

A visit to Sydney's Claymore housing estate

Mark Latham's "vision" for Australian working people

Jake Skeers
21 September 2004

At the centre of the Labor Party's campaign for the October 9 federal election is leader Mark Latham's slogan of creating a "ladder of opportunity for all Australians". Latham's "ladder" is hardly new or original. It merely revives the nineteenth century idea that individuals, not society, must take responsibility for securing their own health, education and welfare. In particular, the unemployed, and everyone else receiving welfare support, must be forced to give up "welfare dependency" and scramble up the social "ladder".

In *The Enabling State*, a 2001 collection of essays compiled by Latham, in conjunction with Labor thinktank adviser Peter Botsman and Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson—a strident advocate of stripping welfare payments from indigenous people—he proposed that welfare benefits be conditional on people making an effort to "learn new skills, improve their health, educate their children, and whenever possible, accept new work opportunities".

Welfare recipients would be required to sign broad-ranging contracts to accept "welfare responsibilities" involving "training programs, schools, health providers, family services, etc." Breaches would be punished by removal of benefits. "This power [of cutting benefits] is sometimes needed to jolt people out of the negativity of long-term welfare," Latham wrote.

Instead of social security benefits for the unemployed, disabled and disadvantaged, Latham advocates low-interest venture capital loans for "social entrepreneurs". Jobless people would be pressured into setting up small businesses to provide or restore run-down basic services, such as low-cost accommodation, laundry facilities, childcare or employment projects. They would tender for government contracts or appeal for corporate backing, seeking to use cheap labour to generate profits in impoverished neighbourhoods.

According to Latham, many of his policies have been drawn from his experiences in his Sydney south-western electorate of Werriwa. Most notably, he has boasted of the "success" that has been achieved in the suburb of Claymore (no longer in Werriwa), particularly in a street called Proctor Way.

Claymore is a public housing estate of 1,150 homes, completed in 1977. Like the nearby suburbs of Minto, Airs, Macquarie Fields and Ambarvale-Rosemeadow, it was designed to provide subsidised housing for workers who would be attracted to the Campbelltown region with the growth of local industry. Large-scale industry failed to materialise, however. According to the 2001 census, only 30 percent of its adult residents are employed.

Claymore is one of the most impoverished and disadvantaged suburbs in Australia, with an average gross household income of just

\$588 a week. Nearly 90 percent of households have a gross annual income of less than \$52,000 a year. Only 3 percent of residents have a university degree, and 88 percent have no post-secondary school qualifications.

But in Latham's view, Claymore has been "transformed". Proctor Way, which once had several vandalised and burned-out houses, has changed. Latham has pointed to community activities such as a police "neighbourhood watch" scheme, barbecues and a communal vegetable garden. New enterprises, such as a maintenance and lawn-mowing service and a low-interest credit scheme for small businesses, "have established new skills and employment opportunities in Claymore".

Latham cites the Claymore "miracle" as proof that "social entrepreneurship" can improve social conditions without government spending. By social entrepreneurs, he means charities, local groups and self-employed people going into business to provide local services. Elaborating on his model in an August 2001 *Australian Financial Review* column, Latham called for "an alternative welfare state, based on the creation of social venture capital". He wrote: "In their hunger for success, social entrepreneurs straddle the corporate and social sectors... They operate on the basis of increasing returns to investment, accumulating additional partners and social capital as their projects develop."

However, a recent visit to Claymore by the *World Socialist Web Site* found that the suburb is far from the "success" claimed by both Latham and the media. There are few government services, not even a decent park or sporting facility for children. Conditions are so deprived that church and government representatives cite Claymore's two public phone boxes as highlights of the suburb. Residents are hours away from the major cultural, entertainment and sporting venues of Sydney.

The small local shopping centre is run-down and many of the shops are closed. The nearest significant shopping complex and railway station are several kilometres away in Campbelltown, on the other side of a freeway. Those without cars are forced to rely on a limited bus system. Residents told us that boredom and drugs are problems for teenagers in the area. Younger children play on strips of grass between houses, because the nearest public park is a bus ride away in Campbelltown or Eagle Vale.

Residents ridiculed Latham's claim that Claymore was a "success story". George from Proctor Way said: "No way. What success is there here? Nothing." Richard Butt, who has lived in Claymore with his partner and four children for nine years, described the conditions

as “bad” and “terrible”. Proctor Way was better than it had been in 1995 but any claims of “success” were “for the media”.

In contrast to Latham, all those who spoke to the WSWs wanted more public spending in the area, not less. Butt said: “There is a lot of anger in the area about the conditions, but they say, ‘we’ve got no funding’.”

The housing in Claymore is poorly maintained and predominately constructed out of materials such as fibro-cement panels. Butt described the housing as “cheap, very cheap. There is no insulation. In winter you freeze and in the summertime you cook upstairs. There are big gaps in the windows and doors. That is why your power bill is \$400. Some houses have holes in the walls. The showers are constantly leaking and water leaks through the light globes. The windows don’t fit and won’t lock.”

Butt said the houses were structurally damaged because the land on which they were built was unstable. “They are built on landfill and the ground keeps on moving. The sewer keeps on breaking all the time. The sewerage often flows out of the toilets or the back yards. The plumber told us that the sewer is going to collapse.”

Like many of the houses, his had accumulated black mould, which is a possible source of allergies and carcinogenic aerosols. The mould “is all through the corner of my children’s room. They [the Department of Housing] said it is nothing. Just wipe it off. When I told them that it is cancerous, they just painted over it. Apparently, there are spurs that come from it which you shouldn’t breathe in.”

Melissa Reynolds, a single mother, used to work at Grace Brothers, a department store in Sydney, but the five-hour travelling time every day became “too much”.

The abysmal conditions in Claymore result from policies pursued by both Labor and Liberal governments, at the state and federal level, over the past 30 years. Under plans originally drawn up under the Whitlam federal government in the early 1970s, housing and industry were to be co-located. But the promised jobs never materialised. Brian Murnane, a Catholic social worker who manages Argyle Community Housing, a non-profit housing provider, told the WSWs: “Government built the housing, but the whole economic structure of the country changed and the industry didn’t come.”

“Because the blue collar workers never came, it became social housing. Therefore the style of housing didn’t match the people who came here. The other thing was that the support services weren’t here. People were coming out of refuges, people with very high needs, high priority. Things started to go wrong. The society started to break down. By 1995, it was pretty horrible. In Proctor Way, just one street, there were about 60 police incidents a month, including break and enters, assaults, malicious damage and lots of petty crime. There had been a series of fires, but there was one fire in 1995 where five people died. That triggered a crisis for the Department of Housing.”

As a result, in 1995 the state housing department contracted Argyle Community Housing to manage 25 homes in Proctor Way. It implemented community consultation programs, conducted a rubbish cleanup and improved maintenance on the houses. “Claymore is very different now to what it was in 1995,” Murnane stated. “We have gone from crisis management to job creation programs to try to capture some of the money that comes into the community.”

However, the so-called job creation schemes have created only a few part-time and low-paid jobs. Murnane explained that the lawn mowing and maintenance service cited by Latham only employs one full-time person, while two others work part time in other areas around Campbelltown.

In another project, the Benevolent Society donated money to create a catering company, which employs 11 part-time workers on award wages. However, Triple C catering is in the process of being developed into a corporation or co-operative and it may not be commercially viable once the Benevolent Society removes its financial backing. Triple C’s growth prospects in Claymore are limited, given that virtually no-one in Claymore has disposable income to spend on catered food.

The St Vincent De Paul Society runs a number of projects in Claymore, based on ideas developed by Indian social workers such as Dr D. Abraham, who have worked in impoverished rural villages in India. A process called “animation” seeks to inspire individuals to make changes to themselves and their local community. It is revealing that processes developed in the poorest areas of Andhra Pradesh are considered applicable in the western suburbs of Sydney.

As part of this program, some residents and Catholic nuns set up a laundromat and “coffee shop”, consisting of coin-operated washers and dryers and a cappuccino machine in a disused Department of Housing shed. The facility, which opens only four hours per day, utilises volunteer labour and employs one paid staff member who is financed by St Vincent De Paul. Paul Power, a media contact for St Vincent De Paul, said the venture was not profitable and relied on grants from St Vincent De Paul and the government.

A community vegetable garden established near Proctor Way has been abandoned, apparently due to water restrictions. A low-interest loan scheme, launched with a \$10,000 donation, continues to provide loans for household appliances.

Claymore provides a model of Latham’s “ladder of opportunity”. The poorest members of society will be given the choice of living in squalid conditions or climbing the mythical ladder by competing for low-paid jobs, trying to go into business or perform voluntary work to increase their work experience. Charities will be further stretched to provide basic services that the government no longer provides.

Under Latham’s recently announced tax and welfare plan, many of the residents of Claymore, who are already living below the poverty line, will lose hundreds or thousands of dollars per year, with the poorest and largest families suffering the most. The protracted decline of public housing will also continue under Labor. With waiting lists nationally exceeding 200,000, after a decade in which virtually no new housing has been built, Latham has promised to fund a mere 11,350 new low-cost homes, with an average construction budget of just \$57,000 each.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact