

Latham's list was a hit in the polls

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Mark Latham's private school funding policy is usually seen as an electoral minus for Labor, but the polls suggest otherwise, writes **Peter Browne**



“Every independent school in Australia will see their funding increase under our plan”: Julia Gillard addressing the Independent Schools Council of Australia last Monday.
Photo: Lukas Coch/ AAP Image

WHEN a party wins or loses an election it's tempting to attribute the result to the issue that created the most heat during the campaign. Labor resisted the harshest of John Howard's border protection measures in 2001 and went on to lose an election that had once seemed its for the taking. Despite the fact that the Coalition's real boost in support came later, after the 11 September attacks in the United States, that poll will forever be known as the *Tampa* election.

Why did Labor lose the 2004 election? Listening to the discussion of private school funding over the past week you'd think that much of the blame lies with Mark Latham's notorious “hit list” – his plan to increase funding for poorer schools by reducing support for the wealthiest private schools. *Age* columnist Shaun Carney [described](#) [1] the impact of that policy as a “searing” experience for Labor; a *Daily Telegraph* editorial earlier last week [called](#) [2] it a “disaster” for the party. Julia Gillard seems to agree – she [announced](#) [3] that all private schools will receive an increase in funding as a result of the government's response to the Gonski report.

But how did voters in 2004 see the issue? Just before Christmas 2003, Newspoll [asked](#) [4] 1200 adults to say what they would “like” or “not like” to happen in 2004. Fifty-five per cent of respondents said they would like to see “a reduction in government subsidies for private schools.” Thirty-five per cent opposed such a move and 10 per cent

were uncommitted. In other words, only a little over a third of respondents felt strongly enough to oppose what would later become Labor's education policy for the election.

Of course, people's views can change once a political debate heats up. Latham announced the school funding policy on 15 September, three-and-a-half weeks before election day. The plan provoked a furor, particularly on talkback radio. The prime minister, John Howard, characterised it as "old-fashioned class warfare," a phrase that appeared repeatedly – along with "hit list" – in media coverage over subsequent days and weeks. The churches "savaged" Latham (according to a headline in the *Australian*), and the private schools warned of fee hikes and an exodus back to government schools. Robert Manne described the announcement as "dubious politics." Andrew Bolt described it as "abhorrent."

Ten days later, though, an ACNielsen survey of just over 1400 voters [found](#) [5] that support for a shift in funding had actually risen since the Newspoll survey ten months earlier. Fully 66 per cent of respondents approved of Labor's policy, with 27 per cent disapproving and the remainder uncommitted. Even among Coalition voters, the policy attracted support from 47 per cent of respondents, with 44 per cent opposed. Given that some schools and parents had an interest in energetically resisting the plan, it isn't surprising that opinion among talkback radio callers (probably reflected in phone calls and letters to MPs) was almost exactly the reverse.

Those are the only two polls from that period that asked specifically about education funding. Most pollsters, especially as the election drew closer, were preoccupied with overall voting intentions. Labor dropped the school funding policy after the election and since then the major polls have not posed the question in the way that Newspoll and ACNielsen did in 2003–04.

So what really went wrong for Labor in 2004? In an article published in the *Australian Journal of Political Science*, Murray Goot and Ian Watson analysed the Australian Election Study, which reported the findings of a post-election survey of 1769 voters. They [concluded](#) [6] that while Labor had a clear advantage during the campaign in relation to education (despite the "hit list"), health and the environment, that edge was overwhelmed by the Coalition's strength on interest rates in particular.

Labor's biggest mistake during the campaign was to wait far too long to respond to the Liberal Party's relentless and visually sophisticated (and misleading) comparison of interest rates under previous Labor and Coalition governments, which it promoted through an intense campaign of direct mail, and print and broadcast ads. After the election, calculations by economics writers at the *Age* and the *Australian* showed a strong correlation between the proportion of mortgagee households in any given electorate and the swing to the Coalition.

If Labor was seared by its schools policy in 2004, it looks like that experience was based on a misunderstanding of why it lost the election. Regardless of the merits of the school funding policy, the evidence strongly suggests that it was an electoral plus for the party. We'll find out in a few weeks whether the same misunderstanding of public attitudes influences the government's response to the Gonski report. •

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