

Lessons of Peter Garrett's evolution: from radical activist to Australian Labor politician

James Cogan (SEP candidate for Kingsford Smith)
5 October 2004

Workers and young people can draw important lessons from the decision of former Midnight Oil singer and anti-nuclear and green activist Peter Garrett to stand as the candidate for the Australian Labor Party (ALP) in the Sydney seat of Kingsford Smith. Especially for those looking toward the Greens as an alternative, Garrett's evolution is a timely reminder of the necessity of carefully examining political program and perspectives, rather than simply taking as good coin radical appearances and phraseology.

Labor pollsters calculated earlier this year that by enlisting Garrett, the party could hope to swing a few potential Greens voters back to the ALP. The celebrity rock star was referred to as "Mr One Percent"—indicative of Labor's desperation to regain whatever ground it possibly could in the lead-up to the federal election.

The poll results stemmed from Garrett's rock star status and lingering illusions in his role in the anti-nuclear movement of the 1980s. Many people entering politics at the time saw Garrett as a left-wing alternative to Labor. He was one of the most prominent figures in the movement that developed against the right wing character of the Hawke-Keating government and the nuclear and military build-up being carried out by the Reagan administration in the US.

Midnight Oil albums produced in the early 1980s, such as *10 to 1* and *Red Sails in the Sunset*, tapped into the opposition to US militarism, as well as concerns over the environment and social inequality. Oils' concerts, dominated by Garrett's undeniable stage presence, assumed the character of political rallies.

In 1984, Garrett entered politics as the main public spokesman for the newly-formed Nuclear Disarmament Party (NDP). In the federal election of December 1984, he stood as the NDP's Senate candidate for New South Wales and won 9.6 percent of the vote. Nationally, the NDP polled 650,000 votes and NDP leader Jo Vallentine was elected to the Senate from Western Australia.

Twenty years on, Garrett has stressed that he will submit to Labor Party discipline on all issues. He has publicly renounced the positions with which he was most identified—closing the US-controlled Pine Gap spy station and banning uranium mining.

Despite the fact that Labor has endorsed the illegal US-led occupation of Iraq, at his maiden press conference Garrett declared his allegiance to the party's foreign policy. He repudiated his past opposition to the US-Australia military alliance and declared that, "with the maturing of time", he no longer believed nuclear war to be a serious threat. "[The] international situation has changed. It's terrorism now, not nuclear disarmament". He was "satisfied", he said, that Labor's policies served the interests of "national security".

Garrett's standard refrain to all media enquiries about his about-face was quickly established: "I agree with the policies of Mark Latham".

In the course of the election campaign, Garrett has remained as quiet as possible about the thoroughly right-wing agenda of Latham's Labor. He has avoided mentioning the Iraq war or Labor's support for the mandatory

detention of refugees, and has failed to comment on the retrogressive character of Labor's taxation and Family Benefits policy, which will deliver tax cuts to better-off layers at the direct expense of the living standards of single-income families earning less than \$35,000.

Garrett has also been notably silent on Latham's policy of forcing all non-residents to carry identity cards—a reactionary form of social control that has not been suggested since the Hawke Labor government's attempt in 1987 to introduce the so-called Australia Card. At the time, Garrett denounced this as a step toward "a one-party state".

Garrett declared when he joined Labor that it was the "primary party of reform." Taken at his word, this amounts to Garrett's open endorsement of the measures carried out by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996.

Throughout that period, Labor presided over declining real wages, widespread casualisation and contracting out, and the dismantling of trade union rights—all in the name of making Australian industry "internationally competitive". Labor introduced user pays in health and education, including fees for university courses, mandatory detention centres for refugees and a wholesale program of privatisation of major state-owned entities. It deregulated the banks, and carried out the first major tax cuts for high-income earners and corporations. In 1991, Hawke was among the first world leaders to back the US attack on Iraq.

The conservative Howard coalition government of the last eight years has simply continued and deepened Labor's policies.

When challenged in the course of the election campaign to justify Labor's record and Latham's agenda, Garrett has offered the pathetic platitude that, inside the party, he will try to be a voice for the concerns of ordinary people. His only differences with official Labor policy appear to be from the right: a Christian moral opposition to the right of abortion and to state support for in-vitro fertilisation. But Labor deems these "conscience issues" and therefore agrees to disagree.

Many people have expressed surprise, and even distaste, at Garrett's decision to join Labor. The spectacle of a man repudiating everything he once stood for is certainly not an attractive one. At the most fundamental level, however, there is nothing surprising about Garrett's evolution. Enlisting with the ALP is the logical outcome of the line he has espoused since entering politics on behalf of the NDP.

Garrett's response to militarism was shaped by his acceptance of the political and economic framework of capitalism. Along with other leaders of the anti-nuclear movement in the 1980s, he uncritically identified socialism with the Stalinist bureaucratic regime in the Soviet Union.

The anti-nuclear activists made no attempt to study the causes of the betrayal of the Russian Revolution or the program advanced by the Trotskyist movement against both imperialism and Stalinism. They rejected the Marxist analysis that the underlying cause of war and oppression lay in the global contradictions of capitalism—between world economy and its division into rival nation-states, and the subordination of social production to the accumulation of private profit—and that, therefore,

it could only be ended through revolutionary social change carried out by the international working class.

Instead, the anti-nuclear movement reduced the Cold War to power-lust and stupidity in both Washington and Moscow, and argued that to end the threat of a nuclear holocaust, leaders on both sides only needed to be convinced to disarm.

Such a pacifist and ignorant analysis offered no answers and no way forward. The nuclear and military build-up initiated under the Reagan administration flowed organically from the economic crisis that had gripped US capitalism since the early 1970s. After several decades of “coexistence”, it represented the first stage of the turn by Washington to military might to overcome its declining world position—a process that has vastly intensified in the last two decades.

Above all, the US military build-up was aimed at bringing about the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite the Stalinist bureaucracy’s decades of collaboration with imperialism, the territory of the USSR remained sealed off from capitalist exploitation by the nationalised property relations established in the 1917 Revolution.

The struggle against militarism and the danger of war demanded the defence of the Soviet Union against imperialist aggression, combined with an orientation to the international working class to construct an independent political movement fighting for a socialist perspective in the capitalist countries, and for the overthrow of the Stalinist apparatus and reestablishment of genuine workers’ democracy in the Soviet Union.

The struggle against militarism was thus inseparably connected to the social issues confronting the working class.

The tremendous political upsurge from 1968 to 1975 had been betrayed and dissipated by its Stalinist, social democratic, trade union and nationalist leaderships, opening the door for a global counteroffensive by the ruling elite. Particularly in the US and Britain, state-sponsored attacks on the working class were being unleashed to meet corporate demands for mass layoffs, the reduction in wages and the restructuring of working conditions. Governments internationally were implementing economic deregulation to remove all obstacles to the global flow of capital, as corporations employed new forms of technology and communications to reorganise production and transfer entire processes to low-cost labour regions.

In Australia, it was Labor, in collaboration with the trade unions, that implemented this agenda and by 1984, it was already well underway.

Flowing from their pacifist renunciation of the class struggle and socialism, however, Garrett and the NDP explicitly opposed any struggle to build an alternative political movement to the Labor and union bureaucracy in the working class. The conclusion drawn by Garrett and other “left” intellectuals from the betrayals and defeats of the 1970s, was not that a genuine socialist leadership was needed, but that the working class was incapable of changing society. As anti-militarist sentiment spread among Australian youth, Garrett and the NDP came forward to tell them that all they could hope to achieve was the narrow perspective of pressuring the Labor government to adopt an anti-nuclear stance.

The organisation was so limited politically that it advanced just three policies in the 1984 election: no foreign military bases in Australia, a ban on uranium mining and a nuclear-free zone in Australian waters and airspace. One of its main arguments was the somewhat inane declaration that it was not in Australia’s “national interest” to be a target in a potential nuclear war.

The Australian nationalism that permeated the NDP led it to denigrate any orientation toward the bitter struggles of the American working class against the Reagan administration occurring at the time. Instead, the NDP promoted anti-Americanism—an outlook that draws no distinction between the mass of ordinary American people on the one hand, and the policies of the US ruling elite on the other.

Summing up his own outlook, Garrett told a 1984 press conference:

“I’m not a radical and I’m not an anarchist. I believe I’m more of a patriot and more jingoistic than these people who see me as a radical.”

The NDP’s basic conservatism did not stop the opportunist Socialist Workers Party (SWP)—predecessor of the Democratic Socialist Party, now part of Socialist Alliance—from promoting it as the means of opposing war, just as the Socialist Alliance now promotes the Greens. Such was the infatuation of the SWP leadership with the NDP, it instructed its membership to join the NDP’s ranks.

At a time when considerable illusions existed in Garrett, the Socialist Labour League, the Australian section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) and predecessor to the SEP, was alone in publicly differentiating itself from his pro-capitalist politics. The SLL pointed out that the NDP and SWP were functioning to channel the discontent of youth back into the harmless arena of parliamentary illusions and prevent their political education.

On the eve of the 1984 election, *Workers News*, the SLL’s newspaper, editorialised on “Why we oppose the NDP”. The editorial explained: “The NDP is a bourgeois pacifist organisation of political confusion, which seeks to maintain confusion about the role of the Labor government.” It specifically warned of the role of Garrett in promoting illusions that the parliamentary system could be made to work in the interests of ordinary people.

The correctness of this warning was rapidly verified. The Labor government stepped-up its backing for Reagan and its assault on the working class, while the NDP degenerated into unprincipled factional infighting. Garrett, Vallentine and others came into conflict with the SWP entrists over organisational issues, and resigned en masse just four months after the elections. The effective collapse of the organisation served to further confuse sections of youth and reinforce the conception that the working class was powerless against the political establishment.

Internationally, the working class proved unable to establish its political independence from the Stalinist and Labor bureaucracies and advance a genuine socialist and revolutionary perspective. This led to major defeats by the end of the 1980s, the most catastrophic being the turn by the Stalinist regime under Gorbachev, in direct collaboration with US imperialism, to restore capitalist relations in the territories of the former Soviet Union and liquidate the social conditions of the Soviet working class.

Whatever their intentions, those like Garrett who rejected a struggle against capitalism and Stalinism as “unrealistic” contributed to creating the political conditions of the last decade-and-a-half, during which the international working class has faced a constant assault on its living standards, along with the global eruption of US military aggression.

Those looking toward the Greens, or Socialist Alliance for that matter, should take note of the obvious similarities between the two organisations’ politics and those of Garrett before he joined Labor. The NDP of the 1980s faded into obscurity. The conceptions that guided it, however, are expressed everyday by Bob Brown, Kerry Nettle and other Green and radical politicians: acceptance of the capitalist market; the politics of pacifism, protest and pressure; the rejection of a scientific understanding of society; parochialism and nationalism; and the same scepticism in the working class.

It took Peter Garrett 20 years to decide that nothing essential in his political outlook stood in the way of working with the Labor Party and serving in a Labor government. Given the economic and social shocks that are on the agenda, the Greens and Socialist Alliance are unlikely to take that long.

In the course of this election campaign, the SEP has spoken with many students, workers and intellectuals who seriously want to fight for equality and revolutionary social change. Over the coming months, we will work with them to study the strategic experiences of the international working class throughout the twentieth century and, above all, the history and

lessons of the Russian Revolution. This is the only way to fight the re-emergence of militarism and imperialist war.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact