Chronicle of a vote foretold

Veteran psephologist Bob Worcester predicted this year’s election result more accurately than any other and is first in print with a detailed analysis, finds Austin Mitchell

Explaining Labour’s Landslip: The 2005 General Election
by Robert Worcester, Roger Mortimore and Paul Baines
Politicos, 377pp, £20

This is the third volume in Bob Worcester’s series of election analyses built around the evidence from the polls. Interestingly, the ‘landslide’ that it originally sought to explain has now become a ‘landslip’, yet this latest volume provides the same valuable contribution to our understanding of the 2005 election as its predecessors in 1997 and 2001.

Worcester is a master at telling us what the electorate thinks, feels or does. The value of this book and its analysis is twofold. First, speed. The ELLs come out fast, in this case the week before the Labour Party conference, for an election as recent as May 5. That’s no mean performance, and certainly well ahead of the more weighty cogitations of David Butler’s British General Election volume, and the other academic studies financed by the ESRC still to come. While his competitors are embalming, Bob provides a vivid scene-of-crime report.

The second value is the full analysis of the polls. Bob Worcester is our greatest expert, with 35 years’ experience of polling Britain. This year his MORI poll was spot on, the result, unlike the failure of 1992. That makes this comprehensive analysis of the findings that much more important.

Like the two previous ELLs, this one tells you everything you ever wanted to know, and some things you don’t, about public attitudes to politicians, leaders and policies – plus a full explanation of the election result.

In case your memory is fading as fast as mine, I should remind you that Labour won. In fact, we couldn’t help but win. We had the most popular leader (though somewhat shop-soiled by Iraq), the most relevant policies (a blend of populism, fear-creation and social progress), the best image (generous but mean) and a record in government of making everybody better off, even if they didn’t appreciate that quite as much as we thought they should.

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Personally, I knew we’d win right from the start. We were the best. The Tories weren’t up to the job, however cleverly they fed those strange beasts lurking in the collective subconscious. The Liberal Democrats were a distraction rather than an alternative. We sat there in the middle, a position from which it’s difficult to displace a government unless they cock up the economy – which we hadn’t. So it was all predictable, particularly in Grimsby which is always my touchstone of reality. Though they weren’t wild about us, the people saw no reason to turn us out. They duly didn’t.

Bob Worcester knew all this from the start. He predicted not only the result but the actual election date well before. So the only person surprised by the result was Tony Blair. He expected better from the nation, and was clearly upset when the British people didn’t prove as worthy of him as he thought they should.

Yet in fact they gave him a perfectly good result for a government which hadn’t excited and hadn’t delivered as much or as well as we should, and certainly not enough to fulfil the vast hopes for change which swept us into power. Except for Iraq, we had worked on a basis of continuous calculation and triangulation rather than any spontaneous passion for altruism. That isn’t going to excite any great gratitude from an electorate which can’t see why things hadn’t got much better more quickly.

All that is set out and quantified here. You’ll know and understand the great British public all the better for reading it. The people know their politicians well. They’ve got both Tony and Michael well weighed up. They were interested, perhaps far more so than we deserved. They were informed in general terms, if not in every detail. Indeed, most could calculate the degree to which they were better off, even if they weren’t prepared to show any gibbering gratitude because it wasn’t enough.

The turnout at 61 per cent was up but still low, partly because it was a boring campaign. Worcester doesn’t think so, but the traditional party games that passed for a campaign will always interest polsters more than the people.

There’s even a fascinating forecast. Next election: June 4, 2008, Liberals losing seats, Tories in urgent need of a reprioritising, Labour the most likely winner. And a promise that Bob will be there to guide us through what must be a far more complicated result. Thank heavens.