

# Harvard University forced to back down on censorship of British poet

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30 November 2002

On November 12, Harvard University cancelled a poetry reading by the Oxford based poet and critic Tom Paulin, following pressure from the university's pro-Israel student lobby. The student body objected to remarks Paulin had made denouncing the state of Israel and supposedly designating US Jewish settlers on the West Bank as fascists.

Paulin, a published poet and lecturer at Oxford who is teaching at Columbia University, New York this semester, is well known to BBC television audiences as a regular critic on late night review programmes.

He was due to give the Ivy League university's prestigious Morris Gray poetry reading on November 14. But a few days before the event was due to take place, a cancellation and a public apology for Paulin's invitation were issued.

In an official statement, the chair of the university's English department, Lawrence Buell, said, "By mutual consent of the poet and the English department, the Morris Gray poetry reading by Tom Paulin, originally scheduled for Thursday, November 14, will not take place. The English department sincerely regret the widespread consternation that has arisen as a result of this invitation, which had been originally decided on last winter solely on the basis of Mr Paulin's lifetime accomplishments as a poet."

In April this year Paulin was quoted in the Egyptian newspaper, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, on the subject of American-born Jewish settlers, as saying; "I think they are Nazis, racists. I feel nothing but hatred for them." He was also quoted as saying that such territorially vicious elements should be "shot dead."

Paulin refutes the veracity of the Egyptian report. He explained in a letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, that his views had been distorted. He said; "I do not support attacks on Israeli civilians under any circumstances. I am in favour of the current efforts to achieve a two-state solution to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians."

In a separate interview for the BBC, Paulin had said; "My quoted remarks completely misrepresent my real views. For that I apologise."

In the *Al-Ahram* piece Paulin is reported as attacking

liberal defenders of Israeli policy in the Occupied Territories. He said he had "utter contempt" for the "Hampstead [fashionable middle class district of north London] liberal Zionists" who "use this card of anti-Semitism" against Israel's critics. "They fill newspapers with hate letters. They are useless people." He clearly stated his position on the Zionists; "You are either a Zionist or an anti-Zionist, everyone who supports Israel is a Zionist."

On the creation of the state of Israel, he went on to say; "I never believed that Israel had the right to exist at all ... In my view the European culture carries a very heavy responsibility for the creation of Israel... it is a product of both British and Stalin's anti-Semitism, but the British never faced their own complicity in its construction."

Paulin said that he thought the majority of British people supported the Palestinians. The problem, though, was that there is no way of articulating this support. "This sympathy is not translated into force against the British government because it is not like the anti-Apartheid movement which had a high profile here and Mandela is a more engaging figure than Yasser Arafat," he said.

Paulin continued; "I think protest and actions have to be organised against the Israelis and their backers. There needs to be a concerted high profile campaign to raise awareness of the people in this country." He also said that the Palestinians had to "meet force with force. They have to be cunning and forceful."

Last year, Paulin resigned from the Labour Party after denouncing the Blair government as "a Zionist government." He explained at the time, "Sixty members of the Labour party went on friendly visits to Israel. Blair's special envoy to the Middle East, Lord Levy, has a son who works for the Israeli government, which means that it is linked in all kinds of ways to the Zionist government in Israel."

Paulin has also gone on record to describe Israel as an "ahistoric state ... a state created by the powerful nations somewhere else. It is an artificial state."

The pro-Israel lobby drew attention to a line from one of

Paulin's poems, *Killed in the Crossfire*, which was published in the *Observer* newspaper last year. Writing during a particularly ferocious onslaught by the Israeli state into the Occupied Territories, he sought to capture the brutality of the Israeli army against Palestinian youth. The line that so offended a 100 or so students and faculty members went; "Another little Palestinian boy/ in trainers jeans and a white tee-shirt/ is gunned down by the Zionist SS."

One of the chief organisers of the student protest, Rita Goldberg, who informed the English department of Paulin's comments, said; "I was very reluctant to do this, but I think that Tom Paulin has crossed the line. Free speech is one thing, hate speech is another ... I think anti-Semitism is on the rise, and Tom Paulin must be quite confused about his relationship to Jews."

The undergraduate president of Harvard Hillel, Benjamin Solomon-Schwartz, said he was gladdened by the university's decision as he felt Paulin's comments had crossed the line between opinion and "being inhumane."

The co-chairman of the Harvard Palestine solidarity committee, Erol Gulay, while calling Paulin's comments "offensive and extremist," went on to warn of the dangerous precedent being set. "It's a blow for academic freedom and free speech" said Gulay. "It's bad for the free exchange of ideas, which is what a university is all about. If he can't come speak at a university, where can he speak?"

One of Paulin's Columbia colleagues, Jim Shapiro, said of Harvard's actions, "I say this as somebody who is a Zionist, who teaches Jewish studies, who has opposed petitions on my campus for the university to divest from Israel. The idea of rescinding an invitation because somebody has not passed a political litmus test establishes a very dangerous precedent. Do I think that Tom said a stupid thing? Absolutely, and I know few people who haven't said stupid things. Do I think Tom is an anti-Semite? I can say from extensive discussions with him on the Middle East that he isn't. These students have an absolute right to heckle Tom Paulin, but they do not have the right to force the university to rescind the invitation."

In the last few days Harvard University voted to "re-invite" Paulin to give his recital, barely a week after he was officially banned. English department academics voted to overturn the decision, with Buell having to perform the verbal u-turn; "Out of widespread concern and regret for the fact that the decision not to hold the event could easily be seen, and indeed has been seen—both within Harvard and beyond—as an unjustified breach of the principle of free speech within the academy."

For the past two years the Sharon government of Israel has led a brutal and bloody war of attrition against a defenceless and impoverished peoples. Not only have Israel's actions

failed to stir even a ripple of protest from the major powers and most media outlets, but it is backed to the hilt militarily and politically by the US.

At the same time Israel has continued, even stepped up, the provocative building of new Jewish settlements on the Occupied Territories. The land which was seized from the Palestinians is being used by the government to house a highly privileged and ultra-reactionary layer of expatriates. It was to this cosseted elite of religious fundamentalists and right-wing extremists that Paulin was referring, no doubt at the same time recalling the old Protestant ascendancy in his native Belfast.

Paulin's poem *Killed in the Crossfire* is worth examining in full:

We are fed this inert  
This lying phrase  
Like comfort food  
As another little Palestinian boy  
In trainers jeans and a white tee-shirt  
Is gunned down by the Zionist SS  
Whose initials we should  
— but we don't — dumb goys  
Clock in that weasel word  
Crossfire

Paulin, in any case, is not a politician but a poet, who should normally be allowed greater license in his use of terminology by anyone not seeking to malign him as a racist.

Attempts are already being made to sweep the controversy under the carpet. Following the re-invite Shapiro said, "Nobody was defending what Tom Paulin said—everyone was defending his right to say it, and I think it took a few days for Harvard's English faculty to come to that conclusion. But they did, they acted impressively and this is past history now."

Wishful thinking perhaps? The recent decision by Harvard will have implications for Vermont University, which had also cancelled an invitation to Paulin shortly after Harvard's initial decision. Moreover, an indication that this is not the end of the matter is shown by the comments of Max Davis, a member of the pro-Israel group at the university. He told the university's *Crimson* newspaper that he and his co-thinkers "will be out there to give him [Paulin] the reception he deserves. If he comes back and has his free speech, I'm sure I'll have mine as well."



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