

Finding the courage to be incomparable

Wednesday, December 01, 2004

Moira Rayner

This week in *The Valkyries*, second opera in Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, Wotan, as omnipotent leader of a decadent and incestuous family of the gods, punishes his beloved but free-thinking daughter, Brunnhilde, for disobeying his express order to let his son die in battle, because he promised his powerful wife that he would.

He casts this mighty, smart, loving and loyal woman into a deep sleep from which she is to be roused by the mortal who will bring about the gods' complete destruction, the *Gotterdammerung*. It might have been different, Wagner suggests, if only the Leader had not made and broken promises, and kept some, not all, of his treaties.

Mark Latham might have seen himself in Adelaide this week.

One reason Latham became Opposition leader was uppity, loyal but independent women. The ALP and the 'bear pit' of Parliament are both hostile environments to women. The worst hurt are those who imagine they can transcend, like Cheryl Kernot, through personal charm and privileged relationships, and those who imagine they are honorary blokes soon find out that only those who can perform standing up are really accepted on equal terms in the Men's Room. The wiser majority of women collaborate with and support one another.

Some, though by no means all Labor parliamentary women belong to EMILY's List, formally launched in 1996 to fund ('Early Money Is Like Yeast'), support and mentor preselected, progressive (significantly, but not limited to, pro-choice) women Parliamentary candidates. This group is widely and rightly credited with getting more ALP women into Parliament over the last eight years than in the previous ninety. Their challenge is to change the way politics are done to improve the lives of Australian women whose priorities and life experiences are, actually, different from blokes'.

Traditional ALP powerbrokers do not particularly like EMILY's List, which raises its own money and decides how to spend it, conducts its own electoral research and isn't faction-controlled. Some see EMILY's List much as the current Pope supposedly regards women, as unnatural, suspect and destructive. Others, such as the national treasure I recently interviewed for my Joan Kirner biography blame the organization, illogically, for the factions' poor candidate selection, yet a Victorian factional warhorse (retired) snarled to me that its members were, 'those bloody women that can't be trusted'.

When it came to women's interests and policy decisions they wouldn't necessarily follow factional instructions.

When Simon Crean's leadership was doomed and a choice had to be made between a boofhead and a bullfrog, senior women sounded out the concerns of candidates on EMILY's List. Beazley made it clear that he would act on the factional warlords' advice; Latham listened, courteously and with apparent humility, and it seemed that he, at least, was capable of thinking independently and would even move a little on women's issues. Some of those EMILY's List women voted against factional instructions in the leadership ballot and Latham got over the line.

It was not a surprise that immediately after the election fiasco the factional dinosaurs started muttering about chucking the women's preselection quota and attacking Latham's flexibility as a weakness in public and in 'off the record' briefings, using code that he 'failed to take advice' on the campaign.

Perhaps a more significant reason for campaign mistakes was hinted at in Paul Kelly's *Weekend Australian* article of 27-28 November ['Losing It – Inside Latham's Campaign'] which cited an anonymous (obviously, female) member of Latham's staff description of the Leader's office as: ' . . . A toxic workplace . . . There was a swinging-dick group-think culture – it was a horrible atmosphere.'

Oppressive groups are not uncommon. People value like-mindedness: it is what allows human beings to form groups and keep them together. There is such a tremendous survival factor in generally agreeing about basic things such as the 'greater good' of a group, that the powerful urge to consensus probably goes back to the dawn of human society, when small and vulnerable family groups first formed tribes then larger communities for self-defence. But we cannot ignore the fact that groups suppress by consensus, too, and that ultimately this destroys the groups' capacity to adapt, and survive.

One can hardly blame Latham alone for any 'toxic' environment, though he did choose to keep on Simon Crean's Chief of Staff, Mike Richards, known to some as a government head-kicker in the early nineties and, to others as an assistant Editor picked by then newly appointed *Age* Editor, Bruce Guthrie, in the mid 1990s. Richards' people skills, sensitivity to women's issues and empathy were neither legendary nor indeed evident in that robust, if not masculinist, environment, either.

Paul Keating once championed Mark Latham as the hope of the Labor Party, because he had a heart and the fire in his belly. That wasn't enough. Becoming a factional creature, as Beazley did, or trying to placate the various factional interests in the Labor Party, or pursuing the objectives of other parties such as the Greens won't be enough either.

What will do it is as simple and unoriginal as getting in tune with the true diversity of the people, which Mark Latham may choke on a little, given his attack on 'élites' and the 'special interest' claims of multiculturalism, feminism, human rights and old-fashioned unionism – in his 1997 book, *Civilising Global Capital*.

But you don't have to be a feminist or any other kind of idealist to find the real, solid arguments for not surrounding yourself with faces just like the one in your shaving mirror; or for 'representative' faces, or making cautious and factionally approved policy shuffles, as Beazley did; or becoming an 'intellectual' or habitué of Institute speakers' circles, as a few too many former ALP 'decision-makers' have done. The business argument will do.

A recently published study by US academics Zuckerman and Reagans, from Stanford University and Columbia Business School, respectively, of how 'diverse' workplace teams operated, came to a conclusion that might seem, in retrospect, to be bleedingly obvious. Most truths are. Success depended on how well team members communicated with each other, and how much people of different backgrounds talked to one another, and the two were inter-related.

But it also depended on whether or not workplace leaders had anticipated and provided means for dealing with the inevitable tensions caused by unexpected communications and 'diverse' cultural values. Groups that were too much alike found it much harder to be innovative, because their members contributed much less variety to the pot of ideas. Groups marked by disparities in age, gender, culture, racial or ethnic identity, status and work roles were far more likely to come up with a variety, including wild and 'off the map' ideas, of solutions to difficult problems. They were also much more likely to be the source of tension and arguments. Bleeding obvious? Of course: creativity and difference creates tension from which the energy flows, or blows.

Our most successful groups don't reward groupthink; don't enforce conformity of opinions through petty coercion such as disapproval and exclusion – we all fear rejection. The most creative groups expect tensions and misunderstandings and set up constructive ways to deal with them up front; they have sophisticated skills in negotiating the reefs of disapproval.

In coercive working environments moral and intellectual courage is needed because you risk disapproval by expressing an unpopular view. This is actually harder than racing into a burning building and rescuing the baby on the second floor: everyone recognises that moral demand, but we do not readily see the necessity to express and argue different points of view, because of individual judgments and perceptions. These differences really do threaten group cohesion and identity, because they challenge the acceptance of some of the rules and values that keep the group together, over which there

can be no 'consensus'. It takes courage for a 'leader' to identify and stop 'groupthink'. For political survival it is essential.

The usual media commentators, group-thinking too, are virtually unanimous in blaming the ALP's election campaign failure on Latham's personal lack of judgment. It was, rather, a triumph for Howard's corruption of 'trust'. Mark Latham did not trust his advisers and he was getting white noise and static because he did not have the people's program properly on the station. Perhaps we should just admit that Latham didn't have the time or, in the circumstances, the confidence to get the right team and on the right wavelength.

Hannah Ahrendt once wrote that 'Total loyalty is possible only when fidelity is emptied of all concrete content, from which changes of mind might naturally arise.' If there is to be any challenge to the hegemony of a right-wing agenda this man has to be given the time to prove what the EMILY's List women thought they had found in him: the courage to be uncomfortable; the capacity to change.

About the author

Moira Rayner is the Deputy Managing Director for the Council for Equal Opportunity in Employment Limited, a lawyer and a writer.

Comments

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Well highlighted Moira, I too picked up on that phrase (swinging-dick group-think culture) in the article, and wondered what the background was. It was as if it was Latham's fault that the office was like that, but gave no idea of why. And the EMILY's list link up makes more sense of some aspects of Latham's failure to connect.

However, nitpicking, I think the feature was written by Cameron Stewart and not Paul Kelly.

Judy Horton

Wednesday, December 01, 2004

I thought Moira Rayner's article was "spot-on". Many people I spoke to before the election spoke of Mark Latham as being a "breath of fresh air". Hopefully the women in the party will continue to influence him. I believe John Howard was floundering until he hit the panic button over interest rates and that fear was the winning card in the election.

TJ Furlong

Wednesday, December 01, 2004

At last someone has come out and said something positive about Mark Latham. I applaud Moira Raynor for her insightful article. I joined the Labor Party when Latham became leader because I found him inspiring, possessing a rare gift to make often dull and complicated policy material easily understood. And, like the feisty women who belong to Emily's List, capable of "the courage to be uncomfortable; the capacity to change". The ALP made that bold, brave and exciting generational leap last year to elect him and plunge the party into the 21st Century. I believe, given time, he has the capacity to transform the Labor Party and make it relevant. This is vital if it is going to "adapt and survive"

I have been appalled by those "factional dinosaurs", together with other superannuated former party associates, spewing their sour opinions to a media, who, since the election, are obsessed with and insatiable for anti-Latham gossip to gorge themselves upon.

But Latham is strong and smart and hopefully will tough it out. He may need to get more in touch with his feminine side, but at least he has one. It angers me intensely that passion and a mercurial personality are not qualities to be celebrated

in this bland, safe and conservative political landscape, that offers instead congratulations for mediocrity. I find one of Latham's strengths is his refreshing candor, naturalness and ease in communicating like a 'real person'. Isn't that what we admire in a leader!!

If the party machine dumps Latham the ALP will look even more like a bunch of dysfunctional, unelectable losers, condemned forever to oblivion. It must stick to its guns otherwise all will be lost. Including my leadership. I will take great delight in cutting up my membership card and sending it in to party headquarters.

rosalie lester

Thursday, December 02, 2004

Spot on Rosalie Lester, Mark Latham does comes across as a real person. Until this country has a voting system where people can check if their vote has offically been counted, we will never really know. In the elections, I heard on the news that one town had Labor and Liberals neck and neck, shock horror a box of fifty ballots is found putting Labor in the lead. Since when do boxes of ballot papers go missing? Why don't people in high places, that believe in a fair system, realise everybody needs to be able to -CHECK IF THEIR VOTE HAS BEEN OFFICALLY COUNTED AFTER VOTING. The Australian and US elections seemed to run exactly the same before, during and after. Does anybody check the voting books to see if anyone has voted more than once? Is it a worry Family First has a parent party in the US? As Kerry said in the US, we don't want our jobs outsourced to India, China etc. to make the corporates bigger profits, we need the jobs here to keep Australians and New Australians employed. How can the powers that be, engage in putting this incredible country, (that has given it's people so much) on the world stage to be to be raped by the corporates. Apparently Australia is seen by some of our international friends as AN OVER RIPE FRUIT TREE, HEAVY WITH FRUIT, JUST READY FOR THE PICKING"

M Hancock

Saturday, December 04, 2004

Bravo, Moira!

That article is a collector's item, like Hugh Mackay's for Fairfax (4/12).

How will Mark Latham know he is getting at diversity of opinion? What will he do to get beyond Labor's dynasties and connubial nests?

I would like to recommend Julie Owens' (Parramatta) first speech. Her background is so different. Is it likely there will be a black woman in the House? There's a challenge for Labor, but they'd better be quick. If I was John Howard ...

Trevor Kerr

Saturday, December 04, 2004

'NewMatilda will not publish material that is untrue or seeks to defame'

How about: 'much as the current Pope supposedly regards women...' etc.,

