

# SEP challenges Labor, Greens over war policies at Sydney election forum

Our reporters  
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In an unashamed display of deception and evasion, Labor Party candidate and sitting MP, Anthony Albanese, when challenged by the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) at an election forum in Sydney on Tuesday, defended Australia's military alliance with the US and slandered socialists as covering for "fascists" in the Middle East.

The Green Party candidate, Jim Casey, who postures as a "socialist" and progressive "alternative" to Labor, made no attempt to oppose Albanese's statements on war, the Middle East or the US alliance. Only after Albanese left the meeting early did Casey offer the opinion that Labor's foreign policy—which is to fully integrate with Washington's criminal militarist interventions around the globe—was "not great."

The forum, held in the Addison Road Community Centre, in Marrickville provided a platform for candidates standing for the inner-West seat of Grayndler to speak and answer questions. The small audience, fewer than 40 people, was an indication of the indifference of the broader population to the official election campaign and disenchantment with all the parliamentary parties.

Seven parties were represented, including SEP candidate Oscar Grenfell. Also present were the Drug Law Reform Party, Animal Justice Party, Science Party and the Australian Sex Party. Opposing attempts by Albanese and Casey, in particular, to focus the meeting on so-called "local" issues, Grenfell insisted that the critical question, which was not being discussed in the campaign, was the drive to war.

In his opening remarks, Grenfell drew attention to the recent report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, which advised that the next government will face the possibility that tensions in the South China Sea could draw Australia into a full-scale war with China.

Grenfell noted that Labor, with Albanese as a leading minister, had aligned Australia with the US military build-up in the region beginning in 2011. The Gillard

government signed an agreement with the Obama administration to establish a new US marine base in Darwin, along with a host of other measures. Labor's Shadow defence minister, Stephen Conroy had recently reiterated his call for Australian warships and military aircraft to be sent to Chinese claimed territory in the South China Sea—a provocation that could lead to conflict.

Grenfell pointed out that the Greens, who have made clear they will join a coalition government with Labor, were "silent on the threat of war in this region." "These war preparations have been carried out entirely behind the backs of the population," he explained. Amid the deepest economic crisis since the 1930s, Grenfell concluded, the capitalist system had "nothing to offer but a future of war, poverty, unemployment, and a turn to dictatorial forms of rule." The only alternative, he insisted, "is the fight for socialism—the reorganisation of social and economic life from top to bottom in the interests of the working class."

When the meeting was opened up for questions, a member of the audience explained that he had not previously known about the SEP's policies, so would direct his question to the other speakers. He demanded to know why there was "bi-partisan support and no effective opposition to Australia's stance on defence." There was "no questioning" of the US alliance, even after the country had been "drawn into the war in Iraq on the basis of lies". "This same ally", he noted, was currently involved in provocative actions in the South China Sea threatening another war.

In reply, Albanese stated falsely that he and Labor had "opposed the Iraq war," then immediately reaffirmed that "Labor supports the US alliance." He declared that there "are real threats to the world" from "fundamentalists," which "the 'lefts' shouldn't dismiss." The Islamic State, Albanese said, "would seek to murder everyone in this room." "The left," he declaimed, "is often ready to criticise the US, but reluctant to criticise a bunch of

fascists.”

Albanese was attempting to turn reality on its head. The barbaric destruction of the Middle East has nothing to do with protecting people against terrorism. Wars have been waged for 25 years by the US and its allies, including Australia, to establish hegemony over the resource-rich and strategically-vital region.

Grenfell challenged Labor’s record on Iraq, noting that former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd had promoted the lies about weapons of mass destruction, thereby contributing to the political conditions for the invasion. Australian troops are currently in Iraq participating in the siege of Fallujah, a city devastated by the criminal 2003 invasion, Grenfell said. In Syria, the Islamist extremists are being supported by the US and its allies in moves to counter Russia.

Grenfell also drew attention to the bipartisan commitment to \$A494 billion in military spending, which is being presented as a “jobs plan” when it is in reality a “direct response to demands from the Pentagon that Australia be placed on a war footing in preparation for conflict with China.”

An SEP supporter, noting the presence of two US carrier groups currently on war games in the Philippine Sea, asked Albanese if he agreed with Conroy’s call for Australian warships to be sent on “freedom of navigation” operations in the region. Albanese attempted to evade the question, declaring “I do not necessarily support your characterisation” of the situation.

Pressed to answer, Albanese claimed he didn’t know what Conroy had said. The former deputy prime minister launched an outburst against the SEP, saying he was not “going to get into a debate with the Socialist Equality Party about the future of China and the US with regard to the Grayndler candidates’ forum.” For his part, Casey remained silent throughout, making no attempt to differentiate himself from Albanese or clarify the Greens Party’s position.

The discussion over the danger of war opened the way for a series of critical questions from the audience on broad social issues, including health and education. Addressing Albanese, a teacher from Petersham TAFE college described it being gutted and the buildings handed over to other institutions. She described the teaching staff as being “on our knees.”

Albanese avoided the issue, saying that TAFE funding was a New South Wales state matter. A high school teacher then challenged him, pointing out that the Gillard Labor government had caused “a lot of the problems” in

the TAFE sector by introducing funding “contestability” which gave contracts to private operators.

Albanese conceded that “there were some errors made” by Labor. He did not promise, however, to eliminate private contractors, saying only that Labor would “get rid of the shonks.” Asked if Labor would introduce universal, free pre-school education, Albanese was again evasive, saying vaguely that Labor would “prioritise” pre-school education.

In fact, Labor has already responded to the worsening economic situation in Australia and globally by dropping promises to oppose or reverse budget measures worth an estimated \$71 billion and committing to deep cuts to welfare, healthcare, education, pensions, aged care and family payments.

The candidates were asked their positions on a Labor-Greens coalition government. Casey claimed that the election was “not about us trying to form a coalition,” but immediately declared that while co-operating with Liberal Prime Minister Turnbull was “not possible,” doing so with Labor leader Shorten was. He said the Greens would prefer a Shorten Prime Minister to a Turnbull one. He praised Labor’s health policies and the Gonski education reforms, which are being used to prepare deepening assaults on public education.

Representatives of the other parties largely supported a possible Labor-led coalition. Grenfell, however, cut through this, declaring; “A vote for the Greens is a vote for Labor.” “Behind the progressive rhetoric of the Greens,” Grenfell said, they would be taking “direct responsibility” for a government that would intensify the assault on the working class, continue Australia’s integration into wars in the Middle East and against China and do nothing to resolve any of the complex social problems facing the working class.

*To contact the SEP and get involved, visit our web site or Facebook page.*

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