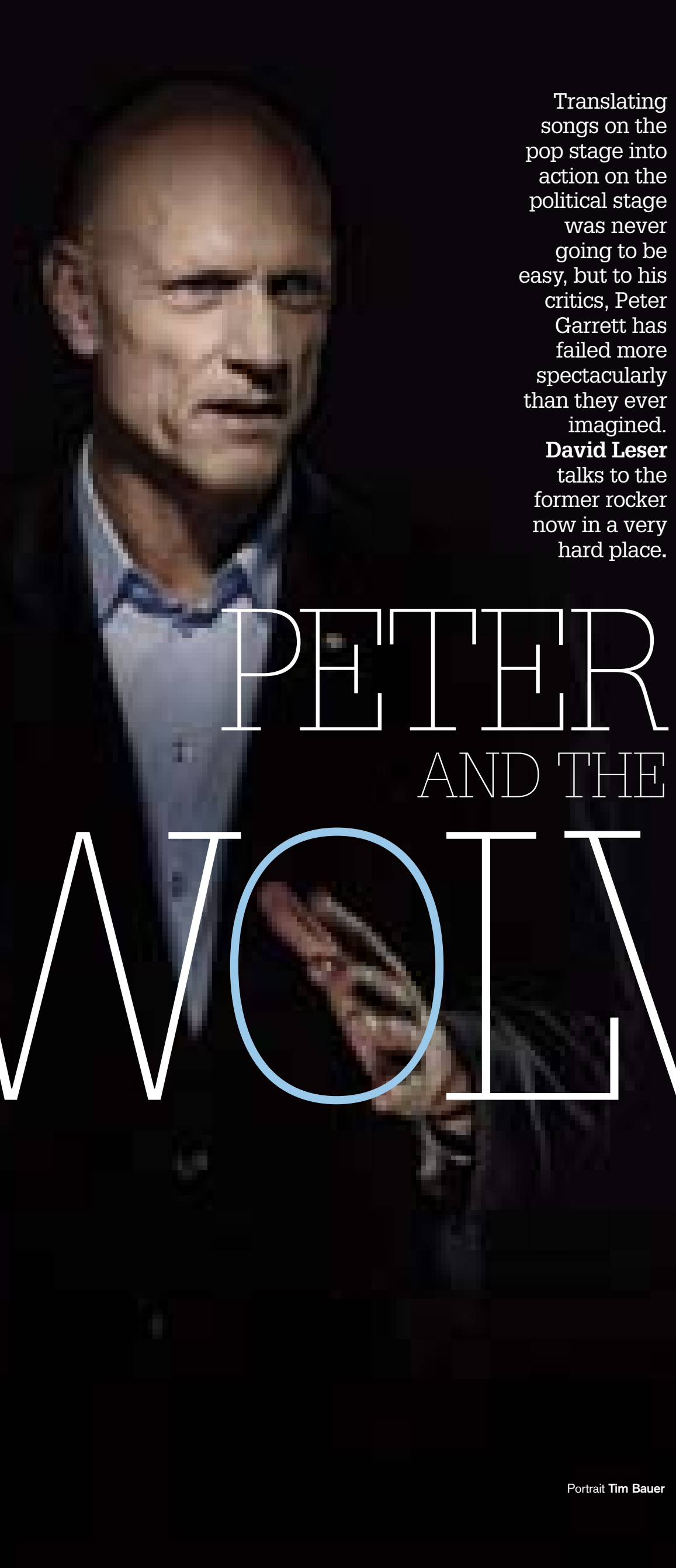




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A black and white portrait of Peter Garrett, looking slightly to the right with a serious expression. He is wearing a light-colored shirt and a dark jacket.

Translating songs on the pop stage into action on the political stage was never going to be easy, but to his critics, Peter Garrett has failed more spectacularly than they ever imagined. **David Leser** talks to the former rocker now in a very hard place.

PETER AND THE

WOLFINVES

Portrait Tim Bauer

THE EASY – AND DARE I SAY IT TEMPTING – STORY TO WRITE about Peter Garrett starts something like this. “Peter Garrett was once the bold and radical voice of two generations of Australians and at a crucial juncture in his life decided to forsake his principles for political power. Or for political irrelevance. Take your pick.”

We all know this story. It’s been doing the rounds for five years now, ever since Garrett agreed to throw in his lot with Labor and parachute safely into the Sydney seat of Kingsford Smith. It’s the story, in effect, of Faust, God’s favoured mortal in Goethe’s epic poem, who made his compact with the Devil – in this case the Australian Labor Party – so that he might gain ultimate influence on earth. The price, of course – his service to the Devil in the afterlife.

We’ve read and heard variations on this Faustian theme in newspapers, across dinner tables, in online chat rooms, up-country, outback – everyone, it seems, has had a view on Australia’s federal Minister for the Environment, Arts and Heritage, not to mention another song lyric to throw at him for his alleged hollow pretence.

He’s all “power no passion”, he’s living “on his knees”, he’s “lost his voice”, he’s a “shadow” of the man he once was, he’s “seven feet of pure liability”, he’s a “galah”, “a warbling twit”, “a dead fish”, and this is his “year of living hypocritically”. The denunciations have been savage and have flowed forth from one end of the country to the other.

Until recently there was a giant poster plastered on Darwin’s Woolworths building declaring: “Peter Garrett, The Ultimate Sell-Out.” Garrett’s mouth was taped shut with an adhesive plaster marked “ALP”, and his forehead branded with an imprint of his own blood-soaked left hand. The poster has since been removed but the casual shopper can still see a portion of Garrett’s trademark chrome dome covering a few bricks in the wall.

More than 3700 kilometres away, near the entrance to the Upper Florentine Valley in Tasmania’s south-west wilderness, protesters have been staging tree-sits and chaining themselves to rusted cars for years now in a vain attempt to stop the logging of some of the world’s most treasured native forests.

When I visited the forest last year, I found the windows of one of these old cars covered in images of our Environment Minister, two scrawled captions demanding to know: “Will The Real Peter Garrett Stand Up” and “How Can You Sleep When Our Old Growth Is Burning?”

It’s a far cry from the man who for nearly 30 years performed to adoring crowds across Australia and around the world – *Time* magazine’s “walking

icon of outrage” who sucked in the oxygen, spat out the lyrics and left no one in any doubt where he stood on all the important issues of the day.

But as he told the Federal Parliament in his maiden speech on December 8, 2004: “I have protested, sung, marched, written, organised and campaigned on those things I simply believed were important, not just to me but to the life of the nation. I have reached the point where I want to take the next step into formal politics.”

Peter Garrett was always the politician masquerading as the rock star. In 1984, he stepped away from the disguise by declaring himself a candidate for the Australian Senate at the head of the Nuclear Disarmament Party ticket. He failed to get elected because the Hawke Labor government decided to pass its preferences to the Liberals, indicating just how alarmed it was by Garrett’s pull on the young and disaffected. Subsequently, he served two terms as president of the Australian Conservation Foundation and also joined the international board of Greenpeace, but it was obvious that his sights were set on higher goals.

In an interview for *HQ* magazine 19 years ago with this writer, he said that although he was not plotting his way to the prime ministership, he wouldn’t say no to the prospect. “I don’t think at this stage of my life that I can say that it’s something I would not do ... that, no, I wouldn’t want to

be PM. Yes, I would be quite happy if enough people voted for me, and there were a whole lot of people working with me, to have a go at that job.”

After Garrett’s five years in Federal Parliament, there is now virtually no one who thinks this is achievable. To some political observers, he has become a parenthesis in the national equation, particularly after being stripped of climate change and water responsibilities following the 2007 election.

“I think the press gallery is always pretty hard on people,” Tony Wright, *The Age’s* national affairs correspondent, says, “and once Kevin Rudd decided to split environment in two and give Penny Wong climate change and water, the gallery began discounting him as a star force.

“You don’t normally feel great sorrow for politicians, but I do feel sorry for him. This is a person who had such a huge profile and so many expectations laid on him and then the political machine consumed him. A lot of people think he’s Faust, but I don’t. I think he’s howling in the wilderness.”

Peter Garrett as Faust or King Lear? Either one has its own cheerless appeal, but Bob Brown prefers the parable of Little Red Riding Hood when discussing his old environmental comrade. The two have known each other since the forest protests of the early 1980s, when Garrett stayed at Brown’s home in Liffey, in northern Tasmania, the night before addressing a rally at Cradle Mountain. Brown remembers the night well, because the car they were travelling in was hit by lightning.

“I don’t know what the significance in the order of the universe was about that particular event,” he says now, “but I remember it clearly and I remember the enormous value and persuasion having Peter at that rally gave us.”

Two decades later, in April 2003, Brown paid a visit to Garrett at his home in Mittagong, in the Southern Highlands of NSW, to try to convince Garrett to join the Greens. A few months earlier, Garrett had announced his retirement from Midnight Oil to pursue a political career.

Says Brown: “I told him how the [wolf dressed up as] Grandma Big Party says to Little Red Riding Hood, ‘Come a little closer, dearie’, and then swallows up Little Red Riding Hood and you never hear from her again. I pointed out the tragedy that had befallen Cheryl Kernot ... and talked about how the big parties of the left always put on their green spots in opposition and shed them in government. That’s exactly what we’re seeing in Australia in 2009.”

IASK GARRETT ABOUT THIS ON A BRISK, SUNNY MORNING IN JUNE AS WE travel in his Commonwealth car from Sydney to the Blue Mountains on what happens to be World Environment Day. I ask him whether he ever imagined seeing his own personal brand trashed to this extent.

“I was certainly aware of the fact that generally in the hurly-burly of media and public debate about politics, politicians can become road kill,” he replies. “That’s a clear and recurring pattern and some suffer slight grazes and for others it can be more fatal. But the point of all of this – and it doesn’t matter how much cynics gag on people saying they go into public life because they want to serve – the fact is that’s what the greater majority do.

“And if your preoccupation is with securing your brand, then you’re not cut out to be a politician. That wasn’t my preoccupation. It wasn’t when I was a musician and it isn’t when I’m a politician.”

To be fair, there are other ways to assess the brand. During the 2007 federal election campaign, despite two disastrous slip-ups, Garrett found himself constantly in demand from colleagues wanting to bask in his reflected glory. He turned up in at least 17 electorates, including most of the marginal seats, and whenever he did, the crowds were bigger, happier, more passionate.

Tim Gartrell, former Labor Party national secretary, recalls an occasion at Sydney airport during the campaign when Garrett was waiting to board a flight with two fellow shadow ministers. “All these people were coming up to Peter and saying, ‘Good on you ... keep up the fight’, and Peter was saying, ‘I’d like to introduce you to my colleagues’ ... these were politicians more senior than him.”

They call it the PG factor, and never was it more evident than after the devastating Victorian bushfires this year when – with his Prime Minister’s blessing – the then 55-year-old frontbencher (the second-oldest member of cabinet after Simon Crean) returned to the stage with Midnight Oil for two warm-up gigs at the Royal Theatre in Canberra, followed by a spellbinding performance at the MCG in front of 81,000 people.

“It was unprecedented,” Midnight Oil drummer Rob Hirst offers now. “I can’t think of another situation where a federal cabinet minister would go back to his former career – in Pete’s case, singing – and perform better than he ever did in his heyday. It was by any account a magnificent achievement.”

And then, three weeks later, with far less fanfare, he visited the scorched earth of Kinglake, north of Melbourne, where dozens of people had died in the inferno, five of them inside the home of Jenny and Mick Clark.

Jenny Clark spent 12 days at the Alfred Hospital burns unit in Melbourne after losing her son and desperately trying – unsuccessfully – to save her two grandchildren. It was during that time that she dreamt Peter Garrett had visited her in her room and sung to her the band’s most famous song,



“You don’t normally feel great sorrow for politicians, but I do feel sorry for him. I think he’s howling in the wilderness.”

“Icon of outrage”: (above) Garrett in the front line of the Walk Against Warming in Sydney, November 2007; (top) in 1990 with, from left, Midnight Oil members Rob Hirst, Jim Moginie, Bones Hillman and Martin Rotsey.

Beds Are Burning. “It was very prophetic,” she tells me, “because I was covered in burns ... and I didn’t know whether it was a dream or hallucination because of all the drugs, but he definitely came into my room.”

Shortly after her release from hospital, Jenny attended the first local football match after the fires to witness Garrett perform the national anthem with her son-in-law, Ross Buchanan, father of her lost grandchildren. A short time later, she turned in her chair to find Garrett sitting next to her. “I thought I’d like to meet you in the flesh,” he told her.

The two of them talked for 20 minutes, and Garrett revealed to the 67-year-old grandmother the story of his own shocking loss as a young man, when he was burnt trying to save his mother from their burning house, from her burning bed. “He was just so lovely,” Jenny Clark says, “and I told him, ‘You should give up your day job and go back to singing.’”

PETER GARRETT IS AN EASY MAN TO LIKE AND A DIFFICULT MAN TO know. Contrary to what he says about his lack of preoccupation with brand, during his days with Midnight Oil he was famous for building a fortress around himself. Journalists were carefully scrutinised before interviews and every aspect of the band’s image closely vetted by himself and manager Gary Morris. It probably ensured Midnight Oil’s survival in what was always a ruthless industry, but it also fostered enormous hostility and robbed the band sometimes of its essential humanity.

Garrett is still like this. Controlled and controlling. His cause is hardly helped by a Prime Minister who appears equally so, cautiously and pragmatically running a government some observers liken to a personal fiefdom. With Garrett, though, the reticence seems inwoven, built into the nervous system. His long bean-pole frame shifts uncomfortably whenever the questions veer towards the personal, as though each question is a trap or a breach of national security.

In preparation for this article, I asked to speak to his German-born psychotherapist wife, Doris, who, over more than 20 years, to the best of my knowledge, has never consented to an interview. “Ah, look,” Garrett said when we met in his ministerial office in Canberra, “I just think this is a piece that’s



about me as a politician, as a public figure, and I value my family life hugely. I've been incredibly fortunate to have a family held together and supporting me and I hold that in such high regard ... I think it should be perfectly okay for someone to have a private family life. I treasure my family life."

Fair enough. So do most people, but in Garrett's case the level of protectiveness is curious. And noteworthy. Joking comparisons were known to be made during the early '90s between the Garretts and the von Trapps, the Austrian family of *Sound of Music* fame where the children were dressed alike and summonsed by their father with a bosun's whistle. Similarly, the Garretts were strict and sheltering with their children when young. They wanted to shield them from the feral world of rock.

Garrett himself has a restraint about him, a watchfulness, that is at odds with his past rock-singer, preacher-man persona. The shame, from the public's perspective, is that he is at his best when he abandons some of this hesitancy, when he speaks from the heart – be that on the hustings, on the stage, in the Federal Parliament or for an interview like this one.

He told me at our Canberra meeting that he had agreed to this particular interview because "18 months into the life of a government" it was a good opportunity for him to provide "a stocktake and some reflections". There were other reasons too, I suspected. The first was that I had told him previously the story would be written, with or without his co-operation. The second was that I believed there was a more interesting, more nuanced, story to be written than the ones to date.

Like millions of other Australians, I'd clung to the romantic fiction of Peter Garrett remaining faithful to his songs, despite not having written most of the lyrics. (Drummer Rob Hirst and guitarist Jim Moginie were always the band's chief songwriters.)

I'd also found it difficult to square his decades-long credibility on environmental issues off stage with the fact that he'd approved the construction, if not operation, of the Gunns pulp mill in Tasmania's Tamar Valley; that he'd said yes to the resumption of zinc mining operations at the McArthur River in the Northern Territory; that he'd supported plans to dredge Port Phillip Bay; that he'd been unwilling – or unable – to stop the continued

"I would rather have Peter Garrett on the front bench of the ALP than most other contenders for that position ... But he has failed in that portfolio."

"Yeah, that's right. I did become a politician": (above) with Kevin Rudd in February this year; (top) as a candidate for the Nuclear Disarmament Party in the 1984 federal election, with former ALP senator Jean Melzer.

logging of the Upper Florentine and the Wielangta Forest in Tasmania; that he'd given assent to the expansion of the Beverley uranium mine in South Australia, and only last month gave approval for the new Four Mile uranium mine 550 kilometres north of Adelaide; that he'd also failed to follow up on a pledge to take Japan to the International Court over its whaling operations; and that he'd abandoned a lifetime's opposition to the joint American-Australian defence facility at Pine Gap.

BUT HAVING SAID THAT, IT WAS EQUALLY TRUE I'D GIVEN (UNTIL THIS point) little if any proper consideration to the complexities involved: that the McArthur River Mine project alone was a farrago of competing environmental, indigenous and economic interests; that along with the pulp mill, Garrett had inherited undertakings from a previous government; that with Gunns there were legal and financial obligations; that the Regional Forest Agreements governing forestry practices had been accepted by both major political parties; that with most of these decisions there had been strengthened environmental conditions imposed by Garrett; and that he was bound by the legislation, as well as by caucus and cabinet solidarity.

There was also the unarguable fact that for 12 years the Howard government had done virtually nothing on the critical issues of energy efficiency and waste; that in the space of 18 months, Labor's star recruit, stripped by his Prime Minister of half his portfolio (as well as undermined publicly by his boss on a range of issues, including whether or not to climb Uluru), had been instrumental in implementing a national waste strategy and the largest roll-out of household energy efficiency measures in the country's history. Not to mention a \$2.25 billion Caring For Our Country program that included a substantial increase in the National Reserve System of protected areas and a \$200 million Great Barrier Reef rescue package; funding for an additional 300 indigenous rangers, a new Coral Sea Conservation Zone, a \$480 million national solar schools plan, and the first independent review of the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act – Australia's primary piece of environment and heritage legislation.

Much of this was the so-called "low-hanging fruit" of greenhouse gas reduction and to some, like Don Henry from the Australian Conservation Foundation, it represented "substantial progress on a number of fronts". To old friends-turned-adversaries like Bob Brown, it was a case of Garrett having got lost in the orchards.

"I like Peter a great deal," Brown says, "and I feel a great deal of empathy with him ... and when I think about the situation he is in, I feel a great deal of anxiety for him as a person. I would rather any day have Peter Garrett on the front bench of the ALP than most other contenders for that position ... But he has failed in that portfolio. I have waited all my life for an Environment Minister who, like a treasurer or minister for mines, goes into cabinet absolutely advocating for the interests which that minister upholds.

"We don't see that coming from this Environment Minister any more than his predecessors – that ability to go in and advocate the extraordinary advantages of tackling greenhouse gases, of ending logging of native forests and woodlands in Australia, the huge advantages of replacing coal-fired power stations with energy-renewable and energy-saving alternatives; with keeping nuclear ships out of our ports."

Garrett's response is restrained but direct. "The thing about the decision to join a political party and participate fully in the life of that party has nothing to do with [Little Red Riding Hood] nursery rhyme allegories, and it's all to do with the necessary disciplines of working in a team.

"Bob Brown is leader of the Greens Party, which is competing with the Labor Party for votes. It's political rhetoric on Senator Brown's part ... I'm not going into what I go into cabinet to say and do, because that's a matter for cabinet, and those discussions properly remain within the cabinet room.

"What I can say is that I diligently and actively advance the interests of the environment, wherever and however I can, consistent with party policy. I do that mindful of the significant range of environment issues we face. And I do it in order to be the best environment minister I can. And no one in the party, in the caucus room or in the public, would be in any doubt about that."

Senator John Faulkner, Garrett's principal ally in cabinet, backs up this view. "I think he's a very strong advocate for his portfolio," he tells me two days before his own elevation to Minister for Defence. "One normally doesn't talk about what occurs within cabinet, but I certainly think it's reasonable for me to say that to you. I don't think being Environment Minister is an easy portfolio, in any government of any Labor or non-Labor persuasion ... but I think Peter Garrett is meeting those challenges extraordinarily effectively."

Finance Minister Lindsay Tanner goes further. "It is an extremely challenging thing to move from a position where you can simply say whatever you like in public, and you are not accountable for delivering outcomes or being part of a team, to being in a position where you are. Some people are much more comfortable shouting from the outside than working from the inside. The debate about Peter's position is really a microcosm of a wider debate

about activism versus politics. As an activist you don't have much power, and as a politician you operate under heavy constraints.

"The second response I have to these criticisms is that it's not the 1980s any more. Whether it is Peter or not, it is absurd to take the lyrics from a song in 1984 and then compare the singer's view of the world 25 years later with those lyrics, without taking into account that we don't live in 1984 any more."

DURING THE COURSE OF RESEARCHING THIS ARTICLE, THE QUESTION of Peter Garrett's core values emerged many times. Tim Gartrell confirmed that the party had done due diligence on Garrett before preselecting him as a candidate.

"We thought there might be all sorts of stories about wild parties and girls and I remember we were all really disappointed. We were pathetic political hacks wanting to live vicariously through someone's past, but there didn't seem to be any of the usual string of paternity suits."

Paul Gilding endorses this perception. Gilding has known Garrett for more than 25 years, since working with him during the 1980s on the successful Save Jervis Bay campaign. Later, when Gilding became executive director of Greenpeace International, he brought Garrett onto the board. Gilding sympathises with his friend's predicament because, apart from anything else, he, too, has lived with the accusation of betrayal. He went from being an environmentalist to advising some of the biggest corporations in the world on sustainability issues.

"I used to be a Maoist in my late teens and then I went into the military," Gilding says. "Then I went straight from Greenpeace to senior personal adviser to some of the biggest CEOs in the world. I was accused of being a sell-out by some of my best friends."

"The question – and I have struggled with this myself – is where do you have the most impact, where do you drive most effectively. It is always changing as the world changes. I used to humiliate CEOs, and one needed to be sufficiently emotionally unaware to live with that ethical contradiction – of making leaders of companies look bad in order to get your point across."

As for the idea that Garrett has forfeited his good name, Gilding says it is preposterous. "The man is not capable of selling out. He is deeply enmeshed in his values and beliefs. Selling out means betraying what you believe in for personal or financial gain. Peter is such an ethical person, such a values-driven person, he couldn't do it."



"We thought there might be all sorts of stories about wild parties and girls and I remember we were all really disappointed."

"There is absolutely an argument to say that Peter might have made a mistake, but I think it's too early to tell. It is absolutely possible that being a minister of the Crown is the most effective way Pete can contribute to the issues he cares about, and that we care about."

These are ultimately the questions I wanted most to put to Garrett. Where did he go in the teatime of his soul when faced with agonising policy choices? Were there principles he would refuse to forsake, a hill he would be prepared to die on, for a creed or some cherished belief?

"Whether I or anyone else is going to be confronted with something where they feel that their conscience and principles are so affronted by what they find themselves potentially surrounded by, who can say?" he replies. "That's a hypothetical question."

What about the Kimberley coastline? Would it make him sick at heart to see a region he loved, and had visited many times with Midnight Oil, transformed from an iconic wilderness into a lucrative gas-processing plant?

"I don't – nor can I – bring a personal predilection, either in favour of or opposed to, to any of these developments in my decision-making role," he says. "That would be to compromise my decision-making role."



What about a personal view on uranium mining or the practice of clear felling? “Look ... I’m not here to provide my personal views on the matter,” he says. “This is the whole point of me becoming a representative, a member of the caucus, a member of the cabinet and a minister. What I’ve accepted is that if I’m going to reflect and enter into a passionate engagement and discussion about some of these matters, I won’t be doing it in public. I’ll be doing it as a member of a party and I’ll be doing it mindful of the policies of the party and the platform of the party, and the disciplines of being in a political party.”

“And I think that’s the crux of this, you know, ‘Peter Garrett is not the person he was before. He’s become a politician.’ Well, yeah, that’s right. I *did* become a politician and I made that step into the discipline of party politics.”

VACLAV HAVEL, THE DISSIDENT PLAYWRIGHT AND FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE Czech Republic, once noted that it was not just “cold-hearted, cynical, arrogant, haughty or brawling persons” who succeeded in politics. “In the end,” he said, “politeness and good manners” weigh more.

Lindsay Tanner told me he could not recall a single conversation where Peter Garrett had denigrated a colleague. Others have said similar things:

“I treasure my family life”: (above) Garrett with his wife, Doris, and two of their three daughters, Emily and Grace, in 2006; (opposite) performing with Midnight Oil at Homebush in 1986, the year of his marriage.

that he was one of the rare politicians in Canberra who refused, point blank, to leak to the press. This didn’t mean he was an effective politician, but it said something important about his ethical framework, his deep Christian faith.

When asked about his spiritual convictions, Garrett replies: “I share the general ethic of doing unto others as you would have them do unto you. I think it’s really important for us to be givers and not takers, and I try to be a giver, not a taker. I value loyalty, friendship, fidelity and I think that given the brief transit that all of us have here, there’s always going to be a claim on us to think about what we leave behind.”

Garrett’s grit and faith were supremely tested when he lost his father as a teenager, then his mother a few years later in that house fire. Friends will never forget him walking among the ash and cinders howling with grief.

“It’s not something I want to say a great deal about,” he tells me finally, “other than it’s a vivid and painful experience. I reflected on it again when I went up to Kinglake ... after the fires, and people had experienced sudden and traumatic loss of loved ones. It’s about as painful an experience as anyone can have. And for me, talking to people just quietly and privately, without imagining that I could be in the same place they were, I was able to say, ‘Look, I know what it’s like to lose a family member. You will come through it. You can. Yes, you will mourn the loss. You will honour the memory, but you will also validate that relationship by going on to do whatever you think you can by living a good life.’ And that’s very much what I believe.”

WHEN PETER GARRETT WAS A YOUNG MAN HE WAS VERY GOOD IN THE OCEAN. He would bodysurf out the back with board riders and slide down the face of the wave as if he owned it. Today the waves have turned into political whirlpools, and the man on the front bench of the Rudd Government appears sidelined, diminished, far less in command.

That seems a pity, because, in full flight, Garrett’s is easily the most charismatic, articulate, firebrand voice in the land. If only there were a way of dividing the man in two – of leaving one version on the outside to keep raising hell, while planting another on the inside to keep chipping away at the margins.

Perhaps the times will suit him, or perhaps he will decide he has made a gigantic mistake. Perhaps there can be no grand vision from him until the ALP learns how to use him properly, or until his Prime Minister lets him off the leash. Or until Peter Garrett decides that the price is too high, that this is the hill worth dying on. Only he can decide that. **GW**