

Eurovision as Politics

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"For me, it's a bit sad that there are so many people associating this song with politics."

Jamala, Eurovision victor, 2016

This year's Eurovision came with its usual cast of political baggage and implications, made spicier by the introduction of a "popular" vote that effectively neutralised usual judging patterns. But then again, the entire tournament was filled with such innovations, with Australia running a second time and winning the professional judge's vote, only to lose by public vote to Ukraine.

Even before the confirmation that Australia would feature again, eyebrows were raised as to what would be in store. A ridiculous competition, famed for its sublimated battles, was about to get even more peculiar. Were the Australians the shock absorbers in a polarised field?

Australia's inclusion was always going to suggest that rules and assumptions can be bent. British television host Graham Norton found the move to continue with Australia bamboozling, a matter, if nothing else, of geographical nonsense. "I know some countries aren't technically in Europe but, come on – Australia is on the other side of the world."

Norton's remarks did not go down well with Jess Carniel, who seemed to take issue with observations on proximity. "In Australia, a land of delayed television and movie releases, geo-blocked websites, and slow internet, we are acutely aware of our geographic location."^[1]

In digging into Norton's ordinarily obvious points, Carniel's could detect the sneer of the exceptional. "Norton's comments seem to exemplify the British exceptionalism that colours UK relations with the rest of continental Europe." Nothing exceptional about making the incontestable point that Australia and Europe are continents far removed. Even in this age of permissible nonsense, occasioned by charlatans of post-modern sensibility, words count. Meanings such as the European Cup are such that they do not include teams from Asia, let alone Australasia.

Matters were always going to come to a head given that the favourite was the Russian contender, Sergey Lazarev, followed by Australia's own Dami Im. But it was Jamala who decided to regale her audience with a musically pedestrian entry "1944" featuring the political theme of Tatar expulsion from the Crimea by Joseph Stalin's diktat. According to Gwendolyn Sasse, the song "anchored a historical date in the minds of over 200 million viewers across Europe and beyond who watched the event live".^[2]

This was done despite competition rules forbidding such content, a situation that has

resulted in elaborate displays of dissimulation on the part of contestants over the years. Even in post-competition interviews, Jamala would claim her victory to be an “absolute, 100-percent victory for music” which was merely a suggestion that it was a victory for bad taste.[3]

Not that Jamala was oblivious to the presence of political content in the competition, having just as happily suggested that “we [the Ukrainian people] deserve it” and reminding journalists of “a revolution, then an annexation, then the war.” She was not to be fooled “into believing that this is the first time this contest has been politicised.”

This, from the same singer who could not understand why “1944” was being associated with politics. Much can be said of the idea that Eurovision would actually be somewhat poorer without the niggling ideologies and forays into broader disputes. Otherwise, the bland tend to usually come through.

Like the realm of sport, an illusion has been carefully crafted from the start that such a competition is somehow free of the political bug, and various associated stratagems. Such publications as Dafni Tragaki’s edited collection *Empire of Song: Europe and Nation in the Eurovision Song Contest* (2015) suggest otherwise.

Conchita Wurst’s victory in 2014 was itself a reminder that the politics of sex and gender would invariably find its way into the competition, though a good foretaste of this was already provided by Russia’s own t.A.T.u in 2003.

In a reminder about how erroneous it can be to render all musical entrants zombies to the broader national program, the duo gave the audiences in Riga a display of faux-lesbian pop eroticism, whatever that is taken to mean in musicological circles. Such sexual overdrive was perhaps inevitable, given the work put into the project by advertising executive and former child psychologist Ivan Shapovalov. In Shapovalov, marketing met sex.

While the competition might have initially been conceived as a synthesis of various countries, and ideal of Europe, realities have spilled over. Modern Europe is a messy place indeed, and it did not need Georgia’s anti-Putin entry “We Don’t Wanna Put In” in 2009 to remind us that wars and disagreements find their way into the performances. Ignorance and hostility reign as powerful forces between the voting rituals, the former characterised by Sweden’s Loreen, winner of Eurovision 2012, who thought that Baku was a Caribbean destination.

The 2016 voting system differed for adding a 50 percent contribution from home viewers. The initial half was determined traditionally: five-person juries of music judges from the 42 contesting countries. Had the old system been retained, suggested data journalist site FiveThirtyEight, Australia’s Im would have been victorious.[4]

The voting patterns in Eurovision 2016 did not in themselves suggest inimical polarisation, though there were obvious points of solidarity. Lazarev received 12 points from Ukrainian’s voting bloc, while the Russian voting public cast ten Ukraine’s way. Even in times of severe violence and disagreement, common ground can be found. There is politics, and then there are the politicians.

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Notes:

- [1] <http://www.sbs.com.au/programs/eurovision/article/2016/05/12/comment-sorry-graham-norton-australias-participation-eurovision-not-stupid>
- [2] <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=63598>
- [3] <http://www.rferl.org/content/ukraine-jamala-eurovision-song-won-artistic-not-political-merits/27740650.html>
- [4] <http://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/may/18/australias-dami-im-would-have-won-eurovision-under-last-years-voting-system>

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