

ISSE exposes hypocrisy of Australian Labor politician at campus meeting

Our reporters
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The International Students for Social Equality (ISSE), the student organisation of the Socialist Equality Party and the International Committee of the Fourth International, spoke from the floor this week at a University of New South Wales (UNSW) campus meeting held to discuss the silencing of dissent and the erosion of democracy in Australia. The ISSE's intervention exposed the anti-democratic record and hypocrisy of Australian Labor Party (ALP) politician Peter Garrett, the meeting's keynote speaker.

The stated purpose of the event, attended by approximately 100 academics and students, was to promote a new book authored by Clive Hamilton, executive director of the Australia Institute, and Sarah Maddison, a lecturer at UNSW's School of Politics and International Relations.

The book, entitled *Silencing Dissent: How the Australian government is controlling public opinion and stifling debate* illustrates some of the extraordinary steps taken by the Howard government over the past ten years to stymie the dissenting views of charities, academics, researchers, journalists, judges, public sector organisations and parliamentarians.

It became immediately clear, however, that the central purpose of the meeting was to provide Garrett with a public platform from which he could pose as a defender of democratic rights in front of academics and students at UNSW, which is located in his federal seat of Kingsford Smith.

Both Hamilton and Maddison praised the politician in their introductions. Hamilton described Garrett, a former rock star and former member of the Nuclear Disarmament Party, as having a long history of providing a "dissenting voice".

In his presentation, Garrett made various criticisms of the Howard government's attacks on scientists,

environmentalists and non-government organisations. He insisted that he was one who "applauded dissenters" and that the danger of dissenting voices being drowned out was of great concern to him. He then appealed to the audience to vote the Howard government out of office and replace it with an ALP government at the next federal election, to be held later this year.

Even the best efforts of the organisers, however, could not hide the fraudulent character of Garrett's claims.

The first speaker during question time was a student member of the ISSE at UNSW, who declared that it was "something of an outrage" that Garrett had been invited to speak at a campus about democratic rights and dissenting political voices given his party's record of supporting far reaching attacks on precisely these principles.

Since 2002, Howard's coalition government and the ALP opposition have together passed over 40 laws, including provision for secret detention, interrogation by intelligence officials for up to a week without charge, and closed-door trials, and laws which give the executive wide powers to ban political organisations. In 2005, the law of sedition was revived. The fundamental purpose of these laws is precisely to silence political dissent and opposition and to create the framework for a police state.

As the ISSE student said, "the party which [Garrett] has joined has voted for every piece of anti-democratic legislation introduced by the Howard government since 2002. Since he was elected he has voted for 'anti-terrorism' legislation himself."

"This has been done under the banner of the 'war on terror'," the ISSE member continued. "The 'war on terror' is a monumental fraud. It has been manufactured by the Bush administration and its

defenders to justify a grab for oil and resources. It has been used to justify the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq which has killed hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqis and is now being honed for a war against Iran.”

As soon as the student began challenging the political record of Garrett and the ALP, Maddison, who was chairing the meeting, attempted to silence him. She yelled “what is your question?” and announced that she should have stipulated that the organisers did not want audience members to make comments.

The irony of this position was not lost on the audience. Both Maddison and Hamilton had insisted that universities should be the centre of politically dissenting views, while Hamilton had criticised a recent decision by the Charles Sturt University to ban political clubs campaigning during the university’s orientation week. He stressed that universities should encourage campus political groups, including providing funds to them.

In response to Maddison’s intervention, a student shouted from the rear of the meeting that she should “stop silencing dissent” and “let him speak.” The ISSE speaker finished his remarks, invited all students to attend the ISSE meeting “Socialism and the struggle against war” the following day, and asked that Garrett clarify his record on the anti-terror legislation and the “war on terror.”

Garrett’s response—that Labor had, indeed, passed the laws and that he fully supported the decision to do so—made clear his own and his party’s thoroughly anti-democratic character. He meekly countered that Labor had made various minor amendments to the legislation, including a “sunset clause” which would allow it to be reviewed after five years.

Subsequent comments and questions from students in the audience about Garrett’s support for a new US military base in Western Australia and for the United States-Australian Alliance further illustrated the interests represented by the ALP—those of the ruling elite, not of students and ordinary working people—and that it could, in no sense, be characterised as a forum for dissenting opinions.

Garrett emphasised that his views were identical to those of the ALP and that by joining the party he had agreed to support those positions.

After the meeting, a number of students spoke to

ISSE members, expressing their disgust at the organisers’ attempts to stifle the expression of an alternative perspective in a forum supposedly being held to defend dissent and debate on campus. Several signed up to join the ISSE.



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