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## 📌 CURRENT ISSUE — Volume 8 Issue 2 – 2014

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### **Latham, Mark - *The Political Bubble: Why Australians Don't Trust Politics*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 2014, pp. 291, ISBN 978-1-74261-407-6**

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“ In talking to average Australians over the past three years, there is one thing more than any other that stands out: they express a deep disdain for Australian politics and politicians. It hasn't always been the case. By last September's election they were just fed up. Fed up with both sides. Fed up with the futile way they feel the game was being played ... 'None of this childish crap both sides carry on with is going to help me' was a typical refrain (ALP pollster Tony Mitchelmore, *SMH* February 10, 2014 cited on p. 96). ”

The evaluation cited above is probably typical of a comment heard from 'the average Australian' should they bother to discuss politics around a weekend barbeque with their friends. The ongoing nightly revelations from the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) have seen a raft of former Labor, and current Liberal, ministers accused of corruption. It has resulted in the resignation of several ministers, the premier Barry O'Farrell and the Lord Mayor of Newcastle Jeff McCloy, with numerous others having been asked to 'consider their positions'. This, plus the ongoing saga of institutional child abuse by clergy, not to mention the bruising political contest of the Rudd/Gillard governments, has left a general sense of distaste and disillusionment about traditional political and social institutions in the mouths and minds of many voters. It is this state of affairs that former Australian Labor Party (ALP) leader Mark Latham seeks to explore in his new book.

Like some other former party leaders, most notably former Liberal leader John Hewson who has the dubious distinction of having lost the 'unloseable election' to Paul Keating in 1993, Latham has reinvented himself in the role of expert political commentator after his bitter retirement from politics in 2005. Like Hewson, he has few qualms about calling his former party and colleagues to account, and unlike others (such as former Liberal treasurer Peter Costello), he is rapidly gaining a reputation for astute observations and insightful analysis. This book is no different, and Latham continues the themes he earlier articulated in *Civilising Global Capital* (1998) and *The Latham Diaries* (2005). In the introduction, he says:

“ This book is about the collapse of trust and hope in Australian politics. It charts the way in which, over the past 20 years, the major political parties have broken the social compact and discredited themselves in the eyes of the electorate. ... The passive delegation of authority to ruling elites has been broken. ... The notion of democracy, as a force for good, has been lost, replaced by a new adversarial way of looking at parliamentary politics. Whereas for much of the last century, people thought they system of government was on their side, they now think it is working against them (2-3). ”

His overarching 'thesis' is that there is an increasing disconnect between the *modus operandi* of traditional

political parties and the constituents they represent. This parallels a broader trend for citizens to become more independent and less reliant on 'information and decisions passed down by powerful elites' (25). The downside is an increasing insularity and loss of trust in traditional institutions and a shedding of the habit of belonging to collective and community organisations such as unions and churches. The result, he argues, is a disturbing loss of 'social capital' (8).

Politically, an ever-shrinking grassroots base is both the cause and effect of this trend, one that has both resulted from, and has been abetted by, historical changes in party structures. The 'mass parties' of the early 20th century have evolved by necessity into 'cartel parties' which operate in a much more highly centralized, tightly and professionally organised and media-conscious fashion – a phenomenon noted by a range of political scientists, including Blyth and Katz (2005), Ian Ward (2006) with respect to the Australian political landscape, and most recently the late Peter Mair (2013) in his book *Ruling the void: The hollowing of Western democracy*. Add to this the impact of globalization on economics, and of new information technologies on public communication and media, and Latham argues that we have arrived at a place where the capacity of the state to solve social problems has diminished significantly. Despite this reality, and in an effort to maintain the 'illusion' of relevance, parties on both sides 'consistently over-promise, manufacturing false hope for what they can achieve in power' (18). It is this aspect in particular, ably assisted by the cabal of media advisors and PR professionals upon whom modern parties increasingly rely, that feeds the growing sense of disillusionment with parties of all colours.

The 'hollowing out' of traditional parties has fostered a sense of internal emasculation that has simultaneously resulted in, and been propagated by, an increasing level of what Latham refers to as 'tribalism' where 'instead of seeking satisfaction from the development of public policy, powerbrokers look for status inside the party, exercising control over their underlings and patronage within their tribal groupings' (12). The role of the 'machine men' to use Stephen Mills' (1986) famous phrase, has become increasingly obvious in the fates of both Malcolm Turnbull in 2009 and Kevin Rudd in 2010, not to mention the nefarious machinations of the NSW Labor Party, the results of which are still reverberating on the nightly news from the ICAC. As the political players have become mere cogs in the wheels of the party machines, he argues, they have become 'more cynical and less responsive to community standards' of behaviour and accountability (8), not to mention more inclined to focus on short term populism at the expense of long term policy formulation. This inclination to look inwards, rather than outwards, has left room for 'vested interests and ideologies [to more easily] control the old parties' (11), a point which has been made with respect to the Labor Party by revered party elders such as John Faulkner and Barry Jones. The power of these vested interests – union-based factions and a 'cadre of dedicated feminists' on the Labor side, religious extremists, ideologues and corporate rent seekers on the Liberal side – have 'weakened the representative nature of democracy' (11) by centralising power in a feudal-like cabal of 'people under pressure [who find] solace in the company of those who share their worldview' (12). Latham uses the example of populist policies and rhetoric that play to the oft-cited cost of living 'crisis', where 'working families' are reportedly 'battling' to make ends meet despite living through Australia's greatest ever period of economic prosperity.

The book is structured along the lines of series of case studies through which Latham argues and tests his observations of the way in which parliamentary democracy has 'decoupled itself from the public interest' (14) by virtue of changes which run parallel with a more affluent, educated populace having given up on organised politics: he titles this trend an 'apathocracy' (34). In a manner familiar to those who have read both *The Latham Diaries* and his regular newspaper columns in *The Australian Financial Review*, he spends considerable time in the early chapters on an eviscerating critique of those in the media he titles 'the right-wing hunting pack', and in particular the Murdoch media. He notes the manner in which very recent political controversies involving the Abbott government, such as the attempt to repeal 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act, are examples of the ideological tribalism that use 'culture wars' on everything from education to climate change to attack its enemies by framing:

“ ... left-of-centre activists as out of touch and unworthy ... [the objective being] to convince middle class families that, in terms of values and interests, suburban communities have little in common with progressive politics (61). ”

What is ironic is that while these chapters devote much space detailing the views and strategies of well known 'pack' members such as Andrew Bolt, Gerard Henderson, Piers Ackerman, Chris Kenny, Miranda Devine and Janet Albrechtsen, Latham argues that in reality these noisy commentators have little impact beyond those who read their columns mostly to reinforce their own worldviews. With reference to the influence of commentators like Andrew Bolt, he writes:

“ But herein lies a delusion. While Bolt is widely admired within the right-wing tribe, he has little influence outside Australia’s political class. He preaches to a niche market, within minimal connection to the electoral mainstream. In practice, his role within ‘the cultural space’ is to make political debate more intense, not to expand it. ... The usefulness of the Murdoch tribe is in its harassment of the left, not in its capacity for persuading middle class voters to believe in hard-right ideology. There is no evidence of its activities shifting votes directly in favour of the Coalition (77). ”

This was borne out by the electoral result of 2013 where the projected wipeout of Labor seats in Western Sydney did not eventuate, despite a rapid anti-Labor campaign by the Murdoch press. In other words, within the ‘political bubble’, the two tribes, in collusion with the struggling old media, are divorced from the ‘real’ world by virtue of their hollowed out political structures. Within the bubble, they fight out their antiquated brand of combative politics for an increasingly narrow audience, leaving the broader, middle ground of voters, if they bother to pay attention, disaffected and cynical.

The role of the symbiotic relationship between politics and the mainstream media is explored in a chapter titled ‘Manufactured Outrage’. Here Latham explores the most recent examples of the ‘sideshow’ syndrome about which Lindsay Tanner (2011) wrote, wherein Tanner argued that politics is increasingly being ‘performed’ for the ‘entertainment’ needs of a cash-strapped news industry hungry for scoops and drama. Latham happily continues that theme. Evidenced-based reporting has largely been replaced by political ‘spin’ and reliance on unattributed sources. The result, he argues, is that many political journalists have become partisan players, rather than merely objective observers, in the political process, a point similarly argued by John Keane (2013) in *Democracy and Media Decadence* (reviewed in this edition of GMJ). Journalists increasingly rely on scuttlebutt and ‘backgrounding’ to produce stories, often without attribution or consideration of the motives of those sources: the case of Kevin Rudd’s use of the media to destabilize a succession of Labor leaders was a point made previously by Latham himself in *The Latham Diaries* (2005), and more recently by Kerry-Anne Walsh (2013) with respect to the treatment and fate of former prime minister Julia Gillard.

The impact of this is an increasing lack of both media and political accountability. Politicians are not held to account for their overstatements or exaggerations, disinformation or lack of transparency (for example Tony Abbott’s assertion that Whyalla would be ‘wiped off the map’ after the introduction of the carbon tax). Journalists and broadcasters are not held to account for their inaccuracies because of the sheer speed of the 24 hour news cycle and the attendant short attention spans of the audience: by the time any one recognises an inaccuracy, it has become ‘old news’ and the carnival, to coin Tanner’s phrase, has moved on. Along with the pervasive reliance upon opinion polls and focus groups, the adoption of the techniques of modern marketing has degraded the willingness and the ability to craft well thought out policy and to build a convincing argument for its implementation.

This state of affairs has created an environment in which there is greater inclination towards short-term politics, a greater chance of leadership instability and a more fertile space opened up for what Latham labels ‘the politics of smear’. As an example, he devotes a chapter and an appendix to a forensic analysis of the Gillard/AWU ‘slush fund’ affair, in particular the power of a small, noisy fringe groups with specific political barrows to push, to garner an unwarranted amount of media attention and credence. He says:

“ The frightening intensity [with which the ‘Gillard-haters’ prosecuted this issue] underscores one of the paradoxes of modern politics. At a time when the general public has disengaged from party politics, becoming apathetic about issues and the possibility of progress within the parliamentary system, fringe groups have become more active (140). ”

This point is most strongly explored in the chapter devoted to the case study of the dysfunctional climate change debate in Australia. Using this issue as an example, Latham takes a rhetorical sledgehammer to both ends of the climate change debate spectrum – from Andrew Bolt on the right, to Tim Flannery on the left. Again like John Hewson, Latham has been a consistent advocate for the need for strong action on climate change. In his 2013 post-election essay *Not Dead Yet: Labor’s Post-Left Future*, he argued that it would not only be morally appropriate, but also strategically sensible, for the Labor Party to revive its damaged credibility post-Rudd/Gillard by prosecuting a strong position on climate change. In this chapter he explores in a very nuanced manner some of the ways in which the debate has been derailed, all the while linking it with the arguments he has been developing about the ‘sclerotic’ nature of both the political class and the media. His analysis also positions the failure of climate change policy within the broader perspective of the nature of the problem itself. In particular he argues that not only is there a great deal of ideological baggage underpinning the various positions on the issue, but the inability of proponents to convince the public of the urgency of the problem, is indicative of a broader loss of respect for traditional sources of expertise and a growth of confidence

in the value and accuracy of their own judgments. In this vein, he says that:

“ There was a time when, to contribute to public life, commentators needed to highly skilled and knowledgeable; now they simply need to be highly opinionated. ... On climate change and similar issues, we have become an expert-free society; more egalitarian in the number of people having a say, but also less rigorous in the substance of the debate (116). ”

The result, he argues, is that because climate change action requires significant changes in expectations of consumer aspiration and a change in the way people think about what defines ‘progress’, it has become a case of ‘political gridlock’ and much more difficult to deal with, especially within the current political and media climate:

“ Left activists have fouled their nest by conflating weather events with climate trends. The Liberal and National parties are dominated by denialists, who rely on electoral subterfuge – appearing to do something when, in reality, they have no intention of acting. Between these two extremes, the ALP is frozen in fear (127). ”

The final chapters are mostly devoted to excoriating the ‘elites’ from both ends of the political spectrum, although he gives more space to those on the right. The power of money to shape and potentially corrupt public policy via influential lobbyists, strategic company board appointments and creatively delivered political donations, is the subject of the ongoing investigation of the NSW ICAC which has claimed scalps from both sides. The effect has been to further reinforce negative public views. These very current examples seem ‘heaven sent’ to support his argument.

On the other side of the fence, Latham takes aim at the Left’s elites whom he accuses of ‘abstraction ... from real-life circumstances’ (207) in their choice of issues upon which to focus attention, in particular asylum seeker policy and gender issues. These points are curious from someone who purports to hold progressive views and to be concerned for the diminution of ‘social capital’. Latham seems to imply that the views of people who have to deal with the outcomes of refugee policy in their own suburbs are more worthy than those who make judgments, in absentia, ‘through the fixed prism of ideology’ (209). While the practical outcomes of the current harsh asylum seeker policy may be to have ‘stopped the boats’, whether the reported broad community support for the policy is a genuine reflection of a concern to stop people drowning at sea or a fig leaf for an undercurrent of xenophobia, he doesn’t take up.

On the issue of the focus on misogyny and sexism, he rails against what he considers a similar degree of disconnect from the ‘real’ issues of concern for progressive voters to the concerns of so-called ‘femocrats’. He says:

“ With its focus on gender issues, Labor has overreacted to an insider’s concern, something that worries progressive women in politics but not voters (male and female) in mainstream suburbia (220). ”

Here he is pointing to more ‘abstract’ issues, including support for same sex marriage and for affirmative action policies, problems that are nowhere as bad as they could be. This is a curious point. On the issue of support for same sex marriage, this seems to go against a broader belief in equality of opportunity and a right to self-determination. On the issue of the need to raise awareness of sexist language, his argument ignores the power of relatively ‘harmless’ racist or sexist jibes to reflect and license deeper, and more insidious, intolerance of difference. Again the case of the treatment of Julia Gillard, so thoroughly documented by Anne Summers in *Her Rights at Work: The Political Persecution of Australia’s First Female Prime Minister*, belies this argument.

Unlike some of the doom-laden tomes that have been written around this topic, Latham does attempt to offer some suggestions and hope. In this vein, the final chapter is devoted to a series of suggested steps, most of which relate to the need to accept the limitations of the party political system and the ingrained apathy of the broader electorate as well as the need to educate the public about a realistic role for government in their lives. He says that:

“ Instead of trying to be all things to all people, the major parties need to concentrate on doing a limited number of things well (227). ”

He champions the value of ‘outsourcing’, (and thereby de-politicising), many of the functions of government to independent external expert bodies, citing the success of the Reserve Bank as a model for independent policy

making. While such a technocratic solution might on the surface seem attractive, it ignores the tendency for governments to 'stack' such bodies with their own 'experts'. He also calls for the downsizing of government bureaucracies, especially those in state governments, downsizing election campaigns and the sidelining of lobbyists, especially former politicians with insider knowledge and contacts. I don't think too many would argue with the latter.

Finally, two of the more interesting suggestions include an end to Question Time in Parliament in order to 'limit opportunities for media infotainment, the harmful practice of turning serious politics into a circus' (231), and an end to compulsory voting. The purpose of the latter, he says:

“ Would enhance the quality of political debate. Self-evidently, it removes from the electoral equation people who have no interest in public issues: the apathetic majority at whom the major parties currently target their scare campaigns and shallow policy platforms (232). ”

Australia is one of only a small number of countries that actually enforces compulsory voting, and so this is a contentious issue. While I can see some merit in Latham's argument, I'm not sure that his reasoning stacks up: why would there be less playing to the lowest common denominator of opinion and not an increased tendency to amplify the extreme rhetoric and fear to motivate the traditionally apathetic? The situation in the USA is a case in point.

In conclusion, Latham's analysis is incisive, articulate and accessible. His style is sometimes polemical and abrasive and will be familiar to those who have followed his political and media career, with his favorite *bête-noirs* (right wing commentators, the Murdoch press, union factions, 'femocrats') up front and predictable. In places his ideological positions are curious and sometimes inconsistent and at times he sounds like he would be more at home in a small 'l' liberal party. However, he is arguing from the position of someone who, despite his reputation as a bully and a wrecker, wears his passion for social justice on his sleeve.

About the reviewer

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