

Australia: A revealing candidates forum in Sydney

Our reporter
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A meet-the-candidates forum in the inner-west Sydney suburb of Marrickville on Tuesday night provided an insight into how the mechanisms of the political establishment, including its pseudo left wing, are utilised to try to keep the working class trapped within the framework of the parliamentary system.

The two main speakers on the platform were Deputy Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, who holds the seat of Grayndler on behalf of the Labor Party, and Hall Greenland, a long-time “left” radical, who is contesting the seat for the Greens.

A sizeable proportion of the audience was made up of Greens supporters, as well as Sydney University students, together with a collection of union officials from the NSW Teachers Federation (NSWTF) and members of various pseudo-left organisations. Labor Party supporters, especially young people, were conspicuous by their absence.

The central theme of Albanese’s remarks throughout the evening, both in his direct presentations and in answer to questions, was that the “left” should stop attacking him, and instead unite behind Labor to defeat opposition leader Tony Abbott and the Liberals.

Greenland demonstrated how the Greens trail behind Labor as it swings ever further to the right. He said that if he were elected in place of Albanese, and Labor won the election, he would support Kevin Rudd as prime minister. This position dovetails with the actions of the Greens’ sole lower house representative in the outgoing parliament, Adam Bandt, the MP for the seat of Melbourne, who has been a key supporter of the minority Labor government over the past three years.

Questions from the audience were confined to local and domestic policy issues until Socialist Equality Party NSW Senate candidate Nick Beams raised the impending US-led military strike against Syria. This immediately changed the tenor of the meeting, with many in the audience recognising the seriousness of the issue.

Directing his remarks to Albanese, Beams recalled the role of the Labor Party in preparing the way for Australian intervention in the Iraq War in 2003 under the former

Howard Liberal government, and drew attention to the specific role played by Kevin Rudd, then Labor’s foreign affairs spokesman and now prime minister, in supporting the campaign of lies over “weapons of mass destruction.”

“On September 17, 2002,” Beams began, “Kevin Rudd stated that Saddam Hussein was ‘in possession of weapons of mass destruction’ and this assertion was ‘not the subject of dispute.’ On October 15, 2002, he said: ‘Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction... This is a matter of empirical fact’.”

Given Rudd’s record, Beams continued, “should not the Australian people reject with contempt his commitment, and that of the entire Labor leadership, yourself included, to back the next criminal war by the United States on the basis of lies and fabrications concocted by the Obama administration over Syria.”

Turning his attention to Greenland, Beams went on: “The Australian Greens have issued no condemnation of the US plans to launch a military onslaught against Syria. Silence, sir, is regarded as consent.

“The question is, why does your party, Mr. Greenland, have no principled opposition to the military intervention against Syria? Your party would approve such a war if it was authorised by that thieves’ kitchen known as the United Nations.”

The answers by both Albanese and Greenland were a mixture of evasions and cover-ups.

Albanese has been a virulent opponent of Trotskyism even since he started making his way through the ranks of Young Labor as a protégé of the Stalinist-supported “left” Steering Committee faction more than 30 years ago. The deputy prime minister identified Beams by name and declared he was pleased to see “the Socialist Equality Party—the Healyite Trotskyite group—attacking the Pabloites [a reference to Greenland’s past political affiliations].”

The truth on Iraq, he said, was that “we brought the troops home from Iraq.” This brought a response from several members of the audience, who shouted: “After supporting the war!”

Albanese then pointedly failed to refer to Syria, the subject of Beams's question, and instead turned his attention to Greenland. "It is one of the frustrations that it is not about him versus me," he said. "It's not about that ... [it is] part of the frustration of the Labor government that we have to continually deal with Abbott, but also attacks from the left that don't acknowledge any of the advances that have been made."

Earlier, in his opening remarks to the meeting, Greenland had tried to establish his anti-war credentials. Replying to Albanese's claim that he was an "extremist" and stuck back in 1968, Greenland reprised the phrase used by former Labor Party leader Arthur Calwell about the Vietnam War during the 1966 election, saying that he was opposed to "dirty unwinnable wars." The implication, as with Calwell's remarks, was that if a war were "winnable," then Greenland would support it.

Greenland carried out a series of evasions in response to Beams's question on the Greens' position on Syria, calling the situation there a "tragedy" that "all of us would like to bring to an end."

It was correct to recall the attempt to mislead the world in 2002–2003 on the issue of weapons of mass destruction, Greenland said, and declared that "we want no cooked up, no sexed up dossiers from Obama or from Assad or from anybody else." It was necessary to proceed with the "utmost caution" so far as Syria was concerned.

Greenland expressed the "hope" that the Greens would take the position they took in 2003 as regards the war against Iraq.

At that time, the Greens opposed the war, after backing the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, on the grounds that it was not in Australia's "national interest."

Different conclusions have clearly been drawn in regard to Syria. The Greens began campaigning more than two years ago for direct "international" intervention. As early as June 2011, they secured the passage, through the New South Wales parliament, of a resolution demanding that the "international community" move to "create and enforce safe zones" within Syria. In February 2012, then Greens leader Bob Brown fulminated against the Russian and Chinese veto of a United Nations resolution that would have opened the way for military intervention.

In response to grovelling comments and a question from NSWTF president Maurie Mulheron about Labor's commitment to the so-called Gonski education "reforms," Albanese specifically praised the teachers' unions for ending "all the old time divisions" and working with the government. The Gonski model is essentially an education voucher system that will only lead to the further long-term gutting of public education and the opening up of more

opportunities for private schooling.

Huge cuts to university funding were a key feature of the Labor government's May budget and Albanese came under fire from a Sydney University student on this issue. Speaking to a WSWs reporter after her intervention, the student revealed that she was a member of the pseudo-left group Solidarity and had attended the meeting to support the Greens. She insisted that it was necessary to "punish" the ALP by giving it a second preference, after voting "one" for the Greens. In other words, opposition to the Labor government should be channelled back within the confines of the official parliamentary setup.

A Greens member in the audience told the WSWs he was proud of the support that the party had given the minority Labor government over the past three years, claiming that bringing down the government would have produced "chaos," and that the Greens had helped secure the passage of 200 pieces of legislation.

Notably absent from the meeting were members of another pseudo-left group, Socialist Alliance (SA). The SA has stood a candidate in the seat of Grayndler in the past three elections, but decided not to run on this occasion, in order to clear the way for Greenland.

Overall the meeting had the character of a kind of family gathering—there were differences, but no denunciations, and nothing was sufficiently serious to get too excited or heated about.

It will be a different matter once the voice of the working class starts to be heard. As Albanese's history of anti-Trotskyism and his response at the meeting demonstrates, he knows that it will be the SEP that advances the socialist program the working class needs to meet its own independent class interests against the corporate and financial elites that he and his party serve.

See: Video below

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