

LATHAM & ABBOTT: The Lives and Rivalry of The Two Finest Politicians of Their Generation

By Michael Duffy, Random House, 2004, Paperback: RRP \$A32.95
ISBN: 1740513185

THE TWO MOST LIKELY

Reviewer: Christian Kerr*

Who remembers the great campaign bio slip of 1993? No takers? Trish Worth, drafted in late as Liberal candidate for the marginal seat of Adelaide, was photographed for *The Bulletin* holding a copy of Christine Wallace's biography of John Hewson. Scandal! Norman Abjorensen's Hewson book was the set text for budding Coalition MPs.

It was a diversion amongst insiders for a few days of a wearying campaign, a diversion soon forgotten. Worth won. Hewson lost. And both books ended up in the remainder shops.

Will any of the sudden rash of Mark Latham books make it into second editions? Will they be going half price by Christmas? It must be a conundrum for authors and publishers.

Craig McGregor and Pluto Press skirted the problem by getting *Australian Son: Inside Mark Latham* out first. Margaret Simons chose the *Quarterly Essay* option. Barry Donovan has used his Labor links to produce the book for the true believers, *Mark Latham: The Circuitbreaker*. Former Sydney Morning Herald journalist Bernard Lagan plans a Latham work for Allen and Unwin that will take in the election campaign. Mungo McCallum is waiting to see which way the cards fall. And publisher, journalist and commentator Michael Duffy has cleverly hedged his bets with a book with a life beyond the 2004 election.

Latham & Abbott: The lives and rivalry of the two finest politicians of their generation serves as a snapshot of Australian politics on the eve of the 2004 election.

There's a mention of Howard, the Prime Minister "whose cramped personal style was reflected in the weird lawyer's way he dealt with broken promises. Most prime ministers simply abandon election policies, but Howard had to invent a new phraseology — 'core' and 'non-core' promises — in a tortuous attempt to justify what he was doing, which simply drew more attention to it". This, however, is just incidental — even though an extrapolation of these few lines would explain much of the Prime Minister's and the Government's approach on issues ranging from breaches of the Ministerial Code of Conduct in its first eighteen months to the most recent allegations about the kids overboard incident.

* Christian Kerr is a postgraduate student at the University of Adelaide, political commentator and former state and federal Liberal ministerial adviser.

Duffy's focus remains instead on his two protagonists, rather than the circumstances they find themselves in.

Abbott and Latham are significant figures. Duffy is right when he says at the very beginning of the book that "the rivalry matters because of the quality of the rivals, and the significance influence both could have in the future".

His comment just towards the end "despite all they have done, and all they have had done to them, they still believe" is true. The conclusion "Abbott and Latham both come from the thinking centre of Australian politics, whose great strength has been its even mixture of inspiration and pragmatism. (It is the glory of our parliamentary democracy that it has always oscillated around this centre, self-correcting any extremism.)" is just as correct.

Latham and Abbott is an enjoyable, thoughtful and thorough book. If it has a flaw, however, it is how Duffy himself has balanced out inspiration and pragmatism in assessing his subjects.

Latham's "club-busting", from Liverpool Council onward, is surely practical economic and policy reform designed to benefit the social strata he comes from based on his own empirical observation. Is it really "impossible to put all his ideas in a box", as Duffy says?

Latham may have quoted "Peter Ackroyd, Lewis Carroll, Winston Churchill, Benjamin Disraeli, and Churchill" in his items for the Liverpool Rugby Football Club newsletter, but despite all his influences surely he is simply an intelligent, pragmatic and open minded modern social democrat.

If one of the two is "a maddie" — in the Tony Benn sense, please note — it must be Abbott. Bob Santamaria is an unlikely inspiration for a North Shore boy of his generation with a professional background and a Jesuit education

His successes as Employment Services and Health Minister have required around \$5 billion of extra funds between them — and a lot of help from his mentor, John Howard. Duffy correctly emphasises how significant Howard's patronage has been to Abbott's career, how it compensated for Abbot's lack of formal involvement with the Liberal Party and how, no doubt, it will be crucial to his future. The Prime Minister looks like the father of the bride in the picture of the two facing page 217.

Duffy also makes much of Abbott's attempts to re-invent welfare and taxation to create a new work and family package.

He rightly quotes Latham saying "can anyone remember the last time Peter Costello gave a serious speech on economic reform?". That is why this book is called Latham and Abbott, not Latham and Costello.

But they have come to nothing. The closest we have at the 2004 election is Labor's Tax and Better Family Payments Plan — credited to Mark Latham. ▲
