that in some of these situations, even though voters may disagree with the ultimate decision, many nevertheless often come to respect the leadership and conviction of politicians who are prepared to say and do what they believe.

How should the left tackle this challenge? Which communication strategies would you suggest here?

I think there's a duty on parties, which they don't always effectively discharge, to frame and conduct the debate on tough issues more effectively. That starts with understanding the concerns, the beliefs, the hopes and the anxieties of the voter. It involves engaging these busy people more effectively and talking about the issues in a way that more directly connects to what they care about.

It's also about creating spaces and opportunities for conversations that voters can meaningfully engage in. I don't mean to sound overly idealistic about all of that. Not everybody is always going to want to contribute, but I would like to think that in a well-functioning democratic system there will be more opportunities for people to contribute, than less. This does seem to me like a significant challenge given the hastening recent changes to things like lifestyles, communities and media.

Progressive parties all over the world are facing a dramatic decline of voters. What should the progressive narrative be today?

It's true that as progressives we sometimes haven't been the best recently at explaining what it's that we're about. I think that it's got to be grounded in a fundamental optimism about the future. Too often I feel that we get stuck in a space where we are heard to be constantly bemoaning the fact that things are broken, without effectively pivoting to a more hopeful narrative about how things could be and the steps that we could take through policy to get to that better place. It's about making sure that people, no matter the luck they're born into, have the opportunity to live fulfilling lives.

Too often that aspiration is not realised, because education is not up to scratch, because there's not adequate housing available or because social mobility is constrained by other societal structures that we've chosen to support. And so articulating the problems, but also talking in positive, hopeful terms about how we might start fixing some of those issues, is to me fundamental to the core narrative that we've got to start telling.

Who gets to define the narrative? Should it be a bottom-up process within a party?

That certainly helps. And it probably goes without saying that there shouldn't be a disconnect between the story the leadership is telling and that which the party endorses. What a good leader often has though, is the ability to communicate the vision in a way that the public hear, understand and get excited by.

What some parties on the left seem to me to be increasingly missing is that deep and broad connection across society that many once enjoyed. Part of the reason is the decline in mass membership and associated professionalisation of policy development. In some ways these are outcomes of increasingly busy lives and the increasing complexity of issues but the upshot is that parties risk losing important connections, affiliations and understandings of broad swathes of society.

To start fixing this I think you need to do two things. You need to find out what the voters find important, and your need to generate and connect your policy to those things. This can also become a party-building process: ensuring that there are mechanisms and structures in the party for ideas to percolate and to be genuinely integrated. We need a mix of formal and informal mechanisms, encompassing a broad range of voices to help identify the key problems, the solutions, and the ways of communicating them in a way that resonates.

In Germany, the Social Democrat Martin Schulz' election campaign in 2017 was heavily criticised for relying too much on polls and having

them dictate the strategy. Tricky question for you as a pollster, but is polling overrated?

I'm not familiar with the details of that campaign but it almost goes without saying that if you are led entirely by research, you're going to run into problems. For example, sometimes voters believe and assert contradictory things. How do you square the fact that they want to fix climate change with the fact that they already think they pay too much for petrol? That's a simplistic example but if you're solely led by what the research tells you day-to-day, you risk your platform appearing to lack coherence. You also risk being unable to display true political leadership, which is fundamentally what people are going to vote on.

But the other side of the coin is that polling and research, used properly, can be a fantastically useful tool, and I would say essential part of a campaign. In my experience, the claim "it's used too much" sometimes comes from insiders and activists who see research with specific segments as amplifying perspectives that differ from their own. I have some sympathy for that view in limited situations but broadly I think that checking in with the general public, and being responsive to their concerns and beliefs, even if different from our own, is a fundamental obligation of a party that aims to represent them.

Market research and polling can be a fantastically useful tool for understanding public sentiment. There's a happy medium where you're using polling simply as another set of data points that help you to know and understand what voters want, how they're hearing what you're saying, and to help you recalibrate your response to their needs – or perhaps to help in refining the story you're telling. Conversely, using research to chart a disconnected, reactive policy response day by day would seem to me to be a mistake.

In this respect, what can other progressive parties learn from Labour in New Zealand?

In New Zealand voters often didn't understand what they were getting from the Labour Party, because its offers seemed a bit confused and ambiguous. Once Jacinda Ardern became leader, many of those problems went away, partly because she personified a lot of Labour values and partly through the way she communicated the policy.

Even without a leader like her, I would be thinking very hard about what kind of story I was aiming to tell the public and what kind of "offer" I was presenting them with. Too often, I think, we tend to get ahead of ourselves, we just put up our 30 or 40 policies and the public

then struggle to figure out what relevance these have to them. That's just not going to work in the modern world – if it ever did. So being very clear about what it is that we're trying to say and what it is that we believe, and working a bit harder at connecting those things to voters' lives, is where I think we should all start.

This interview was conducted by Joanna Itzek.



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