RAY HIRST, *THE ADVERTISER & SUNDAY MAIL*
ADELAIDE

CATEGORY: **ARTIST OF THE YEAR**

WEIGHT OF THE PAST

14/3/09

Are Peter Garretts public profile and well-publicised ideas before politics a millstones around his neck?. Is the very reason he was such an attractive option for the Labor party in opposition a fatal flaw in government?. This illustration points out that we always see Garrett, through the filter of who he was, and asks if we like our public figures to change. If they do, can we trust them?.

adelaidenow.com.au/opinion | Comment

"Garrett worked hard at turning himself into a tall, bald version of our PM

LAURIE OAKES POLITICAL ANALYST, COMMENTATOR

PETER Garrett's brief comeback as a rock singer made fans of Midnight Oil yearn for the good old days. It was also a reminder of one of the problems with politics in this country.

Mr Garrett, twitching and gyrating on stage, full of life and passion, was a far cry from the colourless, cautious figure we have got used to in Parliament House.

It prompted the thought: He used to be somebody – now he's a politician. Modern politics sucks the personality out of those who practise it.

Politicians, even the lowliest of backbenchers, don't only have to toe the party line. They are discouraged from being themselves or chancing their arm in any way. Even injecting a bit of originality into the way they deliver approved "talking points" is frowned upon as unnecessarily risky.

And those who make it into Cabinet, like Mr Garrett, become even greyer and more risk-averse. The process produces a race of John Howard or Kevin Rudd clones.

From the moment he entered politics, Mr Garrett worked hard at turning himself into a tall, bald version of our controlled Prime Minister. Sadly, he succeeded.

Only on those very rare occasions when the Oils get together again briefly to raise funds for a good cause can the man, affectionately known by Cabinet colleagues as "Bollard", express his true feelings, via those rebellious lyrics.

It may be no coincidence, though, that one song the band did not perform at its warm-up gig in Canberra on Thursday night was *U.S. Forces*. To have Mr Garrett singing "Political party line – don't cross that floor" might have been a bit too close to the bone.

Julia Gillard, of course, is an exception to the drabness and caution of the general run of politicians these days. So is Peter Costello, which is one of the reasons he is again being touted as an alternative Liberal leader and causing Malcolm Turnbull such angst.

Turnbull the journalist, Turnbull the lawyer and Turnbull the merchant banker were lively, entertaining customers. But Turnbull the politician is being drained of life, partly because he fears saying something that might alienate the partyroom or the punters, and partly because he has been advised that politics requires endless repetition of the same lines.

Mr Costello does not operate that way. Like Paul Keating before him, he understands that politics is partly showbiz, and the best way to get the attention of voters is to interest and entertain them.

There is, of course, a conundrum here. The public Rudd is unquestionably boring most of the time. But Mr Rudd also has the kind of approval ratings that other politicians would kill for. There are a couple of possible explanations.

One is that voters will always prefer an unexciting leader of a united government to the leader of a divided and directionless Opposition, boring or otherwise.

Another is that, in an economic crisis, people are happy to have a calm, professional in charge.

But Mr Costello does not lose his economic cred by being a bit interesting. Nor does Gillard.

And Mr Garrett did not make himself a more effective salesman of Labor's environment policies when he checked in his Oils persona at the Cabinet room door.

❑ ❑ ❑ ❑

THERE is no doubt the Government wants its Fair Work Australia Bill passed through the Senate next week – but Mr Rudd and Ms Gillard also want the Coalition to oppose it. The PM and his deputy must salivate at the thought of all those Liberal and Nationals senators being seen – in the glare of the TV cameras – voting against the repeal of the unpopular WorkChoices system.

As long as the Greens and the two Independents vote for the legislation, the Government can have its cake and eat it, too. It can get its own laws into place while continuing to portray the Coalition as defenders of WorkChoices, right up to the next election.

Mr Costello and Coalition hardliners say aspects of the legislation – particularly unfair dismissal provisions – should be abandoned or amended because they will make jobs harder to get in a recession.

But that is not an easy line to sell against the Government argument that, in times of economic difficulty, workers need protection more than ever. Job security, after all, is the overwhelming concern of voters at the moment.

Mr Costello clearly believes it is an argument the Coalition can win. Or rather, one it could win if he were leading the Coalition.

Indications are that Mr Turnbull – hoping to avoid the Senate crunch – would prefer one of the Independents to negotiate amendments which the Opposition could then accept without losing face.

Whether the Costello forces would agree to such an escape route, though, remains to be seen.

Meanwhile, political argument over industrial relations laws, the recession, and Liberal leadership tensions has obscured one of the ironic consequences of the Government's attempts to cushion Australia against the global crisis.

To pay for its stimulus – and the drop in revenue caused by the economic crunch – sources say the Government is borrowing around a billion dollars a week. Among the institutions buying government bonds are Australian banks.

Where are they getting the money? Well, last October Mr Rudd announced that all borrowing by Australian banks overseas would be guaranteed by the Government.

Now the banks can borrow money overseas on the strength of that triple A-rated government guarantee and use it to buy government bonds here at 6.25 per cent.

Nice. If you're a bank.

■ **Laurie Oakes is political editor of the Nine Network. His column appears every Saturday in The Advertiser.**

Artwork: R Hirst

THE LAST WORD
MARTY SMITH

MOUTHINGOFF

(1) From a school report: "Your child's handwriting is so bad we cannot tell whether they can spell or not." (2) Hybrid: If you cross a porcupine with a sheep, you get an animal that knits its own sweaters. (3) Ancient words: "One of the penalties for refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors." – Greek philosopher Plato. (4) Anonymous speaking: "Life is serious but art is fun." (5) I am not making this up: The Queen hates cats.

INSIGHT

"There are some questions that can't be answered by Google." – sign outside a church.

QUOTE,UNQUOTE

"Never lend your car to anyone to whom you have given birth." – American humorist Erma Bombeck (1927-96).

KEEPCOUNTING

5126 – the last four digits in the phone number 96 5126 of The Armoury, Shop 3, 296 Brighton Rd, North Brighton, in 1970: "Specialising in antique pistols, badges, long arms, medals, swords and decorations."

JUSTA THOUGHT

A wise person learns from the mistakes of others; a fool from their own.

REMEMBERWHEN

Today is March 14, the 73rd day of the year. On this day:
1879: Physicist Albert Einstein, who died in 1955, was born in Ulm, Germany.
1933: Film actor Sir Michael Caine was born Maurice Micklewhite in London.
1972: U.S. actor Burt Reynolds posed nude for the magazine *Cosmopolitan*.
1974: The first vehicle numberplates beginning with the letter S were issued in South Australia.
1993: The Australian Record Industry Association listed *I Will Always Love You*, from the film *The Bodyguard*, by U.S. singer-actor Whitney Houston (born 1963), as South Australia's No. 1 hit single.
1995: Norman Thagard became the first American astronaut to enter space in a Russian rocket.
2007: Britain's *Daily Mail* newspaper reported London-born model Naomi Campbell, 36, had taken up yoga in the hope of soothing her temper.

out Hindley sewer

on the state's 48 worst pubs and clubs, assaults have more than halved and "glassings" have been eradicated.

Specifically, the initial police review revealed assaults in December-January dropped from 393 to 174 over the same period in 2007-08. And not a single glassing has occurred since plastic cups were introduced.

The figures are so convincing, even the all-powerful AHA has now stopped lobbying the Government to water down the reforms.

"Heck, even Billy the Goose is aware of three foolproof measures which, if instituted, would instantly curb the lawlessness and alcohol-related violence endemic to the area.

Instead, it wants the personal drunkenness provisions returned.

"That would address head-on the current social phenomenon where an emerging generation of young adults does not consider community responsibility over and above their individual rights," says AHA NSW president Scott Leach in its newsletter.

"This is not the old brigade coming out against the young.

"It is based on the experience of our 2000 members who are right at the coalface of our communities in city and rural settings."

So let's not pay any further heed to the excuses and protestations of various vested city interests or of slack community authority.

For the sake of civility – and the thousands of orderly citizens who want to enjoy the precinct in safety – let's just clean out the Hindley sewer . . . and the rats who scuttle with impunity within it.

Post your comments online now:
■ Bikies promise new era of unity - do you believe them?
■ ANZ sends 500 jobs overseas - is your job safe?
■ Does Brett Lee still have a Test cricket future?
adelaidenow.com.au

TODAY'S THOUGHT
Don't hold back or hesitate to do good and help those who deserve it whenever it's within your power to take action.
Proverbs 3:27 (Bible for Today)

The Advertiser www.adelaidenow.com.au Saturday, March 14, 2009 67