

Uri Avnery: The face of exemplary journalism

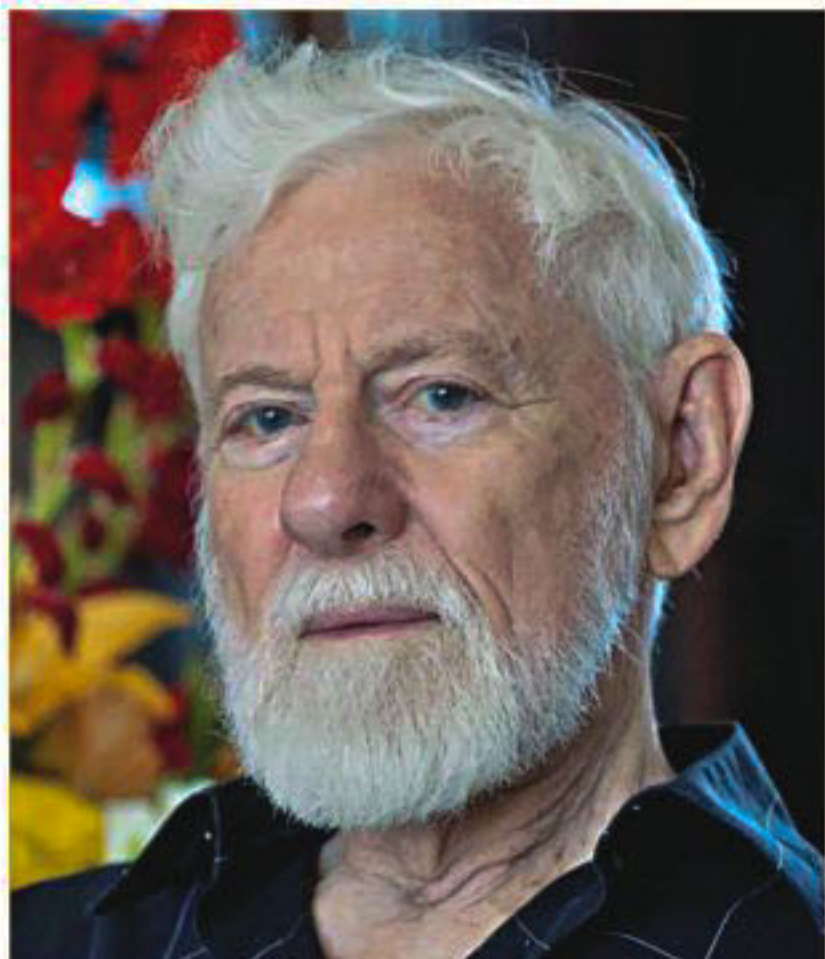


August 20, at the age of 94. It was a natural death, perhaps too natural for someone who lived an extraordinary life marked by extraordinary events. For those who do not know him, Uri Avnery was the most vocal critic of Israel's Palestine policies within the country. In that, he was relentless and unwavering. He never strayed off this course despite the unsavoury epithets—"Nazi" or a "self-hating Jew"—that he was awarded by the Zionist mainstream for his work, or the more oppressive methods of reprisal adopted to silence him including assassination attempts and sedition charges.

To understand the true extent of his resilience, just imagine a journalist in Myanmar trying to uncover truths about the Army's ethnic cleansing project against the Rohingya minority. Or, an activist in China confronting the government for its detention of ethnic Uighurs and other minority Muslims in large internment camps. Both will be risking unjust imprisonment. Avnery did all of that—only he did that for far

longer than possibly any other and against far greater risks, which makes him a truly exemplary journalist and activist of our time.

In a way, Uri Avnery's life is entwined with the history of Israel. It's a storyline about sufferings, wars, mistakes and gaffes, but also about an unflinching courage to fight back against the waves of hatred in an apartheid state and instead promote



Uri Avnery (1923- 2018)

love, generosity and conciliation. Born in Germany in 1923 as Helmut Ostermann, the son of a baker, Avnery and his family escaped to Palestine, then under UK mandate, when the Nazis came to power in 1933. As Jewish opposition to British rule grew along

with Arab opposition to Jewish immigration, the young Avnery in 1938 joined the Irgun, a terrorist organisation associated with Zionism. Later, he would regret this decision. In the war that led to Israel's foundation in 1948, he was wounded twice.

This is the part of his life, one can assume, that Uri Avnery would have liked to forget, for it marked a stark contrast with his later life. But it also makes him human. As is with any human being, it is only through his exposure to life's myriad challenges, the not-so-bright moments and lapses in judgement that Uri Avnery finally came to realise the ultimate goal of his life: promoting peace between Israel and Palestine.

By then, he had come to the view that Jews and Arabs had to share the common space that they lived in—with a focus on the commonness of their Semitic identity. Avnery would go back and forth to polish his peace solution, moving into politics to affect policy change and publishing articles and magazines to advocate greater accommodation with the Palestinians, but the one theory that he would stick to throughout the rest of his life was that no peace was possible without an independent Palestinian state. His impassioned activism in support of this theory made him one of the most authentic voices of the Israeli left.

Several incidents remain the hallmarks of Avnery's life. The most notable of them was, of course, his

meeting with Yassir Arafat, the father of the Palestinian cause. He met with him on July 3, 1982, as the first Israeli to do so, having crossed the battle-lines into West Beirut at the height of Israel's devastating siege of the Lebanese capital. For this, he was widely denounced as a "traitor" in Israel. Even his own mother disinherited him. But Avnery was undeterred by these setbacks. It was just one of the many sacrifices that he had to make as a peace campaigner.

In 1993, he founded Gush Shalom which was the first Israeli organisation to campaign for a boycott of goods produced in the Jewish settlements in West Bank. Avnery said that every settlement was "a landmine on the road to peace" and "the main reason for setting up settlements is to prevent the two-state solution—the only peace solution there is." A decade later, in 2003, he travelled with other Israeli activists to Arafat's besieged West Bank compound to act as a "human shield", as Israel suppressed a new Palestinian uprising.

To his credit, he also wrote a number of books including *My Friend, the Enemy* (1986), *A Soldier's Tale, the Bloody Road to Jerusalem* (2008), and *Israel's Vicious Circle* (2008).

In the twilight years of his life, Avnery found himself increasingly isolated as the Israeli society in general grew more radical because of the decades-old anti-Palestine campaign. But he continued his fight nonetheless. He placed his love for

humanity above all else, and denounced ethno-religious bias which he believed shouldn't be the moral foundation for a state. In what appears to have been his last column, titled "Who the Hell Are We?" and published on August 4, he recalled a conversation with Ariel Sharon in which he had told him that "I am first of all an Israeli. After that I am a Jew."

To that, the late Israeli prime minister responded heatedly: "I am first of all a Jew, and only after that an Israeli!"

"That may look like an abstract debate," Avnery went on to write. "But in reality, this is the question that lies at the heart of all our basic problems. It is the core of the crisis which is now rending Israel apart." Uri Avnery never disowned his own Israeli/Jewish identity per se, despite the country's history of violence and manipulation, but never accepted it either in the way that most Israelis today do. He waded through its mud and blood — only to show that this is how it may have begun, but it doesn't have to be how it ends.

It is this extraordinary courage to speak truth to power and do the right thing, even if it meant challenging the reigning national consensus of his country, that makes Uri Avnery a guiding light for journalists and activists in today's world.

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NRC issue in Assam and our security concern

AIR CDRE (RETD) ISHFAQ ILAHI CHOUDHURY

THE ongoing registration of citizens in Assam first came to the limelight during the Indian national election campaign in 2014, when BJP Chief Narendra Modi announced in election meetings that if voted to power, the BJP would evict those he called "Illegal trespassers from Bangladesh". BJP's current President Amit Shah went a step further and during the May 2016 election campaign for Assam State Assembly declared that while his government would allow Hindu migrants from Bangladesh to settle in India, the Muslims will be pushed out.

Many in Bangladesh took this as empty rhetoric aimed at Hindu voters. However, when BJP came to power in Assam, they restarted the long-stalled NRC process. A part of the draft NRC was released on the midnight of December 31, 2017, and subsequently on July 30, 2018, the full draft of the NRC was released. It appeared that out of about 35 million who had submitted papers for citizenship registration in Assam, over 4 million were rejected.

These are the people who could not prove that they had been living in Assam or had been citizens of India before midnight of March 24, 1971, the cut-off date for inclusion in the NRC. It can be presumed that the bulk of these so-called "illegal trespassers from Bangladesh" are poor Muslim farmers who had settled in the Brahmaputra valley in Assam many generations ago. Although the central government is saying that the NRC list is only a "draft" and there is a provision of appeal all

the way to the Supreme Court, for an ordinary individual, who is likely to be herded to a deportation camp, seeking justice from the Supreme Court will remain a far cry.

With BJP using the NRC process as an election trump card, we cannot ignore the worst-case scenario of a human onslaught on our border by evicted Muslims from Assam. As recently as September 11, the BJP Secretary General has said that those excluded from the NRC will be "detected, deleted and deported". And one can imagine where! In fact, the Assamese example may encourage other states to start their own NRC process. We can no longer ignore the jingoistic threats coming out of mid and high-level BJP politicians, many of whom see the migrant population as having links to various Islamist terror organisations. Where do these people then go, except crowd along the Indo-Bangladesh border?

Incidentally, this is not the first time that Bengalis, especially the Bengali Muslims, have been targeted in Assam. In the 1930s, the so-called "Bongal Kheda" movement started under the patronage of Assam's PM Gopinath Bordoloi. Again in the 1960s, we saw extreme violence applied against the Muslim peasants in the Brahmaputra Valley and many thousands were pushed into the then East Pakistan. As Assam's economy continued to suffer, mainly due to internal disturbances and lack of external investment, local politicians found the "Bengali Muslim infiltration" as a comfortable bogeyman. There were violent protests by the All Assam Students Union (AASU) in the mid-1970s, calling for the expulsion of "millions of illegal

Bangladeshis" who were allegedly taking away their land and jobs. Also, since 1980s, Bengali Muslims living in Northern Assam, known as "Bodoland", were regular victims of brutal attacks by ethnic Bodos who wanted their expulsion from Bodoland. These events forced the then Assam state government to carry out a citizenship survey in 1985 to find out and identify the illegal migrants in Assam. Nothing much happened till the rise of BJP who included it in their election campaign. In fact, because of this issue, BJP got their first ever victory in Assam in 2016.

The Assamese claim that many of the 1971 refugees stayed back in Assam and never returned. This is not a fact because these refugees were not economic migrants; they were forced out of their land, homes, businesses and properties. As such, they returned within months after December 1971. Assamese also complain of a steady flow of illegal migrants into Assam. This is also not tenable because Bangladesh is doing better than Assam in all major economic and social indexes.

In the fields of per capita income, life expectancy, infant mortality, maternal mortality, poverty alleviation, access to sanitation and clean drinking water, Bangladesh is doing better than Assam. Why then should millions be trespassing into Assam? One can even ask, "How could millions cross into Assam while the border is fenced, patrolled round the clock and electrified at night?"

The central government of India and the Assamese government should shift their focus from NRC to creating a climate of confidence in the region.

Assam was one of the richest Indian states at the time of India's partition, today it is one of the poorest. The state is virtually cut-off from mainland India, and is thereby deprived of much needed investment.

Assam could improve its investment climate by using Bangladesh's rivers,

protest against this game of finger-pointing without substantive evidence. Meanwhile, we need to increase vigilance all across the border. The aim should be to check for the possible illegal entry of Indian citizens into Bangladesh. Let us hope that good sense prevails in the BJP leadership and



A woman in Assam checks whether her name is on the draft list of the National Register of Citizens. PHOTO: REUTERS

roads, rails and air links. The only beneficiaries of the NRC issue are those who are against friendly Indo-Bangla relations. Communal forces in India and Bangladesh are exploiting the situation, waiting for an opportune moment to strike. Bangladesh should

they do not dent a friendly Indo-Bangladesh relationship that has been constructed with due diligence over the last decade.

Ishfaq Ilahi Choudhury is an Air Commodore (Retd).

QUOTABLE Quote



CLEMENT ATTLEE (1883-1967)

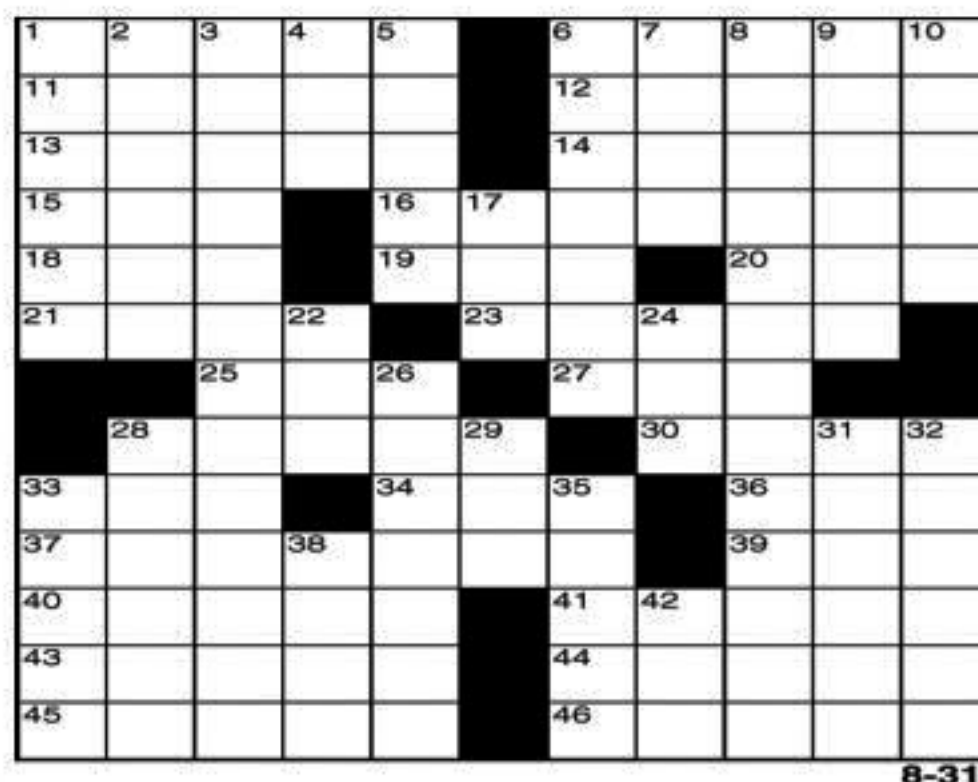
Former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and Leader of the Labour Party

Democracy means government by discussion, but it is only effective if you can stop people talking.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| ACROSS | 34 Urgent call | 7 Bakery buy |
| 1 Command | 36 Crayon makeup | 8 Pool activity |
| 6 Weasel's cousin | 37 Language of biblical times | 9 Steered clear of |
| 11 Audacity | 39 Qty. | 10 Speed trap device |
| 12 Tadpole, e.g. | 40 Critic, at times | 17 Galley item |
| 13 Messy places | 41 Chopper part | 22 Individually |
| 14 Terror | 43 Iron output | 24 Scary cry |
| 15 Signing need | 44 Sports spot | 26 Wins over |
| 16 Fried tortilla | 45 Grazing groups | 28 Pump full of bubbles |
| 18 Moose cousin | 46 Foals' mothers | 29 Luau dish |
| 19 Was inactive | | 31 Surname in punk rock |
| 20 German article | | 32 Crowd scene |
| 21 Movie excerpt | DOWN | 33 Swamp |
| 23 Bridge answer | 1 Without a contract | 35 "Beat it!" |
| 25 Outlaw Kelly | 2 Pass down, as a folk story | 38 Honeyed drink |
| 27 Harry's friend | 3 Basic need | 42 -- pro nobis |
| 28 "Get --!" ("Calm down!") | 4 Holiday lead-in | |
| 30 Beast | 5 Work breaks | |
| 33 Kitten call | 6 Octogenarian, e.g. | |

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

C	R	A	M	S	P	O	O	F
L	U	L	U	I	M	S	U	R
A	D	D	S	S	E	A	R	E
M	E	A	T	B	A	L	L	E
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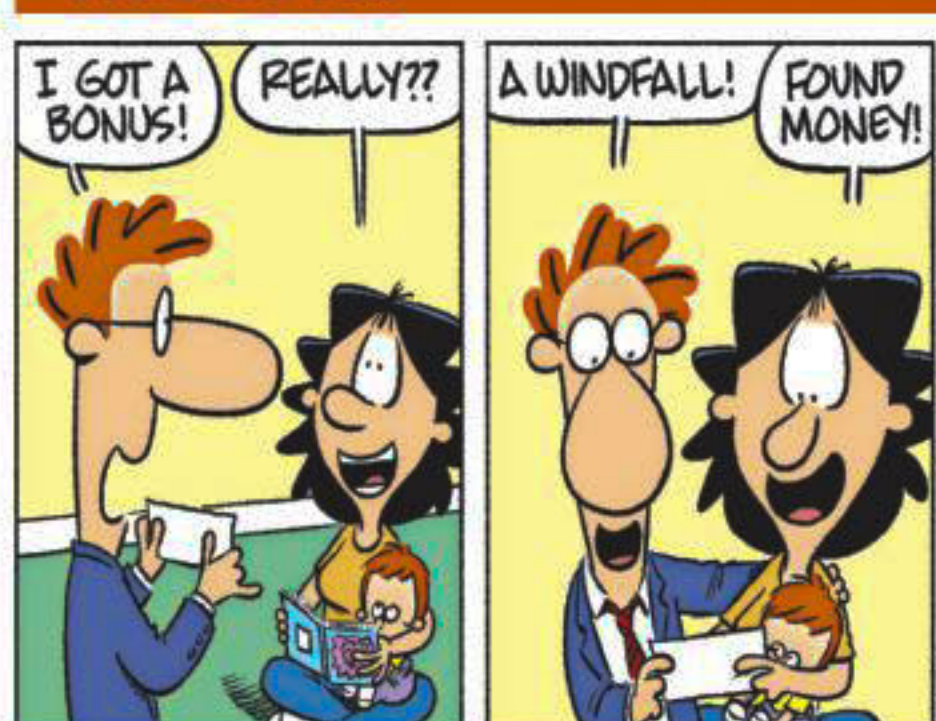
BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

