

LINDSAY BARRETT

the young and the restless

MARK LATHAM

*From the Suburbs: Building a Nation
from our Neighbourhoods*

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LINDSAY TANNER

Crowded Lives

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As we know, history repeats itself, first as tragedy and then as farce. In 1966 Harold Holt, leader of a Liberal government that had invited itself to America's war against Vietnam, brought president Lyndon Johnson to Australia. In one of the great David Moore's most memorable photographs Holt, referred to as 'my friend' by Johnson, was pictured fawning behind the president at Canberra airport. Later, in Sydney, young anti-war protesters lay on the road in front of Johnson's limousine. New South Wales Liberal premier Bob Askin told the driver to 'run over the bastards'. Nearly four decades later, dead currawongs lay on the lawn at Parliament House, having ingested poisoned bogong moths. The moths had been terminated, so argued Senator Bob Brown, in order that their infestation not disrupt the warmonger George Bush's address to Australia's parliament. With the moths dispatched, Bush's address went ahead. Just as his presidential predecessor had done, Bush told us that he was proud to call our prime minister 'my friend'.

The Johnson visit of 1966 was a turning point for the Australian Labor Party. Led by Arthur Calwell, Labor was devastated at the election that followed a few weeks later, with the campaign dominated by the war against communism to the north. But the defeat galvanised the ALP and it reformed under the pragmatism of Gough Whitlam and the anti-war activism of Jim Cairns. The result was what we call 'the Whitlam era'. So far, George W. Bush's Australian visit of 2003 has failed to stir the same sort of political emotions. Simon Crean made an eloquent, polite speech of dissent that went largely unnoticed. The Liberals

and Nationals shouldered each other aside in order to get the biggest pat on the back from the strong American hand. The dead currawongs meanwhile, their demise remarked upon only by Brown, seemed the only collateral damage of this minor episode in the 'global war on terror'.

It's now commonplace to remark that contemporary political processes in Australia bear an almost total absence of what can be termed 'vision'. Across the spectrum, for the political class the horizon of the possible and the achievable appears to have shrunk to a space somewhere between that of the morning radio appearance and the evening television news. It wasn't always like this, but to be reminded of this fact one often needs to turn to sources other than the goings-on in either the House of Representatives or the press gallery. One could, for instance, read Merv Lilley's novel *The Channels*. Published in 2001 (not without difficulty due to its 'unfashionable' subject matter), *The Channels* is a remarkable piece of work, a stream of consciousness narrative flowing from the memories of an antediluvian communist, a memoir of a young agitator's life on the east coast of Australia in 1950. This was a time when the comrades worked for the overthrow of both capitalism and liberal democracy, a time when prime minister Menzies fought to ban them, to jail them, to wipe them from the face of the earth if possible, and a time when Labor's leader Dr Herbert Evatt charged into court and into battle to defend them, and to defend their democratic right to struggle for goals he personally found appalling.

From a contemporary perspective the sketching of such vision, such commitment, such

ideological backbone, seems almost fictional. Did Australians once really think and act like this? Did they really struggle over competing, radically divergent versions of a future society? Were they really prepared to put their careers on the line for principles that could not, in the end, be compromised? Was the Australian political process once really about working to spread social justice, rather than simply market testing policies designed to appeal to the basest instincts of the selfish suburban swingers and the grasping aspirationalists? The answer to all of these questions is yes it was, though increasingly, as our historical and political memory becomes shorter and shorter, and the media-saturated perpetual present in which we're all forced to exist becomes ever more pervasive, we have only the testimonies of those such as Merv Lilley, those who were there at the time, to remind us.

As with all social processes, a complex interplay of factors has led us into this space of apathy, anomie and futility. An increasing reliance by both the Liberal and Labor parties on market research and public relations strategies, resulting in an obsessive focus on a narrow band of electors whose voting patterns are malleable, is one key factor at work here. The expansion of the media sphere to the point where it is actually becoming the 'space' in which politics is articulated and enacted is another. As we know, when Howard wants to set an agenda he goes on talkback radio, a medium that, together with television talk shows, has displaced the more traditional spaces of politics, such as parliament. Another factor is the general acceptance now of the ideologies

of economic rationalism and market fundamentalism, which, with their focus on the ongoing instantaneity of the market, make forward social planning and governance increasingly difficult. All of these factors, for one reason or another, have favoured the Howard government more than Labor.

Another commonplace assertion now is that since the demise of Paul Keating's 'big picture', the Australian Labor Party has been struggling to work out what it actually stands for, and who it actually represents. Not that it has struggled quietly. Two key figures in this activity have been Mark Latham, from the New South Wales Right of the ALP, and Lindsay Tanner from the Victorian Left, currently Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Minister for Communications respectively. Both in their forties, the two were ridiculed a few years ago by the perpetually self-satisfied Peter Costello as 'the young and the restless', his allusion to the fact that neither of them were particularly happy with the leadership of Kim Beazley. This malaise meant that they spent their time writing books, said Costello, an activity that, as part of the Howard government's relentless attempts to dumb-down the electorate, was held up as some kind of suspect, possibly un-Australian activity. Indeed the very titles of two of their previous books, *Civilising Global Capitalism* and *Open Australia*, seemed to raise issues that any comfortable, scared, relaxed and insecure resident of Howard's Australia would be better off not thinking about.¹

Now, the late-term of yet another Howard government sees two more books by Latham and Tanner, both published by Pluto Press:

From the Suburbs and *Crowded Lives*. The title of Latham's book may invoke, for some at least, 1980s Perth entertainer Dave Warner lamenting the fact that suburban boys like himself found it so much more difficult to hit on chicks than did sophisticated middle-class urbanites. Such a pop culture echo, though, is not as fatuous as it may at first seem, as both of these books are, unlike Latham and Tanner's previous publications, grounded in a politics of the personal as much as of the national or the global. Consequently, they both take us straight to the heart of the problem facing the Australian Labor Party: how does a social democratic political party affiliated with the trade union movement, and formed by striking shearers in Queensland in the 1890s, represent a contemporary populace increasingly distanced from the traditional structures of twentieth-century working-class life? Here, both Latham and Tanner approach this conundrum from the ground up, as reflected in the subtitle of Latham's book 'building a nation from our suburbs'. So, in such a context, disaffected suburban boys are far more than a pretext for a pop song: in fact, they're a mainstream political issue. Tanner even goes so far as to have a chapter titled 'Connecting with young men'.

These are crucial issues. But there is also no doubt that these books, particularly Tanner's, are a consequence of the dramatic extent to which Howard and the Liberals are dictating the mainstream agenda of Australian politics. It is unlikely that any Liberal will publish a counter text to Tanner's, one outlining the conservative approach to relationship management. One reason is, of course, that few members of

the Howard government are capable of any form of contemplative social philosophy: as Mark Latham points out, the Liberal Party is almost exclusively a 'lawyers' party, governing for the 'conservative establishment'. (135) But another reason that any Coalition thinker is unlikely to produce a text to match Lindsay Tanner's survey of personal relationships is the fact that, by and large, such issues are not important to the Howard government. Consequently, the personal provides the only real ground for Labor to work on, ground which the government, with its stranglehold on the national agenda through its manipulation of immigration, defence and economic management, appears willing to concede, or at least, just willing to leave alone. So, despite the centrality of these issues, the focus on them in *Crowded Lives* is also indicative of the degree to which Labor is being sidelined. This politics of the personal is important, but a concentrated focus on it can run the risk of producing a shopping list of policy positions from which the consumerist voter can pick and choose according to personal taste. Thus a reader of Lindsay Tanner's book may find themselves in agreement with certain prescriptions, such as the need to devote more attention and resources to the rise in single parenting or the education of boys, and in disagreement with others, such as making Anzac Day Australia's national day, favouring the direct election of the president of a future republic or opposing voluntary euthanasia.

Even so, it is essentially the job of a politician to produce ideas and hold them up for public analysis, and it is perhaps unfair to criticise Tanner too much for simply doing this job.

Similarly, unlike the vacuous ahistoricism of so much of the right-wing discourse flooding Australian public life at present, Tanner's opinions are grounded in a coherent project of social and historical analysis. His references range widely, from the populist Thomas Friedman's *Lexus and the Olive Tree* to the incisive resonance of Richard Sennett's *Corrosion of Character*, while at the centre of his polemic is a succinct critique of the contemporary formation of the social subject. Tanner's principal argument is that the 'wave of social change that has occurred since the 1960s' has produced as many problems as it has improvements. Despite the increase in freedom for women and homosexuals, and the rise of environmentalism as a mainstream issue, the libertarian revolution of the 1960s produced, Tanner argues, an ethic of individualism that has done massive damage to the social forces of community and collectivism. Now, this rampant individualism 'has been absorbed and magnified by the materialism and consumerism that also grew out of the postwar boom', with the result being a selfish society in which 'personal gratification has become a primary driver of economic activity'. (31–3) The atomised individual consumer is the end point of this process for Tanner. Consequently, the rest of his book explores the possibilities for the development of our relationships with each other.

Unlike *Crowded Lives*, Mark Latham's *From the Suburbs* is not a monograph but a collected volume of speeches and conference papers given over the last few years. Latham's focus is also more structural, and in this sense he covers much more traditionally political terrain than

Tanner. Latham also provides the standout sound bite from the two works: 'Increasingly, I get the feeling that all politics is cultural'. (19) To a great extent, Latham's key focus is the impact of globalisation, with all of his analysis and policies influenced to some degree by this overarching contemporary phenomenon:

For the past decade, the Left has been debating globalisation as if it were solely an economic event, when in fact its main political impact has been cultural. The mass movement of people, the internationalisation of crime and the free flow of information and cultural products all challenge our sense of social stability and belonging. In a world without borders and often without order, people are struggling to maintain the anchors of their everyday life—family support, community pride and national identity. (18–19)

Fair enough, this sort of description of the processes of globalisation is standard in cultural studies now. However, Latham is not a cultural studies academic, he's the new federal leader of the Australian Labor Party, and, at a time when the traditional role for Labor, pointing the way to Chifley's 'light on the hill', is just not working for the electorate anymore, it's crucial that such theories actually do get put into practice. For what's at stake is, as Latham puts it, 'the core challenge of Information Age politics: are the shared bonds and responsibilities of a good society still possible? Is collectivism still possible?' (35) Answering his own question, Latham then puts forward in these speeches and papers

a range of quite radical market-oriented propositions, such as his idea for nest-egg savings accounts for low-income earners, and the provision of social venture capital for community groups as an alternative to welfare.

Latham is right, all politics is cultural now. John Howard, of course, is well acquainted with the power of the politics of culture. This is why he has been such a vigorous participant in the culture and history wars, for he understands, possibly better than anyone, that the manipulation of the electorate is achieved as much through the manipulation of the symbolic as it is through the manipulation of interest rates. In fact, with an independent Reserve Bank, symbols are a lot easier to manipulate than interest rates. And this is what is making it harder and harder for Labor to work out who and what it represents. Once upon a time there may have been neat, separate realms constituting our lives, the material on the one hand, the symbolic on the other. Increasingly now though, there is only the symbolic, a realm that has not so much displaced the material, but incorporated it. In *Growth Fetish*, Clive Hamilton argues that 'questions of identity, social structure and political orientation are now determined more by consumption activities than by production and employment'.² This is in striking contrast to the forces determining identity formation throughout most of the twentieth century, where the relationship between workers and capital played the key role, resulting in the Western subject identifying with others primarily through membership of a work-related group, such as a trade, a profession, a union and so. Now, Hamilton argues, the individual

identifies primarily as a lone consumer, in competition with all the other lone consumers in the insatiable quest for new, better and bigger purchases. Hamilton's work has been quite influential, and Lindsay Tanner draws on it extensively in constructing his theory of contemporary alienation in *Crowded Lives*.

And this is where Labor's problems really begin. The Labor Party established itself representing predominantly male trade unionists. From the 1930s onwards it also began to represent the educated middle-class professional, an alliance that found its full expression in the Whitlam Government in the 1970s. As Mark Latham argues, one of Howard's key preoccupations has been the smashing of this alliance that has sustained Labor's successes over the past three decades. So far it has been a largely successful campaign, though this has had as much to do with the cultural transformations outlined by Hamilton and Tanner as it has with Howard's abilities as a ruthless manipulator of electoral rhetoric. Labor, so the argument goes, designed to represent the material world of work and unions, is increasingly finding itself without a constituency as a significant section of the population mistakenly identify themselves as members of the ruling class rather than the ruled. This is an incisive argument, but it is also grounded to a degree in a modernist logic of false consciousness, which sees marketing and public relations as largely responsible for the contemporary malaise. Another way of looking at this situation, though, is to acknowledge that, more than just a pastime or a method of spending disposable income, consumption is in fact the new work. For it is

increasingly the case, particularly in post-industrial countries such as Australia, that consumption is no longer a method of simply attaining the good life, but the motor that keeps our society literally working. As Latham observes, the 'aspirationalists' are not going to go away. (67)

It's difficult to draw definitive conclusions as to where these transformations, which are literally turning our social fabric inside out, will take us. But there's no doubt, and it's no surprise, that at the moment this reification of individualism is favouring the most unimaginative, selfish, mean-spirited and divisive government Australia has ever had. But, it's also simply not the case that Howard has no opposition. Both of these books, *From the Suburbs* and *Crowded Lives*, are thoughtful, creative and full of ideas. And another of history's repetitions is the fact that, in the last instance, ideas are powerful things.

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1. Mark Latham, *Civilising Global Capitalism*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1998; Lindsay Tanner, *Open Australia*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1999.
 2. Clive Hamilton, *Growth Fetish*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2003, p. 149.