

Pollster boldly goes where none has gone before - deep into our political psyche

Saturday December 02 2006

Keep an eye on Dr Frank Luntz who is launching RTE's television coverage of next year's general election on *The Week in Politics* tomorrow night. The mesmerising and controversial US pollster has been contracted to do another two programmes before the country goes to the polls. And the manifestation of Luntz marks a milestone in the national station's television coverage, a reiteration of its tradition values as a public service broadcaster.

Tomorrow night at 10, Luntz will put 30 unsuspecting members of the public through a gruelling process from which they may only recover in time for Christmas. All of them were selected by researchers because they were floating voters with no political allegiances. But their political purity didn't spare them from four hours with Luntz, who forbade them to have a drink of water (it could have spilled and damaged his complex technology) or even go to the toilet (it might have interrupted their concentration and distracted the 29 other panel members).

Their mission was to boldly go where no other TV programme has before. Luntz used statements and video clips featuring the leaders of the Big Four party political leaders and then used his dial technology to find out what the panel members really thought of Bertie Ahern, Enda Kenny, Pat Rabbitte and Michael McDowell.

The set at Collins' Barracks in Dublin, where the programme was filmed on Wednesday, was closed, and the conclusion more fiercely guarded than the Third Secret of Fatima. But according to one source, the results will be more surprising, interesting and revealing than yesterday's opinion poll in the *Irish Times*.

Dr Luntz sprang to fame on this side of the Atlantic when he used his dial technology on BBC's *Newsnight* to catapult David Cameron, then a relatively unknown, into the leadership of the Conservative Party in Britain. Later, he polled Labour voters and found that more of them were impressed by John Reid than Gordon Brown.

More people are impressed that Dr Luntz was a consultant to, and wrote for, *The West Wing* than by the fact that *Time* magazine named him as one of the 50 most promising leaders or that *The Washington Post* honoured him as the most accurate pundit. Or even that he has won an Emmy award for his work on American television.

Dr Luntz, who graduated from the University of Pennsylvania and received his doctorate in political science from Oxford, uses neurological terminology to explain his work.

"This is not a focus group, which is typically eight people for one to two hours," he said in Dublin this week. "This is 30 people for three or four hours, so I can look deep into the public's psyche. It's more of an MRI scan for the (Irish) nation."

Dr Luntz says tomorrow night's programme will give viewers a chance to see the strategies and tactics the parties will develop going into next year's election.

"The people in the group are floating voters who have not made a (political) commitment," he said. "This process is being used across the world (in 11 countries)."

The dial technology, developed by Dr Luntz, is a mechanism whereby people in a focus group register their

moment-to-moment responses to a speech or presentation.

"It's like an X-ray that gets inside the head, and it picks out every single phrase. Politics is gut; commercials are gut. You're watching a TV show, you now come to a (commercial) break, you decide in a matter of three seconds whether or not you're going to a) flip the channel; or b) get up; or c) keep watching. It's not intellectual; it's gut.

"Eighty per cent of our lives is emotion, and only 20% intellectual. I am much more interested in how you feel than what you think. I can change how you think, but how you feel is something deeper and stronger, and it's something that's inside you. How you think is on the outside, how you feel is on the inside, so that's what I need to understand," said Dr Luntz.

Sitting in the Morrison Hotel in Dublin, Dr Luntz spoke about language and how he has advised clients about its use.

"Never use the word 'problem'," said the master of the euphemism. "Don't use the phrase 'drilling for oil', substitute 'exploring for energy'. There are no 'tax cuts' but 'tax relief', and 'education vouchers' are really 'scholarships'. It's not 'welfare', it's 'assistance to the poor'."

Dr Luntz was really enjoying his two days in Dublin before spending a day and night in London. This weekend he is working on the election in Venezuela. But, for the TV programme, his RTE producer and director, Angela Ryan, took him for a sartorial overhaul at Louis Copeland's shop in Dublin's Capel Street.

A political junkie who dresses like a trainspotter, he nearly buckled at the knees when he saw the Taoiseach and the former US president pictured in the shop. "It's Bertie and Bill," he exclaimed in Eureka fashion.

Dr Luntz is also very funny: when he was stopped by a traffic cop in Los Angeles and asked for his name, Frank the geek replied, "Google me." He had some advice for Nancy Pelosi, the new Speaker of the House in Washington: "You only get one chance at a facelift: if it doesn't work first time, let it go."

He said the funniest thing he heard in Ireland was the exchange between Bono and a heckler at a concert: "Bono said 'Every time I clap, another child dies in Africa'; the heckler shouted back: 'Then for f***'s sake stop clapping'."

He found one segment of Bertie Ahern's TV news interview with Bryan Dobson over the "dig-out" controversy fascinating: "He said: 'I didn't give jobs to people because they gave me money; I gave them jobs because they were my friends'. If he had said that in any other country in the democratic world, he would have been gone; but in Ireland Bertie shot up in the opinion polls.

"Another thing that I find fascinating (about Ireland) is that I sense no fear for the economy; people are more concerned with the effects of growth rather than a fear of no growth. You have problems with healthcare, roads, but they're all the challenges of success," he added.

Those who saw his performance with the panel in Collins' Barracks, said it was truly astonishing; that the intelligence and energy he put into it made it entertaining, educational and compulsive viewing.

As he was heading off after his tour de force in Dublin, Dr Luntz - not known to throw compliments around like a frisbee - said he thought RTE's production of his work was better than the BBC's handling of his groups for *Newsnight*.

But then he began puzzling over how the Irish use the English language: "You talk about the 'Troubles' when you mean 30 years of civil war; you talk about the 1916 Rising when it was a bloody revolution. You are even more understated than the English, but then I detected that you don't believe it yourselves."

Dr Frank Luntz plans two more visits to Ireland to do programmes for RTE before next year's general election. And if tomorrow night's *The Week in Politics* makes as big an impression on the public as it has the media and political professionals who saw it being made, then Dr Luntz could even turn up on *Podge and Rodge*.