

Don't blame Latham for highlighting home truths



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In a dull campaign, Mark Latham's report on *60 Minutes* was one of the more interesting. I know the media censored it. Before it aired, Laurie Oakes told us Latham had "crossed a line". Nothing upsets journalists more than the idea that outsiders can do their job.

Who knows where that could end? The public might realise there is nothing special about the insights of political journalists—a group of people who consider themselves expert on something they have never done.

Maxine McKew is one. Her underwhelming parliamentary career shows how much harder it is to do than it is to pontificate.

Latham had no new insight on the two party leaders and it was stretching things to think Pauline Hanson was relevant.

But Latham was revealing about himself. We could write him off as a madman but let us remember that Labor convinced 5½ million Australians to vote for him to be prime minister two elections ago.

Julia Gillard declared "Mark Latham has made a real connection with Australians" and "Mark's the one who is putting forward a vision for Australia". She said "he's got the capacity to govern". I never agreed with Gillard about this. I never thought much of his judgment nor hers. If you want an example of Gillard's judgment remember she believed Latham would make a good prime minister.

Latham is no John Hewson, who joined his party shortly before nominating for preselection. He was practically born to Labor. When his family needed help, the local Labor branch took up a collection. After university he went to work for Gough Whitlam.

Later he took over his seat. Until he resigned, one way or another he had been employed by the Labor Party for all his adult life. And how is he voting on Saturday? Informal.

There must be a lot of Labor stalwarts doing the same, or voting Green, because Labor's primary vote is at 38 per cent. Last election it was 43.3 per cent. About 700,000 voters have left in three years. If Labor is re-elected, it will be on Green preferences. In fact the election is being fought between two coalitions—the Liberal-National one and the Labor-Green one. The Greens will deliver more votes to their coalition partners than the Nationals will to theirs.

The Labor base is drifting away because it does not see this as a successful government. Labor voters feel let down by hyped-up promises that have not been delivered. All those ACTU advertisements claiming Abbott's election will lead to the return of Work Choices (which has no chance of happening) are to scare the faithful back into the fold.

Latham is a high profile example of a wider disillusion with Labor. He puts it down to stage-managed campaigns and "spin". Another word is insincerity. Gillard has a robotic ability to repeat a phrase, but there is no evidence she cares whether it is accurate. She never deviates from the line—especially not for the facts. Few journalists take her up on detail. They care more about reporting tactics than policy. It is easier for them to go after people who say interesting or unexpected things.

In an interview with Oakes on Sunday, Gillard stated "voting for me is voting for... a budget in surplus". She claimed over and over again that Abbott would cut the surplus. Never once did Oakes ask her which particular surplus she was imagining.

This Labor government has never delivered a surplus. Abbott's task will not be to cut a surplus, but to cut the deficit—forecast by Treasury to be \$40 billion this year. But if Gillard can get away with saying this over and over she will. Some people might even think it is true. If no one pulls her up on it maybe even Gillard will start to think it true. It is a long time since we have had someone leading a government as weak on economic policy as Gillard.

Latham knows Gillard well. He knows she is being manufactured for the campaign. A lot of Labor's heartland thinks the same. Climate change got one mention in the closing seconds of Labor's election launch. That's because Labor no longer thinks the issue is politically useful.

Gillard the warrior of the Victorian Socialist Left has now been recast as the stern ma'am of balanced budgets and cuts to company tax. You'd have to be madder than Latham to believe that is genuine.

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