

Playing the game Howard's way

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The Prime Minister still calls the shots in the contest between Liberal and Labor over policies, writes Anne Summers.

The totally over-the-top hyperbole about politicians' apparent plagiarism of words has diverted attention from far more significant examples of policy rustling.

The battle between Mark Latham and John Howard is no longer just a traditional political contest where each strives for psychological mastery over the other. It has become much more like a joust, a medieval contest where horse-riding combatants kitted out in armour charge each other with a long lance aiming to knock the other off balance. In the current contest, the lances have been replaced by policies but the deadly strategies of the game are the same: how to knock your opponent off his perch, thereby unnerving him and perhaps even inflicting some serious political damage.

This is what has been happening for most of this year, with the Opposition leader assuming the armour of the Green Valley Gazumper to charge down the field to take on the Kirribilli Kid.

And the Gazumper has been able to notch up some wins. He jumped in first to announce that a Labor government would get rid of ATSIC, so that when the Prime Minister rolled out the same policy a week later he looked lame, like an also-ran.

The same thing happened with the so-called crisis in masculinity, the latest example of moral panic. Last year Howard bemoaned the lack of role models for boys because of the preponderance of female teachers and the ever-increasing number of female-headed sole-parent families. His arguments were largely ignored so he must have been hugely frustrated when the Gazumper picked up the same themes earlier this year and created a media storm with his contention that there is a crisis in masculinity.

This jousting and gazumping have been fun to watch. The newly familiar sight of a discomfited Prime Minister is a fascinating one. But however uncomfortable Howard might appear in the nightly news, it would be a mistake to assume that his seemingly being outmanoeuvred in the battle is going to cost him the war.

Latham might be getting in first, but he is still dancing to Howard's tune.

The clearest - and most egregious - example of this happened with Labor's baby care package. That policy, announced late last month, promises a \$3000 payment, spread over 14 weeks, to new mothers. The payment, of \$429 a fortnight in 2005 (it will rise in subsequent years), is made regardless of the new mother's employment status and is not taxable. It is, in any terms, a very generous and welcome policy that recognises the costs of having a baby.

The Prime Minister has let it be known to journalists over the past couple of years that he had under consideration a similar scheme: a universal maternity payment of between \$3000 and \$5000. It was no secret in Canberra that a work and family task

force from the Prime Minister's Department had recommended something along these lines and that cabinet had decided at a meeting late last year to adopt the recommendation.

By holding off on making the announcement, the Government risked the report being leaked - which is what happened - and having Labor steal its thunder by adopting the policy first - which also happened.

But who has actually lost out here?

Certainly not John Howard. Rather, it is working mothers who have become the (perhaps unintended) victims of the jousting between the Gazumper and the Kid.

In making his announcement, Latham said, "Labor's baby care payment delivers on Labor's commitment to introduce 14 weeks' paid maternity leave."

It does no such thing. The reality is that in its eagerness to gazump the Government's policy Labor has ditched its promise to provide a national paid maternity leave scheme.

While the baby care payment is generous as a welfare measure, it does not cut the mustard as paid maternity leave, a policy that is predicated on an ongoing attachment to the labour force and whose payments are tied to a woman's previous earnings. Even the no-frills, low-cost model proposed by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Pru Goward, last year would have women receiving income replacement capped at the minimum weekly wage. This would have amounted to \$431 a week for 14 weeks - more than double what Labor proposes to pay all mothers.

So why did Labor ditch a promise it had made such a big deal out of as recently as the ALP national conference in January this year? The answer seems to be that gazumping Government policy has become a more pressing political imperative than delivering alternatives to the current regime.

But this particular stolen policy had its own built-in political premises, the key one being that it should be an alternative to paid maternity leave which the Kirribilli Kid finds ideologically abhorrent.

The Government's work and family taskforce report said the intention of the policy was "to redesign the delivery of the baby bonus so it mimics the effect of a paid maternity-leave scheme". Mimics, mind you. Does not actually deliver.

So in gazumping Howard's maternity allowance policy, Labor has been inveigled into abandoning one of its core promises to women and instead has promised to implement a policy that is so close to the Prime Minister's heart - that of treating stay-at-home mothers in the same way as employed ones - that it might as well be Howard who is campaigning on it.

As things stand, the Green Valley Gazumper might be scoring lots of political points, but it's the Kirribilli Kid who is running policy. It's time to change that.

Last week, in his much-maligned speech on Australian identity, Latham committed to "equal rights and opportunities for women: quality child care, our baby care payment and no weakening of the Sex Discrimination Act". It's been a long time since a federal leader made such promises, and his words were a welcome assurance that women have not disappeared from the political agenda.

It's not something Howard would ever say and indeed much of his policy has gone in the opposite direction. There's nothing useful to be stolen there.

If Latham can set aside his penchant for gazumping and just concentrate on delivering policies that differentiate him from the incumbent (and that includes restoring paid maternity leave to his policy docket), then his chances of displacing the Kirribilli Kid, and of creating a real difference, will be very much enhanced.

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