

**From the Suburbs:  
Mark Latham and the Ideology of the ALP**

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Mark Latham could justifiably claim to be amongst the most intellectually prolific of Labor politicians, with his output of books, chapters, newspaper articles and key speeches challenging that of other Labor intellectuals such as Gough Whitlam, Gareth Evans and Jim Cairns. Consequently, this paper cannot hope to cover all aspects of his arguments. Rather it focuses on a particular issue in Latham's thought, namely his views on inequality and uses that focus to throw light on his relationship to broader ideological traditions in the ALP and international social democracy.<sup>1</sup>

It will be argued that while Latham draws on several Labor traditions in Labor ideology, including some Whitlamite perspectives, his views on inequality show significant differences from those espoused by previous post-war Labor politicians such as Whitlam, Hawke and Keating. The neo-liberal influences on his thought are particularly strong and have implications for his views on class as well as gender, racial and ethnic inequality. The analysis will therefore begin with an account of Latham's views on capitalism and class.

### **Views on capitalism and class**

Some media commentators have suggested that Mark Latham has opportunistically refashioned his arguments regarding class as he positioned himself as a possible future leader of the ALP. For example, Mike Steketee argues that Latham has moved from being a supporter of "Howard's favourite think tank, the Centre for Independent Studies" to being an "us-against-them warrior, reviving the kind of old-fashioned class divisions that he had dismissed not long before as irrelevant" and will now tone down that class rhetoric to appeal to a broader audience, including business.<sup>2</sup> Latham has certainly learned how to achieve a high media profile and more will be said about issues of his personal style later. However, it will be argued here that Latham's views on issues of class inequality are also relatively consistent. Indeed, the genesis of many of his arguments can be found in one of his earlier, and weightier tomes, *Civilising Global Capital* (1998) and in other works written about the same time. The title of Latham's book is obviously a play on Bede Nairn's earlier work on the history of NSW Labor, *Civilising Capitalism*. Latham sees himself as

being very much in the Labor tradition, albeit a tradition that is constantly developing. He argues that Labor was never socialist but always embraced a mixed economy, “acknowledging the primacy of the market as a means of generating income and wealth” while believing that the public sector should ameliorate market “treatment of the weak and vulnerable”.<sup>3</sup> Latham argues that his own proposals belong in the Labor tradition but a tradition that has been adapted to the late twentieth, early twenty-first century. He locates his ideas in the Third Way Debate, attempting to combine liberalised markets with issues of equality and community.<sup>4</sup> He argues that both the left and right have neglected the role of the non-government community sector.<sup>5</sup> In particular, Latham supports the jobs and opportunities that can be opened up by social entrepreneurs.<sup>6</sup> For Latham, “the reform of capitalism has become a moral question” of encouraging social responsibility, particularly in a situation in which global capital may have lost the commitment to creating jobs at a local level.<sup>7</sup> It is here that the role of local social entrepreneurs can be crucial. There is also a need for regulation and mutual responsibility to avoid corporate abuses such as excessive salary packages or environmental damage.<sup>8</sup> However, liberalised markets are still the best way to produce economic wealth.

How Latham characterises the current economy is crucial to the way in which he argues Labor policies should be adapted. Latham draws on common eighties’ and nineties’ arguments regarding the changes which new information technology have allegedly wrought on capitalist economies.<sup>9</sup> (Interestingly, Latham does not deal in any depth with likely social and economic impact of genetic engineering technology and the implications this may have for new forms of private ownership and the role of state regulation).<sup>10</sup> In particular, Latham argues that, with the current information economy, we have moved beyond the industrial age economy dichotomy between labour and capital.<sup>11</sup> The role of the public sector has to change since “there is no lasting role for the State public sector in the ownership of large slabs of industrial capital”.<sup>12</sup> Ownership and control of the means of production is no longer a crucial question.<sup>13</sup> Market forces, free trade and competition policy should guide state action.<sup>14</sup> With the development of the information age economy, knowledge is now

“a core factor of production” alongside capital and labour.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the new social division is between the information poor and information rich with the working class fragmented by this.<sup>16</sup> He argues that there is one major deficiency of a market economy in a knowledge society, namely that the economy won’t adequately provide public goods like education, training, research or development.<sup>17</sup> That should be the crucial area of state provision. McKenzie Wark has argued that “Latham sees education as the crossroads for all of the goals of the postindustrial Labor Party. It’s the elevator to the light on the hill.”<sup>18</sup>

Some of Latham’s arguments show clear similarities with arguments put forward by a number of Keating Labor government Ministers (as well as, internationally, by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair).<sup>19</sup> Kim Beazley had justified the Keating government’s privatisation policy on the basis that the issue of controlling physical capital had now been replaced by the need to invest in training human capital for the information society.<sup>20</sup> Barry Jones had drawn attention to the information divide as early as 1988 and Peter Baldwin (an initially proposed co-author of *Civilising Global Capital*) had emphasised it in a 1995 government discussion paper on social welfare.<sup>21</sup> However, Latham goes further than his Labor predecessors in arguing that traditional working class issues have now virtually disappeared. Latham not only argues that “old constituencies based on blue-collar work and organised Labour are fading away”, he argues that there is no clear distinction anymore between labour and capital. The new information economy, and the creation of the highly skilled “wired” worker, “synthesises capital and labour in the production process. It helps to dissolve the class struggle of the industrial age”.<sup>22</sup> Latham spells out what he means in more depth in a chapter in the 1997 edition of *Labor Essays*, arguing that conceptions of class inequality and exploitation are derived from the industrial age which has now been replaced by an information economy.

Out of the Industrial revolution, which harnessed machine power for commercial purposes, politics came to be defined around ownership issues. The owners of capital were said to be exploiting those who worked the machines. Questions of equality and worker representation were understood

and argued out within this framework of owners and non-owners. In the post-industrial era, however, economic opportunity is being defined as much by access to human capital as physical capital. Indeed, in many cases, the traditional divide between capital and labour has been blurred. The labour market bargaining power of highly skilled, internationally competitive labour — the so-called ‘knowledge workers’ — often exceeds that of the owners of capital.<sup>23</sup>

In short, labour and capital are essentially categories that belong to industrial capitalism. They are no longer relevant divisions for addressing issues of exploitation or equality. Ownership issues, in particular, are being re-worked and we’ll be returning to this later in the paper. For the moment, it should be noted that Latham’s arguments here are not just targetting more radical marxist conceptions of class struggle but also trade union arguments that unions are necessary to prevent bosses exploiting workers.<sup>24</sup> While not wishing to deny the importance of information inequality, or knowledge or skills acquisition, Latham’s view that the information economy has largely negated older forms of economic inequality would be hotly contested by many commentators.<sup>25</sup>

Latham’s arguments regarding class arguably go further than in previous forms of Labor Party ideology although there is an earlier Labor tradition of arguing that there are common interests between labour and, at least some, sections of capital.<sup>26</sup> For example, Chifley may have been hostile to banking capital but he was proud of his government’s record in assisting manufacturing industry. Indeed, he claimed that “no government in the history of Australia has ever given to private industry so much assistance and advice and help.”<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, his government still argued for forms of Keynesian government intervention to mitigate the inequalities of market capitalism.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, despite some critiques of multinational capital, Whitlam argued that Australian manufacturing and the Australian Labor movement had “common interests” and had historically grown together.<sup>29</sup> Whitlam assured business that the achievement of the government’s social objectives depended upon economic growth and “the maintenance of strong and prosperous local industries”.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, while Whitlam argued that “capitalism is the best

means yet devised for producing the material goods required by advanced societies” at the same time he argued that “there can be no question that the injustices and inequalities of such societies must be redressed by government intervention.”<sup>31</sup>

Admittedly, Hawke’s consensus style of politics developed the arguments about common interests between business and labour further. Hawke argued that:

So often in our affairs the emphasis has been put upon the competing struggle between wage and salary earners and business, and residually, welfare recipients. I believe we must come to put the emphasis upon the fact that they all have a common goal and therefore a common interest. They all seek the same thing - the maintenance and through time, an improvement, of their standards of living. The indispensable condition for the achievement of this common legitimate goal is real economic growth - an increase in the per capita output of goods and services.<sup>32</sup>

Hawke’s Accord and tripartite trade union, business and government advisory structures were precisely an attempt to strengthen such common interests. Paul Keating too endorsed the Labor governments attempts to encourage wage restraint, co-operation and consensus rather than confrontation arguing that “conflict in the workplace was not a quintessentially Australian way of operating.”<sup>33</sup> However, there is a difference between suggesting that labour and capital have common interests in economic growth and employment, or even suggesting that labour should take real wage cuts in the longer term interests of economic growth, and suggesting that the categories of labour and capital are now essentially the same in an information economy. Similarly, there are differences in how small a role is assumed for the state. In other words, Latham’s arguments may draw on a long-term social harmony tradition in Labor thought, which argues for some key common interests between labour and capital, but Latham takes those arguments much, much further than previous Labor politicians have. For Latham, the harmony of interests between labour and capital is now so great that the differences between them are no longer significant. Labour and capital have merged. Indeed intellectually trained knowledge workers can in fact have more power than older style capitalists.

### **Other forms of inequality**

It is not just the struggle between labour and capital that is a thing of the past for Latham but also forms of racial, ethnic and gender inequality. Partly, this is due to the influence of technology. For example, Latham argues that gender relations are being challenged because technological change involves new patterns of work that are undermining assumptions around which the post-war welfare state was built including a permanently employed male head of household wage earner.<sup>34</sup> However, more crucial is Latham's long-term argument that issues need to be understood in terms of individual capacities, not social categories. In particular Latham argues against "the segmentation of government into a series of programs which correspond with part-of-life characteristics - race, gender, age and so on." He argues that this "is no longer an effective way to deal with the circumstances and skill requirements of each individual....Labor's starting point must be socio-economic status and capability, not a loose assumption that people sharing a specific characteristic also share the same access to economic and social resources".<sup>35</sup>

Underlying such arguments is not only a rejection of the importance of disadvantage arising from issues such as gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality, there is also a neo-liberal argument regarding inequality. Basically, Latham tends to endorse neo-liberal arguments that exploitation does not arise from the market, or patterns of social disadvantage, but rather arises from sectional interests, based around categories such as race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, trying to obtain scarce state resources.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, Latham rejects what he claims was previous Labor governments' support for "positive discrimination".<sup>37</sup> Indeed, he's reportedly stated that he'd be prepared to "burn off" some constituencies of the Keating government such as Aborigines, feminists and ethnic groups. He claims that providing benefits to such groups helped to create the "downwards envy" that fuelled Hanson's rise to power<sup>38</sup>. He claims that, under Keating, "Labor was perceived to be supporting the allocation of public resources on the basis of segment-of-life categories, at the expense of broader programs of socio-economic security".<sup>39</sup>

Latham's view is indeed different from Keating's. Keating has argued that groups such as feminists, ethnic organisations and trade unions in fact represent major sections of the Australian population and have a legitimate role to play in policy formulation.<sup>40</sup> The major difference is that Keating's economic and social ideology combined neo-liberal economic policy (e.g. support for free markets and economic rationalist cut-backs) with a recognition of the role, and disadvantage suffered by, various social groups.<sup>41</sup> Neo-liberal views that, for example, measures such as child-care provision were middle-class welfare were a minority position during the Keating government.<sup>42</sup> However inadequate critics may claim Labor governments' measures were, Hawke and Keating's recognition of non-class forms of social disadvantage built on the Whitlam government's support for policies that attempted to address Aboriginal, women's and ethnic/racial issues.<sup>43</sup>

Latham's view, by contrast, is much closer to pure neo-liberal views that do not recognise social categories or patterns of social disadvantage but rather focus on individual responsibility and capability. In these views, inequality arises from the incapacities of particular individuals rather than because of inequalities generated by the market system or patterns of racial and gender economic disadvantage. Indeed, as already indicated, many neo-liberals argue that the public sector, rather than the market, is the major source of inequity as elite sectional interest groups capture the ear of government in order to acquire the taxes of hard-working businessmen and ordinary wage-earning taxpayers.<sup>44</sup> David Laycock has summed up this argument well when he writes of the far right Canadian Reform Party:

Following the definition provided by their new right counterparts in Britain and the U.S., Reform identified as elites all those who advocate or participate in social decision-making procedures that do not follow the logic and practices of market transactions....a 'special interest' is any group that asks for or benefits from government agencies' efforts to offset the market's distribution of benefits and opportunities... This definition of 'special interest' has been a staple of the American new right since it captured the Republican Party in the late 1970s.<sup>45</sup>

This conception also underlies many of Mark Latham's arguments. Just as Latham doesn't recognise class inequality generated by capitalism, so he doesn't recognise other forms of inequality which previous social democrats attempted to address. He characterises such attempts as "old" social democracy.<sup>46</sup> Rather Latham only tends to recognise forms of inequality that arise at the level of spatial inequality and the composition of "elites". It is to a discussion of those forms of inequality that the argument will now proceed.

### **The forms of inequality that Latham does recognise**

For Latham, the major struggle now is between insiders and outsiders. Outsiders are predominantly depicted as the aspirational working class and small business people of the suburbs while insiders are "powerful people from both sides of the ideological fence who are reluctant to transfer influence and control to other citizens. There are many examples of this phenomenon — in the media, the corporate sector, the bureaucracy and the parliament itself." Insiders often live in the inner-city and include people with views as ideologically diverse as those of Piers Ackerman and Phillip Adams who are both members of the "media" and "cultural" "elite" living in Paddington, Sydney.<sup>47</sup>

While Latham did not emphasise the difference between the inner city and the suburbs in quite such an explicit way in earlier works, he has long argued that inequality had spatial dimensions and that it was important to generate employment opportunities in suburbs such as Western Sydney.<sup>48</sup> The argument that spatial inequality is important is not a new argument in Labor ideology. Gough Whitlam also argued that where one lived was often more important than one's income:

no amount of wealth distribution through higher wages or lower taxes can really offset the inequalities imposed by the physical nature of the cities. Increasingly, a citizen's opportunities for education and self improvement, his access to employment opportunities, his ability to enjoy the nation's resources for recreation and culture, his ability to participate in the decisions and actions of the community are determined not by his income, not by the hours he works, but by where he lives.<sup>49</sup>

Consequently, the Whitlam government placed considerable emphasis on providing better facilities for suburbs and outer regions, including establishing the Department for Urban and Regional Development. As Whitlam's former research assistant, who holds his old seat of Werriwa, Latham is familiar with Whitlam's arguments on spatial inequality.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, Latham argues that, in pursuing his suburban agenda, he is also pursuing Whitlam's own strategy for dealing with periods of wedge politics:

Right through the 1950s and '60s, Labor was wedged on communism. We were seen as too soft to deal with the communist bogey. And we kept losing. So what did Gough do? He shifted the agenda. To the concerns of suburban Australia. He talked about schools and hospitals and cities. the lesson is identical today.<sup>51</sup>

However, in fact, Latham develops his arguments in a way that is very different from the Whitlam government's commitment to tackling racial, gender or ethnic inequality. Latham reconstructs the concerns of suburban Australia through the prism of his own arguments against previous social democratic government's attempts to address racial, ethnic, gender and sexuality issues.<sup>52</sup> Latham's argues that left social issues are associated with inner city elites, obsessed with ideological and symbolic campaigns that are totally different from those pursued by the more pragmatic outer suburban working class.

While trendy left politics focuses solely on the rights agenda, the people who live and work in poor areas have a different set of priorities. They know there can be no end to the poverty cycle without effort and responsibility.... Rights alone are not enough. They need to be matched by responsibilities...I have been involved with these areas for decades, and not once have I seen people embrace the rights agenda. Not once, whether in the form of feminist, environmental, ethnic or welfare rights. Poor communities have little time for abstract politics.<sup>53</sup>

Latham's depiction of racial, ethnic, gender or sexuality issues as "abstract" politics is highly contentious and leaves out of consideration numerous education and welfare initiatives or measures against workplace discrimination. He also neglects critiques of the Howard government's policies. For example, Latham sees little cause for concern on the issue of gender since "even Tony Abbott has conceded that there is little public support for winding back Australia's abortion or divorce laws or reversing the many gains achieved by women."<sup>54</sup> Latham's views here neglect arguments that the Howard government's policies have in fact had a very negative impact upon women.<sup>55</sup>

For Latham the important issue is that, in his view, so-called "rights" arguments neglect the issue of individual responsibility. Latham argues that Howard's strategy is to target "race and responsibility" as issues. Latham argues that while it would be "unconscionable" for the ALP to renege on racial tolerance, the issue of responsibility is one they must tackle.<sup>56</sup> (It is noticeable that, given his views on "part-of-life characteristics", issues of addressing racial inequality are reduced merely to issues of racial "tolerance" rather than policies designed to address racial disadvantage). Latham's views here are quite consistent with his earlier arguments regarding wedge politics versus responsibility in *Civilising Global Capital*.<sup>57</sup> Given his arguments about inner city elites, Latham endorses Paul Kelly's analysis that Howard is setting out to pursue social policies that break the post-Whitlamite alliance between the "tertiary educated left" and the working class.<sup>58</sup> Howard is using issues such as asylum seekers and reconciliation "to divide suburban Australia against the so-called inner-city elites."<sup>59</sup>

Howard's strategy is to demonise and campaign against a different group of political insiders, those associated with the rise of progressive politics over the past 30 years. That is how he won the 1996 and 2001 election.....For most of the 20th century, the political establishment was associated with the conservative side of politics.....In the 1970s, however, a new group of influential people emerged in society....This was the progressive establishment, led by academics, artists and other cultural producers. Herein lies the origins of the culture war. Not surprisingly, the old establishment resented the emergence

of a new insiders group, one that challenged its political power, The two groups have been fighting ever since.<sup>60</sup>

The implication is that “symbolic” social issues were pursued by elites rather than by broadly based social movements pursuing equality and social justice agendas on behalf of non-Anglo-celtic ethnic groups, Aboriginal peoples, women and gays and lesbians.<sup>61</sup> The implication also is that the suburban working class is not interested in such (merely “symbolic”) issues. The diverse ethnic, racial, gender and sexual preference composition of members of the suburban working class is not adequately addressed, although Latham has noted a non-overseas-born, so-called “white flight” to “the relative stability of the urban fringe”.<sup>62</sup>

Rather, Latham reconstructs Labor’s equality agenda as a form of populist anti-elitism. Latham argues that John Howard supports the “old boys’ club” of the Sydney and Melbourne “power elite” who can buy their kids a good education and who are recruited to run public institutions such as the ABC.<sup>63</sup> Labor’s job is to support the outsiders against the insiders, opening up opportunities and assets for the working class while reducing business “welfare” and forcing the greedy “corporate elite” to compete against each other.<sup>64</sup> Above all, “Labor’s task is to flatten this hierarchical system and to dissolve the power elite. Our role is to re-empower the outsiders, to transfer income and influence to the vast suburbs and regions of the nation.”<sup>65</sup>

Although himself a politician, and arguably a highly productive member of the knowledge-worker, cultural elite, Latham, positions himself as a champion of the outsiders. He does this in a number of ways. One is to emphasise his own working-class background growing up in Green Valley and attending public schools. He contrasts himself with Tony Abbott, “the son of a North Shore medical specialist” who went to a private school and Oxford before becoming a senior Cabinet Minister “has the CV of a rolled-gold elite”.<sup>66</sup> Indeed Latham emphasises the “elite” background of most of the leading Liberals.<sup>67</sup> However, he also constructs his own working class identity as a matter of a combative (populist) style. Latham has diagnosed a “new political correctness” much worse than the old form that protected

“special interests”. This new form advocates a selected “civility” that seeks to protect the “Liberal elites” from the attacks of those such as Mark Latham.<sup>68</sup> Latham’s arguments became particularly clear after he accused John Howard of being an arse-licker towards the U.S.<sup>69</sup> Latham responded to criticisms by saying he was using plain working-class speech:

one of the things the Liberals have been saying about Labor and also some of their fellow travellers in the media have been saying for a decade or so is that, “you’re not a working-class party the way you used to be.” What happens? A Labor MP uses a bit of common working-class language, and ooh! They’re all, “Shock, horror”, that he’s using an Australian slang term.

It just demonstrates that the ALP is still very much a working-class party that uses the language of people in working-class suburbs. And we’re in touch with our constituencies. We don’t talk in some highfalutin’ Alexander Downer-style of English. We’re plain-talking Australians.<sup>70</sup>

So working class identity becomes a matter of verbal style, as other distinctions between labour and capital are allegedly dissolved. However, it isn’t just a particular form of working class identity that Latham is evoking here but also a particular form of masculinity (as the two are implicitly equated). The Liberal elites are depicted as effete. Howard is an “arse-licker” with its implication that he’s subservient rather than a red-blooded heterosexual male. The picking out of Downer, long subject to claims (which he has strenuously denied) that he is gay, and commonly depicted by cartoonists in fishnet stockings, is also significant.<sup>71</sup> Tony Abbott’s red-blooded heterosexual masculinity is also questioned: “Maybe Doug Cameron was right. The fellow that Abbott beat in the boxing final at Oxford went on to be the director of the Royal Ballet in London.”<sup>72</sup> Elsewhere, Abbott is described as a “precious little petal.”<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Latham refers to a well-known conservative commentator as “Andrew ‘Nancy Boy’ Bolt.”<sup>74</sup> Peter Costello is denounced as “a Champagne Charlie” and “the great Narcissus of Australian politics”.<sup>75</sup> Costello has “had more makeovers than Madonna, more image changes than Gary Glitter.”<sup>76</sup> In short, Latham’s political style is deeply gendered (and heteronormative).

Latham asserts that “we’re not a namby-pamby nation that hides our feelings. I think we’re a nation that’s willing to call a spade a spade and, if need be, to pick up the spade and whack someone over the head with it.”<sup>77</sup> Such words are particularly controversial coming from someone who is notorious for having broken taxi driver Bachir Mustapha’s arm in a dispute over a taxi route, paying the fare and possession of a briefcase. That incident has sparked comments about Latham’s appeal to female voters (as well as less macho males). A female ‘colleague’ of Latham is reported to have stated of such behaviour that: “Women hate it, full stop”.<sup>78</sup> Arguably, Latham is evoking a form of masculinity very different from that of Kim Beazley’s who stated after the 1998 election that: “I’ll remain a big cuddly bear... My personality, insofar as it has any impact at all in terms of the voting process, produced the biggest swing to an opposition ever in an election immediately after an election defeat.”<sup>79</sup> Indeed, Latham implied during the leadership struggle that Crean was more macho than Beazley: “Simon Crean is a tough and determined person who has been willing to stand up to the machine men. That is why they turned against him. They like soft and indecisive leaders with whom their interests will always prevail. A North Melbourne Shin-boner is a bit too tough for them.”<sup>80</sup> Latham argues that Labor has been tackled on issues of toughness since Federation, and the accusation that Labor lacked the ticker to tackle terrorism and illegal immigration was just the latest.<sup>81</sup>

While Mike Steketee might have argued, in the passage quoted earlier, that populist, anti-elitist “us” versus “them” views mark a break with Latham’s earlier neo-liberal arguments, it has been argued here that they are in fact consistent in many respects. They draw on Latham’s arguments regarding the new information society, the need for individual responsibility and his rejection of older concepts of class, race, gender or ethnic inequality. Latham talks about how there is now “a different framework from class-based politics. Rather than drawing their identity from the economic system, people now see their place in society as a reflection of their access to information and influence.”<sup>82</sup> In other words, his later arguments against economic and cultural elites are a development of his arguments regarding the information haves and have-nots. His rejection of the “symbolic” politics of the

“elites” draws on his earlier rejection of arguments regarding various forms of social disadvantage and his criticisms of “sectional” interests pursuing ethnic, gender, racial or sexuality rights. Latham re-asserts his arguments that the information economy has synthesised labour and capital and in “many cases, the workers have become the owners of capital.”<sup>83</sup> Latham refers to “the growth of intellectual capitalists — the high-skill, high-wage workers of the new economy — who often have greater labour market bargaining power than the owners of investment capital.”<sup>84</sup> He argues that the blurring of boundaries has impacted upon inequality in the suburbs in that the wealthy now live in the same areas as people who own less: “When I grew up in Green Valley in the 1970s, our values were based on the politics of us versus them — the working class versus the North Shore. Now a young person growing up in my electorate can see prosperity in the neighbourhood next door.” The consequences of this blurring of spatial boundaries is that: “Social mobility has become more tangible and achievable. The politics of envy has been replaced by the politics of aspiration.”<sup>85</sup> The politics of envy is, it should be noted, a term that John Howard also uses to critique Labor’s class politics.<sup>86</sup> It is to a discussion of the politics of aspiration that we will now turn.

### **Aspirational politics**

Whitlam too talked of meeting the “aspirations” of suburban Australians. However, Whitlam’s aspirations were often for better services for cities, including safety, roads, railways, water supplies and sewerage and for better urban design.<sup>87</sup> Like Latham, Whitlam also understood aspirations in educational terms. Whitlam was once asked what he meant by “equality” and replied “I want every kid to have a desk, with a lamp, and his own room to study.”<sup>88</sup> Latham draws on these traditions but, as we’ll see, for him aspirations crucially centre around issues of economic ownership. Once again, the differences arise from the influence of neo-liberal conceptions on Latham’s thought.

Latham argues that he is a “progressive economic liberal” who believes in the “disciplines of competition in a market based economy”.<sup>89</sup> The role of the state is

therefore to facilitate social mobility (e.g. out of dependence on welfare).<sup>90</sup> In particular, the state should enable citizens to utilise available social resources to pursue their desires and aspirations.<sup>91</sup> The emphasis is on self help and responsibility combined with forms of social entrepreneurship that can generate employment in depressed communities.<sup>92</sup> While access to minimum standards of material living are important, Latham particularly stresses the state's role in providing access to education and cognitive skill development (which fits in with his emphasis on the information economy).<sup>93</sup> The major role of the state is to encourage the development of forms of workforce skills that will (hopefully) attract investment from footloose international capital. Educational opportunities are crucial here.<sup>94</sup> There are definite limits on what else Latham believes government can do. For example, he argues that globalisation means that "the Federal Parliament's delegation of power on economic matters — to bodies such as the Reserve Bank and the World trade Organisation (WTO) — will remain".<sup>95</sup> Consequently, the keys to citizenship, opportunities and outcomes lie in developing good knowledge and information skills.<sup>96</sup>

The emphases on developing human capital, on facilitating individual capabilities, on responsibility, on education, on the new economy, on lifelong learning are all features associated with Blairite Third Way or Clintonite "Triangulation" Strategies.<sup>97</sup> If they also have some connections with previous Australian government strategies, this is not only because of general international political developments but also because of Australian Labor's influence on Blair.<sup>98</sup> Nonetheless, Phillip Mendes has argued the Latham sees less of a role for the welfare state than the Blair government, places less emphasis on structural inequality and is even more influenced by neo-liberal perspectives than British New Labour.<sup>99</sup> However, one of the strongest Blairite influences on Latham is the key emphasis on attracting aspirational voters.

### **Latham and the ALP's electoral strategy**

Latham's emphasis on aspirations gelled with Simon Crean's belief that the desertion of aspirational suburban voters, particularly in the western suburbs of Sydney had

contributed significantly to Labor's 2001 election defeat.<sup>100</sup> The argument that winning aspirational voters is a key to electoral success drew heavily on Blairite conceptions. Indeed in 1996 Blair had described British Labour's previous electoral defeat precisely in these terms.

The Tories never did have the best vision for Britain. They just took the best words. Freedom. Choice. Opportunity. Aspiration and Ambition. I can vividly recall the exact moment that I knew the last election was lost. I was canvassing in the Midlands on an ordinary, suburban estate. I met a man polishing his Ford Sierra. He was a self-employed electrician. His Dad always voted Labour, he said. He used to vote Labour too. But he'd bought his own house now. He'd set up his own business. He was doing quite nicely. "So I've become a Tory", he said. People judge us on their instincts about what they believe our instincts to be. And that man polishing his car was clear. His instincts were to get on in life. And he thought our instincts were to stop him..

<sup>101</sup>

Crean gave Latham the job of attracting the aspirational working class voters of major cities' (particularly Sydney's) crucial outer suburbs, given Labor's dismal electoral performance there.<sup>102</sup>

The key to unlocking citizen aspirations for Latham is economic ownership and it is here that all his arguments regarding education, the new information economy and the dissolution and surpassing of the (outdated) division between labour and capital come together. It is here too that Latham states his argument that his perspectives are the next logical development from the policies of Whitlam and Keating. Latham argues that those governments began an ownership revolution that Labor must now embrace.

In large part, the ownership revolution is Labor's revolution. It started with the Whitlam education reforms of the 1970s that lifted working class families within reach of tertiary qualifications. Then the Keating economic reforms of the 1980s gave working people access to an open, dynamic and competitive economy — one in which they could convert their skills and enterprise into ownership.

That was a good Labor thing to do. For the first time in Australia's history, we have an economy in which genuine mobility is possible. for most

of last century, people who grew up in working class families stayed there. The old economy locked them into semi-skilled work. Young people grew up with aspirations no more advanced than doing what their parents had done.

In effect, Whitlam and Keating created a whirlwind of economic and social mobility. In less than a generation, families can go from owning nothing to owning everything. I see them in my electorate all the time. People I grew up with in Liverpool's public housing estates are now the contractors, small business owners and information workers of the new economy, living in double-story suburbs on Sydney's urban fringe.

They represent a new class of aspirational voters. Anyone who denies the importance of this phenomenon is denying reality. The workers have had a taste of economic ownership and not surprisingly, they want more. Not the cars and refrigerators that their parents aspired to but real economic assets: shares, investments, business and skills....And they expect an alert and modernised ALP to help them on their way.<sup>103</sup>

The similarities with Blair's arguments are clear. It is also noticeable that one of the characteristics of these "aspirational" voters, for both Blair and Latham, is in fact the aspiration of many of them to leave the working class and to become business-people.

Latham argues that the ownership revolution also involves new tasks for the welfare state. Increasingly the state should move beyond measures based on income flows to help the working class become asset owners, thereby overcoming the generational inequality in ownership of assets which Latham sees as a pernicious form of market inequality whereas "if the market system produces less inequality to begin with, the task of income redistribution is not so severe."<sup>104</sup> Home ownership is seen as a crucial area of asset ownership that governments should assist given the housing affordability crisis.<sup>105</sup> However, Crean and Latham announced policies designed to facilitate share ownership amongst Australian workers.<sup>106</sup> Employee share ownership schemes would "contribute to the social democratisation of the Australian economy".<sup>107</sup> Latham's proposal for nest-egg accounts for all citizens from birth is precisely an attempt to open up possibilities for economic ownership, especially since these "assets will be invested in the managed funds industry, enjoying the benefit of diverse portfolios and compound interest."<sup>108</sup> Latham argues that such nest eggs are based on 'the notion of being a society of owners not just a

society of workers.”<sup>109</sup> British labour had introduced a child trust fund in the government’s last budget.<sup>110</sup> Latham has also advocated Matched Savings Accounts providing government incentives for poor families to save.<sup>111</sup> Latham’s idea was to introduce a “stakeholder” society, an idea that had been strongly pushed by Tony Blair in the early days of New Labour.<sup>112</sup>

### **The significance of Latham’s elevation to Shadow Treasurer**

It is not clear just how many of Latham’s proposals will become Labor policy. Latham has cautioned that “the policies I’ll be putting forward will be under the banner of Shadow Treasurer. Things that were speculated on or written about as a backbencher in Opposition, obviously that didn’t make for formal Labor policy in the past; it doesn’t now...”<sup>113</sup> Nonetheless, his emphasis on economic ownership and nest-egg accounts suggest that his underlying philosophy is being carried into his new portfolio. Latham has made a point of publicly situating himself very much in the Hawke and Keating economic rationalist tradition.<sup>114</sup> This is significant given Beazley’s attempts to distance himself a little from that tradition - for example through his claim during the 1998 election that Labor had listened and eaten “humble-pie” on economic policy.<sup>115</sup>

The Blairite construction of aspirational voting as a key issue in the 2001 election defeat is also significant. Beazley’s 1998 caution in regard to economic rationalism partly resulted from the September 1996 *NSW Labor Federal Campaign Consultative Panel Report* into the 1996 election loss which found widespread working class dissatisfaction with the ways in which the Labor governments had reduced real wages and working conditions. The August 1996 *National Consultative Review Committee Report to the ALP National Executive* on the 1996 election also found widespread dissatisfaction with economic rationalism amongst party members who felt that the Labor governments had been putting market forces before people. Howard made a point during the 2001 election campaign of reminding workers of Labor’s real wage cuts and claimed that the Liberals had a much better record than Labor of delivering wage increases (as well as substantially reducing home interest

rates).<sup>116</sup> In short, traditional issues such as wages, working conditions, and provision of public services, may be more important than advocates of "aspirational" issues acknowledge.

Latham's support for forms of economic neo-liberalism means that he will not be addressing such issues, preferring to see voters' disillusion with Labor purely in Blairite aspirational terms. This is despite the different ideological positions of the British and Australian labour parties in the eighties and early nineties, when British labour was arguably more left-wing. Given their history of economic rationalism, and good relations with the business community — did Australian aspirational voters really see a Labor government as trying to hold back their success in the way Blair suggests was the case in Britain? As well, Latham's emphasis on encouraging community development through social entrepreneurship and economic ownership may encourage some voters' aspirations but there are doubts over whether it would encourage their feelings of security in any conventional sense. Indeed, Latham's emphasis on lifelong learning is precisely driven by the view that job security and other such features of the old industrial society are things of the past. However admirable some of Latham's measures are, one could argue that they are only part of the solution to very complex patterns of social and economic disadvantage. Crean and Latham's proposal of a "First Share Ownership Scheme" to encourage people into the sharemarket was lambasted by ACOSS President Andrew McCallum who argued that it was "a very middle-class paternalistic approach to the needs of low-income and disadvantaged Australians.... I'm not sure that Mark Latham's ideas would be the first thing on their minds — they'd be wanting to know about job creation, and the fact remains that the best way to get out of poverty is a job."<sup>117</sup> ACTU president Sharan Burrow similarly argued that Latham's plans for asset owning were out of the reach of many members of the working class and argued that Labor should continue to focus on redistributing profits through wages.<sup>118</sup> There is also the problem of whether Latham's neo-liberalism will enable him to adequately differentiate Labor's economic policy position from that of the Liberals. One should not forget that the publication of *Civilising Global Capitalism* was greeted with glee by

Howard and Costello for allegedly supporting a number of Liberal policy positions.<sup>119</sup> .

There is also the issue of Latham's position on forms of social inequality such as gender, race, class and sexuality. As we've seen Latham endorses Paul Kelly's analysis that Howard is setting out to pursue social policies that break the post-Whitlamite alliance between the "tertiary educated left" and the working class.<sup>120</sup> However, that wedge has partly been forged on the basis of neo-liberal arguments that elite special interest groups had won the ear of previous Labor governments and had been ripping off hard-earned taxpayer funds. Rather than critiquing such ideas, Latham has been endorsing them. Indeed, his own version of anti-elitism against the tertiary educated inner-city elites pursuing small "l" liberal agendas has fed into such prejudices. He's dismissed the significance of both various forms of social inequality and the role of the social movements who sought to address them (and whose legitimate advocacy was recognised by Labor leaders such as Gough Whitlam, Bob Hawke and Paul Keating). His argument that various "symbolic" social issues are not important to the working class are arguably reinforcing the very forms of socially conservative working class identity that Howard also appeals to. In short, Latham's position may be strengthening, rather than undermining, the wedge politics and social conservatism that Howard has mobilised so effectively for his electoral success.

Nonetheless, it has been argued in this paper that there are still significant continuities between Latham's views and previous forms of Labor ideology. His emphasis on common class interests, the suburbs, education, free markets and the new information economy all have Labor precedents. However, he is taking them much, much further than senior Labor figures have before. His neo-liberal views on inequality, with their emphasis on individualism rather than on recognising disadvantaged social groups, are particularly different from those of his predecessors.

ENDNOTES

- An earlier version of some of these arguments appeared in a brief discussion piece, "Reconstructing Labor: Tales of an 'Aspirational' Shadow Ministry", *The Drawing Board: An Australian Review of Public Affairs*, January 2002  
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- 1 The term ideology is used here in the non-pejorative sense advocated by political theorists such as Andrew Vincent, *Modern Political Ideologies* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1992), p. 16.
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- 15 Latham, *Civilising Global Capital*, p. xxi; p. xix
- 16 Latham, *Civilising Global Capital*, pp. xxv, xxix
- 17 Latham, "The Third Way: An Outline", p. 30
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- 19 See e.g. Clinton's 1997 'Inauguration Address', the White House, office of the Press Secretary, 20 January 1997; or Tony Blair's October 1994 Speech to the Labour Party Conference.
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- 21 Barry Jones, "The Challenge of Technology" EDP Auditors Association 1988 International Conference, Gold Coast, Queensland, 29 April 1988, typescript p 10; Peter Baldwin, Minister for Social Security, *Beyond the Safety Net: The Future of Social Security*, 23 March 1995, p 29.
- 22 Latham, *Civilising Global Capital*, p xxviii; Latham, *From the Suburbs*, p. 57; Latham, "Marxism, Social-ism and the Third Way: the Long March of History and the Wired Worker", *Arena Magazine*, August-September 1999, p. 10.
- 23 Mark Latham, 'Social inclusiveness in an open economy' in Gary Jungworth (ed.), *Labor Essays 1997*, Pluto, Leichhardt, 1997, p. 48.
- 24 Latham, "The Third Way: An Outline", p. 33.

- 25 See further Michael Cahill, *The New Social Policy* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1994), pp 25, 49; chapter nine of Johnson, *Governing Change* and chapter five of Herbert I Schiller, *Information Inequality: The Deepening Social Crisis in America* (Routledge, New York, 1996).
- 26 See the arguments regarding social harmony ideology throughout Carol Johnson, *The Labor Legacy* (Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1989).
- 27 Ben Chifley, *Things Worth Fighting For*, edited by A.W. Stargardt (Melbourne University Press, second edition 1953), p. 62.
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- 36 Latham, *Civilising Global Capital*, pp 164-5, 336-337,
- 37 Latham, *Civilising Global Capital*, pp 165-166, 330, 337; for feminist critiques of Latham see further, Marian Sawer, "Populism and Public Choice in Australia and Canada: Converting Equality Seekers into 'Special Interests', Us and Them: Anti-Elitism in Australia Workshop, ANU 10-11 July 2003, <http://polsc.anu.edu.au/Julypapers.html>; Carol Lee Bacchi, "Dealing with 'Difference': Beyond "Multiple Subjectivities", in Paul Nursey-Bray and Carol Lee Bacchi eds, *Left Directions: Is There a Third Way?* (University of Western Australia Press, Crawley, 2001), pp. 118-119; Carol Johnson, "Labor and the left" in Nursey-Bray and Bacchi eds, *Is There a Third Way?* , pp. 144-6. Arguably, Latham's particular emphasis on the self-reliant individual is also gendered in some respects, see Johnson, *Governing Change*, pp. 74-5.
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