



Second-rate rant will spoil the party

Mark Latham's former speechwriter Dennis Glover on the ex-leader's diaries

WHEN Mark Latham won the Labor leadership in December 2003, the big issue was: has he changed? The question always made me think of Prince Hal in *Henry IV* — the sharp-tongued bar-room brawler who became the statesman Henry V. Shakespeare showed that political responsibility brings out the strengths of even the unlikeliest of individuals. I believed Latham had that inner strength. Is it too late to hope that I might still be right?

It's easy to focus on the negative insights about Latham found in Bernard Lagan's excellent book *Loner* (released last week). True, he trusted his own counsel, but, after all, he — not his advisers — was elected by the people, and he has to take public responsibility for any mistakes. His staff respected that.

It's also true he was sometimes difficult to work for, but that's not unusual. Forceful politicians are famously tough on their staff: Winston Churchill by all accounts was a tyrant. Politicians should demand the highest standards.

There are many things about the Latham reign to be proud of, which Lagan's book captures well. For insiders, it was thrilling. Suddenly Labor had a leader who could grab the media's attention, which soon gave us a 55-45 lead in Newspoll.

Latham put new issues on the agenda that will outlast him and make a huge difference to the great Labor cause of tackling poverty: issues such as early childhood education. He demonstrated that while people care about their economic interests, there's still room to talk about whether wealth alone is enough.

However, most of Latham's New Labor agenda never materialised: tax cuts for the aspirational; ending negative gearing; an overhaul of tertiary education; substantial welfare reform; and slashing middle-class welfare. Lagan quotes Latham as saying

he decided not to fight on the economy at all. Before he criticises his old party as a bunch of "stand-for-nothings", he ought to reflect that he too sometimes balked at hard change and had an eye to the polls.

In politics, after all, changing things is difficult. It takes charm, persuasion, timing, guile, prudence and luck — and being in government. John Howard has shown what it takes. Simply throwing an idea on the table and expecting others to see its logic may work in philosophy tutorials, but it doesn't work in politics. And, as Latham found, your opponents never make it easy for you to succeed.

Before helping the Tories by repeating the lie that Kim Beazley has no ticker, Latham should reflect that his successor is caught in the same trap set by the same people. Labor during Latham's leadership also faced huge obstacles to winning: the shock jocks, the commentators and the powerful background noise of the culture wars, all of which are slowly changing the political orientation of Labor's base. He certainly disliked the Sydney Daily Telegraph's Piers Akerman, but did he have to go out of his way to make The Australian's Phillip Adams an enemy, too?

Again, for all Latham's books and speeches on these subjects from the back bench and shadow cabinet, Labor never advanced on this front when he was in charge. We're still losing the culture wars and today Beazley faces the same enemy trenches.

We now await Latham's diaries. My hope is that they don't set out to wound his old party even more, although from what I've heard through the grapevine, this is a false hope. Any second-rater could write the kind of four-letter-word-riddled public sewage we're all expecting: the literary equivalent of Big Brother XXX. Latham was — and I hope still is — no second-rater. You don't come from a place like Green Valley to within a limousine drive of the

Lodge by being second rate. And anyway, plenty of others have kept diaries and they will defend their reputations. So abuse will settle nothing.

Instead of blaming others, he should show his inner strengths. When it was announced that he was writing a book, Latham said he wanted it to be the modern equivalent of V. G. Childe's *How Labor Governs*, the classic account of the early decades of the ALP that continues to be a source of enlightenment. He should live up to this claim and put his diaries in the National Archives with a five or 10-year embargo. To hell with Melbourne University Press's profits and the extra royalties. (I'm sure there are many at the old university press wondering just what the heck the publishing house that gave us Manning Clark's histories is doing marketing a book of insults anyway.)

So my message to Latham is clear: Don't become one of the Canberra commentators you always told us you disliked. Don't do the Tories' dirty work for them. Leave your children and your many admirers — your caucus supporters, the party members and your old staff — with a much more formidable reminder of what you were and are. Don't leave history a scratchy, wrathful and demeaning testament; give us a book that will stand the test of time and explain in a thoughtful way the realities of politics for people on the Left in the 21st century.

Dennis Glover is a speechwriter for state and federal Labor MPs, including shadow minister Wayne Swan.

Janet Albrechtsen is on leave
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