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Labor's education policy buried by an untrue tale

Anthony Ashbolt, University of Wollongong

There is a perplexing myth pervading journalistic commentary and even Labor party thinking. The persistence and predominance of this myth not only illustrates the power that the media wield and the ignorance they fuel but also shows how a certain mode of thought, including key terms and phrases, saturates public discussion.

We are told constantly, to the point where it has even appeared as 'news' rather than commentary, that Labor's policies on health and education at the 2004 Federal election were disastrous. When Kim Beazley ditched these policies at a press conference on May 3 this year, this was reported as the removal of commitments that were highly controversial and unpopular. Key terms originating from the Liberal Party peppered journalistic commentary on the issue. Thus seasoned ABC interviewer Tony Jones referred to "the private school hit list" when introducing Beazley on Lateline.

How had this phrase become acceptable but not, for example, "the 67 wealthy private schools draining the public purse"? There is a certain economy of style with the term 'hit list' and it resonates with the moral fervour of similar terms in the arsenal of government rhetoric such as 'rogue state' and 'war on terror'. While there was no 'hit list', note how Beazley accepted the Liberal Party's terms of debate: "Look, I think Jenny [Macklin] is interested in making absolutely certain that our education policy is not distracted by a focus on who loses". Public schools lose under the current system of funding, but we cannot let ourselves be distracted by that. Look at Beazley's press release the following day: "I will lift all schools, not drag some down". Latham and the party as a whole had never talked of dragging certain schools down but merely of righting past wrongs whereby an unseemly amount of government funds went to schools more than adequately provided for. These 67 schools quickly became known as the 'hit list', through a combination of Liberal party rhetoric and journalistic laziness.

Ever tempted by the sound bite, commentators could not resist the 'hit list' label. And they were quite taken with that other liberal invention — 'the politics of envy'. Even class found its way in to the media debate. The Labor party was said to be waging 'class war', rather than merely tinkering with a system infected by the politics of class and privilege. We were told by Peter Hartcher and Louise Dodson that "Latham is unafraid to fight as a class warrior". A little later in an interview with the Herald, Howard was to say "I think his educational policies are based on class and envy".

Thus, the scene for the story of Latham was constructed by the Liberal party and painted by the media: a class warrior, pushing the politics of envy and conjuring hit lists like some mafia boss with Marxist leanings — the people saw his policies for what they were and that is why

they destroyed him. A wonderful story, perhaps, but the facts speak otherwise. This is yet another example of the truth being buried by powerful mythologies.

Allow me to put aside the reasons why Labor lost the 2004 election and to instead examine the public record with regard to its education policy. Numerous opinion polls established that it was very popular, as did the worm in the debate between Howard and Latham (which the worm gave to Latham decisively, proving that media gimmicks cannot be reliable predictors of an actual election result, although the debate was rather early in the campaign). Two separate AC Nielsen polls — one in April, the other in early October — established public education as a priority election issue. 86% in the first poll agreed that the Federal Government needed to invest more in public education, while 78% in the second rated public schooling as a significant election policy matter. The most telling poll, however, was one that went against the grain and predicted the massive swing to government. At the time — late September — most polls were showing a close confrontation, with the usually reliable Newspoll having Labor 52.5-47.5 on a two party preferred basis and Morgan 53 to 47, while Galaxy for News Ltd metropolitan papers gave the Government a narrow victory. So polls were tending to favour Labor and at the time even Liberal party insiders acknowledged that Latham's standing was going up as a consequence of his policy announcements, including that concerning education.

The Sydney Morning Herald reported in its weekend edition on September 25 that, against all indications, an AC Nielsen poll showed that support for the coalition had surged to 54% after distribution of preferences. A most reliable poll, as it turned out. And what were its findings on Labor's schools policy? Two-thirds of voters approved 'Labor's policy of redistributing funds from wealthy private schools to needy schools'. Or, as Mark Methereell put it: "Two-thirds of voters have backed Mark Latham's plan to reduce government funding to high-fee paying schools for the benefit of struggling government and private schools." What a difference language can make. There were no hit lists or envious politics or class war in these commentaries, just straightforward reporting. Note that the very voters who would sweep the Government back into power were not deterred by Labor's schools policy at all. Indeed, even Coalition voters all but supported the policy, with 47% indicating 'approval'. Interestingly, the weakest support for Labor's schools policy was amongst those aged over 55 but even then 53% supported it.

Journalistic amnesia is not particularly astonishing in an age of sound bite politics.

More surprising, perhaps, is the fact that the Labor Party has managed to convince itself of the mythology surrounding its electoral loss. Herein lies the sad tale of a party without conviction or direction.