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Ideologue on a peace pedestal

Stephen Matchett
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A QUIET life is not what the Sydney Peace Prize is about and honouring American linguist Noam Chomsky with this year's $50,000 award ensures the organisers will get an argument.
Chomsky is a serious linguist, famous for his study of the discipline's core question, whether we learn the structure of language that makes communication possible or whether a set of universal principles are innate.

But he is also an activist, a cogent advocate of unlikely causes, a passionate opponent of just about every foreign policy goal the US has fought for in the past 50 years.

And he is a fierce opponent of Israel and US support for the Jewish state, which he believes blocks any hope of Middle East peace.

As he wrote in an attack on Barack Obama two years back: "The most significant acts to undermine a peaceful settlement are the daily US-backed actions in the occupied territories, all recognised to be criminal: taking over valuable land and resources and constructing what the leading architect of the plan [former Israeli prime minister] Ariel Sharon, called 'Bantustans' for Palestinians - an unfair comparison because the Bantustans were far more viable than the fragments left to Palestinians under Sharon's conception, now being realised."

"We are interested in peace but more interested in peace with justice," Rees says.

And for Chomsky that means opposing the US. His website demonstrates he is a man of enormous energy, but one who interprets everything according to a world view that sees the US as responsible for all but endless crimes against humanity.

Standard stuff for a man who believes "the US record, incidentally with the support of Australia, since the period of its global dominance in the 1940s, is one of instigating war and violence and terror on a very substantial scale".

When it comes to politics, Chomsky is more polemicist than scholar who interprets everything through an anti-American prism.

After September 11 Chomsky accepted al-Qa'ida was responsible for the destruction of the World Trade Centre but argued that this was no worse an atrocity than the Clinton administration's use of cruise missiles to retaliate against terror attacks against US interests in Africa.

A decade on he was condemning the assassination of Osama bin Laden, asking how Americans would feel if Iraqi commandos took out George W. Bush, especially, according to Chomsky, as bin Laden's role in the destruction of the twin towers is not clear.

While critics do not fault his academic rigour in linguistics, his writings on politics are also easily attacked for his "yes, but" strategy.

Thus acknowledgment of Khmer Rouge massacres in Cambodia is followed by "yes, but Henry Kissinger is to blame for the bombing campaign against the country".

And in the early 1990s he dug himself into a hole by acknowledging the Holocaust occurred, before suggesting that people who denied it were not necessarily anti-Semitic, and using the argument to score points on the politics of his own era by suggesting his readers should question the motives of Western intellectuals who did not focus on the contemporary crimes of their own governments. Above all, throughout his hundreds of essays and interviews, books and debates covering subjects stretching from Central America in the Reagan years to Obama's policy in Afghanistan, Chomsky sees a pattern of US imperialism.

He thinks well of Venezuela's Marxist leader Hugo Chavez, whose anti-American rhetoric ratchets up with his every assault on private property rights.

As for Iraq, it was always all about oil, as he wrote in 2005: "If the United States can maintain its control over Iraq, with the world's second largest known oil reserves, and right at the heart of the world's major energy supplies, that will enhance significantly its strategic power and influence over its major rivals in the tripolar world that has been taking shape for the past 30 years: US-dominated North America, Europe, and Northeast Asia, linked to South and Southeast Asia economies."

And why do the American people go along with all these outrages? Basically because they are dills who do what they are told and because the media excludes people who tell the truth. Chomsky calls it "manufactured consent".

The conspiracy theory aside, it is still an argument from another age, before everybody had access to endless online opinions.

As Chomsky said on Sydney radio yesterday he is from the stone age when it comes to technology.

Chomsky is not on his own on any of this. He belongs to a long-established school of foreign policy history, founded in its present establishment incarnation at the start of the 1960s by William Appleman Williams, which holds that the US has been an imperial power since it seized The Philippines from Spain at the start of the 20th century, that the US prefers to protect its empire through economic authority but backs dictators against democracy and shoots freedom fighters when it has to.

In the milieu where the Sydney Peace Prize matters, he is less an eccentric activist than a prophet, advocating non-violence but fiercely speaking truth to power.

"Chomsky was head and shoulders above everybody else considered for the prize this year," Rees says.

As with 2003 winner Hanan Ashrawi, Rees says he speaks for "perspectives on human rights and justice" that are excluded by the "version of consent manufactured by the mainstream media".

"[Chomsky] gives millions of people around the world a sense of hope."

Rees says the award goes to an individual who addresses the issue of the hour.

Veteran anti-apartheid campaigner archbishop Desmond Tutu won in 1999, when indigenous issues were at the top of the Australian agenda.

Muhammad Yunus was awarded the 1998 prize for his work on micro-credit to allow the destitute to establish businesses in Bangladesh and beyond, when the UN set eight millennium development goals to abolish poverty by 2015.

And former president of Ireland Mary Robinson received the prize for her human rights leadership with the UN.

However, other awards have gone to more controversial candidates whose practical peace-making achievements are harder to identify, such as journalist John Pilger (2009) and Indian novelist Arundhati Roy, who told the foundation in 2007, "in a world convulsed by violence and unbelievable brutality the lines between 'us' and 'the terrorists' have been completely blurred".

Ashrawi's award set off a long debate within the Jewish community, in state and federal politics as Labor and Liberal politicians struggled to balance support for free speech against being associate with a Palestinian advocate when Israel was under terror attack, and within the University of Sydney itself.

The dispute generated a great deal of publicity, but not much attention to the cause of peace.

Close to a decade later, the most important issue again is the plight of the Palestinians.

"Injustice for them is like a cancer going on for 60 years," Rees says. And addressing their circumstances is a precondition for peace.

"The governments in Washington and Canberra should realise justice for Palestine equals security for Israel."

Chomsky's critics are not convinced on either the individual or issue honoured with this year's award.

Ted Lapkin, a research fellow at the Institute of Public Affairs in Melbourne, argues that Chomsky, who is Jewish, has no credibility as a critic of Israel.

"He has spent his career engaging in unwarrantedly harsh criticism of Israel that relies on double standards," he says.

On many other issues, Chomsky, is "a left-wing ideologue, with everything that pertains to", Lapkin says.

"This is an immoral decision. They [the Peace Foundation] have a political axe to grind."

But should there be a peace prize that can go to activists at all, rather than administrators and politicians capable of brokering agreements between opponents?

Not in this case, says Lapkin.

"Look at the track record of the Sydney Peace Foundation in terms of their awards. It is almost as if they revel in the role of left-wing provocateur."

Lapkin hastens to add that the foundation's members have every right to argue their corner.

"Stuart Rees genuinely holds to his world view, as he is entitled to do," he says.

But it puts a too easily ignored issue on the agenda: can an organisation based at Sydney University (although its funding comes from the City of Sydney and private sponsors) advance such a partisan agenda?

It is an issue that Sydney University vice-chancellor Michael Spence declines to debate when asked for a comment on the award by a campus-based organisation.

Chomsky "was selected by an independent judging panel, joins a long line of distinguished recipients of the Sydney Peace Prize, all of whom have championed the attainment of universal human rights", Spence says.

But Rees sees no problem with being an activist as well as an academic. "If you call human rights a partisan position, yes, I am partisan. You can distinguish between being an academic and an activist if you hide in an ivory tower," he says. "There is a distinction, but students ask: Do we walk the walk as well as talk the talk?

"I have notions of how we should treat one another and this is the starting point, these things are the ingredients of justice."

And as for a $50,000 award, "we give prizes to rugby league players but peace is the most precious thing possible", Rees says.