

Nick Beams addresses Australian election meetings in Kingsford Smith and Batman

“The SEP’s campaign is about ideas, not votes”

Nick Beams (SEP candidate for the Seante in NSW)
23 September 2004

In our election campaign, the SEP has insisted that the war on Iraq represents a turning point in world politics of historic significance. That is to say, it contains issues of such importance that they will shape the future of the world for decades to come.

Last week, the UN secretary-general Kofi Annan acknowledged, in an interview with the BBC, that the US war against Iraq was “illegal”.

While Annan is not proposing any concrete action—the expulsion of the US from the UN, or the placing on trial of its leaders for their war crimes—his remarks do carry a certain significance. They represent an acknowledgement of the breakdown of the post-war order and that the system of international relations set in place after World War II has collapsed.

If the immediate origins of World War II lay in the wars of aggression by Nazi Germany, then we must say that the conditions for new conflicts among the major capitalist powers are being created by the wars of aggression perpetrated by the United States. This must have deep causes. It cannot simply be put down to the personality or criminal character of George Bush and his administration. And the fact that there is no opposition from the Democratic Party underscores this fact.

The introduction to a recent book on world politics and history made the point that, whereas during the 1990s the main topic of discussion in the social sciences was “globalisation,” in the first years of the twenty-first century it is “imperialism”, and the doctrine of empire. This observation is borne out by a list of recent titles: *Colossus: The Price of America’s Empire*, *American Empire*, *Rogue Nation*, *Imperial America*, *Fear’s Empire*, *America Unbound*, *The Sorrows of Empire*, *Hegemony or Survival*, *The New Imperialism*, *Resurrecting Empire*, *Inventing the Axis of Evil*, *Incoherent Empire*. Others could be added to this list.

There is a fundamental and causal connection between the processes of economic globalisation and the eruption of imperialist militarism. World capitalism is racked by a profound contradiction: between the universal character of capital, driven on by the accumulation process to, as Marx wrote, spread everywhere, to nestle everywhere, to break through every national barrier and constriction, to batter down old forms of production, old economic systems in its endless quest for surplus value, and the national state, the foundation of the political structures of the bourgeoisie.

The first epoch of globalisation—the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth—saw this contradiction explode in the form of World War I. The origin of that war lay in the attempt by each of the capitalist great powers to resolve this contradiction by establishing itself as the pre-eminent world power.

The second great phase of globalisation has developed over the past 30 years. Now, under the pressure of the struggle for markets and profits, it has resulted in the re-emergence of this contradiction in a new, and even more explosive, form. And it has brought the same response. Under the

banner of the “war on terror” the US is seeking to establish its unchallenged global dominance at the expense of its rivals. It is seeking to overcome the contradiction between world economy and the nation-state system by establishing the primacy of one nation-state, the US, over all others.

During the course of this election campaign we have heard the argument that, while the war on Iraq was wrong, the occupation must continue so that order can be restored. Unless the US remains, there will be a rapid descent into civil war. Iraq, it is claimed, is the front line in the “war on terror”.

In the first place, like all occupying powers before it—the Nazis are a prime example—what the US calls “terror” is the resistance of the masses to oppression.

Secondly, insofar as there are acts of terrorism, the occupation of Iraq is not the antidote to the chaos, it is the cause. If you are not willing to accept my word on this, let me refer you to a report which appeared on the front page of the September 21 edition of the *Financial Times*.

“The British ambassador to Rome yesterday heaped embarrassment on Downing Street and his diplomatic superiors when he described George W. Bush, the US president, as al-Qaeda’s ‘best recruiting sergeant.’

“Sir Ivor Roberts, one of the Foreign Office’s most distinguished diplomats with long experience overseas, was quoted in a leading Italian newspaper as telling a private gathering of policymakers at the weekend: ‘If anyone is ready to celebrate the eventual re-election of Bush, it’s al-Qaeda.’”

Anyone who is in the least inclined to give credence to the argument that the continued occupation of Iraq is necessary to prevent chaos should think it through to the end, and follow its inexorable logic. To say that the domination of an imperialist power is the only way of ensuring order and stability, is to commit to an unending series of wars of aggression and colonisation.

This is not a matter of hypothetical argument. The British historian, Niall Ferguson, who has become something of a “media personality” in the US over the last two years, has made this theme the basis of two books.

In his book *Empire*, published in 2003, he argued that “what the British Empire proved is that empire is a form of international government that can work—and not just for the benefit of the ruling power.” The lesson to be drawn from the British imperial experience is that “the experiment of running the world without the Empire cannot be adjudged an unqualified success” (Niall Ferguson, *Empire* p. 371).

The inevitable sequel, *Colossus*, published this year, deals with the American imperial experience. Advancing what he called “the case for liberal Empire,” Ferguson claimed that it may well be that “for some countries some form of imperial governance, meaning a partial or

complete suspension of their national sovereignty, might be better than full independence, not just for a few months or years but for decades.” Liberal empire, he continued, should be thought of as the political counterpart to economic globalisation.

Ferguson’s criticism of the US is not that it has sought to establish an empire, but that it has failed to devote the necessary resources to specifically undertake that task. The world, he insists, “needs an effective liberal empire and that the United States is the best candidate for the job” and “economic globalisation needs to be underwritten politically, as it was a century ago” (*Colossus*, p. 301).

Ferguson further develops his case for an American empire in a journal article published a few weeks ago. He maintains that critics of US global dominance need to consider the alternative, which is not a “multilateral utopia” but rather “the anarchic nightmare of a new Dark Age.”

“Anyone who dislikes US hegemony should bear in mind that, rather than a multipolar world of competing great powers, a world with no hegemon at all may be the real alternative to US primacy. Apolarity could turn out to mean an anarchic new Dark Age: an era of waning empires and religious fanaticism; of endemic plunder and pillage in the world’s forgotten regions; of economic stagnation and civilisation’s retreat into a few fortified enclaves” (Ferguson, “A World Without Power”, *Foreign Policy*, July-August 2004).

Ferguson’s outpourings express the political and historical bankruptcy of the entire capitalist order, which offers the “choice” of imperialism or barbarism. The whole history of the twentieth century has demonstrated that imperialism is not the antidote to barbarism. Rather, it can only create and reproduce barbarism in new and even more terrible forms. The experience in Iraq has once again underlined this fundamental truth.

The only answer to the challenges posed by the processes of economic globalisation is the establishment of a new political power, derived from the social force created by these processes themselves—the international working class.

The Iraq war saw not only a renewed eruption of imperialist violence. It also saw the emergence of a new international movement of the working class, reflected in the historic global demonstrations against the war. The task immediately ahead is to arm this movement with a socialist perspective. That is the only answer to the barbarism being unleashed by the crisis of the global capitalist order. This is the basis of the intervention of the SEP in the election campaign.

In order to further clarify our perspective, I would like to refer to those advanced by two of the parties contesting these elections, the Greens and the Socialist Alliance.

During the past three years, the Greens have benefited from the collapse of support for the two major parties. At the 2001 election, the Labor Party’s backing for Howard’s attack on refugees and asylum seekers saw a major swing to the Greens. This deepened in the build-up to the invasion of Iraq, as the Labor Party fell in behind the invasion.

The motivations of those who are considering casting their vote for the Greens are clearly identifiable: they are hostile to the “free market” “user pays” programs of the Liberal and Labor parties; they want a restoration of spending on social services; they have concerns about the subordination of the two major parties to the financial and industrial corporations, reflected not only in their attitude to the environment but in all their policies; and they are opposed to the war, the lies and deceptions which accompanied it, and the fact that the Labor Party provides no opposition to the Howard government on this, or any other question.

These are the intentions of the Greens supporters. One could say they are honorable and honest. But here one is reminded of the old saying about good intentions and the road to hell.

While they benefit from the alienation felt by millions of people from the official political establishment, the Greens are not an alternative to it. Rather, they are committed to sustaining it.

Over the weekend, following the announcement of the preference deal between the Greens and the Labor Party, former Democrats leader, Meg Lees, who faces the immediate prospect of passing into political oblivion, commented that the Greens could force the government into a double dissolution if they obtained the balance of power in the Senate. The upper house could grind to a halt, she warned, because the Greens had a history of refusing to compromise. Greens leader Bob Brown immediately replied, referring to the Greens’ history in delivering “stability” in government, particularly in Tasmania.

The Greens carried out an “accord” in that state with the Labor government from 1989 to 1992 and, as Brown has proudly recalled, they “held the line” in the face of demonstrations, protest meetings and opposition from their own ranks as the government imposed budget spending and job cuts. The Greens will do the same on a federal level.

And one can envisage a situation in which such an accord could be set in place, with more far-reaching impact than what took place in Tasmania 15 years ago. The Green-Labor accord took place in the midst of the last recession. Since then the Australian economy has enjoyed 14 years of continuous economic growth, a major factor in maintaining the Howard government in office. But sooner or later the business cycle must turn, with potentially severe consequences.

A comment published in the *Financial Times* of Monday asks, “How long can Australia keep rolling?” The answer seems to be, not much longer. The article points out that the stock market is at a record high, having risen by one third over the past 18 months, and the economy has been sustained by a massive property boom, with house prices more than doubling since 1997. Consumer spending has been the main driving force of the economy, increasing by 5-6 percent over the past few years, well above the growth of the economy as a whole. The result is an increase in debt. While the US savings rate is still positive, Australia’s is minus 3 percent, while household debt averages 150 percent of household income. Under these conditions, even a relatively mild recession, or a small increase in interest rates, would have a major impact. They would bring political instability, possibly requiring the formation of an accord with the Greens and a coalition government to impose the harsh measures demanded by the banks and money markets.

The basic orientation of the International Socialist Organisation (ISO), one of the components of the Socialist Alliance, is set out in the *Socialist Worker* of September 17:

“The anti-war movement will score a big victory if Latham wins the election, but it must continue to fight against the occupation of Iraq and the ‘war on terrorism.’”

How will it be a victory? Latham has not campaigned against the war, he has not denounced the occupation, he has indicted neither Howard nor Bush over the lies that preceded the war. He has made it clear that Australian military operations in the Gulf region will continue alongside the US. He calls the war a “mistake” but indicates that a Labor government would be ready to sign up to another aggressive war organised by the US. If Labor had been in government at the time of the Iraq invasion, it would have joined in, just as the Hawke Labor government was one of the first to commit naval forces to the 1990-91 Gulf War.

Moreover, Latham, and the two frontbenchers organising his foreign and military policy—Kim Beazley and Kevin Rudd—have made it clear that a Labor government would increase Australia’s military presence throughout South-East Asia. According to Beazley, since the US cannot get forces into the region because of opposition from the governments of Malaysia and Indonesia, this would make a real contribution to the US-Australia alliance.

The Democratic Socialist Party (DSP), the dominant component of the Socialist Alliance, has essentially the same position as the ISO. According to an article in the *Green Left Weekly* of September 8: “Only a strong left

vote can force Labor to be better than Howard. Without that pressure from the left, a Latham government will be just like the Hawke and Keating governments. The more a Labor government depends on Green and Socialist Alliance preferences to get elected, the more likely it is to deliver a few reforms and the more nervous it will be about attacking our rights.”

According to the opportunist logic advanced here, one should vote straight out for the Greens. After all, they are bigger than the Socialist Alliance, and therefore able to bring more pressure to bear on the Laborites. But the Greens have already committed themselves to forming an accord with a Labor government, and even with the Liberals, should that become necessary. In other words, far from responding to pressure from below, the Greens have already made it clear that if a political crisis erupts, they will respond to the pressure from above, and join whatever government can reimpose stability.

The DSP comment raises another issue: what are the lessons to be drawn from the experiences of the Hawke and Keating government?

In this electorate, the Labor candidate Peter Garret has justified his decision to join the ALP by claiming that it is the party of “reform.” But in the period of the Hawke-Keating government the meaning of that word underwent a complete transformation. Up until that time—for the first 80 years of the twentieth century—“reform” meant the amelioration of some of the worst features of the capitalist system and the introduction of certain limited concessions to the working class. Over the past 20 years, however, “reform” has come to mean the complete opposite. When we hear talk of “reform” of the industrial relations and wages system, it means greater provision for sackings, job cuts and casualisation. Likewise, “reform” of the health system means the introduction of user pays or increased payments for pharmaceutical products. “Reforms” of the financial system mean the scrapping of regulations and controls; “reform” of the transport system means increased privatisation, and the list goes on.

The entire process was initiated under the Hawke-Keating government, which came to power at a turning point in the affairs of world capitalism. The long post-war economic boom had come to an end and global capital demanded an all-out international onslaught against the social position of the working class. The Fraser Liberal government, in which Howard was the treasurer, was unable to carry out this task and Labor came into office. The impact of its program, which was continued by Howard in 1996, is detailed in our election statement.

The crucial question we want to address tonight is not so much what was done, but, rather, how was it done?

According to the DSP, the problem was that the working class did not place enough pressure on the Hawke-Keating government. Only if sufficient pressure is placed on a Latham government will it be possible to prevent a repeat of the previous experience. In other words, the problem was that the working class was not militant enough, or did not fight hard enough and, in the end, it was really to blame.

But the history of this period demonstrates that the problem was not a lack of struggle on behalf of the working class. There was the strike of the Queensland electricity workers in 1985 which threatened to spark a nationwide general strike; the struggles of coal miners against attacks on their conditions, and the movement in 1988 to disaffiliate their union from the ALP; and the occupation of Cockatoo Island Dockyard in 1989, to name just a few examples.

The problem was not lack of pressure or militancy or opposition to the attacks of Hawke and Keating, but that the working class had no political perspective around which to organise its struggle against the Labor government.

And this crisis of perspective was part of a global process. Its impact was most graphically demonstrated in the Soviet Union, when the working class was unable to advance its own independent perspective in the political crisis that led to the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in 1990-91. This meant that the outcome was not the renewal of the struggle for

genuine socialism, and the restoration of the political power that had been usurped from the working class by the Stalinist apparatus, but the restoration of capitalism and the establishment of the criminal-gangster regimes which we see ruling in the territories of the former USSR.

Marx once wrote that “the working class is revolutionary or it is nothing.” By this he did not mean that the overthrow of the bourgeoisie was always and everywhere possible. Social revolution is not a momentary act, but an entire historical process. But throughout this process, through all its twists and turns, the working class must advance its own independent political perspective, aimed at the socialist transformation of society. Without this, no matter how militant its struggles might be, it remains, in the final analysis, under the domination of the ruling classes—and is nothing.

The crisis confronting the working class today is a crisis of political perspective. There is no way out of the historical impasse into which capitalism has driven humanity unless and until the working class—the overwhelming majority of the world’s people—begins to advance its own independent solution. Our election campaign is therefore not about votes, preference deals, discussions about which party might or might not constitute the lesser evil. It is about ideas; overcoming the enormous damage done to the political consciousness of the working class by decades of domination by the Stalinist and labour bureaucracies, and restoring the great liberating ideas of Marxism and international socialism to the very centre of the struggles of the international working class movement.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact