

## Why the 2019 election was more like 2004 than 1993 – and Labor has some reason to hope

Written by Frank Bongiorno, Professor of History, ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences, Australian National University

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I recently had cause to look at a large file of material I collected about Mark Latham during 2004. It is full of many of the same columnists who have just campaigned successfully for the return of the Morrison government. They were buzzing with excitement and hubris. News Corps's Miranda Devine saw an omen in the news that arrived from Paris as the polls opened in Australia:

Jacques Derrida, the father of deconstructionism, died in Paris of pancreatic cancer, bringing to a symbolic end a destructive era of postmodern truth-twisting.

While no one else seemed to draw a bow quite so long, almost everyone could agree that John Howard's victory was "historic" and that Labor was in "crisis".

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But The Australian's Janet Albrechtsen's response to that election brings us closest to the present. Howard's very lack of a grand vision was precisely what had attracted voters to him, she claimed:

While the Left aches for a top-down vision imposed from above by some Whitlamite, Keatingesque leader, the rest of us prefer the bottom-up Howard version where we get to choose our own vision.

With Scott Morrison, we also have little choice but to choose our own vision if we want one. But Howard, it turned out, had plans if not a vision. He would use the Senate majority voters had sent his way to deal with Australia's unions once and for all, through WorkChoices. At the 2007

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election, Howard lost government as well as his own seat.

Labor supporters despairing of the result of Saturday's election would do well to recall 2004. It is, to my mind, the closest parallel with what we have just seen. Labor took bold policies to the voters in 2004 and 2019. A Coalition leader managed to persuade enough voters that Labor couldn't be trusted in economic matters.

Resources industries mattered for both elections, Tasmanian forests in 2004, and Queensland coal in 2019. Labor fumbled each, just as housing – interest rates in 2004, and property values and rents in 2019 – caused Labor grief on each occasion.

Shorten is no Latham, but there were question marks hanging over both leaders that told against their party. Shorten made his mistakes but ran a solid campaign in 2019, gradually hitting his stride.

Latham was no slouch in 2004, either; there has been a conflation of his behaviour after the campaign with that during its course. Writing straight after the election in *The Australian*, Paul Kelly had many criticisms of both Labor and Latham. But he also thought Latham had campaigned "very well" personally.

The more common comparison of 2019 has been with 1993, John Hewson's "unlosable election". There is, of course, something in that and, again, some hope for Labor.

There were reasons to imagine after the 1993 election that Labor was in for the long haul – that it would be the modern equivalent of the post-war Coalition with its 23-year run. The Liberals continued with a broken Hewson, had a brief and disastrous experiment with Alexander Downer, and then settled on a failed leader from the previous decade, Howard.

Few saw the Coalition's future as bright after Keating's win. But Labor fumbled its post-1993 election budget and, for all of Keating's bravado in the house and all of his "big picture" hobnobbing with world leaders such as Clinton and Suharto outside it, the foundations of Labor rule were crumbling.

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Is Labor's "crisis", if it is a crisis, worse than that faced by the Coalition in 1993 and Labor in 2004? If the ultimate test is electoral success, only the next election will allow us to answer that question.

But there are some alarming indicators. Labor seems to have [lost votes to the far right](#) in Queensland and preferences then flowed helpfully to the Coalition. Morrison was able to have his cake – getting the Liberals to put One Nation last south of the Tweed – while eating it north of the Tweed, where he had no sway over LNP preferencing and the Coalition reaped the rewards.

There is an emerging narrative that Adani mattered in key Queensland seats, not so much in its own right but for its wider symbolic significance for the future of coal mining in Queensland and Labor's commitment to traditional blue-collar jobs.

If so, Labor has a lot of work to do to clarify its policy and messaging, in a state where coal has formed one of the foundations of the economy since the 1960s.

And it needs to do so without damaging its prospects elsewhere by equivocating on commitments to renewable energy and vigorous action on climate change. The old calculation that alienated Greens votes will come back to Labor might still be largely correct, but Labor has never won from opposition when the electorate votes for it only grudgingly.

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It was ironic, in view of Labor's problems in some regions and outer suburbs, that the two front-runners who initially emerged as Labor leadership contenders were members of the Left faction representing neighbouring seats in oh-so-hip inner Sydney. With Tanya Plibersek withdrawing - and another Sydneysider, Chris Bowen, also bowing out – the leadership is now likely to fall to the Left's Anthony Albanese. Queenslander Jim Chalmers, from the Right, is

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considering whether to run.

The terms in which the post-election debate about Labor's future has been carried on could have occurred after any election defeat in the last 50 years. But the foundational issue for Labor is not where it places itself on the political spectrum, or even whether it can win back voters in the regions, but whether it has any capacity to grapple with the inequalities and frailties that lax, opportunistic and unsustainable policy – much of it dating back to the Howard era – has embedded.

At the 2019 election, Labor proposed chasing revenue by winding back tax concessions to some categories of shareholder, property investor and superannuant. This approach was rejected at the polls. But economic growth and productivity seem unlikely to provide an alternative pathway for a future Labor government, unless there is a miraculous turn-around in the global economy.

No prospective Labor leader should be taken seriously unless he – and it seems it will indeed be a “he” – is at least able to articulate this dilemma.

*Frank Bongiorno does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.*

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