

Looking to ‘Bern’ for inspiration: the future of the Pro-Palestinian movement in Australia

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Abstract

What is happening with Pro-Palestinian Movement in Australia? What can it learn, if anything, from the modern political situation in the US? How can it become more relevant to, and improve its image amongst, ordinary Australians? In addressing these questions this article is inspired by the great deal of work undertaken within the cult of personality and sociology of intellectuals tradition. This article highlights the increased prominence the Palestinian struggle for self-determination has received in the US since 2016, and reflects on and suggests changes the Australian-based pro-Palestinian can make to increase its exposure, highlight the current plight of Palestinians living in the Occupied Territories and ultimately help fulfil the long-held Palestinian desire for their own state.

Key words: Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Australian politics, US politics, Bernie Sanders, cult of personality, sociology of intellectuals.

Introduction

Social movements anti-colonial and anti-imperial in nature are often treated in inimical ways by the political and intellectual groups, namely the elite, with vested interests in maintaining the status quo. The pro-Palestinian movement championing self-determination for Palestinians living under Occupation in their homeland has often been treated in this way in both the US and Australia. The global movement continues to find many allies throughout Europe (Barghouti, 2011), particularly in the Irish nations (Abu-Ayyash, 2015) who have experienced similar struggles against colonial and imperial enterprises, however it remains largely friendless amongst the prominent political, intellectual and media forces within Australia.

Australia’s duopolous democratic political system mirrors the US. Both parties, Labour and the Coalition, have always had a stranglehold at the ballot box. Both parties also share the foreign policy posture that Australia *must* remain unwavering in its support for Israel, and *must* push back against both internal and international criticism of Israel. Australia remains one of the few nations in the world consistent in its support for Israel at the United Nations (Becker et al., 2014), and the dominant political, intellectual and media elements who drive much of the public discourse within Australian want this situation to remain the same.

All of this is unacceptable to the Pro-Palestinian movement operating in Australia, which has expressed itself in some interesting and unique ways. It is best characterised as a loosely connected movement with key elements operating with a strong presence in Australia’s most populous cities. The movement’s core elements include *Australian Friends of Palestine Association* in Adelaide, *The Australia Palestine Advocacy Network* in Canberra, *Palestine Fair Trade Australia* in Sydney, and *Friends of Palestine Western Australia* in Perth. There are two interrelated key aims uniting these groups: 1) support the Palestinian people in their struggle for self-determination, and 2) raise awareness about the brutal nature of the Occupation amongst the Australian politic and policy and decision-makers.

Australia’s location vis-à-vis the Palestinian Territories geographically, and the relatively small population of those of Palestinian extraction living in the Oceanic nation (rough estimates put the population of Palestinian-Australians at around 7000) mean these are challenging tasks. Nonetheless this has not dampened the passion these groups have displayed for the cause. A close monitoring of the functioning of these groups in recent times reveals some interesting and effective approaches to helping achieve these aims and goals. There have been many fund raising activities, including dinners with visiting international speakers / Palestinian activists with on-the-ground experience in the West Bank and Gaza. There have also been events like *Run for Palestine*, organised study tours for Australians to visit the Palestinian Territories, and street protests, which are typically in reaction to the latest major strike in the Territories or to commemorate important days.

It is typically the case that these events receive *very* little, if indeed any, attention from the mainstream Australian media. Activists using social media and alternative media like *Green Left Weekly* and the now defunct *Indymedia* have done their best to help fill this void, however their reach has proven to be very limited. Obviously their readership is nowhere near that of the Australian mainstream news media. It is also the regretful reality for the Australian arm of the Pro-Palestinian movement and its supporters that they are not taken anywhere near as seriously as they would like to be by the majority of Australians. Visiting their demonstrations or occasional activist movie night held at universities or small independent movie theatres reveals the average Australian pays the movement little if any attention.

Of the Australians who have some kind of awareness about the existence and nature of the pro-Palestinian movement, it is very likely they will erroneously conflate the case with Islamic radicalism and terrorism. This is due in large part to the mainstream news media operating in Australia and concerted efforts by the comparatively well-funded and well-connected Australian-based pro-Israeli movement. The mainstream news media, which is dominated by the Rupert Murdoch-owned News Corporation, is involved in a sustained process to represent the Palestinian resistance in ‘Israel’ to be one of the latest manifestations of the same radical Islamism that has inspired other ‘terrorists’ in places like Afghanistan and Iraq (Han and Rane, 2013) – nations where

significant numbers of Australian military forces were deployed, and ultimately killed, alongside the US military as part of the Global War on Terror.

Important research undertaken by Han and Rane (2013) reveals that while the Australian mass media routinely frame Palestinian resistance to the Occupation in terms of terrorism, there was a moment in time when the mainstream Australian news media *acknowledged* the Occupation of Palestine. Their extensive qualitative analysis of news articles found these representations experienced a qualitative shift with the democratic electing of Hamas in 2006. The Murdoch-owned media in particular chose to drop reference to the Occupation from their reporting in favour of focusing on Hamas’ calls for violence resistance against Israel and its general ‘radical’ and ‘terrorist’ behaviour.

In light of these findings, and a range of other and often more recent studies focusing on the representing of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by the Australian news media (Manning, 2018; Abdel-Fattah and Saleh, 2019; Kabir, 2007), it is safe to say the pro-Palestinian movement, just like the Palestinian struggle in the Occupied Territories, suffers a significant image problem amongst everyday Australians. This is certainly a serious problem, however the pro-Palestinian movement and its supporters should take heart in knowing that this situation is far from terminal. It can be rectified, and one of the chief aims of this work is to offer some valuable insight as to how this can be achieved. These ideas are informed by extensive research undertaken in the cult of personality and sociology of intellectuals traditions, and by casting a critical eye over the Bernie Sanders political phenomenon in the US.

If our goals are to help raise awareness about the *true* nature of the Occupation, and to improve the public profile of the pro-Palestinian movement within Australia particularly amongst the politic, with a long-term view of helping bringing about some kind of change to the Australian Government’s current official stance as unwavering in its support of Israel, then we must first have an understanding of the major obstacles standing in the way.

Cult of personality

The cult of personality is an interesting and revelatory field of study with important implications for helping improve both the visibility and influence of the Australian-based pro-Palestinian movement. The relation between an appealing personality of a leader or leaders, and the success of social, religious and political movement to which it is attached is well established (Paltiel, 1983; Strong and Killingsworth, 2011). On first appearances it is not uncommon for one to associate the cult of personality phrase and notion with totalitarian movements and regimes, both historical and modern, such as Joseph Stalin the former Soviet Union, Kim Jong-Un in North Korea, Mao Zedong in China and, in more times, Xi Jinping in China. However, it is no longer the case that the cult of personality exclusively pertains to totalitarian movements. In fact, many of the ideas within this field of study possess great utility for modern

movements like the pro-Palestinian movement with far more altruistic objectives.

Research in the cult personality field reveals that an individual’s charisma and therefore popular appeal can be leveraged as a powerful political tool by a movement to achieve specific political, religious and/or social aims. The kind of cult of personality we are dealing with here is not the prevailing autocratic idea of yesteryear typically associated with Stalin in Soviet Union and Mao in Communist China – the bulk of Western literature in this field certainly does not advocate for the creating of new, or moulding of current, movements to fit an authoritarian style in order to take advantage of a charismatic personality. Rather we are here talking about a more modern conceptualisation that, amongst other things, utilises the great power of social media for grassroots mobilisation to pursue humanitarian aspirations.

We are able to glean from Lu and Soboleva’s (2014) studying the phenomenon of the cult of personality in the context of more modern political systems that some leaders who have achieved political success share similar characteristics. While Lu and Soboleva are not explicitly advocating for a cult of personality, we are able to see the critical importance of a political leader having a clear programme or ideology the politic interprets as providing the answers to pressing issues, having a broad appeal that translates into political supporters, a clear programme, mission or ideology, and being embedded within an established movement or institution possessing the ability to sustain itself.

Their noteworthy research builds on earlier work undertaken by Plamper (2012). While certainly not advocating for the recreating of a Joseph Stalin style cult or a cult of personality per se, his research helps bring into view some of the commonalities between personality cults operating within authoritarian regimes, and those located and working within more open and free societies. These similarities include the ability to use the mass media to construct an appealing image of the leader with the purposes of raising their profile and garnering widespread support amongst the politic, and having legitimate claims vis-à-vis the support of a significant part of the population. These are important findings to keep in mind as we go about analysing the pro-Palestinian movement operating in Australia, and think about new strategies to be adopted in order to increase its visibility and influence.

Feeling the Bern

When looking at the political phenomenon that is Bernie Sanders in the US, we find it satisfies the criteria gleaned from work undertaken by Plamper, Lu and Soboleva. Sanders has been operating within the established movement that is the US Democratic Party, which is clearly able to sustain itself given its huge following and financial resources. His radical anti-establishment political message has been consistent since his bursting onto the political scene in the 1970s and has proven appealing to large swathes of the US politic particularly the next generation of political leaders (Sunkara, 2018). Political polling

consistently reveals millennials have wholeheartedly embraced his personality and his political agenda (Bahrampour, 2016; Wagner 2015; Savodnik, 2019), and it is noteworthy the current face of the young and highly mobilised left in the US, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, is also product of Sanders’ first major tilt / 2016 campaign for the US Presidency.

Much has been written about the charismatic nature of Sanders. Some academic researchers and mainstream news media writers have used the term ‘Berniemanía’ to describe this political phenomenon first taking root in 2016 (Maxwell, 2018; Guentzel, 2016). The coining and repeating of neologisms like ‘Berniemanía’ and phrases like ‘feel the Bern’ by those within the academe and the news media only serves to strengthen the cult of personality that is Bernie Sanders. Keating (2016) is among those to have studied how Sanders’ charismatic nature during political debates, revealing how Sanders’ deliberate gesturing achieves positive results with his audience.

Further research by Abdullah, Bare and Burling (2016) found Sanders’ appeal amongst voters was largely due to his methodical and diplomatic nature, and his ability to address pressing issues in a serious and thoughtful way. This contrasts with many of his political opponents who have, for the most part, proven themselves more arbitrary in their political behaviour and speech. ‘People, who seem to support a candidate like Sanders’ they found, ‘are probably more introspective and tend to think a lot of things through a number of times before deciding on the decisions they should make in everyday life (p.19).’ In short, Sanders has proven himself to be the thinking man’s man.

Sanders’ political campaign has inspired a grassroots following and revitalized segments of the US politic who had already succumbed, or looked destined to do so, to the kind of motivational deficit described by Simon Critchley (2013) as prevailing within modern liberal Western societies. Critchley makes the important point politics *should* be about dedicating ones energies to helping end injustice and wrongs suffered by the Other. This is a process he describes as ‘infinitely demanding’, meaning more ‘good’ can always be done. Among the major issues with the modern neo-liberal democratic systems of government we see in nations like the US and Australia, is the state apparatus has primarily been conceptualised and utilised as a tool to promote partisan interests.

This prevailing approach to the political is reinforced by many intellectuals who assume key roles in the functioning of modern societies. As ‘mediators of ideas’ for a politic, or rather an ‘Imagined Community’ as Benedict Anderson (1991) has famously described, intellectuals play critical roles in translating or creating information about what is happening ‘out there’ in the social world for their audiences. They engage in this process despite often having very little, if indeed any, direct experience with many of the issues and events they are writing about. ‘Mediators of ideas’ is a phrase commonly used by authors like Gilles Deleuze (1995) and Thomas Osborne (2004), whose research forms part of what we call the sociology of intellectuals tradition.

This phrase is designed to convey the integral role modern intellectuals are playing in the knowledge-production occurring within today's societies. ‘The mediator is interested above all in ideas’ writes Osborne, ‘ideas which are going to make a difference...in some later event (p.381).’ Intellectuals writing in scholarly journals, newspapers, online and in magazines, are producing a lot of what we think we know about the nature of the social world. As many writers rightly acknowledge (Osborne, 2004; Said, 2002; Nazer, 1999; Wilson, 1981), it is these intellectuals who are ‘producing knowledge’ about the social world in the form of representations, which are then informing our judgments and decisions, including foreign policy-making processes.

Since his candidacy in 2016, Sanders has helped in shifting the US political landscape in such a substantive way that he has been setting Democratic Party policy. This is perhaps best exhibited by the fact the majority of his Democratic Party members hold favourable views about democratic socialism as a legitimate form of governance (Parnes, 2018). This seismic shift means a lot to close observers of US politics, who no doubt fully appreciate just how poisonous the term ‘socialism’ and its associated ideas have come to be thought of. However, what is most pertinent and illuminating here is what Sanders has been able to achieve for the US manifestation of the pro-Palestinian movement.

Sanders has been able to utilise his cult of personality phenomenon, which has manifested into the popular and catchy slogan ‘feel the Bern,’ to help put the Palestinian struggle on the US political agenda. More specifically, he has been able to leverage his popularity to promote the specific idea that Palestinians, like all people around the world, have a right to self-determination. This is some achievement given he is working within a duopolous political context revealing itself as typically unwavering in its support of Israel; so much so that in some US states it has been made illegal to criticise Israel in anyway (Younes, 2018). While his major internal Democratic opponent Hilary Clinton continued to tow the pro-Israeli line prior to the 2016 US election, Sanders has remained steadfast in his belief that Palestinians are deserving of a state of their own rather than having to continue to live under occupation.

Sanders’ long-time and firm commitment to the Palestinian cause has been music to the ears of many associated with the US-based pro-Palestinian movement. This movement has responded in kind to his political speeches, doing their part to support and promote Sanders’ campaign in the hope he will help bring about a major change to the official foreign policy stance of the US. There is no doubt the Occupation would look very different without the US’ political backing – not to mention the billions of dollars in ‘aid’ the US provides Israel each year, which has been used to develop its already impressive military capability designed in part to sustain the subjugation of the Palestinian population.

Lessons for the Australian arm of the Pro-Palestinian movement

When comparing and contrasting the Sanders situation in the US with the current political situation in Australia; a nation similar in political structure and function, we find there is no such cult of personality phenomenon within the Oceanic nation that has made the struggle for Palestinian self-determination a key part of their political agenda. As it currently stands, Australia is under the leadership of an Evangelical Christian (Pentecostal to be specific) leader Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who like many of his colleagues in the Coalition party and like the majority of self-confessed followers of Christian-Judeo faiths in the US, has firm theological ideas about Israel’s claim to the Holy Land. Morrison was one of the *very few* leaders around the world who responded in kind to President Trump’s announcing his intention to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. In December 2018, Morrison told the Australian public his government would have no problems in recognising the Holy City as the Israel’s capital: ‘Australia now recognises West Jerusalem being the seat of the Knesset and West Jerusalem is the capital of Israel. We look forward to moving our embassy to West Jerusalem in support of and after a final resolution (Kwan, 2018).’

During this December speech, PM Morrison also spruiked Australia’s close relationship with Israel, particularly in terms of military exchange and support: ‘The Australian Government will establish a trade and defence office in West Jerusalem. With deepening defence industry ties and Australia-Israel trade now running at over \$1.3 billion per year, this will help continue to build our strong bilateral trade relationship (Kwan, 2018).’ This landmark political speech signalled a more fervent commitment to the Israeli state by a nation who had already proven itself unwavering in its support. To say this signalling of Australian foreign policy by Australia’s PM was not well-received by the Australian-arm of the pro-Palestinian movement and its supporters is an understatement. President of the *Australia Palestine Advocacy Network* Bishop George Browning was spot on when he responded that any claims by Morrison or his government that Australia supports the establishing of a Palestinian state were ‘empty words’ designed to placate the many Islamic nations with whom Australia enjoys close economic relationships (Kwan, 2018).

It is within this political climate the pro-Palestinian movement in Australia has been crying out for a charismatic leader in the mould of Bernie Sanders. The human rights of the Palestinian people, which includes freedom of movement and access to healthcare and other basic life necessities many of us here in Australia take for granted, in addition to self-determination, has been pushed off the Australian political agenda. Not only does the movement need a similar cult of personality phenomenon to spark debate and help bring to light precisely how Australia’s actions are directly resulting in negative outcomes for the Palestinian people, it also needs the support from a network of *prominent* and *influential* public intellectuals. What is needed are intellectuals who are driven by the more lofty goals of shining a light on injustice, rather than a concern with

advancing their material wealth and political status within a neo-liberal system which has long demonstrated itself as prioritising economic outcomes ahead of acting in moral and ethical ways.

Not since the retirement of progressive and Greens Party leader Bob Brown in 2012 has Australia had such a popular and influential personality who has been committed to the promoting the Palestinian struggle. Brown led the Greens to its crescendo in terms of popularity amongst the Australian politic, achieving a primary vote of nearly 14% in the 2010 Federal Election (Holmes and Fernandes, 2012). This was no mean feat in what was up until this moment in time, and has since returned to following Brown’s retirement, a duopolous political system dominated by parties who have consistently failed and proven unwilling to do anything substantive to help promote the Palestinian plight.

Most importantly, Brown also helped to create a political environment in which the Israeli Occupation and Australia’s specific role in supporting it were able to be seriously challenged. For e.g. emboldened by popularity of their leader and inspired by his desire to shine a light on injustice, West Australian and Greens senator Scott Ludlam called for an arms embargo on Israel in light of its brutal subjugation of the Palestinian population, and South Australian colleague Sarah Hanson-Young backed up these claims when attending protest rallies organised by the *Australian Friends of Palestine* advocacy group. All of this was occurring in 2011 and 2012, when I was student at a popular inner-Melbourne university, and I could see the important flow on effects with regards to the willingness to discuss the Occupation on campus. The situation is vastly different now; the Palestinian-Israel issue and Australia’s involvement in it simply does matter to students in a way it did nearly a decade ago.

As it stands now the Greens Party is a shadow of itself. It has a leader most Australians cannot identify with, and its recent political campaigns at Federal and State levels have been marred by allegations of internal sexual harassment, bullying (Henriques-Gomes, 2019) and by the endorsing of candidates with controversial backgrounds especially with regards to the treatment of women (Willingham, 2018). Any claims by the third most popular party in the Australian political landscape to some kind of moral and ethical superiority are, simply put, no longer tenable. Combining this with the fact any substantive attempts by those associated with the either of the two dominant political parties to put forth the case for Palestinian determination have been shouted down and, in the recent case of Melissa Parke, disendorsed, and the net result has not been positive for the Australian-arm of the pro-Palestinian movement.

Parke was a Western Australian candidate representing the Labour Party at the 2019 Federal Election who was *gently persuaded* by Labour hierarchy to step down when her long-time support for the Palestinian struggle came to light. Her activism included working as a human rights lawyer for the *United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East* from 2002-2004. Parke’s impressive CV also included assuming an Ambassadorial role for *International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons* (winner of the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize for its critical role in *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear*

Weapons) and an appointment by the *United Nations Human Rights Commissioner to the Group of Eminent Experts on Yemen* to investigate alleged human rights violations in Yemen. It was her specific views on Palestine however that made her ‘undesirable’ and politically untenable; a sad reflection on the current nature of the Australian political landscape.

In order to stay relevant the pro-Palestinian needs a new charismatic personality in the mould of Bernie Sanders. A leader able to act as a vehicle for the Palestinian cause and arouse the kind of political debate about the Occupation that is so desperately needed in Australia, and hopefully inspire the next generation of leaders currently studying in Australian universities. The movement needs a cult of personality with the kind of mass appeal amongst millennials that Sanders currently enjoys in the US. Additionally, the movement needs a cohort of public intellectuals located within the mainstream news media dedicated to prosecuting the case that Australia should be helping to end the ongoing colonisation of Palestine, rather than strengthening existing and pursuing new (military) relationships that only assist Israeli forces in their stranglehold on the Palestinian Territories. Whether or not the Australian academe currently possesses the ability to produce these kinds of intellectuals given the neo-liberalisation of these learning spaces is a matter for further discussion.

The alternative is the status quo will remain. Australia will remain among the handful of nations around the world who enjoys a pariah status, particularly amongst Islamic nations, because of its unwavering support for Israel. The Australian mainstream media will also continue on largely unimpeded in its piecemeal covering of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the event the media does choose to cover the issue in any substantive way, it will continue to use frames representing pro-Palestinian forces as radical Islamists and terrorists in an attempt to elicit feelings of anger and condemnation within the Australian public. These are not viable nor acceptable outcomes for a movement that continues to watch what is left of the Palestinian Territories slowly disappear, and its children forced to live in abject poverty in Gaza, the West Bank, and in refugee camps in neighbouring nations.

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