Prize-winning Australian author Michelle de Kretser condemns Israel's war crimes

Richard Phillips
15 June 2025

Addressing the Sydney Writers' Festival last month, author Michelle de Kretser condemned Israel's war crimes in Gaza and Australia's complicity, along with an accompanying crackdown on democratic rights.

The federal Labor government has backed Israel, politically, diplomatically and materially, throughout the Zionist regime's ethnic-cleansing operation.

De Kretser's comments were made after she was awarded this year's Stella Prize for *Theory & Practice*, her seventh novel. The $60,000 prize for women writers was named after pioneering Australian author Miles Franklin (1879–1954), whose full name was Stella Maria Sarah Miles Franklin.

De Kretser previously won two Miles Franklin Awards—Australia's most prestigious literary prize—for *Questions of Travel* in 2013 and *The Life to Come* in 2018, as well as the Prime Minister's Literary Award for Fiction.

The author began by thanking the founders of the Stella Prize. They were one of two groups of women she had recently been thinking of.

Turning to that second group, de Kretser explained: "Even if I knew the names of everyone in the second group, there wouldn't be time to read them out, for they're the women and girls of Gaza. They're the women and girls murdered, maimed, starved, raped, tortured, terrorised, orphaned, bereaved, incarcerated, dehumanised, displaced—in business as usual for Israel's genocide and ethnic cleansing—war crimes for which Australia provides material and diplomatic support."

The current official death toll in Gaza as a result of the Israeli regime's barbarity has reached 55,104 since the start of the war. More than half of the dead are women and children. Another 127,394 have been wounded.

Government support for Israel's criminal actions "has had serious consequences for democracy in Australia," De Kretser said, pointing to the vicious attacks on individuals publicly opposing the war crimes.

"We've seen scholars, creatives, and journalists silenced, their funding revoked, and their contracts cancelled for expressing anti-genocide views. We've seen precious rights eroded and authoritarian laws rushed in on the flimsiest of pretexts.

"We've seen our institutions and our media betray the principles they're supposed to uphold. We've seen language suffer Orwellian distortions. We've seen our leaders pander to the anti-Arab racism of that global bully, the United States. And all of this damage has been done to prop up Israel: a brazenly cruel foreign power, whose leaders are internationally wanted criminals."

The purpose of this "program of suppression is to intimidate," she continued. "In Australia today, it isn't those applauding mass murder who have cause to be afraid, but those speaking out against it."

Those targeted include academics such as Randa Abdel-Fattah, scores of health workers threatened with deregistration, and students, as well as Jewish opponents of Israel's atrocities.

From the outset, the federal Labor government and its state counterparts, the corporate media and the Zionist lobby have justified Israel's war crimes and sought to suppress the widespread popular opposition by falsely equating it with antisemitism.

In February the federal Labor government rammed through sweeping anti-democratic "hate speech laws." These deliberately vague and broad laws, which include mandatory minimum sentences of up to six years' jail time, can be used to imprison critics of Zionism and

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opponents of the Israeli genocide of Palestinians. Similar legislation was passed by the state Labor government in New South Wales.

The laws were introduced following a so-called wave of antisemitic graffiti and a police tipoff about a caravan of explosives in an outer-western Sydney suburb with a list of targets, including the Sydney synagogue. It was later revealed that these incidents were not carried out for political or ideological reasons but by small-time criminals for money or to bargain with police.

De Kretser is the latest creative worker to courageously speak against the Israeli genocide, and the Labor government's support for it, despite the risk of persecution.

In February, Creative Australia suddenly withdrew its Venice Biennale commission for Lebanese-Australian artist Khaled Sabsabi and his curator Michael Agostino .

Sabsabi was falsely accused of antisemitism in Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper, leading to the Albanese government's Arts Minister Tony Burke contacting Creative Australia's CEO and the award being withdrawn a few hours later. The bogus allegation was based on an art installation Sabsabi had made, years before, which included footage of the Lebanese political leader Hassan Nasrallah who headed Hezbollah before Israel assassinated him late last year.

In May, the State Library of Queensland withdrew a $15,000 literary award from Indigenous writer Karen Wyld after being ordered to do so by Queensland Premier David Crisafulli and his Arts Minister, John-Paul Langbroek. Wyld was falsely accused of supporting terrorism for posting a pro-Palestine tweet in 2024.

De Kretser urged Sydney Writers' Festival attendees to "fight the lie that equates our peaceful opposition to genocide with sympathy for terrorism. Help us fight the lie that equates criticism of Israel with antisemitism. Help us fight the lie that Palestinian lives don't matter. Help us fight the undermining of democracy…

"We have two weapons that the powerful dread: words and the truth. That's why truthful speech is being closed down, and why it's essential to resist silence."

Not surprisingly, de Kretser's comments challenging the atmosphere of repression were, with a couple of exceptions, ignored by the establishment media.

Labor's anti-democratic measures and the barrage of pro-Israel lies and propaganda by the corporate media and the Zionists go beyond the immediate question of Gaza. The government's support for Israel, its genocide in Gaza and criminal acts of aggression in Lebanon, Syria and now the naked provocation of war with Iran are part of its close involvement with the emerging US-led global conflict—already underway against Russia in Ukraine and in an advanced state of preparation against China.

The only means of halting the eruption of a world war between nuclear-armed powers is the building of a unified anti-war movement of the international working class based on the fight for socialism. Writers and all creative workers can and should play an important role in this political struggle.

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