

Australia: Labor Party candidate in Werriwa by-election silent on vital issues

Terry Cook
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In its statement for the current by-election in the federal seat of Werriwa in south western Sydney, the Socialist Equality Party warned: “Both the government and Labor share a common interest in keeping the entire by-election as low-key as possible. Neither can tolerate any serious political discussion of their foreign or domestic policies.”

This certainly has proven to be the case. The Liberals decided not to field a candidate at all, knowing that Labor could be relied upon to avoid raising any of the pressing and urgent issues facing working people. Just like the federal election campaign last year, as far as Labor is concerned, the Howard government’s criminal support for the war in Iraq and for Washington’s ongoing brutal occupation, as well as its deepening attacks on social conditions at home, are to remain well and truly off the radar screen.

To this end, the ALP’s candidate for Werriwa, Chris Hayes, has maintained such a low profile that he has given new meaning to the term “small target politics”. Since declaring his candidacy in a brief press interview on February 1, Hayes has issued no election statement outlining his policies, nor has he held a public meeting in the area. With the Liberals out of the race and figuring his election is a foregone conclusion, Hayes’s motto has been “the least said the better”.

Hence, instead of a policy statement Hayes has issued a multiple-page glossy pamphlet, devoid of any political content and consisting of captioned photos of the candidate from the age of three to the present day. Appropriately entitled “Family Album,” the main message was “local and proud of it”. Significantly, it had almost nothing to say about Hayes’s lengthy career as a union functionary, turned private business consultant.

But, as the old saying goes, the best laid plans of

mice and men—including those of Hayes, the ALP and the Liberals—oft times go astray. Since the by-election was declared last month, the issues surrounding the Iraq war and mounting social inequality in Australia have dramatically pushed their way to the surface.

At the end of February, Prime Minister John Howard announced that the government was sending 450 more combat troops to Iraq in a clear attempt to shore up what has become a rapidly disintegrating “coalition of the willing”. Howard’s decision—clearly a significant political development—did not evoke a single word of condemnation from Hayes, or even a comment.

Hayes has been equally silent on the eruption of a major crisis in Macquarie Fields, a suburb right in the heart of the Werriwa electorate. Two teenagers were killed in a high-speed car chase by the police on February 25, and, for days after the tragedy, hundreds of riot police armed with shields and automatic weapons and wielding batons stormed through the streets surrounding the crash site, engaging in violent clashes with scores of youth outraged by the needless deaths and stirred up by the provocative actions of the police.

House to house raids have resulted in wholesale arrests with some young people facing possible jail terms of up to 10 years for riot and affray. Yet, despite everything, Hayes has not seen fit to make a statement or issue a press release. Most tellingly, he has not publicly expressed a word of sympathy over the deaths of the two teenagers, Matthew Robertson, 19, and a 17-year-old youth.

The *World Socialist Web Site* attempted to contact Hayes on Thursday last week to get his comments on what are clearly vital issues for working people everywhere. I spent an entire day attempting to track him down, but to no avail. After getting in touch with

Hayes's electoral office I was directed to his diary organiser, Graham Cassidy, who on two occasions said he would put my request for an interview to Hayes and get back to me. This never happened.

While Hayes himself has not yet spoken to the WSWS, Cassidy's remarks to me were extremely revealing. First of all, he dismissed Hayes's failure to comment on Howard's decision to commit Australian troops to Iraq with the absurd explanation that he (Hayes) "does not comment on everything". My next question was: "But isn't Howard's decision to deepen involvement in a criminal war a vital issue that Hayes, as the Labor candidate for Werriwa, should have something to say about?" This drew the curt reply "there are plenty of statements being made on the issue by other party (ALP) people".

What of matters closer to home? After all, Hayes promotes himself as a local man. Why had he not issued a press release on the developments in Macquarie Fields, I asked. The area had, after all, been under police siege for days. When I pointed out that people in the suburb were outraged about the massive operation and had expressed horror at the deployment of large bodies of heavily armed riot police into the area, Cassidy claimed "our feed back from the community is that it is pleased with the police response". He confirmed that Hayes "supports the actions of the police in dealing with the affray".

When I replied that the operation involved extraordinary levels of police violence and that there were even reports that police had pointed guns at local residents, Cassidy retorted: "That is all crap and you know it." I then referred him to media footage showing police armed with automatic weapons storming through suburban streets. Cassidy merely commented: "Yes, but they haven't used them yet, have they". This remarkable and callous response was no slip of the tongue. It reflects the utter indifference of the Labor Party for the welfare of working people and its full endorsement of mounting levels of state violence to deal with social unrest.

I went on to ask whether Hayes supported the statement of New South Wales state Labor premier Bob Carr on February 28, who declared: "There are no excuses for this behaviour [clashes with the police] and I am not going to have its said that this behaviour is caused by social disadvantage". Wasn't this an open

repudiation of the conception that crime, substance abuse and anti-social behaviour can only be overcome by eradicating disadvantage and improving the conditions of social life?

Clearly edgy about the question, Cassidy contended that Hayes might have some differences with Carr's position, but he refrained from saying exactly what these could be. I told Cassidy that I, as well as the people of Werriwa, would be very interested to hear what they were, and again asked for Hayes to get back to me. To date, he has not returned my calls.

The lack of comment by Labor's Werriwa candidate on these burning political issues is not due to some personal defect. His silence reflects the position of the Labor Party as a whole that is just as anxious as the Liberals to stifle any serious discussion on the ongoing war in Iraq and the growing levels of social inequality at home. Neither party has any solution to the mounting social crisis caused by entrenched poverty and years of neglect and social disadvantage, except the unleashing of ever-greater levels of state repression.



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