

Australian National Press Club cancels Chris Hedges' talk on the "Betrayal of Palestinian Journalists"

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Australia's National Press Club has cancelled a previously scheduled address by US journalist Chris Hedges, without providing any coherent explanation. The events of the Press Club in Canberra are generally nationally televised weekly by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and attract a large audience.

Its denials notwithstanding, it is clear that the Press Club's decision constitutes an act of political censorship. In addition to bowing to a campaign by pro-Israel lobbyists, Hedges' topic, the "betrayal of Palestinian journalists," including by their colleagues in the west, was likely too close to home.

Hedges, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, former *New York Times* correspondent and author, had been set to deliver the speech on October 20, as part of a broader speaking tour in Australia.

Following the cancellation of the talk on Friday and a substantial backlash on social media, the Press Club has tried to limit the damage. In a statement over the weekend, it claimed to have only "tentatively agreed to a date" for Hedges to speak, "given his stature and expertise on Gaza."

The Press Club denied Hedges' assertion that the time and date of the address had been published on its website. That would clearly have indicated substantially more than a "tentative" agreement that he speak.

Sadly for those that issued the statement, people had taken screenshots of a page on the Press Club's website that did indeed advertise Hedges' talk, before it was quietly removed. It was posted on September 8 and even listed the price of admission, making clear that this was far more than a hypothetical proposal.

Given the shakiness of that assertion, one would have to question everything else in the statement. Its insistence

that "there has been no pressure from anyone outside the board, either directly or indirectly" sounds very much like a case of they doth protest too much.

The reference to the absence of "indirect" pressure is particularly implausible. For the past two years, the entire atmosphere in official political and media circles has been marked by precisely such "pressure."

The line, promoted by the Labor government and the corporate media establishment, has been to fraudulently slander as an antisemite anyone who stridently condemns Israel's massive war crimes, as Hedges does.

As for more "direct" forms of pressure, it is well documented that Zionist lobbyists have particularly focused on the media. In June, the federal court ruled that the ABC had illegally sacked Lebanese-Australian journalist Antoinette Lattouf, precisely at the behest of such lobbyists, who had targeted her viciously for criticising Israel's human rights violations.

The Press Club's explanation of its decision consisted solely of a statement that "when more details of the address were made available, we decided to pursue other speakers on the matter." According to Hedges, the chief executive of the Press Club, Maurice Reilly, told him "that in the interest of balancing out our program, we will withdraw our offer."

If that is the case, the obvious questions are:

What is the "balanced" assessment of Israel's murder of an estimated 278 Palestinian journalists?

What is the "balanced" take on a war of annihilation characterised by all reputable human rights organisations as a genocide, and for which the International Criminal Court has issued arrest warrants for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other Israeli leaders?

Hedges, in publicly protesting the cancellation, stated that: "The Israeli Ambassador, retired Lt. Colonel Amir

Maimon, who spent 14 years in the Israeli military, is reportedly being considered to speak.”

In response, Hedges wrote: “Lt. Colonel Maimon can obviously, if he chooses, enlighten us about the artificial intelligence-based program known as ‘Lavender’ and how it selects people, along with their families, in Gaza for assassination... He can let us know why Israel continues the mass slaughter when an internal Israeli intelligence database indicates that at least 83 percent of Palestinians killed are civilians.”

The Press Club statement declared that “The inference that Mr Hedges was being cancelled to make way for the Israeli ambassador is also false and without basis.” That would appear to be carefully worded. It does not explicitly refute what Hedges raised, i.e., that Maimon was being considered.

Such consideration is far from being beyond the bounds of possibility, given that the Press Club hosted Maimon in late October 2023. As Israel was carrying out its heaviest indiscriminate bombing of the Gaza Strip, the Israeli military man ranted about Hamas and insisted that he and his compatriots were the true victims, as a compliant press corps sat in silence.

There are two other factors that may be at play in the cancellation, beyond the prospect of direct Zionist and Israeli lobbying.

In protesting the cancellation and explaining what he had intended to speak on, Hedges linked back to his September article with the same title as his cancelled address.

It is an excoriating denunciation of embedded reporters, who promote war and cover for imperialist crimes, whom Hedges contrasts with genuine investigative reporters exemplified by those Palestinian journalists who have lost their lives while telling the truth.

An obvious point of contention is that Hedges’ description of journalists who “slavishly disseminate whatever they are fed by officials, much of which is a lie, and pretend it is news” applies to the vast majority of the Australian press corps.

While there are honourable exceptions, collectively, they have covered themselves in shame over the past two years, devoting vast resources and limited talents to legitimising the unfolding atrocities and frenetically attacking those that protest them.

The official media has shown a complete incuriosity in Australia’s active involvement in the genocide. Recent revelations of the scale of ongoing military exports to Israel have been published by *Declassified Australia*, a

small independent outlet, and then blacked out by the official press.

The other issue is the character of the Press Club itself. Notwithstanding its pretensions as a forum of public debate, it is essentially a conglomeration of reactionary political, corporate and media interests.

The Press Club’s principal sponsor is Westpac, one of the country’s four largest banks. Other sponsors include dozens of major corporations, including at least one weapons company, Thales.

The first listed patron of the Press Club’s C.E.W. Bean foundation, purportedly dedicated to “Honouring the memory of Australian war correspondents,” is former Labor MP Kim Beazley. He was nicknamed “bomber Beazley,” for his militarist views, and served on the board of arms company Lockheed Martin after exiting politics.

Aside from the character of the Press Club, the censorship of Hedges forms part of a broader assault on democratic rights, targeting mass opposition to the genocide. The New South Wales Labor government, for instance, has once again initiated legal action to try to ban a pro-Palestinian protest, this time over a demonstration next weekend at Sydney Opera House.

Polling commissioned by the Australia Palestine Advocacy Network and conducted last month by the independent YouGov corporation has underscored what such censorship is directed against. 69 percent of respondents agreed that Israel should stop its attack on Gaza. 58 percent agreed “there is a genocide happening in Gaza.” Just 15 percent disagreed.

Those sentiments are diametrically opposed to what has been pumped out for two years by the Labor governments, the political establishment and their media mouthpieces.



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