

Part G. Banning Words, Not Hatreds: “From the River to the Sea”

1. The core tenet of Australian multiculturalism is the acceptance of, and harmonious coexistence with, the ‘other’. Social cohesion is now under strain from an imported conflict between two ethnic communities, the Jewish and the Palestinian Australians. Geopolitical developments are sharpening it as never before. The resulting bitterness is spilling over onto our streets, our campuses and our screens. Blind Freddy can confirm that antisemitism and Islamophobia are rising together, alongside associated racism.

2. Social cohesion is the casualty. To repeat: 70 years later, mistaken for a Muslim, betrayed by a beard and a confident gait, I can *feel* the silent animus on the white Australian street. Hence, my Himalayan sanctuary.

3. The answer cannot be to favour one party over the other. Nor can it be to ban these or that words, while leaving malice untouched.

4. The root of this conflict has come to be symbolised most visibly by the chant of “From the River to the Sea”. It embodies the vision of Greater Israel for Zionist Jews, traceable to the 1977 Zionist Likud platform’s call for sovereignty between the river and the sea. It also invokes an independent Palestine for the banished and suffering Palestinians. Same Land, claimed by two.

5. The Jews rejoice at having returned from exile to the Promised Land after 2000 years; the Palestinians promise to wait for 2000 years with determination and patience for justice and return to the landscape which endows them with national identity. The tragic irony is that the Palestinians have become stateless and disfranchised as the Zionists complain they were.

6. Theologians have argued endlessly about whether Jews possess an ancient or divine right to Palestine as their home. I stress that I am no expert on the Torah or the New Testament. I offer these observations only in the context of the implications for social cohesion of how we deal with this controversial expression.

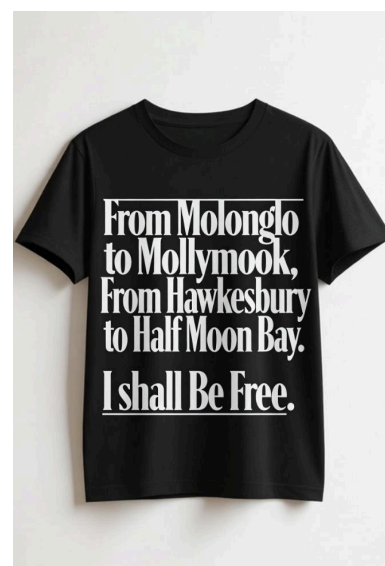
7. The antecedents of the phrase probably lie in the [Hebrew Biblical expression “from Dan to Beersheba”](#), which (apparently) outlines the Holy Land - notably with no mention of the “sea” at all. ([Annexure C](#))

8. For the limited purpose of this submission, one point bears on social cohesion: no single reading of the slogan - or of the scripture or homeland behind it - has ever been fixed beyond challenge. Thus,

- Not all Jews accept a divine title to the land. Indeed, sections of the Australian Jewish community even argue that Israel is ruled by “Zionist Jews”, not “Judaic Jews.”
- Startlingly, Theodor Herzl, the founder of Zionism (*Der Judenstaat*), himself proposed at the 1903 Zionist Congress abandoning Palestine in favour of Uganda, where the British had offered a sizeable tract of land. After the subsequent furore, he retreated to the safe objective, “to create for the Jewish people a homeland in Palestine secured by public law”.
- (It is a delicious irony that PM Netanyahu is actively pursuing “voluntary migration” of Gazans to African countries. Israel (and the US) is in talks with several states on this issue – South Sudan, Somaliland, Ethiopia, Congo, Rwanda, Chad - and Indonesia. Note, though, that all the countries named have denied this.)
- The Jewish diaspora today – 8.6 million - outnumbers Israel’s Jewish population – 7.2 million. Jewish communities continue to put down roots far from the Holy Land in Cyprus, Greece and even, transiently, in India (young ones, escaping IDF Draft). Are Jews of the diaspora not committed to the Promised Land? Why are they not at the front line against the “Arab Hordes” supposedly intent on “annihilating Jews”? The messianic prophecy may not be a universal belief among Jews, as Fundamentalist Zionists claim.

9. My purpose is not to adjudicate anyone’s faith or belonging, but to show that a contested phrase, whatever its antecedents, carries no single, immutable meaning for one and all of a contesting party. The virulent objections to ‘globalising’ of “intifada” reinforce this point: this term was used during the First Intifada, 1987-1993, to describe and claim equivalence with the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

10. I understand that several Australian jurisdictions have now moved against “From the River to the Sea”, treating it as antisemitic. I have been advised that, at least in Queensland, wearing this self-designed T-shirt would fall foul of local law because it would be interpreted as reinforcing the intent of the contested chant. I reproduce it here:



11. My T-shirt makes a point without malice: the longing to be free - from one's own river to one's own sea - belongs to no single people and threatens no other. That is precisely what a ban obscures. A phrase becomes a weapon only through the meaning we choose to read into it, and a law that proscribes the words rather than the malice behind them mistakes the symptom for the disease.

12. If social cohesion in Australia is our genuine concern, we should be wary of granting any one interpretation - of a slogan, a homeland - the status of unchallengeable truth. As far as I am aware, the [borders of the Promised Land were never laid down in stone \(Annexure C\)](#), and freedom was never one people's to ration. To legislate otherwise does not protect a community; it merely silences a conversation that a confident and plural society should be well able to hold with pride.