

Adelaide Writers' Week cancelled, new board apologises for censorship of Randa Abdel-Fattah

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A week after the Adelaide Festival board “disinvited” academic and author Randa Abdel-Fattah from the city’s prestigious Writers’ Week, the organisation is in a total meltdown.

The flagrant censorship of the author, because of her hostility to the Israeli genocide in Gaza, has produced an enormous backlash. That included the vast majority of authors scheduled to appear at the Adelaide Writers’ Week pulling out in opposition to the censorship.

The institution has responded with a desperate and incoherent attempt at damage control.

On Tuesday, Adelaide Festival management announced that the Writers’ Week was being cancelled altogether for 2026. It refused to relent on its censorship of Abdel-Fattah, instead blowing up the event altogether.

The shutdown followed resignations last weekend of four Festival Board members, including its chair, and Tuesday morning’s announcement by Louise Adler, the highly respected publisher and director of Adelaide Writers’ Week, that she too was quitting.

Then, on Thursday, the newly appointed Festival Board suddenly issued an apology to Abdel-Fattah. “Intellectual and artistic freedom is a powerful human right,” it stated. “Our goal is to uphold it, and in this instance Adelaide Festival Corporation fell well short.”

“We apologise to Dr Abdel-Fattah unreservedly for the harm the Adelaide Festival Corporation has caused her,” the new board stated, before inviting her to participate in next year’s iteration of the Writers’ Week.

The statement, suggesting that Adelaide Festival violated human rights, is a damning indictment of the censorship that it carried out.

The statement, issued publicly last week, “disinviting” Abdel-Fattah was an outrageous attack on the author. While acknowledging that Abdel-Fattah had no connection at all to the terrorist atrocity that claimed 15 lives in Bondi last month, it nevertheless declared that it “would not be

culturally sensitive to continue to program her at this unprecedented time so soon after Bondi.”

That was a clear racist dog-whistle, and a declaration that any opposition to Israeli war crimes was tantamount to support for terrorism and antisemitism.

Given Abdel-Fattah’s principled record of opposing injustice and criminality, the statement was also completely indefensible. It is hard not to have the impression that the new board’s apology was prompted by Abdel-Fattah’s decision to flag legal action and a recognition that the statement disinviting her was likely defamatory.

More generally, the Festival has been stung by the backlash, with a broad outpouring of opposition to the censorship from authors, cultural figures and ordinary people.

That included from Adler. In a powerful op-ed in *Guardian Australia*, after she had made public her resignation as director of Writers’ Week, she condemned the censorship of Abdel-Fattah as part of “extreme efforts of pro-Israel lobbyists to stifle even the mildest criticism” and the Labor government’s accelerating measures to outlaw protests, constrain free speech, police universities and starve the arts.

Declaring she would not “be party to silencing writers,” Adler warned that the censorship was “the canary in the coalmine,” telling arts colleagues: “They are coming for you.”?

She later revealed that of 165 scheduled sessions, only 12 events had a full complement of writers left by Monday afternoon, with 70 percent having withdrawn.

Six hours after her resignation, the Adelaide Festival board posted a statement acknowledging the Writers’ Week’s implosion, announcing the resignations of all remaining members and confirming the event’s cancellation. South Australian Arts Minister Andrea Michaels appointed Judy Potter as the new board chair, along with three others—former Adelaide Festival executive director Rob

Brookman, former 7News presenter Jane Doyle and ex-State Opera chair John Irving.?

The board issued an initial apology, which acknowledged “distress” to artists, donors, partners, government and staff—but mentioned Abdel-Fattah only in passing. It did not admit any error in censoring her.

Abdel-Fattah immediately rejected the “apology” as insincere and gaslighting. Today’s fresh apology was at least in part a response to the failure of that previous attempt at damage control.

The latest apology has created an extraordinary situation. The new Adelaide Festival Board, appointed by the South Australian Labor government, has taken a position diametrically opposed to that of the government, which continues to uphold the censorship that it helped to instigate as a righteous act.

Indeed, South Australian Labor Premier Peter Malinauskas has only escalated his vicious personal attacks on Abdel-Fattah.

Addressing the media on Tuesday, he constructed a highly offensive hypothetical. If a “far-right Zionist walked into a Sydney mosque and murdered 15 people... Can you imagine that as premier of this state I would actively support a far-right Zionist going to Writers’ Week and speaking hateful rhetoric towards Islamic people?” Malinauskas said that in this instance, with the Bondi attack, the “reverse” had occurred.

That went further than the initial statement of the Adelaide Festival attacking Abdel-Fattah. While that statement had cynically included a disclaimer that it was not implying any connection between the academic and the terrorist atrocity, the Labor premier drew a direct identity between Abdel-Fattah and the terrorists.

Abdel-Fattah announced yesterday that she is considering defamation proceedings against Malinauskas. In addition to the possibility of his remarks falling foul of those statutes, questions of incitement must surely be raised. Comparing an author to terrorists, with no factual basis whatsoever, clearly puts a target on her back.

The vicious attack on a Palestinian author, by a Labor premier whose interventions on cultural matters resemble those of the fascist Donald Trump, gives the lie to all the claims of the Labor governments, state and federal, that they are seeking to combat “hate speech” and ensure “social cohesion.” In reality, they are going to war against mass opposition to an Israeli genocide that they have supported for more than two years.

The federal Labor government, through several representatives, has signalled its support for the assault on Abdel-Fattah, as part of its spearhead role in the broader offensive against democratic rights.

Federal Trade and Tourism Minister Don Farrell, a longtime factional ally of Malinauskas from Labor’s right-wing Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees’ Association (SDA), publicly backed the board’s censorship on Tuesday, stating, “it is a decision of the board and I support the decision,” while hoping for “no long-term damage” to the festival.?

Farrell and Malinauskas are intimate political allies, forged through the SDA, where Farrell mentored the teenage Malinauskas before handing him the South Australia/Northern Territory branch leadership in 2008. Their careers followed tightly managed paths into parliament: Farrell to federal Senate and cabinet in 2008, Malinauskas to the SA Legislative Council and cabinet by 2015. Like Labor’s trade union apparatus, they maintain the closest ties with the pro-Israel Zionist lobby.?

The destruction of Adelaide Writers’ Week exposes the lengths to which Labor’s South Australian government, fully aligned with Prime Minister Albanese’s pro-Zionist agenda, is prepared to go.

Rather than permit Abdel-Fattah—the sole Australian-Palestinian writer on the program—to participate, Malinauskas and his allies chose to obliterate Australia’s premier literary festival, despite mass calls for her reinstatement, which would have ended the boycott and salvaged the event.

Labor, confronted with the determined protest of hundreds of serious writers and mass anger over the censorship of Abdel-Fattah on social media, decided instead to sabotage a major cultural institution in order to enforce its censorship regime—a deliberate warning to every artist, academic and worker that opposition to Labor’s political and practical endorsement of Israel’s Gaza genocide and Zionist extremism will not be tolerated.?

The resistance from writers and cultural workers must now connect with the independent political mobilisation of the working class. Only the international socialist movement, fighting to abolish the imperialist system that breeds war, censorship and reaction, can defend democratic rights and halt the ruling-class offensive now accelerating across every sphere of social life.



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