

Mate mate mate

A letter to Comrade Garrett

Dear Pete,

You might recall that at the launch of Rob Hirst's book, *Willie's Bar and Grill* last year we spoke briefly about what was then your possible move into politics. In the course of the conversation I observed that I'd been through that country and I offered to lend you my map.

In the meantime, to the surprise of lots of us, you've gone and done it. For your efforts, you're looking at a minimum of three years – possibly six – of mind-numbing opposition in a parliament in which Howard controls both houses.

I would understand if you were rethinking the nailing of your colours to the ALP mast. For good or ill, you're now locked in with the bruvvas and there are some for whom your credibility will be forever diminished. I know how it works. As I said, I've been through that country and I've still got the map, complete with the bloodstains.

Unlike you, I went to Canberra as a mere adviser. Even so, it was soon abundantly clear to me that the political world has little or no regard for those of us from the music industry. In a nanosecond I was dismissed as a "bearded folk singer". They're doing exactly the same to you now by constantly referring to you as a "rock star". In the 1980s we were rock stars (of different sorts) and it was an epithet we didn't necessarily shy away from. Now, it's a pejorative phrase taken up with glee by political opponents. You and I have skills, experiences and contacts that we picked up along the way in the music industry and we know that they can be of use in the political world. The political world, however, sees musicians and songwriters as little more than life-support systems for a photo opportunity.

You'll discover, as I did, that parliamentary politics is a whole new song and a pretty complicated one at that. Most of the time your new comrades won't even let you look at the chord chart, let alone sit down with you to rehearse the song. The truth is they'll revel in your discomfort and ignorance. Some of those who professed undying comradeship when they were wooing you will be the very ones to knife you up if they think you're about to jump the queue to the Lodge. I learned pretty quickly in Canberra that your deadliest enemies are always playing in your own band.

I'm sure you nailed your colours to the Labor's mast with the best of intentions. Other than the Coalition, it was the only party with a chance of forming government. And I'm sure those who coaxed you up the mast and handed you the hammer promised you a spot on the front bench eventually. Given the extent of the flight to backbench and your profile, this might be sooner rather than later but for the moment you're safer where you are. Having observed some of those who've recently moved to the backbench, I'd rather be sitting alongside them than in front of them.

Frankly, I always thought you'd join Bob Brown's mob but, on reflection, your ascension into the ALP was set in train way back in 1990 when Graham Richardson went after the green vote. I understood Richo's preoccupation with the environmental vote back then when the Hawke-Keating government was on the ropes. But I could never really work out why ALP strategists since then have been so fixated on Green preferences. The ALP always gets between 75 and 78% of Green preferences regardless of what the Green how-to-vote card says.

I wonder whether it was your environmental constituency that hurried Latham along with the release of the ill-fated forest policy. If you thought the unions were going to stand by quietly while you and Mark saved the Tarkine, the Styx and the Huon and Picton valleys, I think you know better now. Hindsight is easy to come by but costly. If you take one lesson away from the old growth forest episode it should be that you underestimate Howard at your peril.

For my part, I never bought Labor's professed environmental rectitude. I still remember very well when the ALP voted with the Howard Government in the Senate to exclude Australia's forests from the protection of the 1999 Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act.

I invite you to reflect, for a moment, on Latham's life expectancy as leader. From where I'm sitting it doesn't look good. When the bruvvas start talking about how much they support the leader, you'd better have a close read of the emergency card in the seat pocket in front of you. There's turbulence ahead and as a non-aligned backbencher choppered in to a safe seat over the heads of lifetime party workers, you're a Latham supporter in everyone's eyes. When they come for Mark they'll all be watching you closely to see how you respond. There will be no fence to sit on - not that you've ever been a fence-sitter, mind you.

One of the bruvvas told me that your pre-selection was more about Laurie Brereton preventing Bob Carr's entry in the the federal arena via Kingsford-Smith. Who knows if it's true? Factions, mate, factions.

Parliamentary politics is about the art of compromise. As president of the Australian Conservation Foundation you never really had to compromise. You simply insisted on 100 per cent of whatever agenda you were running and if you didn't get it, you retired to your corner with your trainer to prepare for the next round. That's what lobby groups do.

Inside the tent, however, it's a different matter. You can "do a Bob Brown" and accept nothing less than 100 per cent of what you want, thereby achieving nothing, or you can compromise. But when you compromise, and you will, the very people who nurtured and supported you in your political activism to date, may well turn on you. You'll need to grow a thick skin very quickly. Accustomed as musicians are to respect, affection and adulation, it is distinctly unpleasant when people ring you and write to you accusing you of selling out. And the unpleasantness doesn't stop with you. It seeps remorselessly into your family.

As a leading figure in the entertainment industry, it's easy to make political pronouncements without fear or favour. And, by and large, the fans and the community respond with admiration and loud applause. However, there's a big difference between the ALP caucus room and a capacity Oils crowd at the Newcastle Workers Club.

I expect the Canberra press gallery is in a lather at the prospect of you walking the corridors. There are enough Oils fans up there to keep you safe for a while, I imagine. But remember, the press gallery is like a black snake in a tent. As long as you stand very still, you're fine. But if you lash out at it or move too quickly, it will bite you. With some relish.

I haven't always agreed with you, as you know, but I value your voice, your passion and your deep commitment. I suppose my fear is your effectiveness will be diminished by assuming the role of a loyal backbencher in what is, sadly for us all, shaping up to be a lacklustre opposition of epic proportions.

You might be the one who makes the difference in the ALP, the one who brings to ALP parliamentary politics a bit more than empty symbolism and rhetoric. I really hope you are the one. We all do. God knows, there's no-one else.

Cheers

John

(An earlier version of this letter was published in the Age in June when Peter Garrett announced his candidacy for the seat of Kingsford-Smith.)