



Idealism Meets Reality

Publish Date:

December 2015

There are political lessons in Peter Garrett's career, writes Simon Breheny. Talking about your earnest belief in principle is not enough to achieve change.

Like many of my generation, I grew up listening to Midnight Oil. Australian rock dominated the airwaves—Icehouse, Mondo Rock, GANGgajang, Australian Crawl and Midnight Oil were all I seemed to hear on the radio. When I was younger I didn't really take much notice of the lyrics. It never occurred to me how political Midnight Oil songs were. Although the political messages coming through 'Minutes to Midnight', 'Beds Are Burning' and 'Blue Sky Mine' didn't end up resonating with me, it's undeniable that they helped to shape political culture in Australia.

This brand of activist politics dominates Peter Garrett's memoir as much as the band he fronted dominated radio playlists of the late 80s and early 90s. *Big Blue Sky* charts Garrett's early life in Sydney's northern suburbs, his environmental activism, the translation of that passion into representative politics, and, of course, his somewhat illfated career as a Labor politician. Garrett's early days at university clearly had a significant impact on him. He studied Arts at the Australian



National University in Canberra at a time when Australian politics was full of intrigue. Garrett embraced the city in which he spent his university days:

I found the nation's capital ideal... I loved the natural character of the city, with generous areas of parkland and open space surrounded by wooded hills and ranges.

It's rare to find an Australian offering such effusive praise for the artificial city. Usually it's described in less complimentary terms— Keith Hancock once said of the capital, 'Canberra is a document of Australian immaturity.' One of the reasons Garrett looks back on his early days in Canberra with such nostalgia is that the time and the place suited him so well. This was the period which gave rise to student movements for a range of social causes, including activism against the Vietnam War. The early 1970s were heady times that saw Gough Whitlam's ascension to the highest political office in the land. Garrett clearly admires the long list of policy achievements, as he sees them, of the Whitlam government. And perhaps the most interesting part of Garrett's interpretation of that period is that he ascribes the blame for the demise of Whitlam to 'Whitlam's overconfidence and the ineptitude of some ministers.' And, of course, Malcolm Fraser.

It's a fascinating lack of perspective on the most ambitious left wing government Australia has ever seen. Certainly, Whitlam's arrogance, the incompetence of his ministers, and the ambitious Fraser-led Coalition helped lead to the events of 1975. But the vicious slide in popularity, and eventual downfall of the Whitlam government, was precipitated from within. Labor's loss at the 1975 federal election was a resounding rejection of the ideology that infused Australian government policy between 1972 and 1975.

Garrett however, trusts the philosophy that guided Whitlam. His belief in the goals being pursued at the time is mirrored in his later, more intimate experience with the Gillard government which—in Garrett's eyes—was brought down, not by a fundamental failure to understand the will of the Australian people, but by a host of internal and external enemies.

Garrett constantly thinks about politics. It is a part of everything he does. *Big Blue Sky* is not so much a political memoir as a wide-ranging autobiography. But there are signs along the way of the central place it holds in his thinking.

A large proportion of the book is dedicated to his musical pursuits, culminating in the Oils. Even in this section, he awkwardly shoehorns some superficial commentary about the lamentable state of the U.K. under Margaret Thatcher. Given his deep interest in the affairs of the nation, it's no surprise his music was filled with political messages.

It's slightly more surprising that Garrett ended up entering the political arena as a representative of a major party. It's not a path well-trodden for musicians who prefer to run their own agendas in their own way.

But then this is exactly the way Garrett began his foray into the political world. In 1984, a group of left wing activists was establishing a political party focussed on one issue: nuclear disarmament.





Garrett had previously visited Hiroshima and was so moved by the experience that he decided to join the party and become a candidate for the senate.

IT'S SLIGHTLY MORE SURPRISING THAT GARRETT ENDED UP ENTERING THE POLITICAL ARENA AS A REPRESENTATIVE OF A MAJOR PARTY. IT'S NOT A PATH WELL-TRODDEN FOR MUSICIANS WHO PREFER TO RUN THEIR OWN AGENDAS IN THEIR OWN WAY

His bid was ultimately unsuccessful, but it gave him a taste for representative politics that was difficult to shake. He would come back to it later.

One of the most interesting reflections on his career was that he felt that he had to have his hands on the levers of power in order to make changes:

It may seem like an obvious thing to say but I have always lived and loved music... At the same time, I don't believe that music, by itself, changes the world. It's people who make the changes – for better or worse.

Despite his father being a member of the Liberal Party, Garrett—if he was to enter politics—was destined for the Labor Party. His predilection towards an anti-corporate philosophy, coupled with a disdain for the 'Trots', was always going to lead him to join a centre-left party.

But his transition from a marginal single issue party to a mainstream political machine was not well made.

Garrett was too earnest. His recounting of the story, when he first joined the Labor party in 2004, of being leaked against for not being registered, was obviously a matter of personal incompetence, not factional heavy-handedness. And his flitting from one trendy issue (MakePoverty History) to the next (White Ribbon Day) meant he didn't make the impact he hoped to.

There are political lessons in Garrett's career. Talking about your earnest belief in principle is not enough to achieve change. Reform takes time, commitment, and analytical and policy depth. It's not something that happens naturally. It takes work.

The Garrett experiment also demonstrates that he was wrong to believe that change is only possible when your hands are on the levers of power. Looking back on his life, it's fair to say he achieved more as a member of an activist student movement, the front man of Midnight Oil, and as president of the Australian Conservation Foundation, than he ever achieved as a member of parliament.

The cultural changes that are constantly taking place are affected more by music, film and civil society organisations than by politicians. The lesson for politicians is to stick to your principles, but convince the electorate that your principles align with theirs. Rhetoric is a good start, but achieving change takes more than a naïve belief in your own ideas.

