



Don't ditch the 'elites'

Dennis Glover, Mark Latham's former speechwriter, says Labor should not move to the Right to win back the Kath & Kim voters

AS one of Mark Latham's travelling team during the recent campaign, I spent election night calling out numbers from the Australian Electoral Commission website to my increasingly depressed colleagues. While we'd started by checking progress in the marginal seats, we were drawn back to the horror that was unfolding in Holt — the sprawling electorate based around the satellite city of Dandenong on the southeastern outskirts of Melbourne.

Early in the evening it was looking lost. Holt, the former dormitory for the giant assembly plants of GMH, International Harvester and Heinz, lost for Labor? Impossible. In the end, Holt was retained, but only after a 6.4 per cent swing to the Coalition, caused by concern about interest rates in the new housing estates within easy driving distance of shopping centres such as Kath and Kim's Fountain Gate. It is now a knife-edge marginal.

As the professional statisticians of the party write their reports and blue books, Holt will inevitably become an easy symbol of the growing problem facing Labor — its alienation from the aspirational, socially conservative once working class of outer suburban Australia.

Much is being made of this problem by people on the Labor side, not always with the most transparent of motives. But before the slogan "Kath and Kim aren't voting Labor" becomes a cliché, let me let me add some perspective.

It's tempting to resort to simplistic dichotomies to explain what's happening to Labor's primary vote: that we've become two Australias divided into suburban aspirational and city elites, "conservative Right" and "progressive Left", with the only logical answer being a move rightward to "the centre". Tempting yes, but wrong.

Let's look at Holt. At one end, around Kath and Kim's Fountain Gate, you'll find mums and dads dropping children at low-fee and not so low-fee private schools in four-wheel drives and imported Korean-made people movers.

But at the other end, in the former housing commission prefabs built in the 1960s, you'll see rusting Holden wrecks sitting in concreted front yards, which I saw recently when I went back to see the house I grew up in. It's this other Australia of stagnating housing prices, high unemployment and low school retention rates that can't be accommodated by the elite/aspirational model. Nor can the model account for the fact that stockbroker land still votes Liberal. Not all elites are left-wing.

Given that it's unlikely that stockbrokerland will turn Labor, let's take them out of the equation. For Labor, there aren't two Australias, there are three: the educated "progressive elite", the "aspirational" and the "old working class", who are rapidly becoming the working poor. While Labor may have lost votes recently in the middle group, it has gained support from the first and its safe seats are still based around the third. In Holt, while the working-class booths swung a little to the Coalition, they still recorded a Labor vote in the mid 60s.

Some of those offering advice to the Labor leader to ditch the progressive elites and tone down Labor's redistributive policies in a lunge to the Right to win the aspirational forget these facts.

Call me cynical, but I suspect other motives, such as an opportunity to score factional points, position for the applause of the editorial writers, or grandstand without indulging in serious thought. Sadly, far too much of this analysis is based on a mindless repeating of some of the crude neo-conservative propaganda peddled by Labor's enemies. In the many years I've spent working closely with Labor leaders I've never heard a senior figure, Left or Right, disparage the desire to stay married, send children to low-fee schools, buy a home or go to church. (In fact, some in their quiet way are profoundly religious people. One gave the best church sermon I've ever read.)

Some of these critics might like to reflect on their responsibility for Labor's long-term decline through their factionalism, branch stacking and ruthless ambition.

I've long advocated the need for Labor to appeal to the aspirational voter. It's an absolute political necessity. But for Labor to abandon its twin bases of support in the process would be to court long-term electoral suicide. The party would lose completely its reason for being, members would leave and the party would slowly die.

For Labor to turn on its own supporters and reject en masse their long-cherished beliefs would be like allowing itself to be swallowed whole by John Howard; within no time his digestive juices would start to break Labor down. In modern electoral politics you build on your base.

That's the philosophy followed by the US Republicans and the Australian Liberals. Notice how while appealing to new voters,





the Prime Minister never attacks his committed supporters. Even when distancing himself from the craziest of ideas, he always makes it known that his sympathies lie with the right-wing maddies.

To make a cynical, purely poll-driven lunge to the Right would be suicidal for another reason as well: we live in an age of conviction politics. In a world of threat and uncertainty, voters want leaders who display moral strength and who know what they believe in. The charge of poll-driven opportunism and flip-flop is already deadly to Labor. No matter how false, the accusation killed Kim Beazley in 2001 and killed John Kerry in 2004. Labor must sell its beliefs.

That's not an argument for Labor to remain the same or neglect the aspirational vote. It must appeal to such voters in a way that projects real belief. The answer doesn't lie in a dramatic swing to the Right to try to find the Centre. It's about modernising our ideas, not necessarily making them more conservative.

Labor can win the aspirational vote only by marrying economic competence to its social idealism, not rejecting the latter for the former. People forget, but this was the essence of the Third Way as it was developed by Tony Blair and Bill Clinton. Both managed to develop a message of economic reassurance with a new progressive idealism that suited the times. Think of their slogans: "economic reward for the many, not the few"; "education, education, education"; attacking social exclusion.

Even "ending welfare as we know it" wasn't sold as an attempt to bash dole bludgers but to put jobs and hope into working-class homes. And remember, Clinton didn't become an honorary African-American by attacking his own party's

Instead of attacking its progressive elites, Labor should build a bridge between them and the new aspirational voters

passion for racial tolerance. On difficult social issues such as race he was an idealist of the strongest sort.

Instead of attacking its progressive elites, Labor should build a bridge between them and the new aspirational voters. Ultimately that's the only way to help the working

poor that almost everyone else has forgotten. Labor mustn't turn on its Left; rather, all factions — Left, Right and Centre — must modernise their attitudes to take account of the new electoral geography. At present neither faction on its own has all the answers. Neither on its own can appeal to all sections of society.

But there is a quid pro quo for Labor's progressive elite supporters. If Labor is to stick by them, they need to stick by Labor. They must understand that Labor needs to improve its appeal in aspirational Australia. They must be slower to anger and more selective about claims of betrayal. Labor needs articulate friends, and if it doesn't find them on the Left it will find them on the Right.

This will take an attempt by the elites to understand the changing values and beliefs of suburban Australia and why the old appeals won't work any longer. We're growing apart as a society, educationally, economically and geographically, so it's little wonder we can't comprehend each other and instead fall back upon the caricatures of each other our enemies create for us.

There's only one way to do this. It's surprisingly simple. Hop into the car and go to Fountain Gate or one of the hundreds of similar suburban shopping malls around the country. Look around. Get to know the people. They're bound to be open and friendly in the typical Australian way. Then go to the suburbs close by that affluence hasn't yet reached. They're the places where the same newly affluent grew up.

You'll understand why affluence isn't all that bad, why more people want it, and why those who have it want a Labor Party they can trust to protect it. From this simple bridge of understanding new policies and political common sense will follow. Above all else, it's a moral effort.

Then remember something else: by cutting Labor some slack and helping it into power you can do something for the people at the bottom you probably joined the Labor Party to help. Howard's success in using power to transform the national debate and change the values of the country is a reminder to the "progressive elite" that the only thing about power they should reject is its absence.

Dennis Glover, an adviser to shadow treasurer Wayne Swan, is author of *Orwell's Australia: From Cold War to Culture War* (Scribe Press, 2003). His opinions are his own.

