As we can: Labour campaign to adapt Obama's blueprint

Tony Blair and Gordon Brown's election chief says the party high command needs to have a 'conversation' with supporters

Douglas Alexander, whose knowledge of and enthusiasm for American politics extends to watching CNN political programmes overnight, spends longer thinking about the sometimes abstract art of political campaigning than most. Like business, marketing and media types, he has also thought a lot about how to influence people in the modern world. There are three books that have impressed him most as he thinks how election 2010 will be different from all those that have preceded them.

The Cluetrain Manifesto by Rick Levine, Christopher Locke, Doc Storrs, and Hal Weinberger

Networked markets are beginning to self-organise faster than the companies that have traditionally served them. People in networked markets have figured out that they get far better information and support from one another than from vendors.

Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide by Henry Jenkins

Instead of the television (a broad, "top-down" medium) reigning, the internet (a niche-oriented, "bottom-up" medium) finally had become the dominant forum.

Herd: How to change mass behaviour by harnessing our true nature, by Mark Earls

Rather than behaving always as rational and independent individuals, we are in fact much more influenced by our family, friends, colleagues than we realise.

He hopes too that Labour can plug in to a wider progressive coalition, pointing to the way in which the Cameron posters in January got defaced or spoofed on line repeatedly by groups such as mydavidcameron.com. "We were not responsible for it. I'd like to say we were, but this just happened, in that sense it is crowd sourcing."

But Alexander acknowledges that campaigning techniques take one only so far when faced by the kind of sullen electorate the Labour politician Philip Gould is reporting to the party from his focus groups.

Faced with this mood, the overwhelming campaign spending mismatch and polls that are only narrowing slowly, Alexander still takes comfort from the past six weeks, especially the impact of the party's 150-page attack on Tory tax and spending plans launched at the beginning of January. "Candidly, we were genuinely surprised at how weak they were responding to our initial strike."

On the central question of how to secure economic growth, they are now in strategic disarray. They began the year describing their plans to maintain spending to support the recovery this year as moral cowardice, then off the back of the lower-than-expected growth figures in the fourth quarter they tried to edge away and back down.

"At a broader non-policy area they are impaled on a contradiction. Cameron is being pulled between his brand and his beliefs. One side - people like Steve Hilton [his strategy advisor] - are saying run an optimistic, positive, bland, 'we stand for change' campaign, and there are plenty of other voices, saying it is the absence of specific policy that explains why they are drifting. The honest answer is we are still not sure how they will resolve that dilemma in the weeks ahead."

He claims the public are still unable to colour in a Conservative Britain, and the battle lines have been drawn. On the red side, the economists are supporting the chancellor, Alistair Darling, committing the government to reducing the deficit.