

SEP Senate candidate challenges Greens at Melbourne forum

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Tania Baptist, the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) Senate candidate in the state of Victoria, intervened at a meet-the-candidates forum held on Tuesday night in the inner-city electorate of Melbourne. The forum, sponsored by the Ascot Vale Uniting Church, was attended by approximately 60 people.

The seat of Melbourne, containing a high proportion of young people, students and tertiary educated professionals, was won by the Greens' Adam Bandt in the 2010 federal election. During the course of the meeting, Bandt and Labor candidate Cath Bowtell each made brief presentations on four predetermined topics— asylum seekers, the role of minority government, climate change and infrastructure—followed by one presentation on a topic of their choice.

Throughout their presentations, neither candidate alluded to the behind-the-scenes preparations of all the parliamentary parties for a sweeping pro-business austerity agenda. Similarly, neither Bandt nor Bowtell said a word about the Labor government's alignment with the US "pivot" to the Asia-Pacific, including the new US Marine base in Darwin, which is part of Washington's active preparations for a military assault on China.

The SEP's Tania Baptist intervened from the floor during the question-and-answer part of the meeting to challenge this silence.

"The issue that hasn't been discussed in the elections, or here tonight, is the danger of the United States and Australia going to war against China," she said. "The Greens-backed Labor government has entered into a series of agreements with the US for military bases in Australia, including 2,500 Marines being stationed in Darwin, drones on the Cocos Islands, and nuclear warships from the Stirling naval base in Western

Australia. In other words, the government is placing the people of Australia and the region on the front line of a catastrophic war."

Baptist directed her question to Bandt. "In 2011," she raised, "when Barack Obama used the Australian parliament to announce the US 'pivot' to Asia, you rushed to shake his hand afterwards. How do you see the dangers of the drive to war being prepared behind the backs of the Australian people?"

Bandt evaded the question. He recounted that when Obama came to Canberra, he had been "looking forward to an inspirational speech from someone I admire in many respects," but found the US president's speech "disappointing." The problem, he said, was that "there wasn't any sense that Australia had any say in it [the pivot]."

He then bluntly declared: "My view is that these decisions should be made by the Australian parliament independently, on behalf of what supports Australia's best interests. What is in Australia's best interests in this issue? I don't know; it's incredibly complicated."

This statement exposes the Greens' posturing as an antiwar party. As Bandt explained, the party supports military operations, and the alliance with US imperialism, so long as it is in the best interests of "Australia"—that is, the ruling elite in Australia.

Last December, the Greens adopted a new platform that formally junked their previous token opposition to the ANZUS alliance, a clear signal to Washington that they had no opposition to its war plans. The Greens have been the most aggressive supporters of Australian imperialist interventions throughout the South Pacific, including the 1999 intervention into East Timor, to defend the interests of Australian imperialism in its own "strategic patch." Most recently, the Greens backed the predatory US-NATO bombardment of

Libya, and urged a similar intervention in Syria (see: “Australian Greens posture as ‘compassionate’ alternative”).

Labor candidate Cath Bowtell baldly denied there was any danger that US policies would trigger a regional war, stating that “multilateralism is what’s going to drive foreign policy over the next decade.”

The entire debate between Bandt and Bowtell had an unreal character, with the Greens MP making various limited criticisms of Labor policies, despite the fact that his vote kept the minority government in office, through the de facto coalition agreement signed by the Greens and former Prime Minister Julia Gillard. The Greens bear responsibility for every regressive measure advanced under Labor, including the expanded US military presence in the country, the witch hunt against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and other antidemocratic attacks, the targeting of single parents and other welfare recipients, and the campaign to slash the wages and conditions of workers.

In a revealing moment, Bandt rejected Bowtell’s claim that the Greens were not a “party of government.” He pointed to the Labor-Greens coalition government in the state of Tasmania. This government, in the past three years, has slashed thousands of public sector jobs, closed public schools and made major cuts to health spending. “In Tasmania,” Bandt boasted, “we have Greens ministers in government making these decisions every day of the week.”

Bowtell, a former trade union bureaucrat and now chief executive of the AGEST superannuation fund, defended the Rudd government’s brutal and illegal policy of deporting all refugees arriving by sea to Papua New Guinea, and barring them from ever reaching Australia. Bowtell declared that she regarded the government’s new refugee regime with “grave disquiet.” But she then added that, while she previously believed that the government should meet its obligations under international law, the number of refugee drownings had caused her to shift her position.

This was sharply criticised from several residents at the forum. One man condemned the bogus “humanitarian” rationale advanced by Bowtell and the government, i.e., that they are saving lives at sea by deterring boat journeys. He explained that family members of his had survived the Nazi Holocaust, and that in the 1930s Jewish refugees died at sea precisely

because governments around the world had shut their borders to them.

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