

ably be this year's election campaign. While he may not have meant to provoke such a debate with what was, after all, a standard conservative response to a question on schools, the Prime Minister would have been delighted at the outcome of an ACTU-affiliated teachers' union ACTing foul.

He would have particularly enjoyed hearing, again, just why it is that parents are not sophisticated enough to be told about the relative performance of their local public school.

John Howard believes that school choice will be a key issue for the families that populate the marginal seats on the outskirts of Sydney and Brisbane, and one that will divide the ALP. It is these electorates that are experiencing the largest exodus from public to private schooling. Howard's pollsters have no doubt identified dissatisfaction with values as a reason for disillusionment with public schools. The Opposition Leader, Mark Latham, has been wise not to take the bait swallowed so eagerly by the teachers' unions.

Surely though, all of this will fade as we prepare for another knaki election. Maybe not. Howard no doubt kept an eye on this week's Iowa caucus for US presidential

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nominees. While three-quarters of Democratic Party caucus voters were against the war in Iraq, the anti-war candidate, Howard Dean, crashed and burned. All of a sudden, the war was last year's issue.

So what issues were on the minds of Iowa's voters? Health and education. And so it will be in Australia. Security issues rarely dominate election campaigns - 2001 was an exception because both Tampa and September 11 happened within months of that election. As the memory of those incidents and the Bali bombing recedes, it will become harder for Howard to fight the election on his undoubted strengths of defence and border protection.

Despite being misled over children overboard and Saddam's weapons of mass destruction, most voters trust Howard's judgement over national security issues. However, that level of trust does not extend to health and education.

Howard knows this. His efforts to finalise legislation on troublesome health and education issues late last



year were an indication that he takes seriously his own warning that the Government is just eight seats from electoral oblivion.

Voters have never fully trusted the Coalition to look after Medicare. The Senate's rejection of parts of the Government's Medicare reform package has given Labor time to ask the obvious question: why would a universal health system require a safety net?

Those outer-suburban voters would have been horrified at the revelations of mismanagement at Campbelltown Hospital. Throw in another round of private health insurance price increases, and the Government looks vulnerable on health.

The Government has been keeping the pressure on Labor over the US alliance, promoting a free trade agreement and co-operation over missile defence. While these issues may divide the ALP, they just aren't popular with the electorate. Indeed, Howard's closeness to George Bush may have blinded him to the fact



that the US President has no credentials as a free trader. Without strong concessions on access to agricultural markets, Howard will have little to show for months of effort.

For his part, Latham spent the early weeks of his leadership attempting to neutralise national security as an issue. Howard will ensure that the electorate never forgets Latham's comments about Bush as "the least competent and most dangerous president in living memory".

Latham has had the unenviable task of simultaneously walking away from his more outlandish comments about Bush, and mollifying the left wing of his party. Unlike his predecessor, Latham has no trouble "cutting through". Holding the attention of an electorate that had stopped listening to Simon Crean will be the easy part.

Latham's low profile over the summer has masked a vigorous effort to keep his party united behind him. Unlike Crean, who wasted the last national conference and a good deal



of political capital on internal party reform, Latham will spend the conference focused on policy.

The debate over whether Labor's platform should represent a small or a large target mistakes quantity for quality. The Labor Party will only be truly unified behind a reform agenda. Gough Whitlam's most important contribution towards Labor's electability was the taming of the Jim Cairns-led Left, harnessing their reformist spirit but shedding their socialist policies.

But it is the very egalitarian values of Labor's Left (as opposed to their hare-brained social policies) that Latham would do well to adopt. Articulating the values of hard work and opportunity so close to his own experience gives him an authenticity that many of his predecessors lacked. Making health and education front and centre in its election campaigns has seen Labor take power in every state and territory. It is here that Latham can promote policies that both pacify



his left flank and appeal to the Australian electorate's middle ground. Putting substance behind this "ladder of opportunity" rhetoric will be crucial to Latham's success.

And yet, governments rarely lose elections when the economy is growing strongly, partly because of the public confidence that prosperity engenders, and partly because economic growth provides plenty of tax revenues for pork barrelling.

Once the election campaign heats up, rest assured the Government will remind Latham of some of his more adventurous economic ideas.

Expect more debates over values. We'll be hearing a lot more from both sides about reward and opportunity, hard work and the value of education. Oh, and political correctness, too.

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Booze, bravado and male honour make for a culture of violence

The death of David Hookes highlights a larger problem in Australian society, writes Michael Flood.

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Australian Institute of Criminology says.

A minority of young male bouncers are responsible for some of the violence. But most is perpetrated by males with no formal connection to the venue.

Minor incidents can set off lethal violence. One man may spill another man's drink or look too long at his girlfriend. Homicides outside pubs and in the street are often the result of contests over male honour, according to a study of homicides in Victoria.

A study of public violence in Sydney pubs, clubs and nightclubs

found that violence is more likely in venues where there is a high proportion of males, and especially groups of males who are strangers; the venue is crowded, uncomfortable, or boring; more people are drunk; and the bouncers are edgy and aggressive.

Group drinking, being rowdy, breaking the rules, arguing and fighting are pleasurable forms of entertainment for some men. Most are not violent but some enjoy watching and engaging in disorderly behaviour and violence, and having power struggles with bouncers, staff and the police.

Women, too, are vulnerable. Young women surveyed in South Australian pubs said that they were subject to frequent sexual harassment and verbal abuse. Women also

violence will continue to happen, and men (and women) will be injured and killed. Violence experienced by women has received widespread public attention, and rightly so. But the routine violence between men is rarely the subject of public debate.

The good news is that traditional definitions of manhood, based on bravado and aggression, seem to be declining. With the rise of "sensitive new age guys", involved fathers and even "metrosexuals", we're seeing a shift to a more peaceful and respectful male role. But too many men are still caught up in the fiction that you have to be "10 feet tall and bullet-proof" to be a real man.

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