

Inconsistent, inaccurate and devoid of hope

*Mark Latham's progressivism won't benefit the Labor Party in such a conservative age, says his former speechwriter **Dennis Glover***

IT was inevitable that sooner or later Mark Latham would intervene in the federal election campaign to try to damage his old rival, Kevin Rudd.

But his effort in Friday's *The Australian Financial Review* demonstrates that, far from being Rudd's nemesis, he poses little more than an annoyance.

And while his analysis of what's wrong with Australia's democracy may appeal to many progressive voters, on a superficial level at least, in the end it offers them nothing but despair.

As someone who admired Latham's intellectual courage and energy during his rise from the back bench to the leadership (including a mostly unhappy time as his speechwriter) it's fascinating to see how much his thinking has changed, but also how much has remained the same.

His is certainly a challenging thesis. According to Latham, one of the defining features of globalisation — the redistribution of power

upwards to global boardrooms and downwards to cashed-up individuals and families — has reduced the relevance of the nation state and narrowed the ideological differences between the parties.

As he sees it, with few serious problems to solve, the major parties have become fixated on trivia, creating false crises and satisfying the electorate's addiction to consumerism. This pointless consumerism, he argues, is the defining ethos of the times, and is destroying the planet. Addressing it will require nothing less than a rethinking of our materialistic values to develop "a new social and economic order".

Radical stuff. Latham believes neither party can really address this problem, making this the "Seinfeld election": one ultimately about nothing. If anything, he argues — and here's his attempt at revenge against his former colleagues — Labor is likely to be even more conservative and timid in government than its promises to

date suggest.

So why vote Labor? In fact, why take an interest in politics at all?

While Latham's article proves he has lost none of his dialectical prowess, it's an extraordinary argument coming from the former right-wing populist politician.

His first problem is inconsistency. His analysis — that electoral success depends on satisfying aspirational voters — hasn't really changed, but his attitude to it has.

He used to think aspiration was good and wittingly dismissed those who disagreed as out-of-touch, inner-city elites. Now he thinks aspirationalism itself is the problem.

Perhaps the greatest irony of all is that Latham's ideas now are barely distinguishable from the post-materialist thinking of the Australia Institute's Clive Hamilton, the very person against whom he once reflexively defined his beliefs. To borrow a phrase from the Latham article, political retire-

ment can generate many things, but policy consistency isn't one of them.

The second issue is inaccuracy. While it's unquestionable that the "me too" election demonstrates significant ideological convergence, to make his case Latham overstates the similarities and understates the differences between Labor and the Coalition.

While tax, interest rate and private school funding policies may be similar, when it comes to the defining issues of the age — bringing combat troops home from Iraq, ratifying the Kyoto Protocol and repealing Work Choices — the differences are far wider.

But the third issue is the crucial one. By telling people there's no point in trying to change things, Latham has nothing to offer but despair. Effecting progressive change in a time of conservative ideological dominance may have been beyond him, but that doesn't mean others can't succeed. And his willingness to help John Howard get back into power will only make things worse.

The question, as always, is how to promote change in an unpropri-

ous political and intellectual environment.

One answer, which Latham canvasses and dismisses, is deception: the hope that Labor in office will be more radical than it has hitherto been making out. It is a false hope, but not for the reasons Latham gives. The last thing progressives should do is encourage an incoming Labor government to break its electoral promises. That would have only one sure outcome: a speedy and well-deserved return to long-term Opposition. This is what the Coalition did when it introduced Work Choices, and Rudd is unlikely to make the same error.

But that doesn't mean a Labor government won't be in a position to democratically lead progressive change. If Australians are less egalitarian and more selfish than in the past, as Latham laments, we can hardly be surprised. After all, those values have been officially encouraged by the Howard Government for the past 11 years. (And it is worth remembering they were strongly endorsed by Latham, who notoriously described welfare recipients as bludgers and no-hopers.) A government with different values

will eventually lead a different country.

Take education. Retaining the Coalition's SES funding model for non-government schools doesn't preclude a future government committing windfall revenues to modernise the public school system, too. It's a matter of priorities.

And ask yourself, would Labor have initiated the extraordinary attack on African refugees led recently by the Coalition's Immigration Minister? It's unlikely. Such moral decisions are important to a nation's overall direction.

While Latham has moved philosophically to the Left, he has also, unfortunately, adopted much of the Left's pessimism. But one thing remains completely unchanged: his underestimation of how difficult it is for Labor to win government in such a conservative age. As a result, he offers progressive Australians nothing but despair and the consolations that come from principled opposition.

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