More hard Labor: Latham inside out

Frank Bongiorno, University of New England


A few months ago, my wife and I spent a quiet Sunday slowly working our way back towards Armidale from the mid-north coast. We spent a few hours that day looking at—and occasionally buying—second-hand books for sale at various well-stocked market-stalls, and in shops seeking to cash in on the popularity of the area with visitors hoping to catch a glimpse of Russell Crowe, George Negus or David Helfgott; or, a little less ambitiously, just enjoying the Bellingen Jazz Festival and the late winter sunshine.

We didn’t notice Russell, George, or David, but were often reminded of Bronwyn (Bishop), John (Hewson) and a few other (former) political ‘next big things’ as we searched for that elusive bargain. We recalled that the political ‘quickie’ has long been a feature of Australian publishing. Some of these books fall apart as soon as you open their cheap binding to inspect their rough and yellowing pages. It comes as a shock to find that the subject is, say, the Keating government and that the book is only ten years old; for it looks like the ‘literary’ equivalent of the faded rock star showing the outward signs of too much tequila and cocaine.

It would be unfair to the authors of these four books to suggest that they will all have taken their place among the ‘quickies’ on the Bellingen market-stall by the time we next head down the coast. That said, McGregor’s and Donovan’s efforts appear under-done and hastily assembled. It’s hard to imagine that anyone but the reviewers made it to the end of Donovan’s book. Much of the book comprises an excruciatingly repetitious collection of Latham’s speeches. Politicians repeat themselves; therefore, journalists who reproduce their speeches verbatim repeat politicians repeating themselves. Long extracts—some running to several pages—are accompanied by snippets of pedestrian prose from Donovan himself. ‘Labor in 2004, Mark Latham and families’, he says, ‘have fitted together like favourite old clothes on the Australian political scene’ (p. 155).

Latham, we learn, is the ‘political family wizard’ (p. 156)—presumably of ‘Oz’, but happily Donovan spares us. There are also interviews with Latham and a few who know him (or think they do), and a yarn or two of the ‘matey’ ALP insider variety, such as a dinner attended by Donovan and Jim Bacon in which they talk about Norm Gallagher and the good old days down at Melbourne Trades Hall.

Donovan’s interview with Crean attracted some publicity at the time the book appeared because the former leader pointed to some of Latham’s weaknesses and, in particular, his limitations as a team-player. His interview with the man himself begins with Donovan handing over a couple of children’s books for Latham’s boys, an unpromising prelude for any reader naive enough to hope for a hard-hitting exchange. The first question gives a fair enough indication of where it will go from there: ‘My first question, Mark, is about your attitude to politics and being a circuit-breaker, breaking through from
My reading of these books straddled the 2004 federal election. I had finished with McGregor and Simons before the end of the campaign, and was reading Donovan at the time of the debacle. I didn’t get to Duffy until after the election. That inevitably has a big impact on my reading because the events of 9 October have changed everything for Mark Latham, the Australian Labor Party, and the future of Australian politics. Donovan, for instance, ends his account with a comparison that I, too, would have been inclined to make before the election:

And what if Mark Latham and Labor do lose the 2004 election? In terms of continuing the process of rebuilding federal Labor the best comparison is probably with Mark Latham’s first political mentor, Gough Whitlam. In 1969 Labor came close to winning government with Whitlam as leader but had to wait three more years for the famous “It’s Time” victory. During those three years Gough Whitlam continued to revitalise and rejuvenate the Labor Party and its policies and responded to the desire, especially among the increasingly educated under-thirties, for a new multicultural, outward looking Australia … (p. 280).

In retrospect, another comment in Donovan’s book seems more prescient. Donovan, in the finest Victorian traditions of Burke and Wills, made a trek out to the Campbelltown Bowling Club to speak to some of the natives. There he found that ‘the hard-core bowling fraternity out in the west … were still not quite ready to give John Howard away’ (p. 122).

Michael Duffy, in the conclusion to his Latham and Abbott, also seems to have believed Latham might be headed for a ‘1969’: ‘Victory’, he suggested, might prove beyond Labor’s grasp in 2004, ‘but all Latham needs in order to go on as leader is an honourable defeat. He is young and he is doing well. And he is full of surprises’ (p. 380). Duffy’s book is full of surprises too: I found it engrossing. Greg Sheridan, in a characteristic election eve hatchet job on the Labor Party and Mark Latham, remarked that ‘Latham’s professional experience involves being a political staffer and then going into parliament. Surely no leader has done less to justify more biographies’. For Sheridan, the appearance of ‘multiple biographies’ of Latham was a sign of the ‘banality’ of the 2004 campaign (Sheridan 2004). (Sheridan, incidentally, appears in Duffy’s book as a university chum of Tony Abbott. In those days, Sheridan came across as a ‘long-haired git’ (p. 32). His hair’s now shorter.)

Duffy’s book is anything but banal. Like Don Watson’s marvellous Recollections of a Bleeding Heart (2002), Latham and Abbott reveals ‘that politics is not just about power but about words and stories’ (p. 2). But it’s Duffy’s account of the road travelled by these two men to political prominence that marks this book as a valuable contribution to both social history and political biography. Both Latham and Abbott came from privileged family backgrounds: it’s just that the nature of that privilege was very different in each case. The Abbott family, denizens of middle-class Chatswood, enjoyed annual holidays at Perisher and Gold Coast. Latham, by way of contrast, grew up in the rather less salubrious working-class housing estate of Green Valley in Western Sydney, but in a ‘household … organised around his needs’ (p. 19). Both Latham and Abbott enjoyed a privileged status as the only boy in the family, each outnumbered by three sisters. Latham’s first wife, Gabrielle Gwyther, described Latham’s privilege vividly in an interview with Donovan: ‘there are lots of ways of being privileged in life, rather than just looking at the purely economic’ (p. 187). Duffy notices that both Abbott and Latham were subject to ‘extreme parental urging’ (p. 16); in the family circle, they could never have been in doubt about their specialness.

There are significant differences in the career trajectories of these two men, as well as interesting points of crossover. Both were Sydney boys, although Abbott was born in England. Both were fine sportsmen and good scholars, although inclined to buck authority (up to a point). Both were educated at Sydney University, but living far away and occupied with part-time work, Latham did not participate in student politics. Abbott, on the other hand, was deeply involved in the Democratic Club in particular: it was essentially the student wing of the conservative Catholic organisation, the National Civic Council (NCC). Bob Santamaria, NCC chief, was a mentor for Abbott, as was John Howard. Whitlam played a similar role for Latham, who worked as Gough’s research assistant for five years after leaving university. Abbott reached the federal parliament via a short and winding road that included Oxford, St. Patrick’s Seminary, John Hewson’s office, and Australians for a
Constitutional Monarchy. Interestingly, Duffy reveals the unsuccessful efforts of Bob Carr and Labor legend Johnno Johnson to draft Abbott into the ALP; I was previously unaware of how slightly Abbott had been involved in the Liberal Party before he was preselected for the seat of Warringah. Latham, on the other hand, had been deeply involved in ALP affairs for years by the time he won Whitlam’s old seat of Werriwa. After his apprenticeship with Whitlam, Latham’s road to Canberra came via a career as a municipal councillor in Liverpool, including a controversial term as mayor; and a couple of stints in Bob Carr’s office. Both Abbott and Latham entered the federal parliament in 1994, and quickly made their presence felt as men of promise. Both wrote books and both seemed to realise that politics was about words, ideas and inspiration rather than just policies and management.

Duffy is at his best narrating the lives of his subjects, setting their actions and experiences in the context of Australian society since the 1960s, balancing their strengths against their weaknesses as human beings and politicians. Fortunately, most of the book is devoted to this exercise. Less successful, and fortunately much less in evidence, is Duffy the propagandist: on page 78 we learn that those who criticised Howard about his comments on Asian immigration in 1988 were part of a ‘bipartisan consensus’ whose members ‘considered themselves superior to the general population, whom they despised and feared’. It’s a mystery that a writer who can spend four-hundred pages puzzling conscientiously over the feelings, ideas, and motivations of a couple of politicians who are probably not yet even at mid-career, believes that the feelings, ideas, and motivations of millions of Australians can be summed up by a glib cliche of this kind. Only mysterious, that is, until you take account of the almost mesmerising influence of ‘anti-political correctness’ on a large and growing number of Australian journalists and intellectuals who have made careers for themselves campaigning against despised left-wing ‘elites’ in the post-Keating era.

Once themes such as multiculturalism, the environment, immigration, Aboriginal affairs, refugees and the US Alliance enter upon the scene, it seems the brain is disengaged, ordinary fair-mindedness is turned off, and even basic common sense is unceremoniously defenestrated. Any appearance by P. J. Keating induces in Duffy something close to apoplexia. Hence we learn that in early 1993 Paul Keating ‘was unpopular with many voters because of his increasing enthusiasm for symbolic left-wing issues such as Aboriginal reconciliation, engagement with Asia, and multiculturalism. These were often advocated so as to imply distaste for most Australians, their history and values’ (p. 104). Leaving aside the somewhat peculiar notion that engaging with Asia is a symbolic left-wing issue, and the silly and tendentious claims about denigrating ‘most Australians, their history and values’, this statement is more interesting for what it omits then for what’s there. No ‘recession we had to have’. No double-digit unemployment. No sky rocketing interest rates. No businesses ruined. No rich Labor mates. No Keating arrogance. No Italian suits. No disillusionment with a decade of economic reform that had created a lot of losers and much insecurity along with the winners and the economic achievement. How truly out of touch with ordinary Australians some of these intellectuals are! But to dwell on Duffy at his worst would be unfair; the jewels in his book far outweigh this kind of junk.

Duffy notes in his book that Craig McGregor, the veteran journalist, via an ‘enthusiastic profile’ published in the Weekend Australian in 1997, played an important role is establishing ‘Latham’s life story in the minds of the political class’ (p. 164). McGregor was apparently the first journalist to predict that Latham would one day be prime minister. His Australian Son: Inside Mark Latham is probably the kind of portrait Mark Latham would have liked to be painted of his life and career in the lead up to the last election. Like Donovan’s book, Australian Son is mainly hagiographical, although much better written. A highly partisan account, it suffers from the left-wing version of ‘Duffy’s Disease’. Howard, we learn, ‘remains locked in a sort of 1950s time warp’ whereas ‘Latham has freed himself intellectually from that sort of past’ (p. 189). Judith Brett, in her various studies of Howard’s political rhetoric, has disposed of this hackneyed claim, but it’s remarkably resilient (Brett 2003, p. 183–212; Brett 2004a). McGregor also believes how quickly Latham will succeed depends ‘on an electorate which has been conditioned by a government to accept racism, xenophobia and reactionary social beliefs as the price of economic prosperity’ (p. 190). Again, as Dennis Glover (2003) and David Burchell (2003) have shown, it’s quite possible to criticise the Howard Government and its army of hangers-on from a progressive or left-wing perspective without picturing the people as completely lacking in intelligence, culture or initiative, and therefore vulnerable to the manipulation of the least scrupulous and most cunning politician who comes along. Latham, by way of contrast with Howard, is said by McGregor to believe ‘in the generosity of the Australian people and the common good’ (p. 190). I’m a Labor Party member and may therefore be a bit biased, but I reckon John Howard does too. In the end, Latham himself is not
radical enough for McGregor, for Latham’s ‘old-fashioned labourist conservatism which gives him such force’ also for pragmatic political reasons, holds him back from a more radical reappraisal of what is wrong with Australian society and what he can do about it’ (p. 158).

For someone who has spilt a fair amount of ink over the ALP across the years, McGregor has some funny ideas about what Labor stood for before Latham came along. Apparently for much of its history the ALP has focussed on the possibility of the state taking over the key means of economic production, distribution and exchange, so that the economy would be effectively owned by the people themselves, through the government and the nationalisation of industries, instead of by privately owned corporations and individuals’ (p. 135).

What a true ‘radical’ Latham is—a clearer away of political rubbish of almost Napoleonic stature—that he has thrown off this all-powerful legacy of Labor commitment to the ‘command economy’ (p. 134)! The reality, of course, is rather more prosaic: McGregor seems to have missed the last fifty or so years of debate in the English-speaking world about social democracy. He gets much closer to the mark when he says that Latham can sound like ‘a radical Left democrat’ (p. 99) and refers to accusations that he is ‘a populist’ (p. 100). He’s also right when he points to Latham’s Smilesian values, comparing him with those nineteenth and early-twentieth-century ‘improvers’ who believed that working people could better themselves through self-help (p. 168).

In her Quarterly Essay Margaret Simons explores Latham’s spatial political language. It’s a thoughtful essay with some attractive personal notes. She is particularly informative on Latham’s record as Mayor of Liverpool and usefully summarises some of his ideas about welfare, employment, health, taxation, and education. But, like McGregor, Simons exaggerates Latham’s novelty. She manages this once through simple factual error, when she claims that ‘Latham differs from Whitlam and Menzies in having been born on the fringes’ (p. 35). We can take it for granted that Simons has never been to Menzies’ birthplace, Jeparit! Equally, I find it hard to see Menzies, the son of a shopkeeper, having been ‘born into comfort and privilege’ (p. 35). Simons also believes that Latham’s ‘arrival on the political scene has brought to an end the fictions that have dominated politics for the last ten years’ (p. 107).

At the outset of her essay, Simons identifies herself as one of those Latham regards as ‘insiders’. As such, she is uneasy about Latham’s vision because it makes so large a concession to impulses in our culture that she finds disturbing. Yet she is also excited by the possibility of change. She wants to be jolted, and seems to believe that Latham has the capacity not only to reach the ‘outsiders’ of the suburbs, but also to bring people like her back into the national tent, or at least into some kind of connection with it again.

Like Donovan, Duffy, and McGregor, Simons believes that Latham’s advent has been important—yet none of them seems quite sure about how to articulate that importance. She describes a recent dinner party at which she ‘halted a political argument’ by reading aloud the first few pages of Latham’s From the Suburbs: ‘The silence afterwards lasted for minutes. It was both alarmed and impressed. “There are more ideas there”, said one of the people present, “than I have heard in politics for years”’ (p. 4). (I recall this kind of dinner party from my own years in Canberra. There are virtues in the country life.)

Latham does have lots of ideas, but like Brett (2004b), I think his significance lies in his recognition that it’s important to develop a political language with a powerful resonance in the electorate. His language of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ may or may not work—so far, it clearly hasn’t paid electoral dividends—but Latham is still the first Labor leader since Bob Hawke to recognise the importance of this task and to look like being able to do anything much about performing it.

I suspect that one of Latham’s problems is that while he’s attempting to claim the suburbanites as outsiders, many of them simply don’t feel that way. The federal government and the opposition tripped over one another during the election campaign with promises of cash handouts of one sort or another, while rising house prices, cheap credit and massive and rising levels of consumer spending are powerful forces making for a sense of inclusion, however attenuated it might seem to social democrats like Clive Hamilton (2002). Judith Brett (2004b), moreover, has suggested that Latham’s vocabulary is probably more relevant to Sydney’s social geography than to other cities while David Burchell has shown that even in Sydney’s west, the
name of the game is ‘heterogeneity’; parts of that boom area resemble ‘nothing so much as a motley collection of medieval villages, each writing their idiosyncratic entry in the Domesday Book’ (2003, p. 108).

What the future holds for Latham is anyone’s guess. The two months since election day have been very hard labour, some of it self-imposed. He’s apparently been inspired by the political career of Richard Nixon, notably by the disgraced US President’s capacity to ‘bounce back from failure’ (Duffy p. 122). Perhaps he should look closer to home. Within a few weeks, the two most electorally successful prime ministers in Australian history will be Bob Menzies and John Howard. (The latter will pass Hawke as second-longest-serving prime minister on 21 December this year.) Both experienced catastrophic political defeats during early in their careers, Menzies in 1941, Howard in 1987–9. Both appeared finished. But each had the tenacity, courage, and political imagination to come back and establish an ascendancy.

The next few years will reveal whether Mark Latham truly deserves to be Australia’s prime minister. And, like his mentor Whitlam in the 1960s, it’s becoming increasingly clear that his struggle will occur on two broad fronts. On one side, he faces the Coalition Government. But the tougher battle may be with the Australian Labor Party.

REFERENCES


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Frank Bongiorno was born at Nhill, Victoria, just a short drive from Jeparit. He lives at Invergowrie, New South Wales, just a short drive from Armidale. He may be an insider, but hasn’t lived in the inner city for quite some time. He visits as often as possible.

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Latham then embarked on a second career as an acerbic media columnist, given an open platform to pursue his long-running obsessions, most particularly his hatred of “elites,” both progressive and conservative. At his best, Latham’s columns, mostly for the business newspaper the Australian Financial Review, were hard labour: a punishment for criminals, especially used in the past, that involves a lot of tiring physical work. Learn more.

Meaning of hard labour in English. hard labour. noun /ˈhɑrd ˈleɪ.bər/ /ˈhɑrd ˈleɪ.bər/ /ˈhɑrd ˈleɪ.bər/. a punishment for criminals, especially used in the past, that involves a lot of tiring physical work. Thesaurus: synonyms and related words.