

Australia: SEP candidate James Cogan speaks at Kingsford Smith community forums

Our reporters

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In the past week, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for the eastern Sydney seat of Kingsford Smith, James Cogan, has addressed two election campaign forums organised by local community groups. The first was held on September 23, in the suburb of Malabar, and the second in Kingsford on September 27. Approximately 60 people attended each event.

Cogan appeared alongside the other candidates campaigning in the electorate, including those from the Liberals, Greens, Democrats, and Socialist Alliance. The Labor Party's high-profile recruit, former Midnight Oil singer Peter Garrett, also spoke at both meetings.

Cogan's address emphasised that the Socialist Equality Party was placing the Iraq war at the centre of its election campaign. He condemned the US-led occupation, and drew attention to the litany of lies used by the Howard government as pretexts for the invasion.

"The terrorist attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, are being exploited to justify long-held US plans to militarily take control of the key oil-producing regions of the globe," Cogan explained. "The war on terrorism is nothing more than a propaganda mask for colonialism... The SEP demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US, Australian and other foreign troops. Reparations should be paid for the suffering inflicted on the Iraqi people."

The SEP candidate stressed that Labor's differences with the Howard government on Iraq were solely tactical, and that both the major parties were committed to maintaining a neo-colonial foreign policy. Cogan went on to assess the significance of the political evolution of Peter Garrett, who played a prominent role in the 1980s as a nuclear disarmament and environmental activist.

"Everyone here should draw some lessons from Mr. Garrett's history," Cogan said. "Many young people in the 1980s—myself included—believed him to be some type of left-wing alternative to Labor." What Garrett's trajectory demonstrated, the SEP candidate continued, was the necessity for the working class to assess political parties and leaders on the basis of their program and history. The Labor Party—which Garrett now defended as the "primary party of reform"—had paved the way for the Howard government, after 13 years of the Hawke and Keating governments' sustained assault on the social position of the working class.

"The SEP's main message in this election is that the working class needs to build an international socialist party," Cogan concluded. "It must establish its political independence from the Labor Party and from those who promote the lie that Labor is some type of lesser evil. Labor and Liberal are factions of the same ruling elite, and answer to the same banks and corporate boardrooms."

Of all the candidates, Cogan received the most enthusiastic applause

at both meetings, with members of the audience warmly welcoming the SEP's analysis of the Iraq war and the eruption of US militarism. None of the other speakers—including those from the nominally antiwar Greens and Socialist Alliance—made mention of the Iraq conflict in their opening statements.

This unanimous silence on the most critical issue facing the working class is indicative of the chasm that divides the political establishment from the concerns and interests of ordinary people. Every level of the campaign—from the scripting of Prime Minister Howard and Labor leader Mark Latham's sound bites, right down to local community debates—is marked by the determination of all the established parties to block any debate or discussion on the vital questions of war, democratic rights and social inequality.

After the initial addresses at Kingsford, the candidates were called upon by audience members to explain their parties' positions on Iraq, and it became even clearer that the SEP was the only genuine and principled opponent of the war. While Garrett admitted that the invasion was illegal, he made no attempt to answer Cogan's assertion that Labor supported the US-led occupation, the so-called interim Iraqi government headed by US stooge Iyad Allawi, and Australia's military pact with US imperialism. The Labor candidate backed Latham's call for a limited number of Australian troops to be withdrawn by the end of the year—a policy driven solely by nationalist concerns that Australian military resources be devoted to prosecuting the country's economic and strategic interests closer to home, in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Democrat and Green candidates, after stressing their opposition to the war, nevertheless expressed tacit support for the ongoing occupation, provided that it had United Nations backing. "Now that we have gone in there we have to clean up the mess," the Democrat, Nicole Tillotson, declared. "It's the number one rule—when you make a mess you clean it up. I'm sure all of your parents taught you that when you were little."

"We propose an immediate withdrawal of Australian troops," the Greens' candidate, Hannah Robert, said. "But we should help to clean up the mess that the war has caused, and we should therefore help the UN." While the Greens have enjoyed a recent surge in support, largely because they are seen as an antiwar party, their demand for a UN-led occupation demonstrates that the popular perception is seriously misguided. The UN, far from being a body that will help the Iraqi people, has acted as an accomplice for US crimes against Iraq over the past 15 years. The international organisation enforced the devastating sanctions regime in the 1990s, and, more recently, endorsed the puppet Allawi regime.

The Socialist Alliance candidate, Maureen Frances, gave a rambling

and occasionally incoherent speech, which never referred to the war. The speaker did not use the word “socialism”, and never demarcated the Socialist Alliance from any of the other minor parties. The address provided a graphic demonstration of the opportunist nature of the Socialist Alliance, which is an electoral coalition of various middle class protest organisations. Its essential purpose is to channel left-wing opposition to the Howard government back into the official parliamentary parties—the Labor Party and the Greens.

Peter Garrett began his speech in Kingsford with a direct appeal to the “Anyone but Howard” sentiment. “Do you want Howard in government again for three years?” he asked the audience, before issuing a listless defence of Latham’s policies. The mass hostility of ordinary people to the Howard government is particularly sharp in Kingsford Smith, which has long been a safe Labor seat.

At both public meetings, the Liberal candidate’s defence of the government’s record on the Iraq war, public healthcare and refugees was greeted with derisive laughter and jeers. However, the forums also demonstrated that opposition to the Liberals has not generated any genuine enthusiasm for the Labor Party’s campaign. While Labor once had an active base of support in the working class, the right-wing record of the Hawke and Keating governments produced such anger and disaffection that the party’s social base has disintegrated.

Garrett’s recruitment has done nothing to reverse this protracted process. Audience members listened attentively to the Labor candidate, but there was no enthusiasm for what he said. The sceptical response to Garrett was indicative of the main feature of the entire election campaign: the profound alienation of ordinary people from the two major parties.

The Labor candidate adopted a highly defensive stance in his response to questions. Rather than issuing a serious defence of his party’s policies, he repeatedly stressed his record as a “community activist”, and told the audience that he understood their concerns and would fight for their interests within the Labor Party. Garrett made no attempt to reconcile these appeals with the public commitment he made earlier this year to support the policies of Mark Latham, and the decisions made by Labor’s caucus.

One woman at the Malabar meeting angrily challenged Garrett on the mandatory detention of refugees. The Labor candidate gave a thoroughly dishonest reply, claiming that the opposition’s refugee policy “has been worked on considerably over the last two to three years ... that policy has got some way to go and I think it will continue to be worked on”. He failed to explain or defend the origins of mandatory detention, which was first introduced by the Keating Labor government in 1992 and has been championed by every Labor leader since.

The same issue was also raised at the Kingsford forum. Garrett responded this time by simply reading out the policy position published on Labor’s website. “Mandatory detention is maintained as an essential part of Labor’s approach,” he quoted. He then cited Labor’s call for children to be removed from custody, and for “hostel-style supervised accommodation” for some asylum seekers. After he finished reading the passage, he abruptly sat down, without attempting to clarify or justify any aspect of the policy.

Several questions addressed to Cogan allowed the candidate to outline the SEP’s policies on a range of important issues, including local developmental proposals, such as the expansion of Port Botany’s shipping facilities and the development of the Malabar Headland open space. These issues have generated widespread community concerns over the environment, industrial pollution, and

the potential effect on residents’ health.

The SEP candidate explained that urban development and industrial expansion were being driven by the demands of the profit system. Progressive and environmentally responsible development could only be ensured through the public ownership of major corporations and industries, and through a democratic planning process controlled by local residents, workers, scientists and urban planners.

Similar issues were involved in relation to urban density and the upgrade of infrastructure, Cogan continued. These problems could not be addressed on a local level, and would not be resolved through protest politics or by pressuring the major parties. The critical task was for the working class to develop and fight for its own independent perspective.

“The Socialist Equality Party rejects the position, so prevalent within the Green movement, that seeks to blame technology and overpopulation for environmental problems,” he said. “The problem is not too many people, but the subordination of the world’s natural resources, industry and human ingenuity to the struggle for profits.”

Answering a question on the free trade agreement between Australia and the US, the SEP candidate warned that the shift to regional trading blocs was reminiscent of the fracturing of international economic relations in the 1930s, and was sowing the seeds for wars between the major imperialist powers. The party’s opposition to the deal had nothing in common with the positions of the Greens, Democrats and Socialist Alliance, all of whom rejected the agreement because it was not in Australia’s “national interest”. The increasing integration of the global capitalist economy was an objective process that could not be opposed on the reactionary basis of a return to an insular, nationally regulated Australian economy, Cogan insisted.

Cogan was also given the opportunity to outline the SEP’s policy on the distribution of preferences. Under Australian electoral law, in order to cast a valid vote, voters must rank each candidate in order of preference. Cogan explained that the SEP was not advocating specific preferences for any other candidates. He stressed that the party rejected the position of the Greens, Democrats and Socialist Alliance that Labor was the “lesser evil” for the working class.

A number of audience members approached the SEP candidate following the meetings and expressed their agreement with many of the issues raised and gratitude for the seriousness of the party’s approach. Several purchased copies of the SEP’s 24-page election statement.

James Cogan, along with the SEP’s other candidates in New South Wales—Nick Beams and Terry Cook for the NSW Senate, and Mike Head in the western seat of Werriwa—will be speaking at the SEP’s election meeting this Sunday, October 3. To be held at the Ingleburn Community Centre, on the corner of Oxford and Cumberland Roads, Ingleburn, the meeting begins at 2.30 p.m. Readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* are warmly invited to attend.



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