



Labor's fear of power

Conservative commentators are winning the hearts and minds of ordinary Australians — the Left should ditch its high-minded disdain of power-driven pragmatism and emulate the Right's successful tactics, suggests **Dennis Glover**

OPEN a major newspaper on any day of the week and you will find Labor has few friends in the world of print. Contrast the assessments Mark Latham gets from the Left with the assessments John Howard gets from the Right. Right-wing commentators almost invariably defend the Coalition and slam Labor. Even former Labor ministers, staffers and national secretaries seem to spend as many of their precious column inches attacking Labor's present political strategy as they do attacking the conservatives.

This is perhaps inevitable and even desirable — one of the strong points of the intellectual Left is its independence of spirit, something we'd all be worse off without. It seems, though, that virtually no one will defend the modern Labor Party. In my opinion, as someone with a foot in both the intellectual and political camps, this is a **seriously** underestimated problem for both.

If the Australian Left is to achieve its goal of getting rid of the neo-conservative Howard Government, it needs a Labor Party that can win elections again, and if the Labor Party is to win elections again, it needs champions who can interpret it sympathetically (truthfully, some might say) to the voters. Labor must reach out across this chasm, but both sides have to help bridge the gap.

By constantly attacking Labor, the Left works against this purpose. Its charge that Labor lacks a belief system adds validity to Howard's claim that Labor stands for nothing and will "flip flop" according to the polls (a deadly charge in the post September 11 world of conviction-driven politics).

Its hero worship of Labor's dissidents highlights the party's internal divisions and encourages more members to "go native" (and as Howard says: "If you can't govern your own party, how can you govern the country?").

Its insistence that Labor adopt electorally suicidal policy positions in the name of political purity robs Labor of its support in crucial marginal electorates. To the poor bloody Labor infan-

try given the task of capturing Canberra, left-wing writers often resemble those World War I generals who ordered their troops into barbed wire and machine guns and then, when their mission inevitably failed, had the hide to execute every 10th man for cowardice in the face of the enemy. (And there's sometimes more than a suspicion that their crazy orders are being given from some sumptuous chateau far behind the lines.)

It's obvious to anyone who travels the suburbs of Australia and has access to the reports of political pollsters (whose margins of error are smaller than in the published polls) that Australia's left-wing journalists and writers are out of touch, and often radically so. They're living proof of the accuracy of Mark Latham's theory that Australian politics is divided between insiders and outsiders.

The contrast with the Right and its relationship with the Howard Government could not be starker. The Howard Government is far from ideologically consistent. Somewhere in Australia a right-wing intellectual sits bitterly disappointed at Howard's betrayal of conservative flagship ideas — small government, low taxation, opposition to middle-class welfare — it's just that she'll seldom say so.

Such points are usually left to pointy-headed economists in the business pages. The Right is far cannier. They know that half a loaf is always better than none. By holding their fire on Howard for his betrayals (but never his sleights — he never offends his backers), they've let him get to the position where now, with a Senate majority, he can implement his real ideological agenda and make it sound like common sense. Perhaps the revolution is only just beginning.

This victory is partly because right-wing commentators have led public opinion. They've helped Howard mould the times.

The process has been simple and open. Starting as pseudo-academic articles in Paddy McGuinness's *Quadrant* and the *IPA Review*, ideas travel down the intellectual food chain via broadsheet opinion columns, to the Melbourne *Herald-Sun's* Andrew Bolt and Sydney *Daily Telegraph's* Piers Akerman and on to Sydney-based

radio broadcasters Alan Jones, John Laws and others.

Like a brood of baby crocodiles flushed down a suburban toilet, these ideas have taken a subterranean journey through the sewers and emerged fully formed on main street, to devour the unwary. Listen to the punters from marginal electorates on talkback radio, read the reports of political focus groups, talk to your cab driver; they're all repeating the opinions, boiled down to a populist essence, of some right-wing intellectual.

The Left can't sit back passively and let this happen if it's serious about letting Labor challenge for power again. Dramatic changes of national political direction don't come from the bundling together of a few smart ideas at election time.

Labor can't do it all on its own, even if it does everything right — which even it admits it hasn't in recent years.

Defeating Howard needs a smarter approach from all who oppose what he stands for. I don't mean something directly co-ordinated; intellectuals and writers should never accept political "guidance" or a party line. But it does mean they must wake up, take a sympathetic interest in what ordinary people believe, and work out some practical way of appealing to them.

The Left can learn a lot from the successful tactics of the Right. The US Left already has. Many American left-liberals have woken up to the fact that the present dominance of the Congress by Republicans and their ideas didn't come about by accident. The ideas of the think tanks of the 1960s and '70s quickly became the content of the talkback shock jocks of the '80s. They were then resold by the tabloid television commentators of the '90s and pushed further by the Drudge-like bloggers of the noughties.

This combination of simple ideas and populist flair has all but destroyed the link between the Democrats and their traditional blue-collar base. For two decades or more, right-wing ideas and their salesmen have seemed unassailable. At long last, though, the serious rightback has started.

Liberal America has now started to counter-attack in a way that may promise eventual success. Although it did not get a John Kerry win this time, it will help create the preconditions of



victories in the future.

Former Clinton chief of staff, John Podesta, has established a new organisation, the Centre for American Progress, that is neither think tank nor media outlet but an attempt to both create ideas and disseminate them via the popular media.

Other liberals have turned into successful populist commentators, publishing humorously written political books, such as Al Franken's *Lies and the lying liars who tell them*, that had a simple aim — getting George W. Bush out of the White House.

Still others have become hosts on new liberal talkback radio networks. Mike Moore (who now sees the errors of his ways in helping undermine Al Gore in 2000) has used Hollywood to reach out to millions through his committed, but populist, documentaries and books. Sick of being part of the problem, American liberals are becoming part of the solution. It's a far cry from the often self-defeating ethical spasms of the Australian Left.

The future for the Australian Left and Labor comes down to this: taking politics seriously, and, more to the

point, taking power seriously. Write these sorts of things, as I have recently, and you'll get an immediate response in the letters pages: you have no principles; you are only interested in power; you are a visionless spin-doctor.

The Australian Left needs to ask itself why it's so afraid of power. What exactly is there to be afraid of? In a democracy, power is the very thing that is being legitimately contested.

In a parliamentary democracy such as ours, with its system of checks and balances, there's nothing inherently sinister about power; it's the means to an end — the democratic will harnessed to a set of philosophical beliefs.

Paul Keating's remark has now become a cliché, but it is true nonetheless: when the government changes, so does the nation.

And how Howard has succeeded: using power to propose new ideas, change perceptions and lead public opinion (even if he sometimes does it in an underhanded way). Howard didn't go the people in 1996 promising John Hewson's *Fightback*, but look at how much of it he has managed to

implement and how far the Australian people have been prepared to travel with him. Howard's success in changing Australia should make the Australian Left realise that the only thing about power they should fear is its absence.

So there's the lesson for the Australian Left. Connect with the people — with their interests, their feelings and hopes for their families and themselves. Try to understand the electoral pressures that affect Labor's policy positions. Win power. Then lead the way, intelligently, with the help of friends, in changing the political direction of the country. There's nothing sinister about it. It's called democracy, and it's the only way to have something resembling a social democracy. If we begin from this standpoint, who knows, Labor may even win federal government one day.

Dennis Glover was until recently the principal speechwriter to Mark Latham. His most recent book was *Orwell's Australia: From Cold War to Culture War* (Scribe Press). This is extracted from the current *Quarterly Essay*.

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