Australian election debate follows the script... almost

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If information is the lifeblood of democracy, then Sunday night's Australian federal election debate between Prime John Howard and Labor leader Mark Latham indicates that the official body politic is in an advanced state of decay. The term "debate" is something of a misnomer. It was more like a scripted exchange of sound bites at five or six paces.

Howard began by pointing to the "strong economy" and insisting that he would not "cut and run" from Iraq, while Latham trotted out his latest catch phrase, promising to "ease the squeeze" on middle income earners. Both were repeated more than half a dozen times in the course of the hour-long question and answer session from the panel of five journalists.

Before the debate began, the conventional wisdom in media circles had been that Howard's support for the Iraq war and "national security" would be the prime minister's strong suit, especially in the wake of last week's bomb attack on the Australian embassy in the Indonesian capital, Jakarta.

But every so often reality manages to puncture the world of media images. In this instance, at the conclusion of the debate, journalists and media commentators expressed their surprise over how poorly Howard had rated on "national security", at least among members of the 90-strong, reportedly uncommitted, studio audience, whose responses of approval or disapproval were tracked on a graph dubbed "the worm". As soon as Howard mentioned Iraq and Afghanistan, the worm moved sharply into negative territory, prompting the prime minister to comment after the debate that he was glad it did not have a vote.

But Latham did not press Howard on the Iraq war. There was no mention of the campaign of lies about weapons of mass destruction and the so-called links between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda, nor the bogus assertions that the war would bring democracy. Nothing was said about the torture regime at Abu Ghraib, or about continuing repression of the Iraqi resistance by the American military.

And as for Latham's commitment made last March to withdraw the remaining Australia troops from Iraq by Christmas—hailed by various middle class radical organisations as evidence that the election of a Labor government would make a real difference—it vanished without a trace.

Latham expressed no opposition to the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. His only objection was to Australian involvement: "we have become less safe in the war against terror because of the conflict in Iraq" because "it diverted so many resources from the real task, and for Australia the real task is in our part of the world, in Asia." In other words, Australia should use its military might closer to home, to advance its interests in the South Pacific and South-East Asia.

Just as Latham chose to pass over the lies surrounding the war on Iraq, so did all the five so-called "leading" journalists who comprised the panel, providing a graphic demonstration of the part played by the media in ensuring that genuine debate over vital political issues is stifled and suppressed. Eighteen months after the launching of a war on the basis of lies and falsifications, they chose not to raise a single question of a prime minister who did so much to spread them. Of course, in the self-referential world of the mass media, this is put down to the fact that, despite the mass demonstrations against the war—the largest in history—public opinion has "moved on."

While one should never place too much emphasis on a small sample, the overwhelmingly negative reaction from the studio audience to Howard's comments

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indicates that the war and its broader significance are of wide concern. This is the real reason why the media has worked to block any genuine public discussion.

Both leaders went into the debate well primed with data from their respective party's opinion polls and focus groups. Accordingly, Howard never lost an opportunity to emphasise the importance of a "strong economy", attributing the "economic success" of the past eight and a half years to Treasurer Peter Costello. No one challenged Howard's credentials by pointing out that economic growth has been increasingly sustained by the expansion of debt, both foreign and domestic, and that one of the features of the past decade has been a dramatic increase in social inequality.

The nearest Latham came was when Howard attacked him for trying to cut the so-called safety net under Medicare to which he pointedly replied that Medicare should not need a safety net.

Defining the families in so-called "middle Australia" for whom Labor was pledged to "ease the squeeze," Latham referred to an income range of between $30,000 and $85,000. Significantly, low income earners, whose interests Labor claimed to defend in the past, did not rate a mention. This was no accidental oversight. Under Labor's tax and family benefit program released last week, the poorest families will have their living standards cut—the first time in history that the Labor Party has openly committed itself to such a regressive program.

Despite the fact that Election Day is still almost four weeks off there will not be another debate—Howard ruled it out, after only reluctantly agreeing to one.

The debate itself showed the sterile nature of what passes for political discussion and the concerted efforts of the two major parties, and the mass media, to keep it that way. But there were glimpses of the concerns of wide sections of the population, which, sooner rather than later, will find their way to the surface of political life.

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