

Sacrificing Israel on the altar of domestic political gain

Viewpoint



SENATOR SCOTT RYAN

THE message broadcast loud and clear from the Labor Party last week was that domestic and international pressure will guide its position on Israel. In deciding that Australia would abstain on a United Nations vote to grant special observer status to the Palestinians, the ALP showed its position is based on pressure, not persuasion: capitulation, not conviction.

If Labor had made a case that abstention may somehow advance the peace process and force the Palestinians to reject all forms of violence and come to the negotiating table in a genuine fashion, that may have been acceptable. I probably would not have agreed with such logic, but at least there would have been logic. Instead, what we have seen is a wholesale capitulation, which sets a profoundly concerning precedent.

First, the idea that domestic political pressure – such as increasing the vote for Labor in western Sydney – would force Australia to alter its position on this issue is particularly worrying.

It has been reported that Labor's internal polling indicates the party could lose up to nine seats in western Sydney at the next election. Unsurprisingly, it was MPs from this part of Australia who led the charge against a "no" vote. Many of them have shown little interest or concern for the Middle East peace process until now, but felt compelled to persuade Labor to change its vote in an attempt to save their own skins.

In the words of Professor Amin Saikal writing in *The Australian Financial Review*, "[The Government] has given itself an important opportunity to respond favourably to criticism of its previous position on the Palestinian issue to many Australians, especially those of Arab and Muslim origin."

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Other than The Greens, there has been a substantial degree of bipartisanship on the Middle East peace process since 1948. However, as of last week, Labor, in instructing Australia's Ambassador to the UN to abstain on this



Bob Carr (right) meeting Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel earlier this year.

vote, has made support for Israel in this country controversial.

Making support for Israel contestable has ramifications well beyond this political cycle.

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The aim of the global delegitimisation movement has been to undermine the consensus comprising traditional friends and allies including Australia, who support Israel. The first step in this attack is to make support for Israel a contestable political issue, one that is subject to the ongoing political debate, domestic political pressure and local interest groups. In the decision last week and the manner it was publicly justified, Labor has managed to confirm this major aim of the anti-Israel movement. In this way, Labor has strengthened the campaign that includes the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.

This may seem harsh, but it is what has happened elsewhere in the world. The first steps to delegitimation are now consciously made to seem small, inoffen-

sive, even in line with "international consensus". Now that domestic politics and ethnic identity of voters in parts of our cities have been legitimised, expect greater noise from Australians for Palestine and their fellow travellers. The shark has detected a sniff of blood.

This week the Labor Party started down the road of so many left-of-centre parties around the world – where support for the sole liberal democratic state in the Middle East with rights for all citizens is now something to be bartered for domestic political gain.

With a newly gilded seat on the United Nations Security Council, Labor is overly conscious of being in the gaze of other global powers. We have heard that this push was led by Foreign Minister Bob Carr and former foreign minister Gareth Evans – both of whom would be up-to-date with current leftist and internationalist thinking on this issue. Of course, it is this international thinking that would support conspiracy theories – such as the recent one that Israel only provides extraordinary levels of assistance in disaster zones so it can harvest organs from casualties and sell them for profit – if these theories were to come up for a vote in the UN General Assembly.

Veteran foreign correspondent Tony Walker summed it up succinctly in *The Financial Review* last Thursday: "If Labor

has any pretensions to being regarded as a social democratic party, newly admitted as a member of the Security Council, there was no credible way Australia could have voted 'no' on the Palestine resolution."

Writing in the same newspaper, ANU Professor Saikal added: "By abstaining, Australia can expect to gain wider respect within the international community in general, and the Arab and Muslim worlds in particular."

Our position should not be based on aspirations to join a club or the vanity of foreign affairs ministers seeking plaudits in the international media. But more concerning was the justification used to explain this Labor backflip in the media last week – that domestic political pressure from voters hostile to Israel will guide Australia's policy.

Remember this moment, for it is when the Labor Party, once led by champions for Israel like Bob Hawke, caved in to pressure to Australian ethnic politics. The simple truth is that Labor cannot be trusted again, for what is the next line Labor will not cross due to domestic political pressure?

The Coalition will never barter support for the sole liberal democratic state in the Middle East.

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