

Victorian election

Will Marshall exposes Labor and Greens at Broadmeadows election forum

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An election forum in the Victorian state seat of Broadmeadows last Wednesday sharply highlighted the hostility felt by many ordinary people toward the state Labor government, the Liberal Party and the rest of the political establishment. The meeting was organised by the Broadmeadows Progress Association, a local lobby group with close ties to the Labor and trade union bureaucracies.

Broadmeadows is a key working class electorate in Melbourne's northern suburbs and home of carmaker Ford, as well as several key car parts manufacturers. While considered a "safe" Labor seat, the meeting indicated that this characterisation has little relevance in contemporary Australia as political frustration and anger with Labor's big business policies has dramatically undermined its former widespread working class support.

Sitting Labor Party member and state treasurer John Brumby treated those in attendance with predictable contempt, saying he had a prior engagement and would leave the meeting at 8.30 pm. Brumby, who is rarely available to speak with local residents, planned to make a self-congratulatory speech about Labor's "achievements", announce a new and long overdue local railway station at Coolaroo, and then depart.

Brumby's agenda dovetailed with that of the forum's organisers, who planned to give candidates only one minute to introduce themselves, followed by a question and answer session dominated by local politics. This format, designed to limit discussion to the most immediate and parochial issues, was changed, however, after a Socialist Equality Party (SEP) member in the audience insisted that the candidates be given more time to outline their basic policies.

SEP candidate Will Marshall, was the first speaker. He provided a concise overview of the SEP's socialist program and directly challenged Brumby over Labor's support for the so-called "war on terror" and its ongoing assault on the social conditions of working class communities.

Marshall told the meeting that the opposition of millions of

Americans to the US-led invasion of Iraq, expressed in the recent mid-term congressional elections, was widely shared by working people in Broadmeadows and throughout Australia. This, he said, was being deliberately screened out in the state election.

"Iraq is the great unmentionable in this campaign. Neither the Bracks government nor the official state opposition parties—Liberals, Greens and Democrats—wants any debate on the issue," he said. Marshall went on to detail Labor's de facto coalition with the Howard government on the Iraq war and its assault on long-standing democratic rights.

The SEP candidate made clear that the war on terror was a political vehicle for justifying the invasion of Iraq and an escalating program of militarism and war aimed at seizing oil and other valuable natural resources. This was the motivation, he said, behind Australia's military interventions in East Timor and the Pacific.

John Brumby told the meeting that working class families in Victoria were "better off" under Labor and attempted to impress the audience with the new rail station plans. But Marshall's presentation had opened up the meeting, provoking questions that neither Labor nor the other candidates anticipated or welcomed.

The Labor MP was peppered with a series of angry questions about job cuts at Ford, the anti-terror laws, public health, transport and education and a nearby toxic waste dump.

Several audience members pointed out that residents had been demanding a station at Coolaroo for more than forty years. "We've heard this before," an older woman interjected, "I want to know whether I'll see this before I die." Another local resident called on Brumby to close a nearby toxic waste dump. He refused to give any such undertaking.

Brumby was asked to explain Labor's support for the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and its anti-terror laws. He arrogantly replied: "We don't send the troops to Iraq, that's

a federal issue. If you want change you have to get rid of the Howard government.”

He then emphasised Labor’s collaboration with Canberra: “Our discussions with the Howard government over the anti-terror laws and the amendments we proposed made the laws more palatable.”

The Labor MP categorically ruled out any defence of jobs at Ford and made the ludicrous claim that the job cuts were only “temporary”.

“The reason why they’ve reduced their workforce is because people aren’t buying their cars ... As much as I regret that decision there is nothing that could be done to stop it. It’s simply the result of a range of international factors, including higher petrol prices,” he declared.

An angry audience member interjected that Brumby’s answer was the same as Ford’s. “You may as well be their spokesman,” he insisted.

Brumby brushed aside questions about gas, electricity and water bills and rising youth unemployment with empty claims that the Victorian economy was moving forward. Then he left the meeting.

Election statements by Daniel Parsons, the local Liberal candidate, Greg Barber, the Greens candidate for a Northern Metropolitan upper house seat; Joseph Kalyini, an independent, and two Peoples Power candidates—Marlene Ebejer and Barbara Biggs—demonstrated their utter indifference to the issues facing working people.

Notwithstanding their claims to oppose Labor, the Greens and other local candidates, have no fundamental differences. Danile Parsons, the Liberal candidate parroted a series of party slogans, including promises of free travel for students and aid to small business, and told the meeting that if elected he would “move the electoral office into the community.”

One worker angrily denounced the Howard government’s moves to privatise Medibank, and then declared: “You and Brumby come here but you’re all liars. The whole lot of you....”

Greens candidate Greg Barber tried to avoid the issues raised by Marshall. Barber, a former Green mayor of Yarra City Council, was instrumental in slashing operating costs at the council during his administration. He told the meeting that the Greens were concerned about families and children.

An audience member asked the Greens to explain why they supported Australian military incursions in East Timor and the Solomons. Barber attempted to dodge the question, declaring, “East Timor is a very complex question and I’d be happy to talk to you after the meeting. I’ve been to East Timor but I don’t think you have time for a history lesson here tonight.”

Marshall told the meeting that the Greens had no principled objections to the US-led Iraq war and had never

denounced it as imperialist plunder. “This is why they were in favour of the Afghanistan war, the war in the Balkans, the interventions into East Timor and more recently Australia’s virtual takeover of the Solomon Islands. They simply argue that Australian forces would have been better deployed in ‘our region.’”

Marlene Ebejer and Barbara Biggs from People Power, a right-wing populist formation contesting a number of Victorian seats, claimed to oppose Brumby but emphasised that their preferences would be directed towards Labor.

As the question and answer session developed Will Marshall further clarified the SEP’s internationalist and socialist program against that of the Greens.

Marshall said comments by Greens leader Bob Brown about his party’s record in Tasmania were very revealing. Explaining Greens collaboration with the Tasmania Labor government in slashing the state budget, Brown told the media last year: “We had Greens’ supporters protesting outside our offices. We went to some very angry public meetings, but we Greens held the line.”

“In other words,” Marshall concluded, “the Greens, can be relied upon to defy working people and defend the profit system.”

Asked about the job cuts at Ford, the other candidates made clear that they favoured increased handouts and other concessions to the corporations. The Greens said tax concessions should be given to environmentally ethical businesses as did People Power candidates, who also called for increased tariffs on imported goods.

The Broadmeadows forum made clear that the SEP is the only party that genuinely represents the working class. Those looking for answers to the critical issues facing workers and youth should study the Socialist Equality Party’s election program, vote for Will Marshall in Broadmeadows in the November 25 Victorian election and seriously consider joining the SEP.



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