Australian journalist targeted under Racial Discrimination Act over Israel war coverage

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Complaints lodged last week against veteran Australian journalist Mike Carlton under the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) underline the anti-democratic character of the legislation. According to media reports, two separate complaints have been received by the Human Rights Commission in response to a column by Carlton that condemned Israel's assault on Gaza.

Titled "Israel's rank and rotten fruit is being called fascism," Carlton's July 26 article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* denounced Israel's bombardment as a war crime, and quoted *Haaretz* columnist Gideon Levy—an Israeli citizen whose parents fled fascism in 1939—who compared Israel's bombardment of Gaza to the methods employed by the Nazis against European Jewry.

"The onslaught is indiscriminate and unrelenting," Carlton wrote, "with but one possible conclusion: Israel is not fighting the terrorists of Hamas. In defiance of the laws of war and the norms of civilised behaviour, it is waging its own war of terror on the entire Gaza population of about 1.7 million people."

Carlton was the only prominent Australian journalist to condemn Israel's war in such strident terms. Just 10 days later, the 68-year-old resigned, citing a concerted campaign against him by the Zionist lobby and Murdoch's News Limited outlets.

Now it appears that complaints have been lodged against the *Sydney Morning Herald* under the RDA's section 18C, the provision used to convict right-wing commentator Andrew Bolt in 2011 over an article he wrote—"It's so hip to be black"—that claimed "fair-skinned" Aborigines were identifying as indigenous to advance their careers.

Section 18C was adopted by the Keating Labor government as an amendment to the RDA in 1994. It outlaws any public act that "is reasonably likely, in all the circumstances, to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate another person or a group of people" on the basis of their race, colour or national or ethnic origin.

In 2011 Bolt's prosecution under the RDA was widely supported by bourgeois liberal commentators, including Mike Carlton, and by the various pseudo-left organisations. The subjective (i.e., unprincipled) response of Socialist Alternative's Louise O'Shea was typical: "Bolt unashamedly lied in his column and broke the law," she declared, continuing, "I hope that all those who have been vilified, disparaged and mocked by Andrew Bolt over the years are enjoying his public humiliation. May there be more of it."

From the outset, the Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* opposed Bolt's prosecution under the RDA. In a statement published earlier this year in response to proposed amendments to the RDA by the Abbott government, we reiterated the principled considerations at stake. The statement explained that "Bolt's conviction for expressing an opinion—however reactionary—constituted a direct attack on freedom of speech and established a dangerous precedent" and warned that "any group constituted on the basis of nationality, race or identity could use the judgement in Bolt's case to suppress ideas and opinions it found offensive."

The threat of legal proceedings against the *Sydney Morning Herald* entirely confirms these warnings. The RDA is being wielded by supporters of Zionism to silence media criticism of Israel's criminal war.

The anti-democratic character of the attack on Carlton has been clouded by the controversy surrounding a cartoon that accompanied his July 26 piece. Le Lievre's cartoon depicted an elderly Jewish man, with hooked nose and kippah (skull cap), seated on a lounge chair emblazoned with the Star of David and directing rocket fire into Gaza via remote control. The cartoon employed racial stereotypes and was no doubt offensive, not least to the many Jews who oppose Israel's war on Gaza.

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Initially the *Herald* rejected claims the cartoon was anti-Semitic, explaining it was based on widely publicised photographs of Israelis in the town of Sderot who watched (and in some instances cheered) Israeli rocket attacks, from chairs and lounges positioned on a local hilltop. On August 3, however, the cartoon was withdrawn, with an editorial headlined, "We apologise: publishing cartoon in original form was wrong," saying the image "invoked an inappropriate element of religion, rather than nationhood."

The targeting of Carlton has also been obscured by claims by the management of Fairfax Media, publishers of the *Herald*, that the prominent columnist was suspended due solely to abusive tweets and emails to *Herald* readers. This is bogus. Carlton has long been known for firing off intemperate replies to those opposing his views. He was suspended for political reasons, with the *Herald* bowing to pressure applied by pro-Zionist organisations, government ministers and Murdoch's News Limited.

On August 5, that is, two days after Le Lievre's cartoon was withdrawn, News Limited editors stepped up their campaign against Carlton. The *Australian* sent a letter to the *Herald* detailing further instances of expletive-laden tweets or emails by the Fairfax columnist and demanding to know what action the newspaper would take against him.

At 10 pm on the same day, Fairfax publisher Sean Aylmer provided the answer, phoning Carlton and telling him he was suspended for four to six weeks. Aylmer overturned an agreement reached earlier that day between Carlton and the newspaper's editor Darren Goodsir that the columnist apologise to six of the offended readers. Carlton resigned on the spot, hanging up on Aylmer and confirming his resignation the following day on Twitter, saying: "Sad that a once great newspaper has buckled to the bullies."

It hardly needs mentioning that News Limited's moral crusade against Carlton, and its outrage over Le Lievre's cartoon, is shot through with rank hypocrisy. A cartoon published by the *Australian* on July 31 showed a Palestinian man wearing a headscarf and Kalashnikov using his child as a human shield, with the caption: "There! Now you go out to win the PR war for Daddy." It was met with silence.

The *Herald* 's editor was contacted personally by federal Attorney-General George Brandis and Communications Minister Malcolm Turnbull over publication of Le Lievre's cartoon. Brandis subsequently warned Fairfax Media that "it ought to be very careful about the almost overtly anti-Semitic tone of some of their commentary"—an accusation without the slightest foundation.

Meanwhile, Murdoch's editorial writers, cartoonists and columnists churn out anti-Islamic racism on a daily basis because it bolsters the ruling class agenda of imperialist war abroad and the ongoing suppression of democratic rights at home. (See: "The Australian media and the severed-head photo")

If anyone has even the slightest doubt that Carlton has been targeted for political reasons then consider the words of *Australian* columnist Gerard Henderson, director of the conservative think tank The Sydney Institute. On August 7 the *Australian* published an extraordinary comment by Henderson entitled: "Why did editors take so long?" Henderson revealed: "Last November I specifically warned Goodsir that the SMH had a problem with Carlton, who was allowed to abuse Coalition voters, business figures, religious believers, parents who send their children to private schools, supporters of the right of Israel to exist within secure borders and more besides."

Henderson continued: "I said to Goodsir it was odd that the SMH allowed a highly paid columnist to rage at those who bought and advertised in the SMH. Goodsir seemed unaware of the problem and ignorant of how Carlton interacted with his readers via tweets and email. Finally this week Aylmer decided to suspend Carlton. But Carlton spat the dummy and resigned. He was indulged for far too long."

Henderson revealed more than he perhaps intended, pointing to the anti-democratic machinations that constitute daily life in official circles. The "problem" the SMH had with Carlton, his public skewering of right-wing politicians, business figures and supporters of Zionism, has been "resolved." His removal points to the rightward lurch of the entire Australian political and media establishment.

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