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Weekend Inquirer
Incorporating Editor

CONFRONTATION IN KIEV
UKRAINE DIVIDED OVER ELECTION

LOSING IT

LATE IN THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN, ALARM BELLS WERE RINGING AMONG LABOR STRATEGISTS AS THEIR LEADER SHOWED WORRYING SIGNS OF DISENGAGEMENT. IN THE DEFINITIVE ACCOUNT, CAMERON STEWART AND CHRISTINE JACKMAN REVEAL HOW MARK LATHAM LOST IT

THE final Saturday before election day 2004 dawned cool and cloudy in Sydney. But at Labor campaign headquarters in Canberra, the party's senior strategists permitted themselves a brief moment of sunny high spirits.

After a long and haphazard campaign, the main event on Mark Latham's daily itinerary was a barbecue for families in western Sydney, where campaign veterans hoped the leader would get back on track, hammering home Labor's key campaign message: "Families under financial pressure — ease the squeeze."

Like most campaign stunts, the barbecue at a park in Parramatta would appear casual and lighthearted despite being the result of hours of meticulous planning. Sausages, salads and bread rolls had been ordered for about 100 people — mainly young families — who had been invited after careful vetting by the NSW branch of the Labor Party. Although campaign security meant they could not be told about Latham's scheduled appearance, about 80 had RSVPed by Friday.

But the sausages never made it on to the barbie and the salads stayed in the Esky.

According to sources travelling with the leader and at Labor's campaign HQ, Latham woke that morning and decided he did not want to attend a barbecue, regardless of how many supporters had been invited. Nor did he want to speak about families or easing the squeeze.

"The word came back that Mark had woken up and decided to talk about Kirribilli House instead," a senior member of Labor's campaign strategy group recalls. "So that was the end of our opportunity to talk about tax and family benefits."

Says another: "We were like: *What!?* Why do you actually get the most experienced campaigners in the country nutting these things out and then on a whim change your mind about it?

"We had images of families turning up, still looking for sausages, and he's off somewhere else talking about Kirribilli House. And who cares? It certainly wasn't showing up anywhere in our research."

Neither did it show up in the news the next day. Most Sunday newspapers buried the story, running only a few paragraphs inside about Latham's pledge to give Kirribilli House "back to the people".

To Labor insiders, the barbecue incident was a microcosm of all that was wrong with Latham and his campaign.

Latham had all but rejected the party's vast campaign machinery. The rookie leader was running his campaign the way he wanted it — on gut instinct alone. He had become a one-man show, dictating his daily message, his media opportunities and his campaign strategy. Labor's small army of strategists and advisers had been pushed aside. They had become the ALP campaign's fringe dwellers.

"You think a guy like that would come to the leadership and say, 'Shit, I could do with some help'," one strategist says. "There was no shortage of willing people who wanted to help win the federal election — and some of them had decades of campaign experience — but they didn't get an opportunity. He was determined to dictate the direction."

Six days later, Latham — now a barbecue-stopper in his own right — would lead his party to its second worst election result since World War II.

In the blink of an eye, Latham has gone from hero to zero in Labor ranks. The backlash against him is gathering pace with each day of election post-mortems, throwing doubt on his future as leader as he approaches his first anniversary in the top job.

Now, in interviews with *The Weekend Australian*, key Labor insiders, campaign strategists, advisers and frontbenchers reveal the inside story of Latham's sudden rise and his spectacular fall from grace. The willingness of so many senior party figures to talk so frankly, albeit anonymously, about Latham reflects the depth of concern in Labor ranks about his leadership and a fear, shared by many Labor MPs, that it may be unsalvageable.

Latham has tagged his anonymous critics as big men on the blower but cowards in the caucus. But these insiders reveal a compelling portrait of Latham as a forceful, headstrong and intuitive leader with a swaggering, unshakable confidence in his own judgment. They say Latham's refusal to take advice left him exposed when his judgment failed him and ultimately doomed the party to its historic defeat.

The slide has been so fast that it is easy to forget Latham was embraced as the future of Labor barely 12 months ago. On his debut, the rookie wrong-footed the Prime Minister by ignoring traditional battlefields and instead dwelling on left-field social issues such as reading to children and obesity. It was a quixotic approach to political leadership and could easily have been dismissed as madness if the polls hadn't reacted so well to it.

Latham was fresh, unpredictable and intoxicating. Better still, he was not Simon Crean.

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ONE-MAN BAND

The Labor Party needs a leader with humility and a common touch to heal the wounds of defeat, writes **Paul Kelly**

THIS was the week the Labor Party was supposed to address its election problems — but instead it turned into another graphic display of Mark Latham's leadership inadequacies.

Latham seems unable to grasp the elemental needs of his new situation, both human and political. Having been extended by the party the privilege of one-man band status before the October election, he has become a leader on probation. But Latham doesn't seem to comprehend that he must change his outlook and style — indeed, that he must change himself to survive.

The days of being a one-man band are over. Latham's task is to lead a team, team Labor. He mightn't like it but this is the price of his humiliating defeat. And if Latham cannot make this transition, then he is finished. If Latham does not possess the introspection to reassess and remodel his leadership, then he may as well surrender his leader's badge now.

This is a challenge, above all, of character. Labor is wounded, bleeding badly and divided. It is angry, disappointed and confused about its future. It needs a leader with a big heart and a generous spirit, a leader whose personal example embodies the Labor verities, a leader with the humility to admit his blunders and the common touch to reach across the divide in the party. It needs a leader whose personal qualities are respected and whose wise judgment is born of the election defeat.

Is this the Latham on display today?

Everybody knows the answer. Having been shocked by its election defeat, Labor is in a second shock — the spectre of an indulgent, irritable leader who seems unable to command himself, let alone the party.

Even if the test of being a big-hearted leader is too great, Labor still needs a leader who will listen with restraint and contain the narcissistic compulsion that dominates too much of his political behaviour. But is there any realistic sign of this happening?

Latham's tone betrays a failure to assess the transformation in his fortunes. An initial denial was understandable. But Latham must surely grasp by now that he failed badly at the October 9 election and that the Coalition has a distinct prospect of another two terms. Nearly every

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