

Branding the Acceptable: Battling Cancel Culture at Adelaide Writers' Week

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Writing festivals are often tired, stilted affairs, but the 38th Adelaide Writers' Week did not promise to be that run-of-the-mill gathering of yawn-inducing, life draining sessions. For one thing, social media vultures and public relations experts, awaiting the next freely explosive remark or unguarded comment, were at hand to stir the pot and exhort cancel culture.

The fuss began with the festival organisers' invitation of two Palestinian authors, **Susan Abulhawa** and **Mohammed El-Kurd**. Abulhawa was specifically targeted for critical comments on Ukrainian **President Volodymyr Zelenskyy**, notably regarding NATO membership, and for being a mouthpiece of "Russian propaganda", while El-Kurd [has been singled](#) out for social-media commentary on the Israeli state, calling it "sadistic", "demonic" and "a death cult".

Righteously, the South Australian **Premier Peter Malinauskas** showed his less than worldly view on such festivals by insisting on boycotting their talks and presentations. Ever the vote-getting politician, there were those constituents at the Association of Ukrainians in South Australia who had been making noise, notably through their president, **Frank Fursenko**. "We are very concerned that [the festival organisers] are giving a platform to people who are known apologists for the Russian invasion of Ukraine," [insisted](#) Fursenko.

Malinauskas even contemplated pulling government funding from the event, something he [declared at his address](#) opening Writers' Week. (This was also the view of the South Australian opposition leader, David Speirs.) The premier, it should be noted, is less morally troubled [when it comes to funding](#) the LIV Golf tournament, backed by the obscurantist journalist-assassinating regime of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

At the very least, he made some concession to maturity: refusing "to listen to someone's viewpoint" also involved surrendering "the opportunity to challenge it, much less change

their mind.” But for all that Abulhawa’s presence at the Writers’ Week had to be “actively” questioned.

The Advertiser was less reserved, barking in childish condemnation and demanding, [via a statement](#) from editor Gemma Jones, that the Writers’ Week director Louise Adler resign. “The views of the two writers in question are repugnant.”

Law firm MinterEllison also took up a tenancy in the land of black and white in their decision to withdraw sponsorship, [citing concerns](#) about “the potential for racist or antisemitic commentary.” The company had decided “to remove our presence and involvement with this year’s Writers’ Festival program”. That’s branding for you.

Consultancies hardly known for their principled stances on intellectual debate let alone the public good took to the podium of virtue even as they withdrew their support. PwC, which provides pro bono auditing for the Adelaide Festival Foundation, openly disassociated itself from the event by requesting that its logo be removed from the festival website. “We condemn in the strongest terms any antisemitic comments and any suggestion of support for Russia’s war against Ukraine,” the company [stated in a memorandum](#). “We stand with the Jewish and Ukrainian communities who have been understandably hurt by this issue. In this respect, we have asked the chair of the Adelaide Foundation that any association with PwC with this aspect of the festival be removed.”

In all these shallow, stubbornly ahistorical assessments, context is missing. The background, and sense of where such supposedly horrendous opinions sprung from, are dismissed. The culture of cancellation and erasure, as it has been previously, is the prerogative of the powerful and their PR offices. It is also insidious, stressing the trendy, appealing brand of the moment, the acceptable opinion which makes the acceptable person.

El-Kurd, Palestinian poet and correspondent for *The Nation*, enraged since the day Jewish settlers made their way into his East Jerusalem home, has made no secret in adopting a more militant stance for Palestinians. It was, he [stated](#), “not enough that I have lost my home to Israeli settlers, it’s not enough that I grew up and lived as a refugee under military occupation.” In his protest and suffering, he had been constantly told to be “polite” and “respectable”.

Those years were behind him, times which featured a “failed strategy” that placed a heavy emphasis on humanising unacceptable tragedy: the focus on women and children (again, the branding that matters); the focus on “our inability to commit violence, our inability to feel rage”. “And we over-emphasise the victims whose qualifiers make them human.”

In her [response](#) to the storm, Abulhawa expressed gratitude to Adler and the Board of the Adelaide Festival “for bravely ensuring that we do and will have space to speak and interact with readers on a cultural landscape.” She then moved to chart the fault lines that have made contrarian views – or at least views deemed undesirable by the anointed policing agents on the Ukrainian War – a matter of vengeful reaction. To be critical of the Ukrainian Saint was to somehow be a shill for Russia’s Vladimir Putin; to be a proponent for peace was somehow akin to encouraging genocide. “These assertions are false, absurd and libellous.”

Specifically regarding Zelenskyy, his sins lay in “taking actions and provocations that would lead to foreseeable, even predictable, war, which has not only wrecked Ukraine and her

people, but led to global insecurity and fuel shortages, affecting the most vulnerable among us.”

Her views are not unusual, or astonishing. They are also echoed through the Global South, where the brands of the noble Ukrainian victim and the remorseless Russian monster have lesser currency. One can understand the dynamics, and sad perversions of power, without justifying their brutal manifestations. Abulhawa references John Mearsheimer’s warnings about US provocations against Russia, using Ukraine as a base and pretext. The Ukraine conflict, to that end, is not isolated or regional. It is a “global proxy war, the outcome of which may well determine the world order for generations to come.”

Abulhawa would have also been well within her rights to cite the very figure who gave birth to the doctrine of Soviet containment at the start of the Cold War. The late diplomat and historian George Frost Kennan, eyeing the expansionist drive of NATO and US power eastwards towards the Russian border, could only [issue this warning](#) in 1997: “Such a decision may be expected to inflame nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.”

To her estimable credit, Adler remained adamant and defiant in permitting the writers to attend their events. “Our business,” [she told](#) the ABC, “is to operate an open space, not a safe space, in which ideas that may be confronting, disturbing, provocative, are debated with civility, that’s the agenda.” Writers, she also explained to *The Age*, were not sought out “via their Twitter feeds. I do not think the social media space for a nuanced or reasoned analysis and discussion.” It never was such a place, but to the cancel culture footsoldiers, that is exactly where they feel most comfortable.

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