

WEEK 3

Kith and kin

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When Sydney journalist Michael Duffy was researching his joint biography of Mark Latham and Tony Abbott early in 2004, he visited Latham at his family home in the outer-Sydney suburb of Glen Alpine, on the southern outskirts of Campbelltown. They chatted in the backyard, amid the humming of lawnmowers and the hissing of barbecues from neighbouring houses beyond the Colorbond fence. Duffy was struck by the idyllic, and to his mind nostalgic, qualities of the scene. Where else in modern-day Sydney would one have so close a sense of connection to community, and yet so perfect a sense of family autonomy, all in the one sprawling backyard? And he guessed this must have something to do with Latham's championing of Australian suburbanism and its distinctive ethos. The question he asked himself was how typical this scene was of contemporary Australia as a whole.

The answer, of course, depends on your vantage point. We live, after all, in a time of growing social and cultural distances, where rival definitions of what's "un-Australian" can give the impression of two continents accidentally sharing the same latitude and longitude. In such a time it's remarkably easy for high-energy, high-stress, big-city professionals to underestimate (or simply dismiss) the continuing emotional attraction of the suburban Great Outdoors for many of their countryfolk. Just as easy, in fact,

as it is for the folks tending their lawns on the city's outskirts to imagine themselves as the "real Australia," and the stressed-out sophisticates as somehow fake.

There's also a specifically Sydney context here. The name Western Sydney still conjures up for many nervous residents of the city's east images of an undifferentiated urban badlands, riven with "social problems." For others, newly enamoured of the quaint cornices and terracotta-tiled backyards of the inner city, the West often seems to denote a kind of limitless suburban hell, with Dante's exotic torments replaced by more subtle horrors – acres of bleached front lawns, lino-lined kitchens, Balinese knick-knacks on the mantelpiece, white bread and Vegemite, and endless mugs of instant Nescafé.

Dispel these lurid dreams, though, and the heady ambience of Glen Alpine comes as less of a surprise. Large tracts of Sydney's outer western fringes are a full-on nostalgia trip for anyone with gentler memories of suburban childhoods from the fifties and sixties: kids cycle up the middle of half-deserted streets, backyards are strewn with old car parts, garden sheds are full of unfinished home-handyman projects, and the steady throb of cicadas fills the air. While the denizens of these suburbs are just as preoccupied with the obsessions *du jour* – interest rates, home renovation and the vaudeville villains of reality TV – as anybody, there's a nagging sense in the mind of the casual visitor that somehow, some way, the ethos of a quieter if more naive era still lingers here, like an undead retro pop melody on a "greatest hits" radio station's playlist.

While Latham is MP for the neighbouring seat of Werriwa, based around the Labor-dominated city of Liverpool, his home in Glen Alpine sits in the heart of the bellwether electorate of Macarthur. It's a strategic location. Just to the east is the Campbelltown Hospital, where some of the best-publicised controversies over Sydney's public hospital system have been played out in recent years. Next to it is the Macarthur Square shopping centre, currently under redevelopment to fit its new role

as the commercial “town square” of what is projected to be Sydney’s fastest-growing region in the next decade. The new square will have 300 shops, thousands upon thousands of parking spaces, a bowling alley and an ice-skating rink, and will extend right up to the gates of the local railway station.

Just across the railway line from the building site is the precinct that houses the Campbelltown campus of the University of Western Sydney and the local TAFE college. A perpetual after-thought in the calculations of higher education planners, the university sprawls untidily across the entirety of the city’s west, from Richmond in the outer north-west to Penrith in the outer west, Parramatta on the hinge of the west, and Bankstown and Campbelltown in the south-west. Nearly every one of its campuses is a converted college of advanced education site from before the “Dawkins era” of higher education: many of the humanities tutorial rooms are converted labs, the carpets are often threadbare, and the facilities sparse. The Campbelltown campus, on the other hand, is architect-designed, stylistically coherent and impeccably neat. The lawns curve like a GI’s crew-cut, and if you cross the grassy verge you provoke raised eyebrows. It’s a very Campbelltown kind of place.

Past the campuses you can see the treetops of Mount Annan Botanic Garden, perhaps the lushest location in this rather parched electorate. Finally, nestled among the winding streets of Glen Alpine itself, the unsuspecting traveller hits on the twists and turns of the local golf course, complete with ample clubhouse and artificial lake. Like Campbelltown proper, Glen Alpine may not be a Happening Place, but it’s doing just fine, thank you very much.

Indeed, it may be that Latham’s feel for the electoral pulse of his home city derives as much from the bustle of Macarthur Square and the “puck” of golf balls as it does from the neighbourhood lawnmowers and barbecues. Sydney in the first decade of the new millennium is a boom town, and decidedly pleased with itself and its progress. And while sophisticates from the city of

apartments and European car yards to the east probably couldn’t locate it on a map of Sydney if their lives depended on it, Campbelltown is garnering its fair share of the affluence.

It’s a paradox of electoral science that bellwether seats are often quite atypical of the wider electorate: their marginality is a product of a fragile balance of local interests and subcultures, rather than some judicious admixture of the nation’s leading tribes. Macarthur is a classic instance. It may straddle the electoral fault line of Sydney, and it may traditionally have sat on an electoral knife-edge. (Every party since 1945 to win here won Australia as well.) Yet it doesn’t look typical of Sydney as a whole – it doesn’t even seem typical of the city’s West. In many respects it feels more like the country. Drive to Campbelltown from Penrith down Northern Road (as I do for my work), and you sometimes have to remind yourself which side of the Great Dividing Range you’re on: at times you could be on the road to Mudgee, in the NSW mid-west. There are old, parched-looking farms with a few cattle, emerald-green lucerne and scrawny avenues of trees leading up to 1940s fibro cottages; and other properties, attached to grand houses on a pattern loosely derived from *Gone with the Wind*, which look remarkably like hobby farms for cashed-up tradespeople from the east. There’s even a winery with cellar-door sales, though you’re not likely to see its products in the stores. It’s one lane the whole way, and road trains are plentiful, so the regular traveller has ample opportunity to practise the ancient art of overtaking across the centre line. In the evening the sweet stench of freshly watered manure wafts across the roadway like a soporific. It’s not quite Route 66, but it’s close.

Even today the twin towns of Campbelltown and Camden have a certain bucolic air. Campbelltown Sports Ground is part-time host to the Wests Tigers, the Sydney rugby league joint venture that brought together two old inner-city teams and presented them to the denizens of the city’s fringe, with only moderate success. Season by season, though, the “franchise” is

slowly disentangling itself from the unsteady grip of the Macarthur region and slipping back to its roots in the big smoke. (Next year only three club games will be played out here.) Somehow, like the vines of the part-time winery up the road, the grafting of the inner-city football culture onto the urban fringe didn't quite take. Flip through the sports pages of the local newspaper, the *Advertiser*, and it's clear the football heroes out here don't hail from the Olympian reaches of the Sydney first-grade competition. The full-colour poster boys here are the broad-shouldered warriors of the Narellan Jets and the Camden Rams, two entirely amateur teams playing under the auspices of the NSW Country Rugby League. Looking at the photos you can almost smell the sausages sizzling.

As you might expect, then, with the exception of some parts of Campbelltown, Macarthur is bungalow-and-backyard territory. Sydneysiders as a whole have been opting increasingly for flats and apartments in recent years – in the former case because it's all they can afford in the areas they choose to live in, and in the latter because it's felt to be New York–loftish and chic. About one in three Sydney dwellings at the time of the 2001 census were either flats, apartments or semi-detached properties, and the number has undoubtedly grown since. Across Macarthur, though, more than seven out of eight occupied dwellings are free-standing houses – and that proportion will surely grow, given the sprawling estates destined to spring up on the electorate's northern outskirts, around the Sleeping Beauty hamlet of Bringelly. Here, anyone who shares a building with anyone but family has very likely hit hard times: chic has nothing to do with it.

Macarthur sits astride one of Sydney's quickest-growing regions. Between 1981 and 2001 the number of separate houses occupied in Sydney as a whole grew by about a quarter, but in Campbelltown it almost doubled, and in Camden it trebled. In retrospect, though, this may be the quiet before the storm. The tidy, sculpted lawns of Harrington Park – “Sydney's most exclusive

location,” as the local posters rather fancifully claim – are the harbinger of a corridor of projected housing developments leading northwards towards Penrith and north-east towards the old airport site at Badgery's Creek. There are claims that the new conurbation of Bringelly – until recently a sleepy hollow hidden off the Northern Road – will house around 300,000 people, although no one wants to explain that figure in detail. In Campbelltown itself these developments are viewed with a jaundiced eye. There is talk of the “character” of localities being ruined, and local anti-development groups contest everything from the siting of child-care centres to the timetable of road widenings, on the grounds of noise pollution, increased traffic and parking problems – all the usual bugbears of the community activist.

When residents of Sydney's inner-west raged against the extension of Sydney's main airport in the mid-1990s (to the extent that it became *the* major election issue in some electorates) they – little realising it – provided the residents of the outer-west with a crash course, a veritable master class, in local activism (or NIMBYism, depending on how you prefer to view it). In areas that had hardly seen a placard waved in anger since their first drain was laid, vocal and persistent community groups sprang up to resist the creation of a new airport at Badgery's Creek, on Macarthur's northern boundary, using precisely the same arguments and language as those honed by their inner-city counterparts in their opposition to the extension of the existing one. Except that – since the panacea of the inner-city activists was precisely the new airport in the outer-west – the two “grassroots” movements were actually at odds. Ever since that time the residents of the south-west have been assiduous lobbyists, determined that the new developments be kept at a geographical arm's length from the old.

In more ways than one, that poster for Harrington Park is a sign of things to come. The residents of the older townships here mistrust the new developments as a drain on resources; the denizens of the new estates – like tourists in a caravan park – tend

to stay to themselves, and to motor everywhere. To the sociologists these pristine walled communities, with their grand entranceways and curlicued lettering, resemble a kind of new feudalism, a retreat behind the parapets. In some parts of Sydney's West – Blacktown, for instance, where some localities are becoming increasingly polarised between the thriving and the rest – the thesis may hold water. In areas like this, though, it's surely too early to tell.

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Much has been made in recent years of Sydney's status as Australia's premier migrant city. Premier Bob Carr has suggested the city is suffering migration-overload, and has floated what look suspiciously like off-the-cuff plans to direct new migrants towards regional centres, or else (horror of horrors!) interstate. Earnest academics (and Latham himself, come to that) have raised anxieties about a new phenomenon of "white flight" to the outer suburbs, where buying land is still cheaper than building a house, crime is believed to be lower, and the "urban problems" of the inner city can be left behind. Demographers with a flair for the graphic are wont to depict Sydney as composed of concentric circles, with privilege in the centre, deprivation in the middle ring, and aspirational refugees from anxiety clinging to the outer edges like gravity-affected water molecules in a school science experiment.

When the bicycle bells peal and the cicadas buzz it may seem like a plausible hypothesis. Catch the train from Central Station to Campbelltown or vice-versa and you'll certainly be struck by the "cultural" shift. Almost a third of the four million residents of the Sydney statistical district were born overseas; the figure for the Macarthur electorate is less than one in five. More than a quarter of the population of Sydney speaks a language other than English at home; in Macarthur about half as many do. And the greatest body of migrants in Macarthur (like other parts of the city's outer-west) come from the sleepy provincial hamlets of Old Blighty rather than the turbulent townships of Indochina or the Middle East.

It's important not to overstate the contrast. If Sydney does have an urban social crisis – and it's far from clear that it does – migration and ethnicity comprise only a small part of it. On the whole, migrant Sydneysiders are doing just as well for themselves as their Australian-born neighbours: home ownership among migrant families is at least as high as among non-migrants, and unemployment rates are at worst no higher. When the "problems" of Sydney are invoked in public debate it's a fair bet this is code for a gaggle of quite specific localities (the areas surrounding Cabramatta and Bankstown come to mind) in which local migrant communities have battled against community dysfunction of different kinds. Ironically, the same intellectual hygiene that requires liberal-minded intellectuals to avoid specifying the social problems of "minorities," lest this fuel their victimisation, can also conspire to give the impression that those problems are far more widespread than they actually are.

Yet the threat of "other people's problems" is a recurring if submerged theme in local debate in the outer south-west. After all, Cabramatta – the epicentre of Sydney's heroin trade, and the city's "little Saigon" – is only a modest drive away, albeit across the electoral boundary. And the ghost of Cabramatta – like a floating Chinese New Year dragon – seems to swirl menacingly around the tidy streets of Campbelltown and Camden, and over their busy shopkeepers. On the face of it, this is not an obvious crime hotspot. Rates of theft are below the city average, and the incidence of robberies accompanied by a firearm is less than half that in Canterbury, Bankstown or even Parramatta. Assault rates are on the high side, but it's not an epidemic. Yet in the local newspaper Macarthur's young, photogenic federal MP, the former distance runner Pat Farmer, goes out of his way to be photographed with the "victims of crime," and to be seen questioning the adequacy of policing methods in the region.

In Sydney more broadly, policing and ethnicity is a hot potato: there is a widespread belief in some areas that "ethnic" crime is

under-policed on grounds of “political correctness.” The town’s premier talkback radio host, Alan Jones, labours the theme at length in his regular audio “editorials” and recruits hand-picked “experts” to the cause. One of the most celebrated of these is the former Cabramatta detective Tim Priest, a jaundiced character who delights in detecting “politically correct” hidden agendas behind the softly-softly policing tactics used in Sydney’s Indochinese heartland. Recently Pat Farmer has taken to wandering the streets of Campbelltown with Priest in tow, acting out a mime performance for the local media, the gist of which is that the MP is “seeking advice” from the former detective. Asked by genuinely anxious local shopkeepers for tips on reducing crime, Priest proposes a battery of closed-circuit television cameras up and down the town’s main drag and points the finger at the local (Labor) council for its televi-sual tardiness. Never mind that when CCTV was proposed as a crime-prevention measure in Cabramatta, the former detective dismissed it as just another wishy-washy alternative to “zero tolerance.” Priest simply shrugs off the apparent inconsistency. Behind his steely gaze and boundless self-assurance you sense Whitmanesque dimensions: he is vast, he contains multitudes.

Yet to depict the residents of Macarthur as creating for themselves a privileged cocoon is to underrate them. Ever since Campbelltown’s most famous resident coined the term “aspirational” in the aftermath of the 2001 federal campaign, the “aspirational” have become the premier bugbear of many liberal-minded commentators for whom a passion for upward social mobility without the imprimatur of upward educational attainment presents itself as a form of social gaucherie. (Which is odd, given how many present-day academics are themselves the beneficiaries of their parents’ determination for their children to have “better opportunities.”) It’s the kind of pained cultural disdain posing as social critique that fuels the popularity of ABC Television’s *Kath and Kim*. Yet, if being “aspirational” means anything, it generally means not naked personal ambition so much as the

desire for your kids to have better lives than your own, or at least the chance for it. This doesn’t necessarily require that anybody else’s kids have to have a worse life: after all, hasn’t the postwar history of Australia been a tale of social improvement through individual striving? All it means is that, when your kids are the centre of your life, the horizons of society seem in comparison blurred and unreal. The focus of aspiration is the people immediately around you – kith and kin rather than Kath and Kim.

To read the Sydney broadsheet media these days, you’d imagine the city’s outer south-west to be a page out of a Victorian romantic novel, all provincial petit-bourgeois respectability and Devonshire teas. Actually, Macarthur has its sleeves pretty well rolled up, and its brow is thinly lined with sweat. On the evidence of the official figures, the electorate’s demographic heartland is composed of tradespeople, shop owners and skilled blue-collar workers. Not that many people above 30 have finished high school; fewer still have a post-school qualification. Sydneysiders who left school at Year Twelve are nowadays more numerous than those who left at Year Ten; in Macarthur, however, Year Ten school-leavers still outnumber Year Twelve graduates by two to one. Four in ten Sydneysiders nowadays have some post-school qualification; in Macarthur only one in eight do (and most of those have trade certificates). Despite that manicured campus down the road, residents of Macarthur are less than half as likely to have a university degree than Sydneysiders as a whole. The list goes on, but I’ll spare you it.

Despite these striking differences, there’s an inter-generational change in Campbelltown and environs that is as obvious in the tutorial room as in the classroom. While the parents of Macarthur have mostly graduated through the “university of life,” and while the grander private schools have all chosen to raise their front gates and unfurl their manicured lawns elsewhere, the children of the area are almost exactly as likely to be attending private schools as their cousins in the north and east. Labor’s complicated if

well-intentioned schools policy – with its focus on the few elite private schools attended by the old families from the old suburbs – was crafted precisely with areas like this in mind.

And so, given the obvious links between the zeitgeist of Labor's new leader and the area in which he's placed his own roots, it's bound to be a cause of disappointment to Labor's strategists that Macarthur shows no sign of swinging back to the Labor side of the electoral ledger any time soon. Pat Farmer is looking like a long-term member, a veritable Menzies of the borough – and his demeanour reflects it. Farmer's rhetorical stock-in-trade – like that of other recently installed Liberal MPs in outer-western Sydney, typified by Lindsay's almost pathologically easygoing Jackie Kelly – is the persona of the non-political politician. For the papers he's the slow-moving, fast-smiling local boy with a *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* distaste for the wiles and seductions of Canberra, and an insatiable appetite for the smell of bricks, mortar and potting mixture. Asked by the local paper for his election-week vision for the region's future, he replies with artless ease: "Our future lies with our children, their ability to dream and those dreams to be supported by governments." Alongside Pat, Mr Smith would have looked like a spokesman for the Third International.

Right now the Farmer smile is a genuine one. And the easy hopes for the future are unforced. When the prime minister visited Western Sydney in the middle of the 2004 campaign the curtain behind the podium was festooned with larger-than-life images of all the region's Liberal MPs, each with the same bland and forthright smile, as if crafted by the magic of digital enhancement. Howard, smiling in an altogether more fox-like manner, observed: "This is a great way to begin the second part of the campaign, here in territory the Liberal Party thought it could never have." In front of him, on the face of the lectern, was the succinct electoral slogan: "Keeping Interest Rates Low."

The slogan is astute, of course: it bites around these parts. A couple of interest-rate percentage points in the wrong direction

and a lot of house-proud home buyers here with private school fees to pay could be in real trouble. And there's a lot of hard work, a lot of pride and even self-contentment locked away behind those tailored lawns. By the same token, there's no one more apolitical – in the inner-city activist, Political Science 101 sense of that word, at least – than one whose values are tied up in the tight bonds of bricks and mortar, blood and water, kith and kin. In such circumstances being a good citizen is all about the school canteen and the cricket nets, facilities not readily amenable to ideological interpretation.

Yet this reliance on the visceral and the apolitical perhaps hints at the limits on the Coalition's apparently firm grip on Sydney's West. As the PM's comments from the dais suggest, the Coalition can't quite believe its luck in capturing territory like this. It's still inclined, privately, to attribute this good fortune to the economic gods. It's not entirely clear how the government will respond in the event that the economy goes sour. Labor's long slide in Western Sydney began in 1993: it will be a long haul back. So long as the Keating-era image of Labor as big-city social engineers for the chattering classes lingers, candidates like Pat Farmer have an easy time of it. So long as interest rates do stay low, the government doesn't really have to project forward-looking policies for the new communities springing up here like fields of lucerne. But they may not stay low for much longer. Then Pat and Jackie might need new stories to tell, new visions for the kids. The pendulum may not have swung yet. But if it were the needle of a barometer it might be wobbling, signalling stormy weather ahead.

On election day 2004 Macarthur moved further into the Coalition camp, with a swing of just over 2.5 per cent – as it happens, almost exactly the national average.