

Permissible Influences: Israel and the Australian Elections

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So much hullabaloo; so much pent-up anger and, let's face it, so much opportunity for the political classes of Australia. The theme since 2016 is electoral interference; the object: whichever power so happens to afford an opportunity to gather support against. Demonising the Chinese has been a specialty of Australian politics since the first members of the middle kingdom began eyeing prospects in the antipodes. When Chinese residents did well on the gold fields, challenged Australian legislatures insisted on punitive reactions, hoping to curb the wicked success of the Yellow Race. Chinese-made furniture in Victoria needed the special tag of being made by Chinese. The result in the nineteenth century was predictable: sales of Chinese-made products in the state grew.

Now, the terrors are somewhat more refined. There is Huawei with capacities that make Australian 5G technologies look like pygmy newborns taking their first steps. There are pokes and prods from the People's Republic of China seeking to influence policy making with varying degrees of subtlety. (Hardly shocking given that other mightily righteous states, including the United States, are very prone, and have done, the same thing.)

All in all, interference in the electoral process of another country can come in all manner of forms. What matters is whether they are tolerated or not. The hectoring quality of interference from a small, undeclared nuclear state that insists on living, and exploiting, the shadow of the Holocaust, that unspeakable fate that befell the rich Jewish communities of Europe during the Second World War, is singular. The unspeakable has proven to be politically useful for Israel, enabling a disproportionate influence to be exerted in the political affairs of other states.

In Australia, anybody who either defends Palestinians against Israeli policy during their political career, especially prior or during an electoral campaign, or insists that Israeli policy falls well short of humanitarian standards, is deemed a rabid anti-Semite frothing with manifest hatred. To limit criticism of questionable policies, its best to simply limit the terms used: avoid, for instance, a reference to "Israeli policy", or "atrocities", or "settlements". Never mention "lobby" in the same sentence as "Israel". Importantly, the strategy here is to conflate Jews and the expanse of their history and experience with the hard edged, often harsh features of Israeli policy, thereby meaning that any criticism of policy implies a libel on the Jewish people. Devious, that.

As Australia now moves into another federal election of characteristic, lowbrow tedium, a few sparks are starting to show in that regard. Interest has piqued towards certain members of the Australian Labor Party, targeted for expressing unscripted and

inappropriate views favourable to Palestinians. Again, anything favourable towards a Palestinian state or critical of Israel's approach to it is singled out for special treatment.

Curtin candidate Melissa Parke, deemed by ALP leader Bill Shorten a "star" in the running, became a casualty for remembering "vividly" how the IDF forced a pregnant Palestinian refugee "to drink a bottle of bleach", an effort that apparently "burnt out all her throat and insides". She also likened Israel's settlements to China's efforts in the South China Sea. The comments were made to pro-Palestine Labor activists at the United Voices headquarters in Perth.

The defensive response is always on cue: the IDF is accountable; the IDF is "transparent". As the WA Liberal Party's Policy Committee Chairman Sherry Sufi [explains](#),

"Israel is a country with the rule of law. It has sent its Presidents and Prime Ministers to jail."

He cannot believe that an Israeli soldier could engage in the conduct alleged by Parke and "get away with it". The niggling problem disappears because it could never happen.

Fremantle MP Josh Wilson also caught the eye of the permanently indignant Israeli lobby. At a December event organised by the Australian Palestine Advocacy Network, featuring seven other Labor MPs, Wilson [described](#) the checkpoints peppering Gaza as "a series of chokeholds that squeeze Palestinians". The squeezing took place "on movement and time and dignity and peace of mind", humiliating, delaying and discomforting Palestinians in the process. The outcome? "They are going to turn Palestine into Swiss cheese and that is what is happening."

Senator Sue Lines, demonstrating how something is truly afoot in Australia's western state, has done the unpardonable in mentioning the unmentionable: that the Israel lobby has influence in Australia. In an address to WA Labor Friends of Palestine in March, Senator Lines [lamented](#) the tardiness of Labor policy towards the Israel-Palestine issue.

"Not so much for those of us who are supporters of Palestine, but because the Israeli lobby is so powerful within the party and outside the party and it really does impact on the sort of movement we've been able to make in our policy."

The Labor leader has had to spring into action to douse any electorally damaging flames. Shorten, on a visit to the seat of La Trobe in Melbourne, [assured](#) gathered journalists that Wilson and Senator Lines had "reconfirmed" their support for the official pro-Israeli Labor line. Zionist Federation president Jeremy Liebler [could rest easy](#):

"Good on Bill Shorten and Chris Bowen for swiftly clarifying that Ms Parke's views are inconsistent with Labor's approach to Israel, and I'm confident the party leadership will issue a similar response to Josh Wilson and Sue Lines."

Ignoring the substance of Senator Lines' remarks, Liebler put it down to hostility against the Jewish community "having a dialogue with the Labor Party". Again, never mention the lobby.

Much of this, sadly, comes down to keeping up, and in, with the voters. Crude calculations figure. Votes from Palestinians and their supporters are insignificant and few; votes from Jewish voters, highly prized. The inner-city Melbourne seat of Macnamara, held by Labor, is of interest, given its slim margin and the retiring, pro-Israeli Labor MP, Michael Danby. To that end, negative comments on Israel are not so much niggles in electoral strategy as bombs waiting to go off.

Israel's Ambassador Mark Sofer has started to engage in what can only be regarded as standard electoral meddling. Those not on script on the Israeli message needed to be [called out](#) as ignoramuses who do not understand that they are hurting the cause of Palestinians.

"The obsession with demonising Israel, which thankfully is the domain of the few, does not at all help the Palestinians and serves only to hamper possible rapprochement in the Middle East."

Shorten has preferred to treat the Israeli ambassador with care, insisting that he will keep Labor contrarians in line.

"For the sake of clarity, the Israeli ambassador representing the Australian government said they could work with both sides of politics."

Such talk is not so much diplomatic as capitulating. Come May 18, Australia's meek approach to the Middle East peace process is bound to be affirmed, with Israel unimpeachably dominant.

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