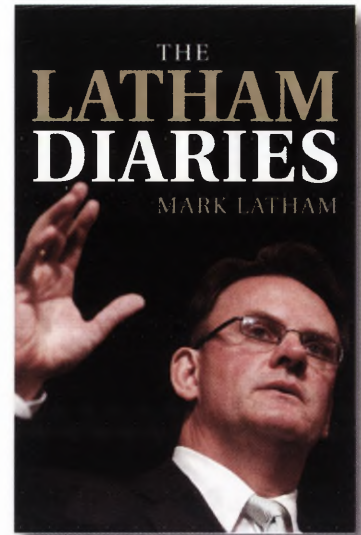


The LATHAM Diaries

by Mark Latham

published by Melbourne University Press, 2005, \$39.95

By David Dickinson



The *Latham Diaries*, with their often vitriolic characterisations of his former parliamentary colleagues, have attracted massive media coverage, placing the book on the bestseller list.

Given Latham's failure to exercise some tact or good grace in the way in which he sledges almost everyone in his book, it is tempting to dismiss the work out of hand as the ravings of an embittered political malcontent.

Moreover, his willingness to thrust into the public domain the off-the-record and private utterances of those who have caused him no apparent offence serves only to underline the concerns expressed by many as to his temperamental suitability for high public office.

These more sensationalist musings, while undoubtedly boosting the sales and media coverage of his book, have detracted from – and blunted – some of Latham's more incisive criticisms of the Labor Party, particularly of the corrosive effect of its factions and the lack of a vibrant climate of policy debate and development.

Latham's central thesis is that the Australian Labor Party is no longer a party working for the workers. Factionalism has developed to the point where one must seriously question the Party's social democratic credentials as a party of reform and compassion. It is a party that exists in

large part to further the careers of place-servers. It is run by the machine men for the machine men.

'When I worked at NSW Party headquarters in 1987-88, I remember the General Secretary, Steve Loosley, saying to me, "The big decision we need to make is whether we actually need a rank-and-file membership." It took me a while to work out he wasn't joking. With modern fundraising capacity and campaign technology, it is possible to run a successful political party without any local branch members. That's what Labor has become, a virtual party controlled by a handful of machine men. [p185]

A few dozen Party officials and faction bosses have the power to run the organisation: who goes to Parliament, how they vote in Caucus ballots, the outcomes at party forums. Very few people progress without their say so: through Young Labor, into State ministerial offices, recruited for future parliamentary service. It's a dense network of influence, a political mafia full of favours, patronage, and, if anyone falls out with them, payback.' [p399]

It is with respect to the Party's failure to provide a forum for policy formulation that Latham is most critical of the parliamentary leadership of Kim Beazley. In an entry made on 27 May 1996, Latham says that 'Beazley told the Shadow Ministry that "Opposition

is all about pissing on them and pissing off" – a hit-and-run style of politics. He sees our political future as hinging on the exploitation of the Government's failings and public discontent issue by issue. I've got that sinking feeling that, for all his rhetoric, Kim is not going to deliver a new modern Labor agenda. Even in opposition, a political party needs a philosophy of government, a set of ideas that inspires our supporters and gives the show some purpose beyond an opportunistic grab for power. At the end of the day, only the big things really count.'

Beyond the bile and the vitriol, the *Diaries* do provide a rare and unvarnished glimpse inside politics and the workings of a major political party. The book has the capacity to damage both the Australian Labor Party and Beazley, and the Liberals have already made considerable capital out of it.

However, the Labor Party ignores Latham's more considered criticisms at its peril. In the long term, it must address both the problems caused by the dominance of internal factions and the need to create a climate conducive to creative policy development if it is to remain viable as a force for reform. ■

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