Prize-winning writer Richard Flanagan denounces escalating pro-Zionist attacks on democratic rights in Australia

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On August 22, acclaimed novelist Richard Flanagan delivered a powerful 45-minute speech in Sydney condemning the escalating persecution in Australia of opponents of Israel's genocidal assault on Palestinians in Gaza. He called for a determined fight to defend freedom of speech and basic democratic rights.

Flanagan won Britain's most prestigious literary award—the Man Booker Prize in 2014 for *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. By winning the Baillie Gifford Prize for Non-Fiction for his book *Question 7*, he became the first and only author in history to win both Britain's premier fiction and non-fiction prizes. The popular writer has just published *Heresies*, a collection of essays, articles and speeches.

Titled "The New McCarthyism: Gaza and Australia," Flanagan's speech, which was presented to the Festival of Dangerous Ideas and received a prolonged standing ovation from a sold-out audience of 1,000 people, systematically exposed the state-backed pro-Zionist campaign that falsely equates opposition to Israel's war crimes with antisemitism. The address explained how this false claim, aided and abetted by the Labor government, is being used to unleash serious attacks on basic democratic rights.

Flanagan began his speech by reflecting on his upbringing in Tasmania, a society that, he said, was shaped by a "shrill, deafening silence" about its foundation as a convict slave system and the near-total genocide of Tasmanian Aborigines. This background, he explained, established his lifelong commitment as a writer: "To name, to point, to bear witness."

Turning to Gaza, Flanagan pointed to the work of Israeli scholar Lee Mordechai, who has compiled a meticulously sourced archive documenting war crimes committed by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Flanagan cited the deployment of quadcopter drones playing audio recordings of crying babies and screaming women to lure civilians out of shelters before opening fire. He also referred to British surgeon Professor Nizam Mamode's testimony to the UK Parliament.

Citing Mamode, Flanagan reported on the murder of a zip-tied 62-year-old Palestinian man who had been detained and was then run over and crushed to death by an Israeli tank—an image subsequently celebrated by IDF soldiers in online chat groups.

Flanagan noted that more than 21,000 children have been killed in Gaza, with the World Health Organization estimating in late 2023 that a child was being killed every ten minutes.

Emphasising the criminality of the IDF's occupation, Flanagan told the audience that he and artist Ben Quilty had planned to travel to Gaza two years ago to document the destruction through prose and drawings. The plan collapsed after the Israeli government banned the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which was organising the trip. Prior to the cancellation, organisers gave Flanagan and Quilty a chilling briefing: the IDF would treat them as legitimate targets for assassination.

Flanagan said the IDF was responsible for two-thirds of all press killings worldwide in 2024 and 2025—resulting in more journalist deaths in Gaza than throughout all of World War II. He then asked the following question: "Why would a state claiming to be the sole democracy in the Middle East orchestrate the serial murder of observers?"

The answer, Flanagan said, was to "silence every voice that seeks to bear witness to the truth… the orgy of evil that Israel has visited on the Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and elsewhere over the past three years."

In Australia, the weapon of choice to silence opponents, he continued, was the smear of antisemitism. He then explained how this bogus allegation was weaponised following the December 2025 Bondi terrorist attack and used by Zionist lobby groups, in partnership with the Labor government, to unleash a barrage of repressive measures. Australia, it was claimed, faced a tsunami of antisemitism and the Bondi terrorist attack was an "Australian Kristallnacht."

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Flanagan refuted the allegation, describing it as a "destructive myth." Far from turning on their neighbours, he said, ordinary Australians of every background rushed forward to help the wounded and dying at grave personal risk.

Flanagan did not fully detail Labor's active collaboration in the weaponisation of the slur, its anti-protest laws or its direct involvement in the genocide, but he bluntly criticised its appointment of Jillian Segal as Special Envoy to Combat Antisemitism. He detailed her pro-Zionist credentials and the sweeping leverage her office has over public life, and named key Israel lobby organisations operating in Australia—the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, the Zionist Federation of Australia and the Executive Council of Australian Jewry.

The primary weapon in their agenda, he told the audience, was the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism, which explicitly asserts that antizionism and antisemitism are identical expressions of hatred toward Jews. Under Segal's implementation, this definition is being incorporated into official handbooks and applied to schools, universities, healthcare settings and cultural organisations.

Flanagan rejected the IHRA's definition. "Zionism is neither the Torah nor matzo ball soup. Zionism arose out of the same fetid ethno-nationalist ferment of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe that also gave the world Nazism, fascism, extreme nationalism and authoritarianism. Its model of society-building was that of nineteenth-century imperialism: conquest and violence to create ethnically pure countries," he said.

Flanagan detailed the long history of Jewish non-Zionism and anti-Zionism, citing Jewish thinkers and writers from Albert Einstein and Stefan Zweig to Victor Klemperer and Joseph Roth. To emphasise this point, he referred to contemporary polling that has revealed large declines in Zionist identification among Jewish populations internationally, with significant percentages of American Jews acknowledging Israel's actions in Gaza as genocide. He warned that the identification of all Jewish people with Israel's military campaign risks stoking the very antisemitic resentment it claims to combat.

Flanagan concluded by warning that the apparatus established by the Segal report poses an existential threat to democratic rights in Australia. By demanding bureaucratic oversight committees to police speech across broadcasting, universities, galleries, healthcare and sports, he said, the government was constructing a framework designed to blacklist individuals who question official policy.

"Make no mistake: the Segal report will allow government the power to do what the Trump administration has done in the US: defund universities, cower civil society and curb free speech," he said.

Flanagan's speech follows similar warnings over the past two years by other prominent Australian writers and creative workers: two-time Miles Franklin Award and Stella Prize winner Michelle de Kretser and veteran publisher Louise Adler, the former director of the Adelaide Writers' Week. Adler was forced to resign from the Writers' Week over inviting award-winning author, leading Palestinian scholar and Macquarie University academic Randa Abdel-Fattah to speak at the prestigious event.

Flanagan warned earlier in his speech: "The guarantee of Australian democracy is not to be found in parliament nor with our elected representatives but in freedom of speech and expression and the right to protest."

Towards the end, he declared: "We are free and we must not surrender that freedom. Yet, it is under attack, and we must now fight for it." Flanagan warned that if the escalating attacks were not resisted, "all Australians would quickly understand that there is now a sphere of human life about which they must be silent—or risk being blacklisted. That's the new McCarthyism."

Mass opposition to the genocide and the related turn to authoriatianism, expressed in the statements of Flanagan and other courageous artistic figures, raises the question of how such a struggle will be developed, on what program and which class will take it forward.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and his government are not being "cowed" into submission by an external lobby, as the situation is sometimes presented; they are implementing the demands of the Australian ruling class and the US, its imperialist ally.

The turn to police-state measures goes beyond the immediate issue of suppressing mass opposition to the genocide. It is inextricably bound up with Australia's participation in a developing global war, including the utterly criminal US-led assault on Iran and the preparations for a catastrophic conflict against China in the Indo-Pacific.

As the Socialist Equality Party has insisted, the fight against the genocide, war and authoritarianism are revolutionary questions. They pose nothing less than the need to build an independent political movement of the working class, based on a socialist perspective directed against the source of the deepening barbarism, the capitalist system itself.

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