

The Sydney Morning Herald

Politics Federal [Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#)

Labor senators condemn 'river to the sea' chant in Fatima Payman rebuke



Matthew Knott

Updated May 16, 2024 – 3.40pm, first published at 12.00pm



Listen to this article

6 min

Labor senators have joined the opposition to condemn the controversial pro-Palestine “from the river to the sea” slogan, delivering an implicit rebuke to their colleague Fatima Payman as fiery scenes erupted in parliament over her comments condemning Israel.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said he considered Payman’s use of the phrase inappropriate, but sidestepped opposition calls to remove her from a parliamentary committee on foreign affairs as senior Coalition figures accused her of supporting terrorism.



Senator Fatima Payman during question time on Thursday. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

Other senior Labor figures distanced themselves from the first-term senator, who on Wednesday [accused Israel of conducting a genocide in Gaza](#) in the most forceful criticism of Israel by a government MP since the war in Gaza began.

The Senate voted 56-12 on Thursday to condemn the “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free” slogan, saying it “opposes Israel’s right to exist, and is frequently used by those who seek to intimidate Jewish Australians via acts of antisemitism”.

The motion also welcomed comments by Albanese in which he backed former Defence department secretary Dennis Richardson’s view that the slogan is “a very violent statement” which could “easily flow into actions of violence against communities in our own country”.

Only Greens senators and independent senator Lidia Thorpe voted against the motion, which was introduced by Opposition Senate Leader Simon Birmingham.

Payman was not present for the vote but attended Senate question time, where an intense debate unfolded over her comments.

Liberal senator Hollie Hughes was forced to withdraw a comment accusing the government of supporting terrorism that some senators interpreted as being aimed at Payman.

Greens senator Sarah Hanson-Young accused the opposition of “intimidation, bullying and harassment to a high order” and making the workplace unsafe for Payman.

Nationals Senator Bridget McKenzie later backed in Hughes, telling reporters: “If you are chanting ‘from the river to the sea, Palestine be free’ then you are effectively supporting Hamas and you are effectively supporting terrorists.”



Senator Fatima Payman and Senate leader Penny Wong. ALEX ELLINGHAUSEN

Foreign Affairs Minister Penny Wong accused the opposition of trying to politicise the war in Gaza, saying: “This is a government that does represent the community more completely than any government in Australia’s history.

“It is a government that does represent, that does have members and senators from a wide range of faiths and perspectives and cultural heritage.”

Wong spoke to Payman at the end of Senate question time and Greens Senator Mehreen Faruqi embraced her.

Jewish groups regard the “from the river to the sea” slogan as a coded call for the elimination of Israel while others have insisted it is simply a call for freedom and equal rights for Palestinians.

Asked about Payman’s comments during question time in the House of Representatives, Albanese said: “The chant, from the river to the sea, has been used from time to time by some in the pro-Palestinian movement, by some who argue that Israel should be just one state as well and that Gaza and the West Bank should be wiped out, it is inappropriate.”

“I very strongly believe in a two-state solution. I strongly believe in the right of Israel to exist within secure borders. I strongly believe as well in the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people.”

Albanese declined to directly address a question by Liberal MP Julian Leeser, who is Jewish, about whether Albanese would remove Payman from her position on the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade.

Earlier in the day, Albanese said he had not spoken to Payman since she made the remarks, describing her as “a young senator from Western Australia”.

Payman, 29, was born in Afghanistan and is the first Muslim woman to wear a hijab in the federal parliament.

Payman told a small group of reporters on Wednesday: “Instead of advocating for justice, I see our leaders performatively gesture defending the oppressor’s right to oppress, while gaslighting the global community about the rights of self-defence.

“My conscience has been uneasy for far too long and I must call this out for what it is. “This is a genocide, and we need to stop pretending otherwise.”

Payman did not respond to a request for comment on Thursday.

Asked about the “river to the sea” phrase, Health Minister Mark Butler said: “The phrase that she used is not a phrase that would ever escape my lips.

“It’s fundamentally inconsistent with the long-standing position of the Labor Party and Australia for a two-state solution to the ongoing conflict in Israel and Palestine.

“This phrase is fundamentally inconsistent with the ongoing existence of the only Jewish state on the planet.”

Asked if it was appropriate for Payman to use the word genocide, Defence Minister Richard Marles said that “it’s not the word I would use”.

A spokeswoman for Labor early childhood education minister Anne Aly said she did not want to comment on the issue.

Australia Palestine Advocacy Network President Nasser Mashni said: “Our liberation cry ‘from the river to the sea’ is a call for equal rights and justice for all, which sits in stark contrast to the genocidal words and actions of the Israeli government, which has implemented racist policies of apartheid to strip Palestinians of rights, self-determination and life, for 76 years.

“We are alarmed that the Australian Senate has today taken this step to try and silence the Palestinian justice movement, and to shore up Zionist Israel’s oppression of Palestinians.”

Colin Rubenstein, executive director of the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council, said Payman’s comments were a “stain upon the Labor Party”.

“We appreciate that the government has distanced itself from Senator Payman’s extremism and implied endorsement of the Hamas agenda, labelling her comments ‘inappropriate,’” he said.

“However, this does not seem sufficient consequence for her actions, given the effects they will have on Australia’s social cohesion at a time when it is already under severe threat.”

Cut through the noise of federal politics with news, views and expert analysis. [Subscribers can sign up to our weekly Inside Politics newsletter.](#)



Matthew Knott is the foreign affairs and national security correspondent for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age. Connect via [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#).