

Australian 2004 election:

Howard and Latham united on Iraq war cover-up

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Prime Minister John Howard and Labor leader Mark Latham have their differences. But on one key issue they are united: the Iraq war and the lies and falsifications on which it was based are to be kept off the agenda in this Australian election campaign.

In his major policy speech last Sunday, Howard spoke for more than an hour, but the Iraq war occupied barely a minute of his address. Latham devoted even less time to it in his policy speech on Wednesday, gaining a tick of approval from Murdoch's newspaper the *Australian*, which noted that there was "no stroking of the consciences of the moral middle class over issues such as Iraq and asylum-seekers."

Howard made no references to his bogus reasons for joining the US-led coalition, but nevertheless maintained that his decision was correct. "If I had my time again, I would take the same decision," he declared. "The world is a better place, the Middle East is a better place, without Saddam Hussein."

In other words, as these remarks make clear, the invasion of Iraq had nothing to do with alleged weapons of mass destruction or links to terrorist groups because, even knowing that none of these allegations was true, Howard would still go to war. This simply demonstrates that the invasion of Iraq was not determined by facts, but by the material and strategic interests of the US and its allies.

Latham had literally nothing to say on the war and the campaign of falsification that preceded it, except for a passing reference to the need for a prime minister to tell the truth on the great issues of war and peace, and that "mistakes" committed over Iraq had made an impact "in our region." Moreover, in line with his previous commitment to join future US-led military operations, Latham made clear that he had no qualms about US plans for global domination—the real motivating force of the invasion of Iraq and the so-called "war on terror".

"I want to render the United States the best service any Australian prime minister ever could," he declared. "And that is to help the United States develop its true role of world leadership, based on respect, understanding and cooperation demonstrated so powerfully after September 11, but undermined so tragically by the mistakes in Iraq."

The policy speeches of the major parties are never about providing accurate information to the voting public. Rather, like the election campaign as a whole, they are aimed at manufacturing a certain "spin", securing a good headline or a favourable

television news item.

Accordingly, Howard's address had two central themes: his interest rate scare campaign and a commitment to spend an additional \$6 billion, on top of the extra \$52 billion already allocated in the last budget. Notwithstanding the fact that interest rates are determined by the Reserve Bank, whose decisions are shaped by world market conditions, Howard repeated his claim that under a Labor government interest rates would be higher than under the Liberal National Party coalition.

On the other hand, Latham and his political minders decided that their best option was to present the Labor Party as "responsible" economic managers. In contrast to the Liberals, Latham insisted, Labor was "the only party in this campaign that's been making budget savings. The only party willing to respect the budget surplus. The only party putting downward pressure on interest rates."

Howard's spending policies—in the field of technical education, school funding and tax relief—had definite political objectives.

The provision of \$800 million over the next four years to set up 24 technical colleges to train students in years 11 and 12 was put forward on the basis that it would overcome specific skill shortages in the labour market. But the very structure of the scheme points to another agenda. The new colleges will not function under the jurisdiction of the technical and further education (TAFE) system, which is operated by the states, but will be run independently of state governments, with funding contributions from private sponsors. They will thus contribute to the ongoing privatisation of public education—one of the major aims of the Howard government. As well, teachers' pay in the new system will be based on performance, another key feature of the right-wing agenda for education "reform."

Similarly, Howard's additional \$1 billion for repairs to school buildings and facilities will by-pass the state-run education systems, and be allocated directly to school principals and parent bodies. While portrayed as a means of circumventing bureaucracy at the state level, the scheme drew the immediate criticism that it would require a new bureaucratic apparatus at the federal level to administer it. Furthermore, parents' organisations will be forced into competition with each other to secure funds, with those in better-off regions likely to get the lion's share.

In an attempt to ensure that every conceivable potential voter for

the government would get something, Howard promised yet another tax initiative, costing around \$1.3 billion over the next four years—this time for contractors and small businesses.

Every opinion poll has recorded growing concern about the rundown of health, education and other public facilities, with the latest surveys revealing that the majority of the population would forego tax cuts in favour of increased public spending in these areas. Accordingly, Latham centred his speech on a populist appeal for the defence of the Medicare health system and the mechanism of bulk-billing, under which patients pay no up-front fees for medical consultations.

Pledging to increase the rate of bulk-billing to 80 percent of all medical consultations, Latham promised to lift the rebate for bulk-billing doctors, provide incentives for doctors who reach the bulk billing target and set up Medicare teams of salaried doctors and nurses in communities where bulk-billing has collapsed.

Howard, Latham declared, was “waging war on Medicare.” The Liberals, he said, favoured a private health system, based on private hospitals and private insurance. Howard had opposed Medicare from its inception and had pledged to take a scalpel to it when he first became leader of the Liberal Party in the 1980s. The deputy prime minister, John Anderson, had recently spoken in favour of a two-tier system. The election, Latham continued, was a “referendum on the future of Medicare.” “Mr Howard is waging war on Medicare. I want to build a fortress around it.”

But Latham’s defence of the public health system did not extend to spiking some of the main artillery used against it—in particular, the \$3.7 billion paid by the government to subsidise the private health funds. Instead of using this money to expand the public health system, the Labor Party remains just as committed as the Liberals to maintaining this massive benefit to the private insurance industry.

Latham’s major policy initiative in health was to pledge that a federal Labor government would take over the hospital costs of all those aged 75 and over, ending the situation where they had to wait for periods of 12 months and more for hip, knee and eye operations. People aged over 75 would no longer have to take out hospital insurance, since they would be automatically covered by the government.

The commitment was accompanied by lofty tributes to senior citizens, who had “served the country well”, “built peace and prosperity” and now “deserved to be treated with honour and respect”. The real reason was somewhat more prosaic: pensioners and retirees are concentrated in the marginal seats that Labor needs to wrest from the Liberals, if it is to win the election.

Moreover the so-called “Medicare Gold” reform only raised the larger question: why aren’t sufficient resources being allocated to ensure that everyone needing treatment has automatic entry to the hospital system? Neither Labor nor Liberal will end the systematic rundown that has led to hundreds of thousands of people, not just the elderly, being forced to wait for weeks, months and even years before receiving adequate care.

Both policy speeches contained all the key words and phrases used by capitalist politicians throughout the decades to invoke the so-called Australian ethos, while covering over the deep class divisions, based on wealth and property, which run through

Australian society.

Latham promised a government “for the people, not just the powerful, caring for the sick and the frail, a government that gives real life expression to the great Australian ethos of a fair go for all.”

Except, of course, for the poorest families. The Labor tax and family benefit package announced earlier in the campaign actually reduced living standards for single-income families bringing in less than \$35,000 a year. According to the Labor Party’s own calculations, an unemployed couple with three children would actually be \$1,199 worse off than they are now.

But in election policy speeches hypocrisy knows no bounds. Declaring the problem of 800,000 children growing up in jobless families to be a “national shame,” Latham claimed that for the disadvantaged, the Labor plan, which uses the “stick” of reduced benefits to push them into low-paying jobs, offered “new opportunities in life.”

For his part, Howard insisted that Australia “should never be a nation defined by class or envy, but rather a nation united by mateship and achievement.”

One invocation of mateship is never enough for Howard—he once suggested that it should be included in the preamble to the constitution—so he returned to it at the end of his speech. What was his vision? “An Australia bound together by common bonds of egalitarianism and mateship, an Australia made up of people proudly drawn from the four corners of the earth ...”

Except if they happen to be refugees fleeing persecution and oppression. Then they are subject to detention for indefinite periods, under the notorious mandatory detention program initiated by the previous Labor government, and extended under Howard. This will be continued by whichever party takes office after October 9.

There are, of course, differences between the Liberal and Labor parties, and they were reflected in the two speeches. But Howard and Latham’s basic class orientation—and fundamental unity—was expressed in their attitude to the Iraq war, and the fate of the most vulnerable and impoverished layers of society.



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