

## FREEDOM OF SPEECH

*A regular column on defending free speech*

One does not have to agree with all the views of Noam Chomsky to endorse his main thesis about Manufacturing Consent. It is all very well having freedom to express a view, but where do you convey it to anybody else? Or read where somebody else expresses it?

There is supposed to be freedom of speech in Australia. In practice the libel laws are severe, especially compared to the US. Furthermore there are Government bodies set up to expressly suppress certain opinions being voiced. Even if those bodies reject complaints, dissemination of ideas can still be blocked.

In Victoria there was a classic case in July. The Melbourne Underground Film Festival (MUFF) shows many films too far out even for attendees at the normal film festivals, let alone the general populace. MUFF decided to show the David Irving film, *The Search For Truth in History*. Some Jewish groups sought a ban from the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal, who ruled against the objectors.

The reason for the proposed ban was racist views in the film. Since the views of Irving, a British historian on the Imp's definition, are presumably available in Australia in print and on the internet, those moving the ban are appearing to be as obsessive as Irving. Some of their claims came close to suggesting blasphemy, based on insulting the memory of those Jews that were exterminated and those that survived. Blasphemy is not a crime.

In the end the owners of the venue suddenly discovered that the venue did not have a licence to show films. The owners were Jewish. Devotees of Jewish conspiracy theories have had their beliefs confirmed. MUFF abandoned seeking alternative venues because of threats which made them fear for their safety.

There has been a campaign by some Jewish activists in Sydney against the awarding of the Sydney Peace Foundation Prize to Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, an outspoken advocate for the Palestinians. Somehow Sydney University Great Hall and Sydney Town Hall were not available and there are allegations of behind the scenes pressure on the awarding body. Premier Bob Carr was under pressure not to award the prize, but refused to buckle, unlike some other Sydney public figures. Unfortunately this campaign has created some public perception that Dr. Mahathir's comments about undue Jewish influence has some credence.

Naturally not all Jews agreed with the position taken by activists in these two instances. Official representatives have been vocal, but inside acceptable debate. Most heartening was the response of Ian Cohen, the only Jewish member of the NSW Parliament (a Green, not beholden to Carr). As reported in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, he supported the award decision and Carr's decision to award it. He was in favour of constructive engagement, rather than delivering a snub.

In the vernacular, some Jewish activists should take a good hard look at themselves and their actions. They have plenty of access to the media to put their views as strongly as the libel laws permit. Many people will view the actions of Jewish activists as lacking in commitment to freedom of speech, the cornerstone of democratic institutions. The upshot is that battles may be won, but the war lost. Sympathy will diminish towards Israel, which needs all the friends it can get.

These recent incidents involve Jewish groups attempting suppression. However, one should not forget that in 2001 the Victoria University was forced to apologise over their cancellation of a lecture by a right-wing Israeli academic, Dr. Yossi Olmert. It was all a mix-up, of course.

The next issue will take up an attempt by Muslims to suppress free speech. Any other examples, especially suppression by governments, would be welcome.

## VICTORIA THE POLICE STATE

States keep on thinking up fancy mottos to put on their number plates. Victoria was once *The Garden State*, now it is *The Place To Be*. However the suggestion above is appropriate at the moment.

The *Independent Australian* is all for freedom of information and freedom of speech, but draws the line at police files being made public. Make that a double line when the files are accessed for political purposes.

In October last year, just before an election, the Police Minister revealed in Parliament that he had information that was on the files of a Liberal candidate. Links via Minister's staff were established later. At first the Government held that there was no need to go further. After being forced to investigate further it transpired that police also accessed the files of an independent, Ms Kay Nesbit, who was standing in a crucial seat where her preferences delivered the seat to the Liberal. Only out of curiosity, according to Police Commissioner Nixon, but not according to Nesbit.

The audit continues.