

THE CHOICE 2004

Matched on mojo, powers to persuade

BLUEPRINT

Howard and Latham have different strong points in selling conflicting visions, writes Andrew Leigh.

Leadership. One of the most important words in Australian politics is also one of the most misused. What does it mean to exercise leadership? And how does understanding leadership help us to gauge John Howard and Mark Latham?

According to the typical business text, leadership is about influencing, persuading and mobilising others to follow your goals. Successful leadership requires a modicum of strategy, and a pinch of charisma, or what Austin Powers would call "mojo". Leadership of this type is value-free. Bill Clinton and Adolf Hitler had vastly different philosophies, but both were highly charismatic, and succeeded in influencing others to follow them.

John Howard's critics have often sneered at his lack of charisma. Working a room, Howard lacks the magnetism that characterised Bob Hawke's prime ministership, or the soaring oratory that Alfred Deakin, Robert Menzies and Paul Keating so relished. Yet if we are to measure Howard solely on his ability to influence the electorate, he must be counted as a success.

As political scientist Murray Goot has pointed out, the characterisation of Howard as a poll-follower is mistaken. On issues that mattered to him - the privatisation of Telstra in 1996, the GST in 1998, the republic in 1999, and the war in Iraq in 2003 - Howard took a stance at odds with public opinion, and set about persuading the electorate.

Howard's persuasive skill is reflected in results from the Australian Election Study. When first elected in 1996, 54 per cent of the population thought that Howard provided strong leadership. By 2001, this figure had risen to 72 per cent. Yet persuasive prowess is not synonymous with honesty: over the same period, the fraction of people who agreed that Howard was honest fell from 74 per cent to 55 per cent. It seems that the more people believe Howard is a strong leader, the fewer believe that he is honest.

What do we know about Latham's skills of persuasion and influence? While it is more difficult to judge an Opposition leader than a prime minister, three pieces of evidence are relevant. First, despite most pundits predicting that the Labor caucus would select Kim Beazley as leader on December 2, 2003, Latham was able to persuade a majority of his colleagues that he would do a better job. Second, he then managed to dominate the political news agenda for several

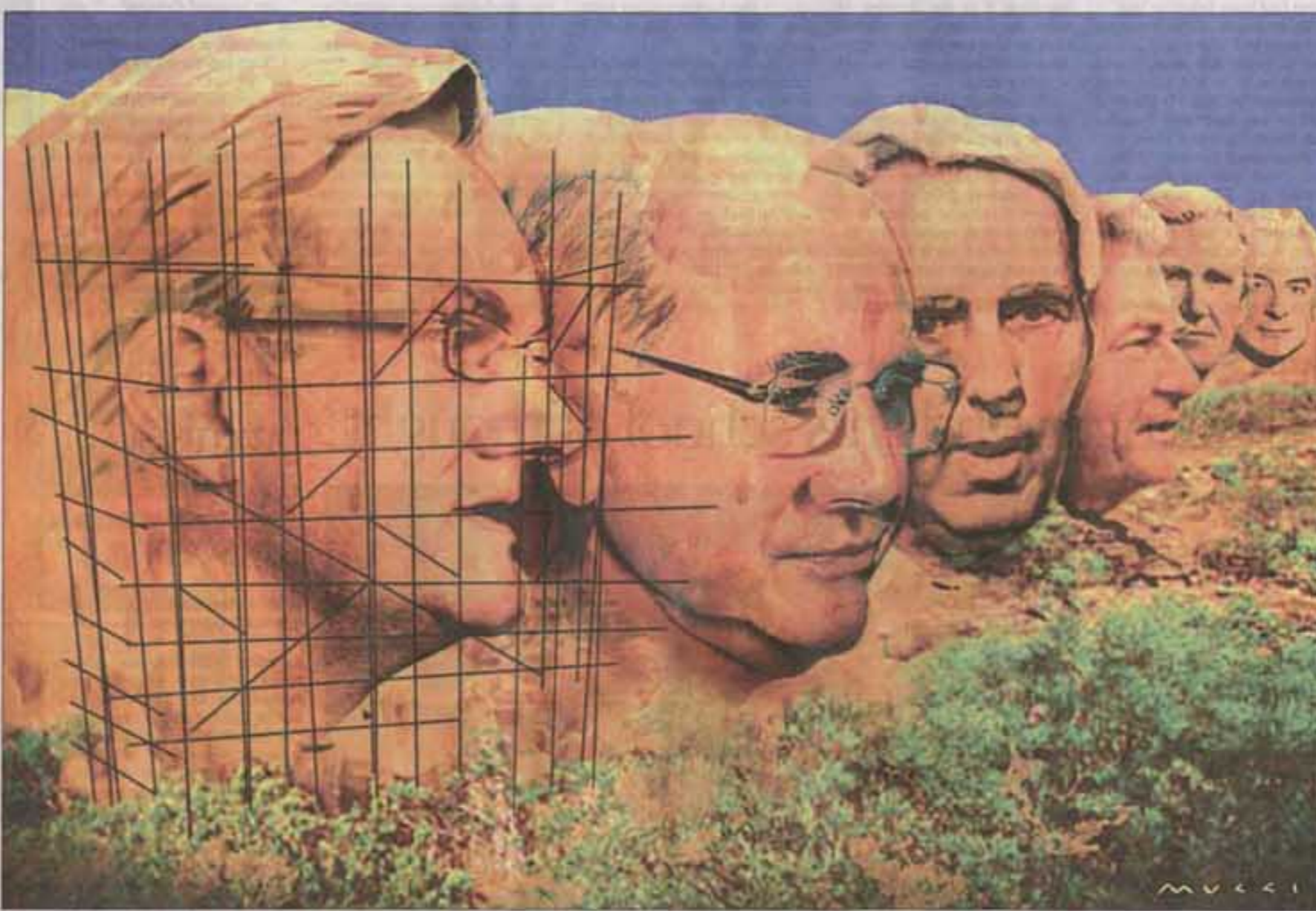
months - presenting Labor's policies in a compellingly straightforward manner. Yet against this should be set the published views of how a Latham cabinet might operate. When Latham biographer Barry Donovan asked Simon Crean whether it was true that Latham sometimes turned up to shadow cabinet 10 minutes late, saying "I'm going to do this", Crean agreed. It appears that Latham's powers of persuasion may not extend to all members of his shadow cabinet.

The bottom line? On the traditional definition of leadership - influencing others to follow you - Howard is probably the better leader, with a proven track record of moulding his party in his own image and convincing the nation to support him at several critical moments. Yet in Sunday night's debate, Latham wormed his way to victory - indicating that if he is to win on October 9, he too may be able to transform his party and persuade the nation to adopt his agenda for change.

A more challenging form of leadership is creating the conditions in which people can come up with their own solutions to difficult problems. Harvard University's Ronald Heifetz argues that leadership should not be viewed as influence at all, but rather as providing an opportunity for a group to tackle a difficult problem. What Heifetz calls "adaptive leadership" can only take place when people delve down to the root of a problem, rather than merely dealing with its symptoms. Eschewing easy answers, adaptive leadership requires that people take ownership of a problem, and devise a solution themselves.

So far, the 2004 election campaign has been narrowly focused over a suite of hip-pocket issues that would have been familiar to voters 20 years ago: Medicare and taxation, welfare and private school funding.

This has left precious little space for the parties to debate fundamental questions of national identity. Aboriginal reconciliation, for example, is one of the most difficult issues facing the nation today and a natural opportunity for a leader to put adaptive leadership into practice. Seven years after the Reconciliation Convention, and four years after the Sydney Harbour Bridge walk, reconciliation seems to have lost its way. Part of the reason for this was Howard's preference for "practical reconciliation", with its emphasis on improving the living standards of indigenous Australians; and the downplaying of interpersonal reconciliation, which seeks to

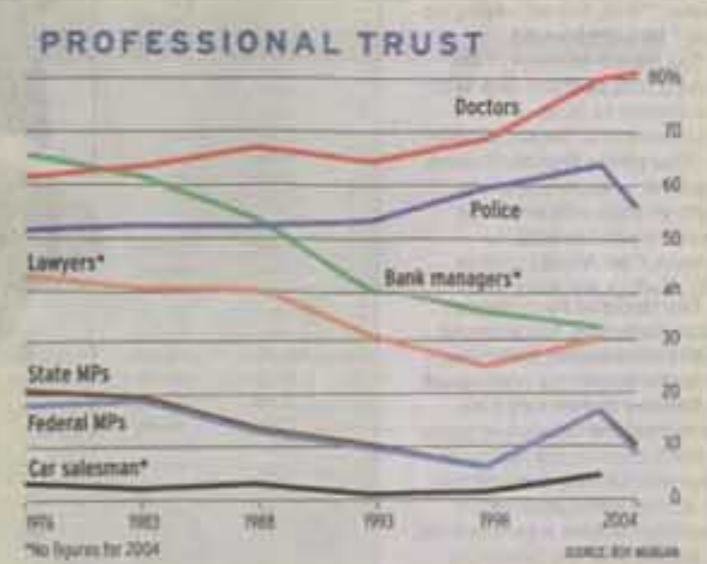


THE ISSUE POLITICIANS HAVE US THINKING 'USED CAR SALESMAN' AGAIN

Paul Keating went to the 1996 election with a one-word slogan: leadership. For John Howard, the 2004 election is about trust. But why? With the "children overboard" affair merely the latest scandal to come to light, surely the standing of federal politicians is lower than ever? The story is more complex. In 1976 Roy Morgan began asking people to rate various professions, including politicians, for their ethics and honesty. Until six years ago, as the graph at right shows, the Morgan poll showed a steady decline in the proportion of people who gave federal politicians a high or very high rating for ethics and honesty, from 19 per cent in 1976 to a nadir of 7 per cent in 1998.

Briefly it looked like times had changed. Last year 17 per cent of the public gave federal politicians a high or very high rating for ethics and honesty. Even more surprising, unpublished data from Morgan indicated that the rise was greatest for young voters. In 1998, just 9 per cent of those aged under 25 rated politicians ethical and honest, but in 2003, 29 per cent did so. Yet it now appears that the trust in politicians has again plummeted. In the survey released today only 9 per cent of the public gave federal politicians a high or very high rating for ethics and honesty. Trust in politicians is again in decline. Three factors help explain this trend: media reporting that is

overly focused on personalities over substance; a long-time decline in social capital (membership of organisations such as unions and bowling clubs); and the rise of issues outside the left-right spectrum of party politics. While last year's figures might have given hope for a turnaround, the latest numbers indicate the decline in trust in politicians continues. The so-called trust election seems to be taking place in an atmosphere of distinct distrust. Less than one in 10 Australians thinks their politicians are ethical and honest. Whoever is prime minister after October, regaining trust in politicians should be high on the agenda. Andrew Leigh



change the relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous people. At certain moments of his prime ministership, Howard has displayed adaptive leadership. His 1999 Regional Australia Summit encouraged local leaders to find local solutions to reinvigorate the bush, rather than looking to Canberra for additional assistance. As the Deputy Prime Minister said in his closing address, securing the future of the bush should be

guided by the philosophy "that we do things best when we do things from the bottom up and from the inside out". Likewise, Howard's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy is aimed at giving communities "the power to develop their own solutions to local problems and helps them help themselves". Yet in other areas, the Howard Government has tended to operate from the centre, instead of turning difficult problems back to the communities themselves. We know less of Latham's ability to employ adaptive leadership, but his emphasis on community-driven solutions offers some reason to believe that he might be willing to encourage local groups to solve their own problems. In his 1998 book *Civilising Global Capital*, he wrote that "social democracy needs to give closer consideration to the relations between citizens rather than simply working from the assumption that all social issues can be resolved in the state-to-citizen relationship".

A third form of leadership is policy entrepreneurship - the willingness to engage the public in debate about where the nation should be in 20 years, and pursue new and innovative solutions to policy problems. In *Looking for Leadership: Australia in the Howard Years* (2001), Donald Horne argues that over the past 30 years, Australia has never had a leader who can communicate on matters of economic policy as effectively as Franklin Roosevelt did with Americans during the Great Depression. If the people running Australia rust up, Horne argues, Australia will rust up. In past decades, Australia has been fortunate to have policy wonks on both sides of politics. In 1972 Gough Whitlam's policy manifesto included 140 specific promises - the most comprehensive election platform ever seen in Australia at the time. In 1982, Labor - largely driven by the intellectual energy of Gareth Evans - produced a series of policy monographs around the theme of "Preparing for Government". And

the record for policy entrepreneurship must surely go to John Hewson, who oversaw the production in 1991 of *Fightback* - a 650-page policy platform whose executive summary alone ran to 70 pages. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the contents of *Fightback*, Hewson's loss at the subsequent election was a body blow for ambitious party platforms. Since 1993, the political wisdom has been that opposition should present "small targets", offering not bold visions of the future, but small increments on the status quo. It is difficult to imagine that this philosophy does not carry through to the way in which a successful opposition goes on to govern the nation.

There has been less sense of Australia as a bold policy entrepreneur in recent years, even though Howard's eight years have been marked by some strong policy initiatives. In the early days of federation, there was a sense that Australia was the "social laboratory of the world". Social reforms (the

minimum wage and the aged pension) and democratic reforms (the secret ballot and the right for women to vote) were implemented in Australia decades before they were put in place in other developed nations. In the 1980s, there were flashes of this: the Higher Education Contribution Scheme and our child support scheme are two policies now being copied. The GST was radical for Australia, and in a broader context it brought us in line with the rest of the developed world. Other initiatives - such as work for the dole, the offshore processing of asylum seekers, or the free trade agreement with America - are more in the nature of incremental amendments to our existing policy infrastructure than bold reforms to bring the rest of the world knocking at our door, asking for policy advice.

Some have also argued that the Howard Government should have done more to engage with voters on matters of economic

reform. As Rod Cameron, one of Australia's most prominent pollsters, noted in 1999: "There were a few brief years in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when ... concerns about the debt, the deficit and the balance of payments really did reach ordinary voters. Times have changed. Macro-economic issues are off the agenda of the general public. And they are off the agenda largely because the Government has stopped forcing them on to that agenda. With the exception of the goods and services tax, the Government is no longer trying to educate the Australian people about the need for continuing reform."

Would a Latham prime ministership be different? It is true that no other federal politician has published so many books, articles and speeches, on so many different topics. Over the campaign, we will discover how many of these ideas have found their way into ALP policies. Latham's other challenge is to weave his many ideas into a consistent story. For the campaign, the "ladder of opportunity" may be sufficient. But if he finds himself in the Lodge, Latham will need to paint on a larger canvas. A committed economic liberal, he will also need to find new ways of engaging with the public on economic matters. From free trade to competition policy, having the right policies will mean little if Latham is unable to articulate the case for economic reform.

So who would make the better leader? If leadership is defined traditionally as an ability to influence and persuade, then Howard is the better leader. If leadership is providing a crucible for communities to address challenges by themselves, there is little to choose between the two. If leadership means policy entrepreneurship, Latham is likely to be ranked ahead of Howard.

The next three weeks will determine not only who will run the nation, but also how history will remember the two who would be prime minister. Will Howard be remembered as he would like - as the Robert Menzies of his age, carrying his party to repeated electoral success before a graceful mid-term retirement? Or will future generations think of him as Stanley Bruce, prime minister from 1923 until 1929, swept aside because of his uncompromising stance on industrial relations, credited with little by way of policy innovation, and largely forgotten?

And will Latham be remembered as a latter-day Gough Whitlam, his political mentor - a political leader who inspired his own adjective (Whitlamesque) and retains a dedicated following nearly 30 years after leaving office? Or is he destined to become the next H.V. Ewart, the most brilliant Opposition leader never to become prime minister?

Dr Andrew Leigh is a Fellow in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University. He is co-editor of *The Prince's New Clothes: Why do Australians Dislike Their Politicians?* and co-author of *Imagining Australia: Ideas for Our Future*. From 1998 to 2000, he served as an adviser to the federal ALP.

TOMORROW
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VOICE OF YOUTH
How the polties can get hip to the groove
Judith Ireland
When it comes to political leadership, the mojo just isn't there for young voters. David Galler, 22, a Sydney barista, thinks politics and leadership is "quite boring at the moment, [older] people are looking for something I think that's a bit more safe and secure - they'd rather have boring". Mimi Zou, 19, a Sydney student and recent representative at the Oxfam International Youth Parliament, agrees there is a difference between what younger and older voters value in a leader. "I look for a leader who has vision, who has innovation, who has creativity and I think they do look for stability; almost predictability," she said. For Felix Eldridge, 21, president of the University of Sydney's student representative council, a good leader is one who unites,

rather than divides, to conquer, "someone who's able to make and stick by the really hard decisions that aren't necessarily popular". Galler also wants a leader with charisma and backbone. "Someone that's very passionate and able to voice those passions in a clear and concise way," he said. Contrary to what the polls indicate, both Zou and Eldridge do not see honesty and good leadership as mutually exclusive. "To be a good leader you have to be honest," Eldridge said. "If you have to lie in order to get people to support you then you're not a good leader." But Galler is not too concerned if leaders do not always behave with respect to honesty. "Sometimes the public doesn't need to know, sometimes it's in their best interest." And besides, "We're talking about politics here," he said. No, you can't forget that famous youth cynicism: "I think a lot of us have grown up not really even expecting our political leaders to be honest ever, whereas you get the impression that older Australians have a little bit more of an expectation," Eldridge said. According to Eldridge, mojo levels in Australian leaders are "massively low". But Zou advises against any aspirational Austin Powers attaching a "Groovy baby, yeah!" to their next policy announcement. Stunts like the Macarena and *Rove Live* appearances are "a bit lame," she said. "In terms of trying to appeal to young people, I think that politicians either don't try or try too hard." Whilst "honesty" and "leadership" may not be mutually exclusive concepts, perhaps "mojo" and "political leaders" are.

Mojo raising ... University of Sydney students Felix Eldridge and Mimi Zou with David Galler. Photo: Wade Laube