

A Warning To Those Who Dare Criticize Israel In The US

By Robert Fisk
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Behold Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, would-be graduation commencement speaker at Emory University in the United States. She has made a big mistake. She dared to criticise Israel. She suggested--horror of horrors--that "the root cause of the Arab-Israeli conflict is the occupation". Now whoah there a moment, Mary! "Occupation"? Isn't that a little bit anti-Israeli?

Are you really suggesting that the military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip by Israel, its use of extrajudicial executions against Palestinian gunmen, the Israeli gunning down of schoolboy stone-throwers, the wholesale theft of Arab land to build homes for Jews, is in some way wrong?

Maybe I misheard you. Sure I did. Because your response to these scurrilous libels, to these slurs upon your right to free speech, to these slanderous attacks on your integrity, was a pussy-cat's whimper. You were "very hurt and dismayed". It is, you told The Irish Times, "distressing that allegations are being made that are completely unfounded".

You should have threatened your accusers with legal action. When I warn those who claim in their vicious postcards that my mother was Eichmann's daughter that they will receive a solicitor's letter--Peggy Fisk was in the RAF in the Second World War, but no matter--they fall silent at once.

But no, you are "hurt". You are "dismayed". And you allow Professor Kenneth Stein of Emory University to announce that he is "troubled by the apparent absence of due diligence on the part of decision makers who invited her [Mary Robinson] to speak". I love the "due diligence" bit. But seriously, how can you allow this twisted version of your integrity to go unpunished?

Dismayed. Ah, Mary, you poor diddums.

I tried to check the spelling of "diddums" in Webster's, America's inspiring, foremost dictionary. No luck. But then, what's the point when Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines "anti-Semitism" as "opposition to Zionism: sympathy with opponents of the state of Israel".

Come again? If you or I suggest--or, indeed, if poor wee Mary suggests--that the Palestinians are getting a raw deal under Israeli occupation, then we are "anti-Semitic". It is only fair, of course, to quote the pitiful response of the Webster's official publicist, Mr Arthur Bicknell, who was asked to account for this grotesque definition.

"Our job," he responded, "is to accurately reflect English as it is actually being used. We don't make judgement calls; we're not political." Even more hysterically funny and revolting, he says that the dictionary's editors tabulate "citational evidence" about anti-Semitism published in "carefully written prose-like books and magazines". Preposterous as it is, this Janus-like remark is worthy of the hollowest of laughs.

Even the Malaprops of American English are now on their knees to those who will censor critics of Israel's Middle East policy off the air.

And I mean "off the air". I've just received a justifiably outraged note from Bathsheba Ratskoff, a producer and editor at the American Media Education Foundation (MEF), who says that their new documentary on "the shutting-down of debate around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict"--in reality a film about Israel's public relations outfits in America--has been targeted by the "Jewish Action (sic) Task Force". The movie Peace, Propaganda and the Promised Land was to be shown at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts.

So what happened? The "JAT" demanded an apology to the Jewish community and a "pledge (for) greater sensitivity (sic) when tackling Israel and the Middle East conflict in the future". JAT members "may want to consider threatening to cancel their memberships and to withhold contributions".

In due course, a certain Susan Longhenry of the Museum of Fine Arts wrote a creepy letter to Sut Jhally of the MEF, referring to the concerns of "many members of the Boston community"--otherwise, of course, unidentified--suggesting a rescheduled screening (because the original screening would have fallen on the Jewish Sabbath) and a discussion that would have allowed critics to condemn the film. The letter ended--and here I urge you to learn the weasel words of power--that "we have gone to great lengths to avoid cancelling altogether screenings of this film; however, if you are not able to support the revised approach, then I'm afraid we'll have no choice but to do just that".

Does Ms Longhenry want to be a mouse? Or does she want to have the verb "to longhenry" appear in Webster's? Or at least in the Oxford? Fear not, Ms Longhenry's boss overrode her pusillanimous letter. For the moment, at least.

But where does this end? Last Sunday, I was invited to talk on Irish television's TV3 lunchtime programme on Iraq and President Bush's support for Sharon's new wall on the West Bank. Towards the end of the programme, Tom Cooney, a law lecturer at University College, Dublin, suddenly claimed that I had called an Israeli army unit a "rabble" (absolutely correct--they are) and that I reported they had committed a massacre in Jenin in 2002.

I did not say they committed a massacre. But I should have. A subsequent investigation showed that Israeli troops had knowingly shot down innocent civilians, killed a female nurse and driven a vehicle over a paraplegic in a wheelchair. "Blood libel!" Cooney screamed. TV3 immediately--and correctly--dissociated themselves from this libel. Again, I noted the involvement of an eminent university--UCD is one of the finest academic institutions in Ireland and I can only hope that Cooney exercises a greater academic discipline with his young students than he did on TV3--in this slander. And of course, I got the message. Shut up. Don't criticise Israel.

So let me end on a positive note. Just as Bathsheba is a Jewish American, British Jews are also prominent in an organisation called Deir Yassin Remembered, which commemorates the massacre of Arab Palestinians by Jewish militiamen outside Jerusalem in 1948. This year, they remembered the Arab victims of that massacre--9 April--on the same day that Christians commemorated Good Friday.

The day also marked the fourth day of the eight-day Jewish Passover. It also fell on the anniversary of the 1945 execution by the Nazis of Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer at Flossenbug concentration camp. Jewish liberation 3,000 years ago, the death of a Palestinian Jew 2,000 years ago, the death of a German Christian 59 years ago and the massacre of more than 100 Palestinian men, women and children 56 years ago. Alas, Deir Yassin Remembered does not receive the publicity it merits.

Webster's dictionary would meretriciously brand its supporters "anti-Semitic", and "many members of the Boston community" would no doubt object. "Blood libel," UCD's eminent law lecturer would scream. We must wait to hear what UCD thinks. But let us not be "hurt" or "dismayed". Let's just keep on telling it how it is. Isn't that what American journalism school was meant to teach us?

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