


A fizzled campaign to muzzle free speech

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Antisemitism, like all forms of racism, is a scourge and Australia has not been immune to it. Traditional antisemitism is not hard to identify or call out whether it is in graffiti, slogans or slurs. However, when it comes to debate over Israel and Palestine, what is or is not antisemitic is a highly political issue.

The Executive Council of Australia Jewry, the Zionist Federation of Australia, and the private Australia Israel and Jewish Affairs Council act as a lobby and take an aggressive, if not belligerent, stance against strong criticism of Israel or Zionism, claiming that it is by and large antisemitic except when conducted within very narrow parameters (theirs). Anything supporting the rights of Palestinians is usually condemned. They largely echo the Israeli government. However they cannot claim to speak for all Jews, nor should they seek to police debate about Israel and Palestine in Australia.

The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition on Antisemitism that has been shown to suppress discussion about Israel/Palestine and intimidate critics is being promoted internationally by Israel and pro-Israel organisations as a benchmark with a quasi-legal status. After the key professional Zionist lobbying organisation, the Australia Israel and Jewish Affairs Council, called for the adoption of the IHRA definition in August 2021, the peak Jewish communal organisations followed suit. Not unsurprisingly, the Zionist Federation of Australia welcomed the establishment of the Federal Parliamentary Friends of the IHRA weeks before it was publicly launched in late October 2022. At that

launch its first order of business announced was lobbying Australian universities to adopt the definition.

The IHRA definition has been extensively discussed in international academic and general media where it is identified as a trojan horse. Internationally, Jewish scholarly groups with expertise in Holocaust Studies, Middle Eastern and Jewish History, and Palestinian and Jewish organisations have opposed the definition. In Australia, 120 Australian and international academics have addressed an Open Letter to Australian Vice-Chancellors opposing the Parliamentary Friends group's 'initiative' to have them adopt the definition on teaching, research and debate. The idea that speech about Israel and Palestine should be governed by a pro-Israel speech code, given the current radical right-wing Israeli government, beggars belief.

The Parliamentary Friends campaign has fizzled. Unsurprisingly this has not been reported in the compliant Jewish media nor unfortunately in the mainstream press, the pro-Israel Lobby preferring to only announce their "successes" at Monash and Melbourne Universities.

There are 43 universities in Australia. Responses to the Open Letter have been received from 13, and three universities responded to requests to impose the IHRA definition prior to the 'initiative' by the Parliamentary Friends group. However, from these 16 responses from over a third of the university sector -and other information is online- reasonable conclusions maybe drawn.

Six universities (ANU, ACU, Flinders, Griffith, the University of Divinity and QUT) have rejected IHRA, referring to their own internal policies and/or existing legislation on racism and human rights issues. Latrobe University is considering two definitions, the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism and the IHRA even though they represent alternative political approaches. At UNSW Adelaide and Sydney Universities the matter is still being considered administratively or by committees of their academic boards that are considering submissions pro and contra. Deakin University has provided the IHRA definition to staff to consider.

The response from the university sector so far has been not to adopt, and in fact, the responses of both Monash and Melbourne to adopt are qualified, couching the IHRA definition in a raft of policies on free speech, anti-Islamism, and behavioural expectations. And, both universities include the important qualifier, that debate on Israel/Palestine is not intrinsically antisemitic. Further, it appears that Sunshine Coast and Wollongong universities, who adopted the definition prior to the Parliamentary Friends 'initiative', did so without reference to its contentious examples (as is required by the IHRA definition). It is unclear what if any aspect of the definition Macquarie has adopted.

Universities should not bind themselves to something with quasi-legal force such as the partisan IHRA definition. There is already a plethora of legislation and university guidelines dealing with racism that Vice-Chancellors have referred to when responding to

the Open Letter. Critically, free speech is still important in universities.

Unfortunately, the campaign to suppress speech about Palestine and Israel is likely to continue. The Zionist Federation of Australia and the Australian Union of Jewish Students are pressing ahead with an opt-in survey of Australian Jewish university students past and present. However, given the problematic wording of past surveys conducted by these groups, the survey questions are likely to be ambiguous enough that perceptions rather than facts (similar to exaggerated perceptions of crime) will “demonstrate” that tensions over Israel/Palestine are equivalent to antisemitism.

Don’t be surprised if the “results” of that survey will be used in future to pressure universities to engage in suppression of free speech with or without the Parliamentary Friends group being used as the post-box.