

Latham, Weber and compassion

Scott Hargreaves

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Former Federal Opposition Leader, Mark Latham, is said to have read widely, but in the hurly-burly of undergraduate life he must have missed the great social theorist, Max Weber. If he had read Weber's great work of politics, *Politics as a Vocation*, Latham might have saved himself the disillusionment and bitterness so candidly revealed in his own *Diaries*.

Max Weber (1864–1920) was one of the founders of social science as we understand it today. He enunciated many of the political ideas that we take for granted. So, for example, he said that what distinguished the state from other forms of social organization was that the state possesses a monopoly on the use of force. And Bob Hawke didn't invent charisma in politics either. For Weber, 'charismatic domination' was one of the three forms of leadership—the others being traditional, and legal domination. The 'Protestant Work Ethic' was also first considered by Weber.

Weber delivered *Politics as a Vocation* as a lecture to the Union of Free Students in Munich in 1919, amidst Germany's post-war collapse. Weber established the theoretical basis of his model of how modern democracies

function and thus the nature of the appropriate role for the professional politician (*Berufspolitiker*).

Even the casual observer of bureaucracy and 'public administration' will be familiar with (though probably not actually have read) Weber's descriptions of the capabilities and functions of the permanent officials of the state, whose guiding light is the impartial administration of objectively rational rules. What a good bureaucrat does is to worry about means, not ends. It is politicians who should concern themselves with ends. But this is not to say that Weber had no interest in what moves people to political action.

Weber's analysis identified three key requirements for effectiveness, and made it clear that no one of these held singly could suffice for a politician to be effective. What were required were passion, a sense of responsibility and, finally, judgement. Latham is a case study of what happens when a politician has lots of passion, but little sense of responsibility, and even less judgement.

Ultimately, the Australian electorate recognized this—but relying on the innate good sense of the population to save the day at the last minute is a risky business.

Calls for more passion in politics are the *sine qua non* of the zealots and perennial adolescents that shadow every cause and party. A failure of passion is what is habitually invoked

whenever their favoured project of social change is crushed by the will of the majority. Moreover, the chattering classes define conviction as passion only when practised in pursuit of what they see as the correct goals (otherwise the objective is dismissed as 'ideological'). Weber understood this to be an untenable basis for evaluating the ethics of politicians. Weber understood that there needed to be an objective test of what is ethically 'right' rather than what was in accord with the ends of the observer.

What Latham didn't know was that passion is not enough. For Weber,

simply to feel passion, however genuinely, is not sufficient to make a politician unless, in the form of service to a 'cause', *responsibility* for that cause becomes the decisive lode-star of all action.

This is the burden that all political leaders know, but it is also one that

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has crushed many in high office and on the way to high office. What is also required is *judgement*, by which Weber means:

The ability to maintain one's inner composure and calm while being receptive to realities, in other words *distance* from things and people.

This is the insight one should bear in mind when John Howard is criticized for making decisions which lack "*compassion*". Indulging compassion by setting aside responsibility is the essence of poor judgement, and would not for long be tolerated by the voters.

That said, neither do the voters tolerate heartlessness or an apparent betrayal of stated convictions. Certainly no-one, least of all Weber, said finding the balance was easy:

For the problem is precisely this: how are hot passion and cool judgement to be forced together in a single soul? ... if politics is to be genuinely human action, rather than some frivolous intellectual game, dedication to it can only be generated and sustained by passion.

For Weber, this combination of qualities is an essential defence against *vanity*, in which the striving for power becomes a matter of 'purely personal self-intoxication instead of being placed entirely at the service of the cause'. This is just another form of a 'lack of responsibility'.

In contrast to Machiavelli, Weber believes that if a politician is to have any 'firm inner support' he must remain in service to a cause. In modern parlance, this is the positive sense in which we refer to "conviction politicians", such as Howard and Kennett. In each case, their 'lode-star' and sense of responsibility is fixed and strong, even if different capacities for judgement are displayed.

Finally, Weber turns his attention to the 'problem of the ethos of politics as a "cause"'. As previously stated, we

shouldn't judge ethics of any particular politician merely on the relativistic basis of whether or not we approve of their *Weltanschauungen* or 'world-view'. Moreover, we cannot evaluate according to the more everyday, personal qualities we might seek in our friends, spouses, and business partners, because politics is a distinctive domain in which decisions are backed by the coercive power of the state. The ethics of the Sermon on the Mount, alas, cannot be our guide.

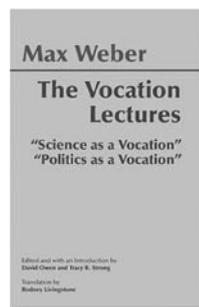
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In contrast to the Gospel, the injunction to the politician must be 'you *shall* resist evil with force, for if you do not, you are *responsible* for the spread of evil'.

A politician trying to follow the Gospel or similar pacifist principles takes the view that he 'does what is right and places the outcome in God's hands', but the professional politician follows the ethic of responsibility, in which one must answer for the consequences of one's actions.

In exploring the difference between these ethics, Weber developed an insight that has some bearing on the difference between Mark Latham and John Howard. Weber wrote that most politicians who proclaim that the 'The World Is Stupid' are merely 'windbags'.

Latham's *Diaries* make it clear that even without his unfortunate illness, he was not going to stay for the long haul, and his sharpest barbs were saved for those in the ALP. He may



have been a bit more than a windbag, but the strength of his conviction and the power of his rebarbative rhetoric were certainly not matched by political stamina.

Weber even anticipated Latham's 2005 speech in which he preached flight from organized politics towards a more personal level

of engagement. Speaking of the embittered failed revolutionaries of his own time, Weber remarked that:

They did not have the vocation they had for politics ... they would have done better to cultivate plain and simple brotherliness.

By contrast, the demeanour of Howard during the lead-up to the invasion of Iraq could have been the model for the following, unusually heartfelt, commentary from Weber:

it is immensely moving when a mature person (whether old or young) who feels with his whole soul the responsibility he bears for the consequences of his actions, and who acts on the basis of an ethics of responsibility, says at some point, 'Here I stand, I can do no other'.

In closing his essay, Weber coins what is now a well-known simile from which many writers extract the first clause, namely that 'politics means slow, strong drilling through hard boards', whereas in the full quotation he goes on to say 'with a combination of passion and a sense of judgement'.