

Mark Latham passes “acid test”

Behind the media boosting of Australian Labor’s new leader

Mike Head
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Within just two months, a remarkable turnaround appears to have occurred in the landscape of official Australian politics. Late last year, with Simon Crean as leader, the Australian Labor Party was languishing disastrously in the media’s opinion polls, while Prime Minister John Howard was portrayed as a political giant with an unassailable lead over Crean.

Today, in the wake of last weekend’s ALP national conference, its new leader Mark Latham—elected by federal Labor MPs on December 2—is being hailed by the media as a political hero who has rescued Labor’s electoral fortunes and given it hope of ousting Howard at federal elections due this year. Glowing headlines such as “Latham: the power of image” have proclaimed his performance. One commentator even referred to Latham as Labor’s new “king”—a title last afforded to Paul Keating, who led Labor to a landslide defeat in 1996, paving the way for Howard.

Howard, by contrast, has been widely reported as “rattled” by Latham. The media highlighted Howard’s cranky display in a radio studio when his ear piece failed to function and lambasted him for calling an unprecedented press conference at his official residence within two hours of Latham’s opening address to the ALP conference, in a botched attempt to deflect attention from the speech.

In a typical comment, *Sydney Morning Herald* political correspondent Mark Riley wrote: “In the space of two short months the ALP has gone from the Australian Losers’ Party to the Australian Latham Party... At least with Mark Latham at the helm Labor is now firmly in that race [the federal election]”.

Such hype cannot be explained by any popular enthusiasm for Latham. The same opinion polls, which now claim that Latham has doubled Crean’s miniscule satisfaction rating, reported that Latham had only 5 percent support as preferred prime minister (even less than Crean) before he was installed as ALP leader. The dramatic reversal illustrates the extent to which the media’s polling results are simply measuring the impact of their own coverage.

Nor can anyone claim that Latham’s speech-making at the ALP conference was inspirational, despite the extraordinary razzmatazz. A standing ovation greeted him as he arrived, accompanied by a fanfare version of the pop song “New Sensation” and carefully selected video clips of his life. But, as some media pundits have admitted, his delivery was awkward, flat and hectoring. His opening address also contained almost nothing new—he largely rehashed policies already announced under Crean.

Nor was there any sign of an influx of new members into the ALP, which over the past two decades has been reduced to a bureaucratic

rump, dominated by rival factional cliques of MPs, union officials and assorted careerists jockeying for official patronage and the spoils of office. In fact, the tight security surrounding the conference—there were several layers of guards checking name tags—suggested that Labor’s apparatchiks were more concerned to prevent workers attending. Even for Latham’s initial speech, the highpoint of the event, the Darling Harbour Convention Centre was only a third full. Apart from the large media contingent and a full house of 110 business observers, the audience was about 700 party faithful, including some 400 delegates.

The only constituencies that interested Labor’s leaders were the business lobbyists, who had an exclusive lounge upstairs, and an elite bevy of media pundits and editorial writers. Faction chiefs constantly consulted with key journalists. Virtually every speaker referred to producing the desired “message”, “script”, “pitch”, “spin” or “image”. Their primary concern was to curry favour with the media owners and others in the business establishment who have groomed and cultivated Latham.

The shift in the political wind signalled that Latham had passed the initial test assigned to him by the media proprietors: to prove that he could firmly impose his will on the ALP and make it a reliable vehicle for his extreme right-wing economic and social agenda.

A January 20 editorial in Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian*, for example, had described the conference as an “acid test” for Latham and the ALP. It expressed reservations that Latham was offering some policy platform concessions, such as freezing the removal of tariffs, in order to please trade union officials. “If Mr Latham himself returns to his 2003 themes of reduced government spending and tax relief across the board, voters ... will quickly prick up their ears. As the battle-lines are finally drawn, Labor’s best bet is to let Latham be Latham.”

Latham’s opening address spelt out plainly enough why his agenda has the backing of powerful business elements. His central theme was that only Labor, not Howard’s Liberal-National Party Coalition, could deliver the next phase of the pro-market “economic reforms” unleashed by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996. “Labor built the modern Australian economy,” he declared. “Competition and productivity are Labor words. They don’t belong to the Tories, they belong to us.”

This has been Latham’s core message, restated repeatedly in media columns and interviews, since he quit Labor’s front bench following the election defeat of 1998 in order to act as the flag-bearer for an unabashed free market agenda. His two predecessors as Labor leader, Crean and Kim Beazley, both sought without success to distance

themselves somewhat from the Hawke-Keating years, which produced deep-seated hostility among working people. But Latham has openly advocated a new wave of business de-regulation, tax cuts for high-income earners, imposition of user-pays measures and cost-cutting, accusing Howard's government of stalling on this agenda.

In particular, he has outlined a vicious social policy, based on punishing and stripping social welfare from those deemed not to be pulling their weight. This was the second axis of his opening speech. There was not a murmur of dissent in the hall when Latham asserted that there were two types of people in society—"the slackers and the hard workers". Only those who were "willing to work hard and respond the right way" deserved any social welfare or government assistance, he declared. Latham explained that this was the essential content of his main slogan—that of creating a "ladder of opportunity". It was up to individuals to climb the "rungs" of the ladder themselves.

On foreign policy, Latham advanced a more nationalist line than the Howard government, saying he would never call Australia the US "deputy sheriff" in the region. This is in tune with those in ruling circles who have been concerned that Howard's unconditional support for the Bush administration's militarism is damaging their commercial and strategic interests in Asia, without any notable payoff in return. Nevertheless, despite Washington's ongoing war crimes in Iraq, Latham reinforced Labor's commitment to the American military alliance, describing it as one of the three pillars of the ALP's foreign policy, together with membership of the UN and engagement with Asia.

After the conference, the media continued to extol Latham as an "ideas man". All that means is that he is susceptible to every reactionary nostrum floated by right-wing thinktanks. For the corporate establishment, his primary function is to present a fresh set of camouflage, myths and spin-doctoring to implement a deeply unpopular agenda. In this, he has been assured of the total subservience of the Labor Left.

This was made clear from the outset of the conference. Party president Carmen Lawrence, a member of the Left faction, opened the proceedings with effusive praise for Latham, expressing her excitement at the prospect of Labor returning to office under his leadership. "With a new, energetic leader comes the very real prospect of that we are months away from victory," she said.

From that point on there was never any doubt about the conference outcome. With two symbolic exceptions, every vote at the conference was unanimous. Factional leaders ensured that compromise resolutions and amendments were agreed behind closed doors to ensure there was no distraction from Latham's "message".

Lawrence led one cynical set-piece debate—on the detention of asylum seekers. It was an attempt to shore up Labor's vote among workers, students and professional people appalled by Labor's bipartisan backing of the Howard government's policy of mobilising the armed forces to repel refugee boats and incarcerate their passengers on remote Pacific islands. Several "Labor for Refugees" resolutions advocated modifying the mandatory detention of asylum seekers (which the Keating government introduced in 1992).

The difference between the two sides was minimal. Latham insisted on retaining compulsory detention, except for children, while "Labor for Refugees" proposed detaining adult refugees for an unspecified "brief" period for health, security and ID checks. Not a single delegate opposed Latham's plans to introduce ID cards to crack down on supposed "illegal migrants" working in Australia, establish a Coast Guard to turn back refugee boats and impose life sentences on the so-

called "people smugglers" who help desperate refugees flee to Australia.

The vote was never in doubt. The 40 percent tally for the "Labor for Refugees" motions was determined weeks earlier in negotiations between factional leaders. Lawrence delivered what amounted to a concession speech, and then in an attempt to maintain the illusion of genuine policy debate in the ALP, said: "We'll come back again and again." Yet, the media portrayed the session as a key test for Latham and presented the outcome as a major victory for his leadership.

Another equally orchestrated "debate" was designed to give a sop to the trade union bureaucracy, whose coverage of the workforce has plunged to 16 percent in the private sector after two decades of ruthlessly enforcing massive job destruction and the smashing up of workers' conditions. Appealing for "fair trade" rather than "free trade," Australian Manufacturing Workers Union national secretary Doug Cameron proposed a more protectionist version of the official platform. But he concluded by happily conceding that the resolution would be comfortably defeated and pledging his support for Latham's "vision, courage and commitment".

Also sniffing the possibility of a Labor government, the major banks, construction companies, pharmaceutical and private health corporations, media empires and retail chains all sent observers, each paying \$7,500 for the privilege. Their numbers were up by 40 percent, pouring more than \$800,000 into the party's coffers. In return, they had intimate access to Latham and his shadow ministers, as well as the Labor leaders of the eight states and territories. At a corporate fund-raising dinner the night before the conference, 900 guests contributed \$11,000 a table, underscoring the ALP's orientation to big business.

Having succeeded, with little difficulty, in stamping his authority over the ALP conference, Latham has been given a further set of instructions. Although the media generally lauded his performance at the conference, reservations remained. The *Australian Financial Review* editorial of January 30, for example, warned him not to be distracted by the "glitz and glamour" of the conference. It accused him of making undue concessions to the unions and urged him to ride roughshod over the party platform where necessary, as the Hawke and Keating governments did "many times to the country's enduring benefit".

The extent to which Latham will continue to receive ruling class support depends on his ability to deliver on these directives. Murdoch and others have long expressed dissatisfaction with Howard, accusing him of running out of steam on economic and social restructuring. Now these circles consider they have a possible alternative. Latham, however, remains on probation and must continually prove himself to the powers that be. One thing is clear: in doing so he will face no resistance within the ALP.



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