

**Meet the Federal Labor Spokesperson for the Arts
Peter Garrett**

Speaker: Peter Garrett, AM, MP, Labor Member for Kingsford Smith, Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Reconciliation and the Arts

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By Tracy Ellis

For the final seminar of 2005, SAMAG invited Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for the Arts, Peter Garrett MP to be the evening's sole guest speaker. It was a rare chance to meet this dynamic politician and performer and engage in some serious debate and discussion about some age old and some current arts issues.

Peter Garrett has had a long association with both art and politics in Australia. He fronted Midnight Oil for 25 years and used their immense popularity as a platform to raise public awareness on a broad range of issues. Even as they rose to success, the band took the path less travelled, often choosing to play protest shows and benefits over more commercial or career-boosting gigs, and they wrote some of the more musically original and sophisticated songs heard on Australian radio. Thanks to classic rock radio, several of their anthems, such as Blue Sky Mining, about the deadly legacy of the asbestos industry and Beds Are Burning about indigenous land rights, are still played every day on airwaves around the country.

Since a very public run as an independent on the platform of Nuclear Disarmament in the federal election of 1984, Garrett has somehow managed to keep up a fiercely paced parallel life as an activist and politician alongside his career as a member of Midnight Oil. He served two terms as president of the Australian Conservation Foundation, winning a humanitarian award for his efforts, and was also awarded an Order of Australia for services to music and the environment.

It was typical of Midnight Oil to choose a benefit for victims of the Asian tsunami to reform for their last official show. WaveAid was held at the Sydney Cricket Ground in January 2005. Before an audience of 60,000, and many more watching at home, the current member for Kingsford-Smith managed to bridge the gap between his artistic and political life. It was, as always, extraordinary to see and hear the very vocal praise of thousands that Garrett and his band mates commanded. It is hard to imagine how the juxtaposition must sit with him some days, how he can be satisfied with the convoluted political processes required to achieve sometimes minimal shifts and amendments when, through the power of popular song, he seemed to have a direct line to the hearts and minds of so many Australians.

But tonight, Garrett was very much the politician and keen to show his dedication to the job. There are some big issues on the table in the closing weeks of 2005, from the impact of IR reforms on arts workers to anti-terrorist sedition laws, on which Garrett has been a vocal and articulate opponent over the last few weeks.*

As a politician, Garrett doesn't seek to distance himself from Midnight Oil. "If you want to pick up on the way I think about these things then go back through the Oil's catalogue for some inkling of my own thoughts and my own very strong values about the country and about creativity," he says.

"I spent a lot of my working life as a performer, and as a songwriter, and I don't know whether you'd call it art, but I feel, without wanting to overstate it in any way, some kind of kinship with the artistic community," says Garrett.

"I see my role as having a couple of important elements to it politically," says Garrett. "First, to build support, understanding and awareness of art and the arts sector and the issues that are important and so on, within the caucus of the ALP. The second is to connect with people working in the area – with that constituency – and be available and talk to them and understand what's going on in their world. And the third ... is the community at large.

Garrett identifies a range of contemporary political issues for the sector that he seeks to address in his role, including the usual: "Accountability, budgets, Australia Council, the allocation of taxpayer's funds into that department, the likelihood of that expanding or contracting, the involvement and the relationship between, particularly, the OzCo and the government ... cross media ownership, the likely sale of television stations, entering into additional free trade agreements with China and other nations ..."

But of the "threshold, immediate" issues, he is particularly concerned about "whether or not artists will have their creative expression, particularly if it has a political element, imperilled by laws that may pass through the parliament."

With the prospect of revised sedition laws being attached to that legislation, Garrett's concern is about "whether those sedition laws would, in fact, have some impact on the free expression among artists in the course of their work."

He cautions, "I have to say, looking at the way in which they're worded ... organisations that have relationships with artists may fall within the coverage of the sedition laws as proposed now."

Another threshold issues is industrial relations legislation. "Again," says Garrett, "there will be issues there, particularly for those of you who manage or employ people in arts organisations, and again the sorts of challenges that people face will be pretty considerable."

On broader arts issues, Garrett says, "If we look generally at the health of what's happening across the sector, the one that tends to get the most attention, particularly in the media and politically, is film, and the reason for that is it's one of the most expensive parts of the budget so it's one of the areas where there's an expectation that there'll be success and that taxpayers' moneys are, in some way, being seen to be well spent."

"On that particular matter I'm convinced that we do need to do a couple of things better," says Garrett, "and one is getting hold of money, because films are very expensive things to make."

"Reviews are underway ... about taxability status, appropriate frameworks for investment and also the way in which the government instrumentalities, that are charged with the responsibility of having an Australian film industry, conduct themselves and the decisions that they make."

"But, of course, once you make a statement like that you immediately jump across to the broader issues of content, both on free-to-air and pay, and the likely development of a whole series of additional platforms that people will be able to access material on, whether it's through their phone, their computer or otherwise, and that's, to me, really the biggest challenge to the sector as a whole, is to come back and look at the debate that took place over the Australia/US FTA."

In future, Garrett hopes to progress that debate to see "the government and the opposition taking the position, when they negotiate these agreements, which actually bears much more in mind the interests of having a healthy artistic culture in the country."

On recent UNESCO deliberations, where 140-150 countries signed up in favour of a cultural diversity convention, Garrett points out that, "Only two countries opposed ... the United States and Israel, and I think only four countries abstained," including Australia.

"Really, just not an acceptable situation for a national government to be in at all," says Garrett, "particularly when you consider that, amongst other things, that convention dealt with the question of indigenous languages as much as it dealt with the question of artistic diversity and creativity being given room to flourish and [being] supported within the national jurisdiction."

"My other role in the parliament for Labor is shadow for reconciliation," he says, "something that has been very important to me over the years and so I saw both issues that were dear to my heart fade away because of a lack of commitment from the current government, so there's clearly a lot of work to be done to build constituencies on those issues."

On a personal level, Garrett is excited by "the digital platforms and the work that people are doing in the digital domain," and concerned about areas that traditionally struggle, "particularly small to medium sized theatre, but there are others as well," and how such organisations will "gain a foothold and get themselves moving forward, and what will the situation be like if and when we're not running surplus budgets, when the economy is not as robust as it is at this point in time, if there isn't a very, very strong and foundational sense from people that this stuff counts and that this stuff matters."

Garrett recognises that there's only so much you can do as a shadow, especially when you're part of a fairly embattled opposition, but he remains optimistic about his role. "Even though we've politically got a bit of a fight on our hands in terms of establishing ourselves as a bona fide, fair dinkum opposition and doing our job well, I personally am very, very pleased to be able to take up this role. I think it's something that, hopefully, I can bring a little bit of value to and I have a slightly different view about the politics of it than some of my colleagues."

"We are very strongly committed, as Labor, to reinvigorating and re-energizing support for the arts community," he says, "which has been a feature of our political history from the period of Whitlam through.

"It was a strong part of what we stood for as a political party and I certainly identified it from the outside as a young bloke."

Garrett's strategy won't be to "spend the next twelve months putting out press releases that bag Senator Kemp". "I am not a combatant by nature," he says. "On primary values I express myself very, very strongly, but I think we need to deal with, where we can, bi-partisan support and consensus for our artistic sector."

"At the end of the day," says Garrett, "it's treasury that makes decisions about the arts." And with treasury in mind he intends to continue "building that constituency of support and pushing very, very hard, so that when you reach the treasury gate, the door opens and something decent flows out."

And right now, the arts community has an important role to play in the process. The ALP recently announced that they are conducting a major review of their arts policy. "I invite you to make direct submissions to my office on any range of issues that you think are important," says Garrett.

*Speeches, including Peter Garrett's addresses to parliament on recent sedition laws and other commentaries and media releases can be found at www.petergarrett.com.au/

For details on SAMAG seminars and membership: www.samag.org or info@samag.org