

## Labor, larrikins and *The Latham Diaries*

**Review: Mark Latham, *The Latham Diaries*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2005 .**

A great deal of controversy surrounded the publication of *The Latham Diaries* earlier this year. Accusations flew that it was the work of sour grapes, of a bitter and depressed lost soul, of someone who had never been fit to lead the party. I wonder then, which book it is that the media and his fellow politicians have read. Most of the book is a reasoned and passionate lament about the problems of the Labor party, the problems of Left politics more generally, Latham's often biting perceptions of the nature of Australian democracy and his own personal journey through that quagmire. Interestingly, these are not perceptions that suddenly changed after the election defeat of 2004 and the moves to unsettle his leadership. They are perceptions that are with him from the beginning of the diaries, which start in 1994. There is little that is actually defamatory, and there is much that is insightful if the party were willing to read with an open mind. The fact that they are not and that they have continued their assault on Latham (and that it has been a largely personal assault) indicates only further the rot that he identifies.

There is one claim against him which I think is probably correct, however, and this is the idea that he was never fit to lead the Labor party. This is not because he is mentally unstable, or not leadership material, or not even a good politician. In reality, it's more to do with the choice of party. Mark Latham is without doubt an idealist with strong ideas about the problems of Australian social life, and what is required to fix them. Yet his constant complaint about the Labor party is its lack of concern with these very issues, and I would suggest that this is a historical problem with the Labor party itself. Latham identifies the problems himself: the machine-like nature of federal party politics, the corruption that power brings, the sad failure of representative democracy, the lack of true political alternative presented by the Labor party.

The diaries are frustrating in this respect, because every few entries Latham sets out his agenda for a kind of Latham 'third-way' based around ideas of community consultation, public ownership of local resources and social capital, but these ideas never get anywhere. This is because Latham is not really able to articulate the problem at the heart of Labor politics, and this is its too-close attachment to the system it attempts to change. All of his ideas for social justice, as noble as they are, are predicated on the belief in market forces. The historic origins of the Labor party meant it has never been capable of more than piecemeal reformism. Worse than that, it has been from the beginning, a party that accepted the status quo of capitalism, of wage labour and of consumerism, and so it must fight its battles on the terrain, and with the tools, set by the enemy. It has no chance of winning this battle. Not ever.

This is because the problem that Latham sees, but can not articulate, is the problem of hegemony. Developed most notably by the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci, hegemony as a theory seeks to explain the way in which capitalist social relations are achieved, maintained and reproduced in specific historical contexts. In this explaining, it

seeks to bring about their undoing. Gramsci saw quite clearly the way in which capitalist hegemony pervaded all aspects of modern life, the way in which social and economic relations become imbued with the rationale of capitalism. Capitalism was so successful because it worked through all aspects of civil society, and it did this before it came to power. In that sense, any opposition to it must employ the same tactics, and must start from the bottom up. An organized political party, which was already a part of the system, that spoke down to the masses which it sought to mobilize, using the same language and the same ideas, stood no chance of bringing about any meaningful change. When ordinary people talk about the Labor party not presenting a real alternative, they understand hegemony better than the Labor party does.

In some ways, this is a dilemma also personified in Mark Latham's characterization of himself. He refers to himself many times throughout the diary as a larrikin and he equates this with the stereotypical Australian male culture of beer-drinking, physicality, and rough-talking. Given that this is what most Australians think a larrikin is, then he probably was one. But given the history of larrikins, Latham is way off the mark, and this is telling. Larrikins were indeed heavy drinkers, physically and sexually aggressive and known for their bad language. But in their time (the late 1800s) they were not viewed as typically Australian. They were a serious problem for those attempting to move Australia and its cities, into the 'civilised' modern world. Specifically, larrikins represented a lack of personal and public discipline and respectability which was seen as a serious threat to the project of industrializing capitalism. Although they were workers, they refused to identify in this way. They did not join unions or take political action, they did not act out at work but saw it merely as a means to an end, a practical reality but one that did not define who they were or how they would be in the world. They did not save their pennies to buy a house in the suburbs but spent it on beer and gambling and fancy clothes which they flaunted on the streets on Saturday nights. They did not save their energy for work tomorrow but spent it on fighting and on undisciplined and unregulated sexual activity. They had a joy and a lust for life that no workplace could bash out of them. In the end it required the state to step in and throw them in prison.

What is telling about Mark Latham's use of this term, and of his dilemmas about the state of modern politics, is the extent to which capitalism has been successful in hiding its own history. The Labor party, and its politicians, would do well to go back and learn their own.