

# Labor government attacks its own senator for condemning Gaza genocide, Australian complicity

**Oscar Grenfell****16 May 2024**

Since Labor Senator Fatima Payman read a statement to the media on Wednesday denouncing Israel's mass killing in Gaza and condemning the complicity of Western governments, she has been roundly attacked by the political and media establishment.

But significantly, the witch-hunt of the 28-year-old MP has been facilitated and even led by her own Labor government, underscoring its ongoing commitment to Israel's war crimes and to a crackdown on popular opposition.

Payman had told the media she was "terrified at my own inadequacy to stand for what I believe... My conscience has been uneasy for far too long, and I must call this out for what it is. This is a genocide, and we need to stop pretending otherwise."

Federal Labor MPs have previously shed crocodile tears over the mass deaths in Gaza. Some have obscenely suggested that the Zionist regime take more care, as though the killings were somehow an unfortunate mistake, all the while proclaiming Israel's purported "right to defend itself."

Payman is the first government representative to brand what is occurring a genocide. That accurate characterisation has vast implications. It refutes the entire official narrative that Israel is conducting a defensive war in response to the October 7 uprising. Instead, it makes clear that the Zionist regime and all of its backers are engaged in the most heinous war crime, the deliberate extermination of an entire people.

Payman pointed to those implications. She noted: "Instead of advocating for justice, I see our leaders performatively gesture defending the oppressor's right to oppress, while gaslighting the global community about the rights of self-defence, of the armed jailers against their prisoners, of the dominators against the subjugated, of the well-fed against the starving."

Directly addressing her party leader, Anthony Albanese, Payman stated: "I ask our Prime Minister and our fellow parliamentarians, how many international rights laws must Israel break for us to say enough? What is the magic number? How many lives need to be lost before we say enough? What is the magic number? How many mass graves need to be uncovered before we say enough? How many images of

bloodied limbs of murdered children must we see?"

Those comments were a blow to the attempts of Albanese and the Labor leadership to present themselves as largely uninvolved bystanders to the catastrophe unfolding in Gaza, which is a cynical bid to distance the government from the horrific consequences of its own criminal program. That has included full diplomatic and political support to Israel throughout the genocide, as well as material aid and likely data from the Pine Gap spy base in Central Australia that would be used to target strikes in Gaza.

Payman said that Australia could "do something" to stand for "what is right," including through divestments from Israeli industry, the imposition of sanctions and demands for a permanent ceasefire. She concluded by uttering the well-known protest chant: "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free."

The pushback against Payman was almost immediate. Albanese led the charge, telling an interviewer she was a "young" senator who had made comments that were "not appropriate." Other senior Labor MPs followed suit.

Albanese and all of them have avoided the substantive content of what Payman said, including about Australian complicity, instead focussing on her use of the "From the river to the sea" chant. The prime minister again branded this as an attack on the supposed "two-state solution."

That program was always a bankrupt one, envisioning the creation of a Palestinian Bantustan, ruled by a bourgeois regime that would be subservient to Israel. Now, as the Zionist regime is seeking the complete ethnic cleansing of historical Palestine through genocide, Labor's concern over the "two-state solution" is a cynical absurdity.

In addition to publicly criticising their parliamentary colleague as she is rabidly denounced by Zionist organisations and the Murdoch media, Labor went a step further. It joined hands with the Liberal-National Coalition to pass a Senate motion that was clearly directed against Payman.

Introduced yesterday by Coalition leader in the Senate, Simon Birmingham, the motion began by declaring that the Senate "notes that the slogan 'from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free' opposes Israel's right to exist, and is frequently used

by those who seek to intimidate Jewish Australians via acts of antisemitism.”

That is a complete sham, part of the lying attempts to conflate opposition to the militarist Israeli state with anti-Jewish bigotry. As activists who use the slogan have insisted, including anti-Zionist Jews, its meaning is a complete end to discrimination and oppression of the Palestinians and the establishment of equality regardless of race or religion.

The deliberate misinterpretation of the slogan by politicians and the media, as calling for the mass murder of Jewish people, is no different to the racist claims of the 1980s that opponents of South African apartheid wanted to massacre all whites.

Most strikingly though, three of the five clauses of the motion introduced by the Coalition hailed and/or cited the statements of Albanese. The second clause “welcomed” Albanese’s lie that the slogan was “a very violent statement.” The third “concurred” with his frothing denunciation of peaceful pro-Palestinian student encampments, citing his description of them as displaying divisive “hatred” and “ignorance” which “doesn’t have a place.”

Labor and the Coalition joined hands to pass their motion, with virtually no debate.

That has a significance that goes beyond the immediate question of Payman. It underscores the fact that whatever differences they may have on secondary tactical issues, Labor and the Liberal-Nationals are on a unity ticket when it comes to war. They are in a *de facto* coalition in their support of Israel’s genocide, as well as the broader eruption of militarism, of which it is a part, including the US-NATO proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and the advanced preparations for a catastrophic conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific.

Payman’s decision to speak out is a limited expression of growing opposition to that program. The senator has previously made a couple of condemnations of Israel’s mass killing of civilians, but avoided labelling the slaughter a genocide or highlighting the complicity of her own government. As recently as March, Payman issued a statement defending the Labor government and repeating its lie that Australia has not exported any weapons to Israel in the past five years.

In the hysterical denunciations of her comments, the media has universally missed a significant element of Payman’s statement. While including sharp characterisations of the war crimes, much of it was framed as a warning to the Labor government and the ruling elite more broadly, that their complicity in genocide risked inflaming popular opposition with dangerous implications for the stability of the existing political order.

Payman began by noting that she had planned to make her remarks at a protest that night commemorating 76 years since the establishment of Israel and the dispossession of the Palestinians. However, she could not address the rally because “understandably there is disillusionment in the community with the parties.”

Later, Payman warned that the official “lack of clarity, the moral confusion, the indecisiveness is eating at the heart of this nation. It is dividing and confusing the nation. Hundreds of thousands are on the streets. Encampments are taking place across the universities.” Payman said that “social cohesion was at stake,” and “we cannot be disconnected from the people of Australia.”

Payman’s political career has substantially been based upon “multicultural” identity politics, related to her background as a Muslim from a family of Afghan refugees. That undoubtedly makes her particularly sensitive to the growing opposition and her own complicit silence has repeatedly been subject to widespread criticism on social media.

The reaction to her limited statement, however, underscores that there will be no shift from the Labor government or the political establishment as a whole. It is committed to militarism and war abroad, not only in Gaza but internationally, and to an accompanying war against the social and democratic rights of the working class. The episode with Payman further exposes the fraudulent claim of fake-left organisations that endless protests, appealing to the government, will compel it to shift course. In fact, the more opposition has been expressed, the more Labor has doubled down on its support for the genocide.

The “disconnect” of which Payman warned will only widen, but to go forward, it must take the form of a political movement of the working class directed against Labor, all the parliamentary parties and the capitalist system that is responsible for the deepening barbarism.



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