GLOBAL TURMOIL

Informed, balanced debate was the casualty when a panel discussion tackled the Middle East

Sydney Writers Festival needs to right a few wrongs

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Israel is an “apartheid” state, a “colonialist” enterprise guilty of carrying out “ethnic cleansing” against the Palestinian people.

If you wanted to be assailed by a barrage of such polemics — left dammingly unchallenged and uncorrected — all you needed do last Friday was turn up at Carriageworks, venue for much of this year’s Sydney Writers Festival, and attend a session obscurely titled Somewhere in the Middle: Israel and Palestine.

The panel, declared the promotional material, would “consider whether, for the first time in decades, a new path to peace can be forged in the Israel-Palestine conflict.”

This seemingly laudable objective never saw the light of day — indeed, could never see the light of day given the glaringly stacked panel the SWF put together. In no particular order there was John Lyons, a former Sydney Morning Herald editor and present head of investigative and in-depth journalism at the ABC, who spent six years in Israel as The Australian’s correspondent.

His recently published book Balcony Over Jerusalem paints one side of the Israeli-Palestine conflict as inhumane villain, the other as hapless victim. In 367 pages, much of it devoted to demonising Israel, one is hard-pressed to find substantive mention of the fact Hamas is a genocidal regime whose charter states that Israel will exist until Islam obliterates it, as it has obliterated others before.

To his credit, Lyons did at least contradict two of the panellists by affirming Israel’s right to exist as the nation-state of the Jewish people and rejected the so-called “one-state solution”.

Then we had Randa Abdel-Fattah, an articulate Australian Palestinian writer whose book Where the Streets Had a Name paints a similarly simplistic picture and who peddles the falsehood that Israel’s establishment created 750,000 Arab refugees. No mention of the even greater number of Jewish refugees who were expelled from Arab countries after 1948, or that both groups of refugees were created by a brutal war initiated by Arab leaders. Her “argument” consisted chiefly of parroting slogans branding Israel as an apartheid and colonialist state and that BDS (the boycott, divestment, sanctions campaign) is the best way forward, just as sanctions and boycotts proved effective in ultimately terminating South Africa’s apartheid regime.

If that weren’t enough of a loaded panel, the SWF thought it useful to also include would-be journalist Antony Loewenstein, who has made a virtue of being a Jew who demonises Israel and who happily tossed cheap barbs into the fray while making it clear that he was profoundly ashamed of Israel.

Then there was Melbourne academic Mark Baker, who sought to raise the level of the discussion and insert a measure of balance into the proceedings while holding fast to his humani-
tarian world view and endorsing criticism of the occupation. In the chair was journalist Peter Greste, who did a fair job challenging the speakers — although it surely would have been relevant to mention the Hamas tunnels designed to abduct and kill Israelis, or Hezbollah’s 150,000 missiles and rockets pointed at Israel, or Iran’s burgeoning nuclear capabilities and menacing presence in Syria, in response to panellists derisively scoffing at the suggestion that Israel faced security threats.

In a bizarre coincidence, two of the questions taken from the floor were from identities who hold positions harshly critical of Israeli policies — Nick Riemer, the academic who orchestrated the recent campaign at the University of Sydney, calling on the university to cut ties with Israeli institutions; and Jews Against The Occupation member Vivienne Porzsolt, whose years of anti-Israel activism include being detained in Israel after she joined a Gaza flotilla along with former Greens MP Sylvia Hale. The third question was from Liam Getreu, executive director of the New Israel Fund, which is about to host the even more harshly critical Breaking The Silence group, but who did well to raise the importance of the two-state solution.

No one suggests every political session at the SWF need comprise an equal number of protagonists advocating competing perspectives. But surely the integrity of the festival demands what on any objective analysis should be a reasonable measure of balance, both in the cases presented and those invited to present them.

I’m not suggesting anyone in the room did anything wrong or anything other than express their honest opinions — but that’s the point: the opinions expressed were overwhelmingly one-sided.

Israel is an imperfect democracy, as the best democracies are. And criticism of course goes with the territory. But there was never so much as a hint during the SWF session that most Israelis are desperate for peace, as evidenced by poll after poll supporting a two-state solution. On the contrary, it was argued repeatedly that most simply don’t care; never a mention of the multiple peace offers that Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas knocked back; never a mention of the fundamental refusal by many of Israel’s neighbours to accept a Jewish presence in the Middle East.

What transpired at the SWF was a sorry parody masquerading as intellectual debate. It was the manifestation of an egregious lack of judgment that reflects poorly on the organisation, on its management and on the festival itself.

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