

Policy Launch Speech: Mark Latham, Opposition Leader (ALP)

Brisbane, September 29 2004

“My message today comes straight from the people of Australia. It's a message to the people, drawn from the strength and wisdom of the people. From the Australians I've been privileged to meet, across the vast suburbs and regions of our nation, over the past 10 months. And the millions of their fellow-Australians they represent. Today I want to speak on their behalf.

I want to talk about opportunity, responsibility and honesty - the key themes of this great campaign for a new Labor Government.

This message comes from the heart - the big heart of the Australian people themselves. It's from the people - and all that I have learned about their concerns, their needs and their aspirations for the future - that I see a real urgency in this campaign. The urgent need to change now.

The urgent need for an Australian Labor Government. Unless we change now, it will be too late to save Medicare - too late to increase bulk-billing and improve our public hospital system.

Unless we change now, it will be too late for the fairness of our education system - too late for needs-based funding in our schools and new opportunities at TAFE and university. Unless we change now, it will be too late for the families under financial pressure - too late to solve the family debt crisis and deliver tax relief for all Australian taxpayers.

Unless we change now, it will be too late for the security and safety of our nation - too late to shift policy and resources to our part of the world, getting it right in Asia in the fight against terror. And unless we change now, it will be too late for the basic decency and honesty of government in this country - too late to restore truth in government and end the deceit and buck-passing of the Howard years.

Australia needs these changes. And Labor is ready to make them, before it's too late.

I have listened to the Australian people, and now I have the privilege of speaking for them - in presenting the key elements of Labor's plan for the future.

Our plan for a stronger, safer and fairer Australia. Our plan to grow the Australian economy by investing more in skills and education, by creating incentive and rewarding hard work, by reforming the Trade Practices Act and helping small business.

Our plan to use this prosperity well, to ensure that the hard work and enterprise of the Australian people delivers a social benefit: the world-class health and education services we need for the future of our children.

Our plan for uniting the Australian people around a sense of common purpose and participation in the whole work and life of the community. Our plan for new opportunities for all Australians. Our big ambition for this great country of ours.

And given the size of these tasks - saving Medicare, lifting educational opportunity and securing the nation - Australia needs a Prime Minister fully committed to the long haul. We need a Prime Minister who trusts the people, who tells them the truth about the great issues of war and peace.

And when things go wrong, a Prime Minister who is big enough to take responsibility and not blame others. We need a Prime Minister who will take the people into his confidence, not least about his own intentions.

It's urgent to bring a new energy, a new accountability to Australia's biggest job. And that's the difference between Labor and the Liberals. We've got a great public plan for the future. Mr Howard's got a private plan for retirement. I'm ready to lead. He's ready to leave.

I have a simple goal: to give Australia a government as good as the Australian people themselves, to bring new drive and ideas to the leadership of the nation. Mr Howard, too, has a simple goal: he wants the electorate to help him beat Bob Hawke in the Guinness Book of Records. That's the big difference in this campaign.

Mr Howard sees it as a lap of honour. I see it as an honour to serve, to muster all my passion and commitment for the long-term service of the Australian people. I say: if you truly love this country, if you truly respect its people, no one could run to be Prime Minister with anything less than a full commitment to the job.

I couldn't do it. And I don't know how Mr Howard can claim to believe in Australia when he refuses to be honest and open with the Australian people themselves.

But perhaps we shouldn't be too hard on him. There is, of course, one promise Mr Howard has kept in full. There's one goal he and his Coalition colleagues have pursued relentlessly for eight years - and that's the destruction of Medicare. This has been one of the great ding-dong battles of Australian public life. A battle of principle on health policy.

The Coalition pursuing the privatisation of health - a system based on private insurance and private care. Labor investing in one tier of quality health care for all Australians. The Coalition preferring a two-tier system - private health insurance for the top tier and a second class service for everyone else.

That's what they believe in. Last year Mr Howard was asked about his preferred health policy. And he said that he liked the system we had at the beginning of the 1970s. None of us should forget what he was talking about.

That was a time when a large number of Australian families had no health insurance - public or private. They had to make that terrible choice in life between food on the table and the health care of their children. It's the reason why Labor Governments introduced Medibank and then Medicare - to provide a decent level of public health insurance for all Australians. A health system based on the medical needs of the patient, not the size of their bank account.

John Howard has opposed Medicare ever since. When he first led the Liberal Party he said that he wanted to "take a scalpel to Medicare". Last month his Deputy John

Anderson said that country people wanted and needed a two-tier health system. Well, that's what this election is all about. It's a referendum on the future of Medicare.

Do we want the Coalition to take us further down the American road of privatised health - a two tier system? Do we want to give John Howard another chance to put his scalpel into Medicare? Or do we want a Labor Government with a plan to save Medicare? Just one tier. One world-class health care system for all Australians.

We set up this system, we're proud of it and we're going to bring it back to its full health. Labor believes in Medicare. It's good public policy. But it also says something special about who we are, about the things that make us uniquely Australian. It says that in our country, if you get sick then someone will care for you. It says that the Australian people look out for each other. That we help our mates and those in need.

No one gets left behind. No one gets left without decent hospital care, without the availability of a bulk-billing doctor. That's what makes it Medicare. And that's why Labor believes in it. It's universal. It's for the many, not just the few.

The Liberals talk about a safety net. But you don't need a safety net unless you've turned the health system into a highwire act and families are in danger of falling off. Labor doesn't believe in a safety net. We believe in Medicare. And we'll never surrender, we'll never give up on increasing the rate of bulk-billing. We want to get it back to a national rate of 80 per cent.

That's why a Labor Government will: immediately increase the patient rebate by \$5 for every bulk-billed consultation; provide incentive payments of up to \$22,500 for doctors who reach bulk-billing targets; introduce Medicare After-Hours - GP clinics and services that stretch well into the night; and we'll train thousands of extra doctors and nurses around Australia.

In communities where bulk-billing has collapsed, we'll provide Medicare Teams - salaried doctors and nurses to deliver bulk-billing services. Labor will also work with the States to upgrade our public hospital system.

When the Coalition finds an extra dollar in the budget, they spend it on private health. Labor's top priority is public health - investing in public hospitals, reducing out-of-pocket expenses and cutting waiting lists.

The Howard Government has taken almost a billion dollars out of public hospital funding to the States. Labor will put it back in. We'll invest an extra \$350 million in capital improvements for emergency departments - clearing the backlog, getting the patients off trolleys and into hospital beds. We'll also provide an extra 2.4 million specialist treatments for outpatients in public hospitals, free-of-charge.

This is Labor's vision for the health system. Families who can find a bulk-billing doctor. Patients who move quickly through emergency departments and then have available to them the best doctors, nurses and medical technology - services free-of-charge in public hospitals. Quality health care for all.

To make this vision real, we always need to do more. Mr Howard is waging war on Medicare. I want to build a fortress around it. In particular, we must do more for our senior citizens. I can't stomach a system where elderly Australians are left on hospital waiting lists for long periods of time.

Our senior citizens have served this country well. They've defended it during times of war. They've won peace and built our prosperity. The measure of our civilisation, the test for Australians of my generation, is how we treat them in return.

You know, I'm part of the lucky generation. We've fought no world wars. We've seen no depressions. We've enjoyed a national dividend of peace and prosperity secured by older Australians. Surely now, it's time to say thank you. And to treat our senior citizens as they have treated us. With honour and respect. And the best way of honouring their service to Australia is to give them the world's best health system. To get them off waiting lists and into hospital beds as quickly as possible.

Today I can announce the greatest extension in Federal responsibility for hospital care in this country since the introduction of Medibank 30 years ago. A Federal Labor Government will take full responsibility for the hospital costs of Australians aged 75 and over. We will ensure that they can access a hospital bed - public or private - straight away.

No more delays. No more waiting lists for our oldest Australians. This is an important extension of the universal coverage of Medicare. We call it Medicare Gold.

In some parts of Australia, our senior citizens can wait up to 12 months for hip, knee and eye operations. Medicare Gold will give them a hospital bed straight away. Public hospitals will receive additional funding to improve the services they provide for Australians aged over 75.

Labor will also pay for private hospital beds, under agreements finalised with the private hospital system. As a result, senior Australians will no longer need to take out private health insurance for hospital care. The costs will be covered by a Federal Labor Government.

Medicare Gold is a great advance for our national health system. It ends the old, inefficient divide between public versus private hospitals and Commonwealth versus State funding. It will also deliver significant benefits for Australians under 75 - taking the pressure off public hospitals and reducing the cost of private health insurance.

People aged 75 and over make up five per cent of the private insurance pool, but account for 23 per cent of hospital benefits paid out by the private funds.

Under Medicare Gold, these costs will be met by the Commonwealth, allowing the funds to reduce their hospital insurance premiums by at least 12 per cent. Labor will regulate to ensure these savings are passed onto the public.

That's the advantage of Medicare Gold: extending Medicare into universal hospital coverage - public and private - for Australians aged 75 and over; reducing hospital waiting lists for all age groups; and providing better value for money with private hospital insurance - savings of more than 12 per cent. It's a gold-plated Medicare system - Medicare Gold. And only a Labor Government will deliver it.

My fellow Australians, there's another waiting list we must also confront. Another service we must provide to our senior citizens. Currently there are more than 500,000 Australians, most of them elderly, waiting for months and years, just to have their teeth fixed. Mr Howard axed the previous Federal program and said that the States had to look after dental care. I say: it's a national responsibility, part of the care and consideration we owe our senior Australians.

That's why a Labor Government will create a national dental program: a \$300 million investment with an extra 1.3 million dental treatments for aged pensioners and health card holders.

This will clear away the existing backlog and give our senior citizens what they deserve: the care of a civilised society in getting their teeth fixed up. They've served our country well. Now we must honour and serve their needs, through Medicare Gold and a national dental program.

When I became Labor Leader I said that I would listen to the Australian people. I said that I would open up the political process - a new politics of community forums and consultation. I promised to reform politicians' entitlements, starting with the parliamentary superannuation scheme. And I delivered.

Many of the people coming to our community forums have been senior Australians. Aged pensioners have told me how they're struggling financially under the Howard Government. Their incomes are fixed, but the cost of living keeps on rising - with higher health costs, bank fees and the impact of the GST. They're frustrated that the government only adjusts their pension twice a year.

I say: six months is too long to wait for assistance. It's too long to wait for a cost of living increase in the pension. I've listened to these concerns and now I want to deliver a solution.

A Labor Government will increase the pension four times a year. We'll introduce quarterly indexation - increases in June and December, in addition to March and September. These new arrangements will start on June 20 next year, with an increase in the fortnightly pension of around \$5 for singles and \$8 for couples. The cost of living doesn't stand still for six months between pension increases. The pension shouldn't be frozen either.

Labor will index it every quarter. We'll ease the financial pressure on Australia's pensioners. Our policy will benefit Age Pensioners, DVA Service Pensioners, Carer Pensioners, Disability Pensioners, Sole Parent Pensioners, Wife and Widow Pensioners.

There's another group of senior Australians who have been coming to my community forums. They're grandparents who, late in life, have taken care and custody of their grandchildren. Having moved into retirement, they now face the renewed challenge of raising young children - with all the costs and pressure this involves.

These grandparents deserve our support. They're providing love and devotion to children in need. The Australian Government needs to provide them with new forms of financial support. Today I can announce that Labor will introduce a new Grandparenting Allowance, worth \$20 per week for each child. This will benefit over 27,000 grandparents around Australia who have primary care of their grandchildren.

And I say: they deserve every cent of it. They're unsung heroes in our society.

This is one of the great goals of Labor's campaign: lifting the financial pressure on the families and senior Australians doing it tough. Just four months ago, on Budget night, these were the forgotten Australians: the hard workers on 30, 40 and 50 thousand dollars a year who missed out on a tax cut; the pensioners and self-funded retirees who were also ignored.

Well, Labor hasn't forgotten them. Our Tax and Family Plan will ease the squeeze on middle Australia. It will put incentive and reward for effort back into the Australian economy.

Under Labor all those Australian taxpayers earning under \$52,000 a year (including self-funded retirees) will get a tax cut of up to \$8 a week - \$416 a year. With the rising cost of buying a home and raising a family, people earning over \$80,000 a year also need incentive.

That's why Labor will lift the threshold for the top marginal tax rate. Plus we'll help families with a better family payments system. Combining payments into one, simpler scheme and raising the point at which the means test starts from \$33,000 to \$50,000. For a typical middle Australian family, this means an extra \$70-80 a week.

We'll also overcome the family debt crisis which has harmed 1.4 million Australian families. We'll end the nightmare of having to haggle with Centrelink about undeserved debts to the government. And a Labor Government will introduce income splitting for the benefit of single income couples - two tax free thresholds to help families where one partner stays at home. For 30 years Mr Howard has been talking about income splitting. But now, only Labor will deliver.

For the disadvantaged, our plan offers new opportunities in life. We need to confront the problem of 800,000 Australian children growing up in jobless households. We know what this leads to: poverty, poor health, increased crime rates and, worst of all, lack of hope. This is the national shame we face as citizens under the Howard Government.

There are three answers to this problem: participation, participation and more participation. By offering incentive and services, we can bring more people into the labour market, and give our young people the best example they need in life - parents who work. So if you want to know what our tax policy means in one line, it's this: fairness, aspiration and participation. A fairer go for Australian families.

Our plans for the nation are fully costed and fully funded. We're the only party in this campaign that's been making budget savings. The only party willing to respect the budget surplus. The only party putting downward pressure on interest rates. For me, that's not just a policy. It's a personal commitment. Janine and I have got a great, big mortgage. We live in a mortgage belt street. We come from a mortgage belt community. We know the importance of responsible economic management, of keeping interest rates low.

The Howard-Costello Government is the highest taxing government in Australia's history. There is no shortage of funds flowing into Canberra. Our task is to make better use of this money: to cut waste and mismanagement, to reorder priorities. And that's what Labor has been doing. So far, we have identified more than \$27 billion in savings, with another half-a-billion announced this morning. Responsible economic management.

Budgets are about choices. And Labor's choice is to cut bureaucracy and wasteful spending to make way for our investments in education and health. That's our priority: cutting at the centre of government and delivering new programs and opportunities for families and communities on the edge. It's good economic policy, and it's good for the fairness of our society.

There's another area where the Howard Government has followed a user pays approach - the education of our children. The Liberals and Nationals always run down the education system. Always. It's only Labor that believes in opportunity for all. And sees education as the greatest of all opportunities. We believe in the next generation of young Australians. And a Labor Government will invest in their future. Reading books to our infant children - building literacy when it really matters, early in life.

Plus we'll extend the principles of public education into our child care and preschool systems: a free day of learning for three and four year olds. Something more than child minding - early childhood development. And when our children go to school, we need to give them a fair funding system so that every Australian school can be a high-achievement school.

You know, I'm a very different person to Mr Howard. But the biggest difference is this. He sees a school like Kings in Sydney, with its vast resources, its boat shed and its rifle range, and he says: "that's the sort of school that needs a 200% funding increase". I see schools in this country that haven't even got libraries or computers.

And my response: engage in any debate, take on any political fight, do whatever it takes to give these schools a fair share of funding. Give them a library - books to read and computers to use. Give these students a life full of opportunity and social justice. For me, it doesn't matter whether they are government or non- government schools.

Our policy is about the fair funding of schools, not who runs them. Under Labor's new system, all schools will be funded on the basis of need. We will bring every Australian school up to a high national standard of resources and achievement. The overall funding level for non-government schools will be maintained, but with a fairer pattern of distribution. Needy Catholic, Christian and Independent schools will receive an extra \$520 million, at the expense of wealthy schools like Kings and Geelong Grammar

Labor will also provide an extra \$1.9 billion for government schools - lifting them up to our national standard of resources and results. For the most disadvantaged parts of our society, they have one great hope in life: the neighbourhood government school at the end of their street. It's their passport out of poverty. As Prime Minister, I won't rest until that hope is fulfilled. Until we can give every parent - not just some, but every parent - the most important guarantee and choice in life: no matter where they send their children, they will find a quality education.

Under Labor's plan, 19 out of 20 students will be better off - increased funding for 9,500 schools. That's what I call equity in action. And at the end of the school years, I don't want any talented child who has worked hard and studied hard to have to pause for a moment to see if they can afford a higher education.

It goes against the great Australian principle that rewards in life should flow from talent and hard work, not your bank balance. That's why Labor will create 20,000 new university places and 20,000 new TAFE places, without the need for higher fees and student debt. Before the last election, Mr Howard denied he was planning to create \$100,000 degrees.

Now there are nearly 50 courses that cost that much. You know, it must have been a non-core promise. There will be no \$100,000 university degrees under Labor. We'll stop the Howard Government's 25 per cent increase in HECS and abolish its full-fee system.

And my fellow Australians, let's not forget that the skills and quality of our society relies on more than a good education system. It relies on the quality of all our public institutions, especially our national public broadcaster. That's why Labor will restore the independence of the ABC, and restore its funding - an extra \$105 million. Plus, we'll run Australia's telecommunications system in the public interest. That means keeping Telstra in majority public ownership. There'll be no Telstra privatisation on my watch.

And as we look to the future of our children, let's not forget the greatest intergenerational challenge of them all - saving our planet. Australia must play a role in the international struggle against global warming. Our national icons are at stake: the coral bleaching and destruction of the Great Barrier Reef; the flooding of Kakadu National Park with salt water. No responsible leader could stand by and watch these things happen. That's why Labor will ratify the Kyoto Protocol and establish a carbon trading regime. We need to be part of the lucrative international trade in carbon emissions. It's good for the environment and good for the economy.

In this campaign, Labor is the party of sustainable development: increasing the Mandatory Renewable Energy Target from two to five per cent - giving clean industries like solar and wind power a future in this country; investing \$1 billion to save the grand old river system, the Murray/Darling, with improved water efficiency and water flows. And our commitment to halt land clearing, to protect our beaches and coastline and to lock away forever our greatest rainforest, the Daintree.

In the coming days of this campaign, I'll also be announcing Labor's plan to save the mighty Tasmanian forests, conserving one of our greatest natural assets for future generations.

Two days before this election, there's an historic anniversary: 7th October 1941, when John Curtin became Australia's Prime Minister. Curtin's priority was the Defence of Australia - securing our country, in our part of the world. In putting Australia first, he had to stand up not only to Winston Churchill but President Roosevelt as well. But that didn't stop John Curtin building a new alliance, a new partnership with the United States. And he built that partnership on the only worthwhile basis - mutual respect between two sovereign and independent people.

The Alliance is not the property of any Australian party or any particular American administration. It belongs to our two great peoples. I want to render the United States the best service any Australian Prime Minister ever could. And that is to help the United States develop its true role of world leadership, based on respect, understanding and the cooperation demonstrated so powerfully after September 11, but undermined so tragically by the mistakes in Iraq.

Most of all, the impact of those mistakes in our region. When Mr Howard sent Australian troops to the war in Iraq he knew, on advice, that his decision would make Australia less safe in the war against terror. Now he says that he'll keep Australian troops in Iraq until they have finished the job. But he can't tell them what the job is.

The real job for Australia is in our region, working with our neighbours and with the United States. And as Prime Minister, I'll sign up for that job, for as long as it takes. This is where our permanent interests lie, not on the other side of the world. This is where Labor will dedicate our resources in the war against terror - to our region, to our part of the world, to the real security of the Australian people.

My fellow Australians, Labor's plan for Australia's future draws its strength from four great sources: from the voice of the people themselves; from the hard work of the Labor team I am honoured to lead; from my pride in Labor's historic achievements for Australia; and from my deepest convictions about a better way ahead for the country I love.

And those convictions, in turn, come from my community, the people who believe in me and my work, the people who have given me so much help, every step along the way.

When I was young, my mother taught me to believe in ambition and aspiration. She gave me the best advice of all: study hard, work hard and live your life in the service of others.

The community I grew up in taught me to believe in Australia and the possibilities of progress. A place called Green Valley gave me a passion, a belief in opportunity for all.

And now in my life and in my home, Janine and the boys have taught me the power of caring, of our love and time together. They have made me a better man. A man strong enough to know that he can lead this nation well. That he can unite our people, not divide them. That at 43 years of age - in the prime of my life - I have something to offer our country: the beliefs and values of a good society.

That's the Australia I believe in. No matter where you come from, you should have the same chance to succeed in life. A society where we look out for each other, not just ourselves. And if someone falls, we pick them up and give them a second chance in life. No one gets left behind.

I believe in governments helping people. I believe in opportunity.

But I also know that the people should be enabled to help themselves - to work hard, to exercise responsibility. There is no way out of poverty and disadvantage without having a go, without effort.

I want to lead a government that will free up the Australian people to have a go, by giving them all a fair-go. This is what I mean by the ladder of opportunity - all Australians climbing upwards. Making a better life for themselves and their families, knowing that at the same time, they are making Australia stronger and fairer.

Only in this way can we end the drift into division and ever-widening inequality. Only in this way can we restore a shared sense of purpose, every Australian participating in the life, work and future of the nation.

Making Australia truly prosperous and secure, no longer growing apart, but growing together.

My fellow Australians, Australia needs, and needs now, a new government.

A government with optimism and energy.

A government, a Prime Minister with fire in the belly.

A Prime Minister in touch with the Australian people. A leader who believes in the people and always trusts in them.

That's Labor's goal - to give this nation a government every bit as fair and warm-hearted as the Australian people themselves.

A government as big and generous in spirit as the country we love.

A government with the plans, the leadership, the will and the energy to take Australia forward.

A government for the people, not just the powerful.

A government that cares about the needy, the sick and the frail.

A government that gives real life expression to the great Australian ethos of a fair go for all.

A government for the many, not just the few.

That's why I'm asking for the support of the Australian people on the 9th October - to achieve these goals: our mighty crusade for a stronger, safer and fairer Australia, through the election of an Australian Labor Government.”

Source: Compiled from audio at Australian Politics Online, The Age and the Canberra Times.