

SEP candidate Alex Safari speaks at election forum in Maroubra

Labor's Peter Garrett presents his pro-war credentials

Our reporters
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Labor's environment spokesman Peter Garrett is currently keeping a low profile in the federal election campaign after a series of 'gaffes' in recent days that have been seized on by media outlets and the Howard government. The latest of these, involving a joke by the former rock-star that Labor would depart from its 'me-too' policies once the November 24 poll is over, has thrown the ALP into damage control. Rudd and Garrett have issued public declarations that their bipartisan support for Howard government policy is indeed genuine and will remain if Labor takes office.

But for anyone with lingering illusions on this score, Peter Garrett's recent performance at a candidates' forum in his Sydney electorate of Kingsford Smith should serve as a reality check. Responding to warnings from Socialist Equality Party (SEP) candidate Alex Safari that the US was preparing an unprovoked war of aggression against Iran, the Labor frontbencher and former Nuclear Disarmament Party (NDP) leader refused to condemn the war preparations, and indicated his support for the current media campaign demonising Tehran.

The election forum was at Maroubra's Bowen Library on October 23, and was convened by local community group EAST. Politicians in attendance were Garrett, Safari, Greens candidate Sue Mahoney and Democrats senate candidate Lyn Schumack.

Each speaker was allowed 10 minutes to make an opening presentation, but Garrett failed to mention Australia's involvement in the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq. Since 2004, public support for the Howard government has unravelled, driven largely by antiwar sentiment. Yet Garrett's remarks formed a stark contrast to the popular revulsion over the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He said nothing about the mountain of lies over WMD, the incarceration of 'enemy combatant' David Hicks or the assault on democratic rights ushered in by the "war on terror".

As the subsequent discussion made clear, Garrett's omissions were far from accidental.

In his own opening remarks, SEP candidate Alex Safari warned that the election of a Rudd Labor government would see no reversal in the attacks waged on working people by the Howard government. He stressed that the most important issue confronting workers and young people was the global eruption of militarism and war.

Safari condemned the silence of all other candidates regarding the Iraq war. "The illegal invasion of Iraq, which was based on lies, has resulted in the deaths of more than 1 million Iraqis, more than 3,000 American and other foreign troops, and has created 4 million refugees. Iraqi society has effectively been destroyed.

"They are now preparing for a new and bloody intervention in Iran

which will destabilise the entire Middle East and raise the threat of a wider global war. According to Seymour Hersh, the award-winning American journalist, Australia has already signed up for an air war against Iran. All the major parties, including the Greens, are maintaining silence on this issue. As far as they are concerned, it cannot be discussed."

"Whichever party wins the election," Safari concluded, "none of the pressing problems confronting ordinary working people will be resolved... The SEP is standing candidates in order to build a socialist movement in opposition to the entire political establishment—Labor, Liberal and the Greens."

Later in the discussion, Alex Safari strenuously opposed Garrett's claim that global warming could be averted via agreements between the major capitalist powers or through carbon-trading schemes such as those piloted in NSW and the European Union. "I don't agree with Peter Garrett when he says that the environmental crisis is man-made," said Safari. "It has been produced by the capitalist system—a system that puts the needs of profit before the needs of human beings."

Safari, an agricultural scientist, explained how the carbon-trading schemes advocated by Labor and the Greens were a massive cash bonanza for private industry, "Millions of dollars has been handed to the pockets of the big corporations, to the largest polluters, giving them a licence to continue emissions. None of these schemes challenges the anarchy of the capitalist market. In fact, they are merely creating a new market—in emissions trading—and new avenues to wealth creation for a tiny elite."

During question-time Garrett came under fire from local residents over environmental issues, including Labor's support for Gunn's pulp mill in Tasmania, inaction over development at the local Malabar Headland and the disposal of toxic waste from the nearby Orica chemical plant. Audience members also expressed concern over global poverty and income inequality and the financial hardship faced by pensioners.

In response, the shadow environment minister offered glib assurances that Labor was listening. But when it came to the life-and-death question of war, on which the economic and strategic interests of Australian capitalism depended, Garrett made absolutely clear that he was 'on message'. He studiously avoided any condemnation of the US-led invasion of Iraq, falsified Labor's record of support for the Iraq occupation and launched a vicious attack on Safari after the SEP candidate opposed the current propaganda campaign portraying Iran as a threat to world peace.

Speaking from the floor, SEP campaign manager Tania Kent demanded to know why Garrett was silent on US war preparations against Iran. Kent referred to a report in Britain's *Sunday Times* which revealed Australian and British SAS troops were already operating in Iran. Furthermore, in the October issue of *Australia-Israel Review*, Rudd had declared Labor's support for "any future measures" which may be necessary against Iran. "Where do you, Mr Garrett, former NDP leader, stand on this issue? You have not raised it at all. And your party is supporting these plans for what is going to be a human tragedy for millions of people in that country and in that region. And I also direct my question to the Greens, who have been silent on this issue as well."

Garrett claimed he was "not familiar" with Rudd's comments, despite them having appeared, just days earlier, on the front page of Murdoch's *Australian*. Rudd has been even more bellicose than Howard, castigating Iran as "an existential threat to the world", calling for Ahmadinejad to be placed on trial for "incitement to genocide" and referring with approval to the stance of former Bush Administration neo-con John Bolton for such proceedings.

While Garrett claimed Labor policy was bound by "the whole corpus of international law which governments and alternative governments are bound by", the ALP's positions in relation to Iraq, Afghanistan and its support for the Howard government's military interventions in the South Pacific, make a mockery of this claim.

Safari opposed Garrett's whitewash of Labor's record: "Peter Garrett made a comment that Labor has opposed the Iraq war. That's not correct. The Labor Party did not oppose on principle this war. The Labor Party did not say that the attack on Iraq was based on lies and criminal aggression, or that its aim was to gain access to oil and attain strategic advantage. Labor didn't say 'this is the act of an aggressor power against a defenceless country and people'. And three days after the start of the war, in March 2003, Simon Crean said 'okay, everyone is in, we have to support our troops.' And the United Nations is an organisation representing the interests of the big powers. It supported the installation of a puppet government, in Iraq."

Garrett made no attempt to factually refute Safari's presentation.

"And now they are preparing for war against Iran," Safari told the forum. "Another catastrophe! George Bush, two or three days ago said, 'Either we're going to stop Iran being nuclear, or we're going to have a third world war.' And I want to tell everyone here that Iran, whose regime I do not support—has obeyed all the rules and regulations concerning nuclear non-proliferation agreements. Pakistan, India, America, Israel: none of those countries has complied. Yet thousands of hours have been spent investigating Iranian nuclear facilities, with no evidence begin found... Iran is a country years away from nuclear weapons technology."

Safari said the Bush administration's claims about Iranian nuclear weapons capacity were reminiscent of those made five years ago concerning Iraq's 'weapons of mass destruction'. "So now George Bush is turning to another lie—that Iraqi Shiite forces are killing American soldiers with the support of Iran."

While audience members listened intently, Garrett's hostility toward Safari was immediately evident: "In regards to his comments on Iran," Garrett told the forum, "I cannot disagree more strongly. I think they were factually, historically and politically incorrect. I need to put that on the record."

This was the sum total of Peter Garrett's response to an impending war crime of unprecedented dimensions against an oppressed country of 65 million people. He reserved his hostility to the socialist

opponent of war.

Herein lies the kernel of Garrett's increasingly rightward evolution. From his earliest days as an anti-nuclear campaigner and activist, he has been an open opponent of the Marxist insistence that war is the product of the central contradictions of capitalism—between world economy and its division into rival nation-states, and between socialised production and private ownership for profit. Instead, he has advocated protests aimed at influencing the existing political establishment. "I'm not a radical and I'm not an anarchist," Garrett told a 1984 press conference of the NDP. "I believe I'm more of a patriot and more jingoistic than these people who see me as a radical."

His 2004 decision to join the ALP was the logical outcome of this program.

Garrett's evolution into a silent accomplice for war crimes against the people of Iraq and Afghanistan contains vital lessons for all workers and young people. The only genuine antiwar constituency is the international working class. Only a perspective based on the independent political mobilisation of the working class against the profit system itself is capable of achieving genuine and lasting peace.

As for the Greens and Democrats, their candidates at the Maroubra forum uttered not a word of opposition to Garrett's pro-war stance. Instead they made clear their own support for the Australian state.

The Greens' Sue Mahoney said her party advocated immediate Australian troop withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan, but then went on to spell out the thoroughly nationalist character of the Greens. "We support an independent foreign policy, not led by the US and not committed to following blindly wherever the US goes," Mahoney declared. Such an "independent foreign policy"—based on the defence of Australian capitalism, underpins the Greens' call for Australian troops to be deployed throughout the South Pacific. The Democrats Lyn Schumack echoed this position. "[Australian troops] should be focussed closer to home," she told the forum, pointing to the need for intervention in West Papua.

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