How Amnesty International lost its way

With the blacklisting of feminist groups and suspension of its Israeli branch, the charity has steadily abandoned its founding principles

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Nicole Lampert
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As the granddaughter of Sean MacBride, Amnesty's late co-founder and international chairman, Iseult White feels the human-rights charity is part of her DNA. In the Seventies and Eighties, the pre-Christmas period at home was always spent writing to various prisoners of conscience around the world, and supporters of Amnesty's work were always in and out of her grandparents' house.

An Irish Republican, MacBride, who died in 1988, had spent time in prison, as had his firebrand mother, Maud Gonne, who set up the Women Prisoners' Defence League. Years after Amnesty was founded in London in 1961, initially to fight for prisoners of conscience, MacBride widened its remit in the 1970s to champion miscarriages of justice and oppose torture. A fundamental principle of the organisation was that human rights were universal.

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So when, in 2020, White saw that Amnesty International Ireland had signed a letter from the lobby group Transgender Equality Network of Ireland, effectively calling for the silencing of free speech on trans issues, she saw red. The letter demanded that the media and politicians "no longer provide legitimate representation" for people described as sharing "bigoted beliefs".

"The whole letter was bats--- crazy, and I couldn't believe that Amnesty had signed," says White, a psychotherapist. "And then I saw the CEO of Amnesty on Twitter claiming it was only British feminists who had any sort of issue around self-ID."



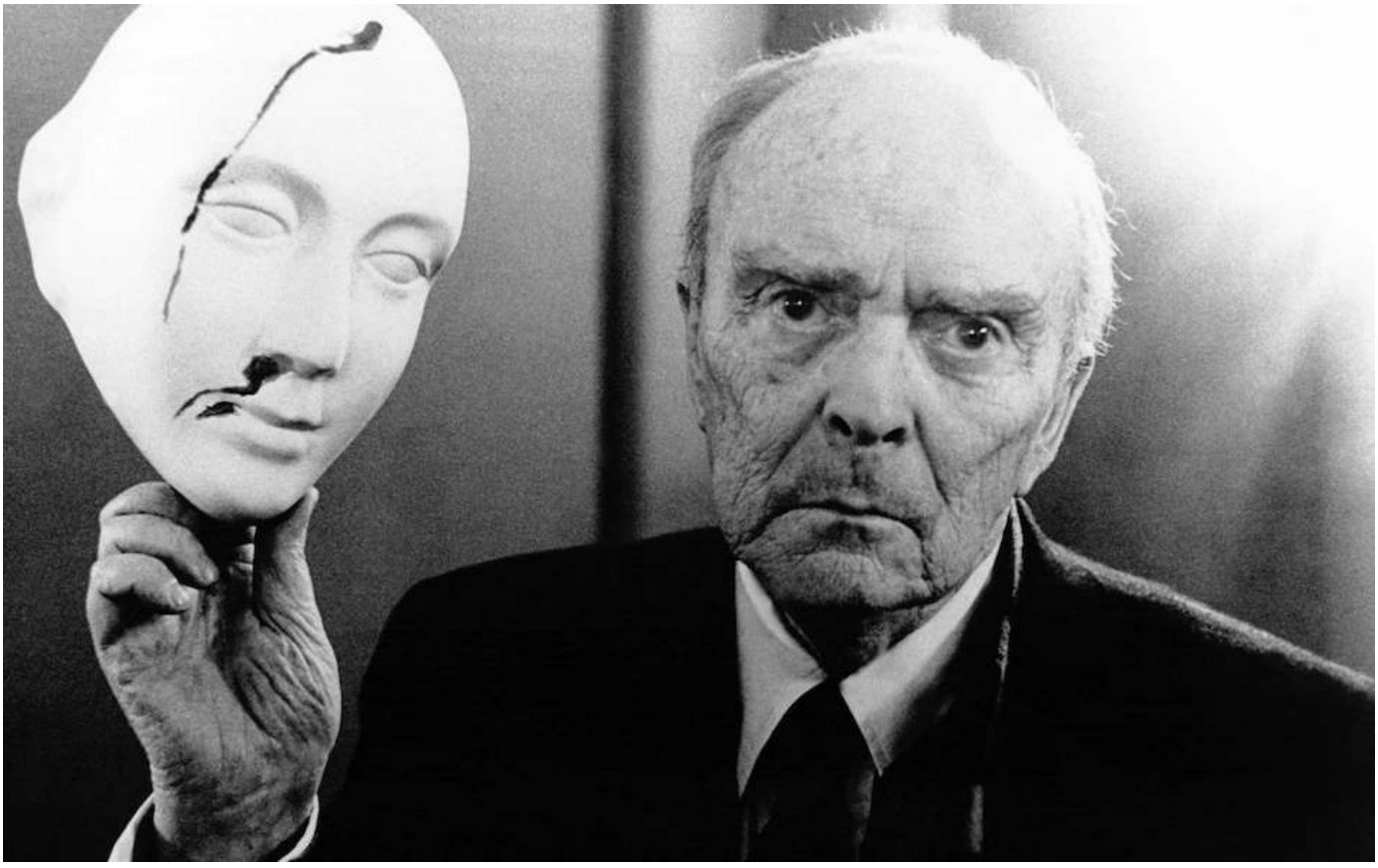
Iseult White received death threats after speaking out

The Irish Amnesty had effectively waded into what had become known as the gender wars, which saw many feminists and gay men coming out against the idea that society should unquestioningly treat a biological man as a woman if they identify as the opposite sex.

But attempting to silence those who held an opposing view seemed like “authoritarian behaviour”, which is what Amnesty was established to campaign against. “I was shocked,” says White, who describes herself as same-sex attracted. “I felt hurt. So I put myself out there, I wrote a letter saying that by signing such a document, Amnesty was seeking to deny legitimate representation to people of conscience.”

White soon discovered what happens if you speak out against the trans lobby. She got death threats and was warned by her bosses to stay off social media. It became such a storm that she felt she had to take some time off work.

But at the same time she started to look at Amnesty with clearer eyes, and some of the projects it was involved in – from working with pimps to legalise prostitution to working with a British group since accused of having an "Islamist orientation and views" – shocked her, all the more because the organisation's reputation relies on the good work done by her grandfather and others. The Amnesty International building in Dublin is named after MacBride, who served as Amnesty's international chairman until 1975 and helped shape it into a global human-rights NGO.



Sean MacBride (pictured in 1981) co-founded the organisation in 1961 Credit: Christian Rausch/Gamma-Rapho via Getty

"Amnesty dines out on its reputation," says White. "Newspapers parrot their findings. People assume what they say is correct. I did. It was only through this experience that my understanding was totally changed. Watching the relationship between governments and NGOs like Amnesty and Stonewall, and how they have worked to silence ordinary people from speaking up about things that impacted them: I didn't realise this could

happen. This is the exact opposite of what my grandfather and others set up the organisation to do."

White was one of the earlier figures to start raising the alarm about Amnesty's recent approach. This week, though, a spotlight was shone on the body's approach to trans issues – and women – when its UK arm published a report called *A Growing Threat: The Anti-Rights Movement in the UK*, written by Chiara Capraro, a programme director at Amnesty International UK. It warned that an "anti-rights ecosystem" was threatening "the safety of women and LGBT+ people in the UK". It identified 117 of these supposedly dangerous organisations, which ranged from British feminist and lesbian and gay organisations to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, to American Christian groups. Perhaps most shockingly it listed Beira's Place – JK Rowling's charity for female rape survivors – among the alleged offenders, for which it is now facing legal action from the Harry Potter author.



In response to the blacklisting, JK Rowling suggested she was willing to fund legal action should any of the listed groups wish to take it against Amnesty Credit: Tolga Akmen/AFP via Getty

In the face of a major backlash, the document was withdrawn, with Amnesty saying "its use of language does not reflect the position of Amnesty International UK". A spokesman for the organisation says the report "was uploaded to our website without going through the

established internal review processes that are in place to ensure consistency, accuracy and alignment with Amnesty International UK's positions", adding that it remains "committed to defending human rights, including both the rights of women and the rights of trans people" and that human-rights protections "are strongest when they apply equally to everyone, and no community should be singled out for unfair treatment or denied their dignity and rights".

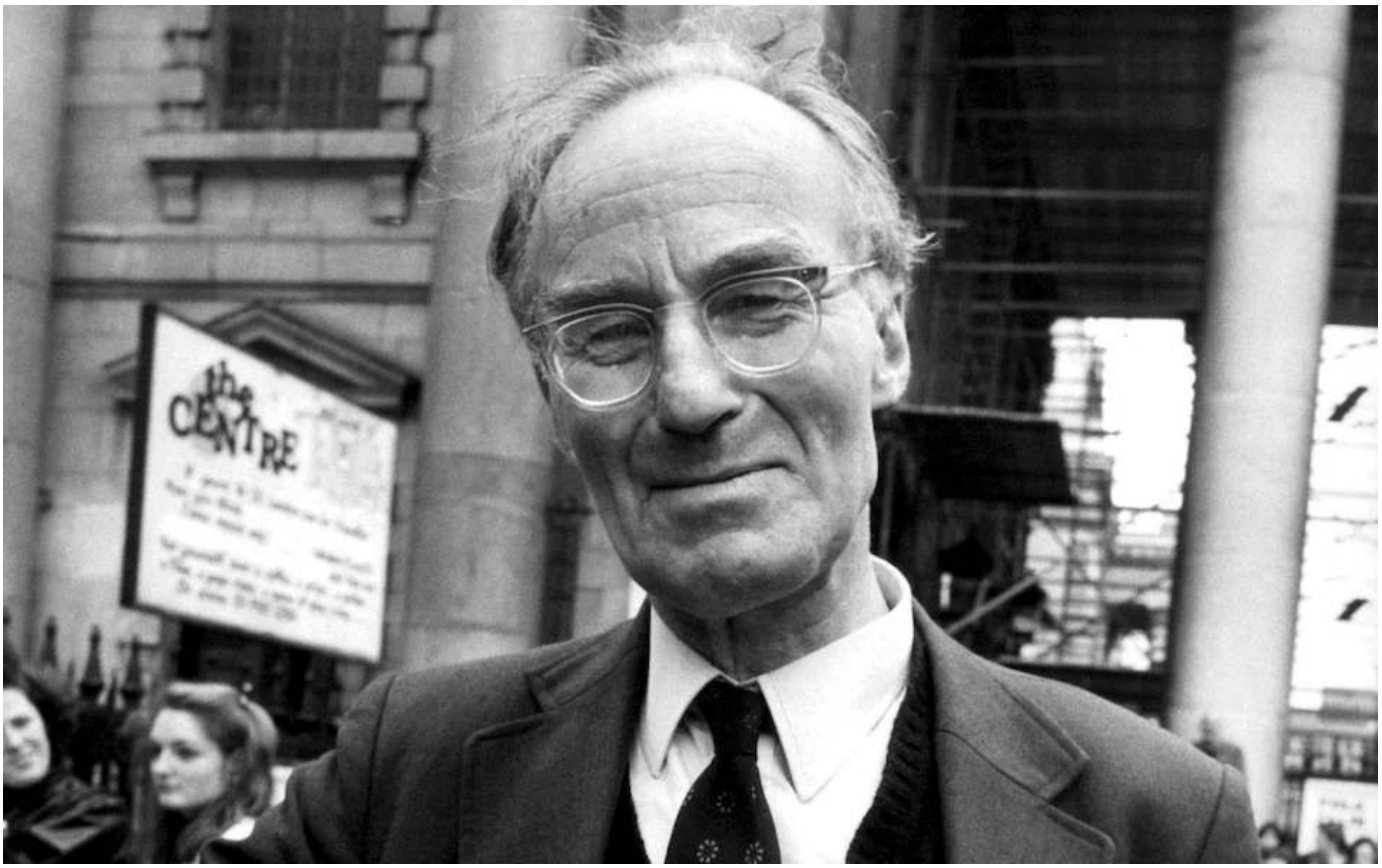
But the broad rhetoric from the report fitted into a pattern of criticism of gender-critical groups that remains on Amnesty's website.

Charlotte Cadden, a former police officer who leads the PoliceSeenUK campaign for sex-based rights, warned Amnesty that "by misattributing the threat of violent protest, hate crime, criminal damage and assault to groups fighting for their sex-based rights, you risk fuelling further violence towards women and anyone who holds sex-realist views in society".

It has also led to fury from some of the charity's best-known supporters. The actor John Cleese, who helped organise and perform fundraisers for the charity in the 1970s, wrote on X: "I was once a major fund-raiser for Amnesty. But in those days, it was about preventing torture. Not about sexual identity. I disown them."

How did Amnesty end up this way?

The organisation was founded by Peter Benenson, a British barrister who was born Jewish and converted to Catholicism after reading about two Portuguese students imprisoned for toasting to freedom under the far-right Salazar regime. He started a campaign, Appeal for Amnesty 1961, to draw attention to people imprisoned for their beliefs, opinions and religion.



After co-founding Amnesty, Peter Benenson spent three years as general secretary Credit: EPA

Working with his fellow lawyer MacBride and the Quaker activist Eric Baker, who had helped found the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, he set up Amnesty International, which drew attention to peaceful prisoners of conscience, partly by getting the public to join in with huge letter-writing campaigns to show that the wider world was watching out for them. In 1977, Amnesty International won the Nobel Peace Prize.

But in recent years the organisation has increasingly waded into controversy. In 2010, Amnesty drew criticism for collaborating with Cage, an advocacy group that was campaigning for "victims of the war on terror", to campaign against Guantanamo Bay detentions and torture. The relationship led to the departure of Gita Sahgal, the head of Amnesty's gender unit, who wrote an internal email condemning Cage, which in 2024 was described in Parliament by Michael Gove as giving "rise to concern for their Islamist orientation and views". Amnesty distanced itself from Cage after the 2010 row, but Sahgal later described an "atmosphere of terror" and "deep misogyny" at her former workplace where, she said, staff were cowed into accepting the prevailing line.

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In 2015, Amnesty sparked anger from feminists when it issued a report as part of a push to persuade countries to decriminalise the sex trade. One key group quoted in the report was the Global Network of Sex Work Projects, even though its vice president, Alejandra Gil, had been jailed for 15 years for sex trafficking.

In 2019, an independent report commissioned after the suicide of two Amnesty International staff members found a "toxic" working culture at the organisation, including widespread bullying, public humiliation, sexism, racism and abuse of power by management. Later that year, the organisation admitted a £17m funding shortfall and announced job losses.

A 2022 report that accused Ukraine of illegally endangering civilians by placing armed forces in civilian areas following Russia's full-scale invasion of the country only made things worse, and the organisation was forced into a rare apology. In the same year, an internal investigation found that the UK branch of Amnesty "exhibits institutional racism". To its detractors, its extraordinary, laser-focus on Israel in recent years also flies in the face of its professed anti-racism efforts.

Benenson was a Zionist, and Amnesty's Israel office is one of its oldest international outposts. But Israel has long been the focus of particular criticism by Amnesty branches and its staff, including Frank Johansson, who called Israel a "scum state" while serving as the Finnish chairman in 2010.

In 2012, Kristyan Benedict, Amnesty UK's response manager, drew scrutiny for singling out three Jewish MPs for their support of Israel,

having tweeted: “Louise Ellman, Robert Halfon and Luciana Berger walk into a bar… each orders a round of B52s… #Gaza.”



Kristyan Benedict in 2016, attending a rally outside Downing Street Credit: Jonathan Nicholson/NurPhoto

However, Amnesty had also criticised Hamas and other armed groups in a 2014 report on the conflict.

Molly Malekar, an Israeli veteran human-rights and anti-occupation activist, had frequently demonstrated against her government when she joined the organisation in 2015, eventually becoming the chief executive of Amnesty International Israel. She was someone who was always happy to criticise Israel for human-rights breaches that it had actually committed.

She remembers how soon after she started, Amnesty changed its policy of allowing countries to do reports on their own regions. “They said they wanted to safeguard their staff and keep neutrality, but we and other sections would joke that it was part of the London headquarters making sure they were in control… It felt like they wanted to control the narrative.”

There was a lot of internal discussion about how to retain and attract progressive donors, many of whom were critics of Israel, Malekar adds. “I clearly recall that sections in Western Europe and the USA saying we were

losing ground and membership because we were behind others in progressive circles who were criticising Israel."

"Until then, Amnesty had held to its core values of judging things on international and humanitarian laws, but slowly I saw how the line was being blurred as the work became more politicised and standards went down.

"The organisation became more and more led by political ideologies such as theories around colonialism and seeing everything through the lens of the victim vs the oppressor. Younger people were joining from universities who were imbued with these political theories in which Israel is only ever viewed as an oppressor."

In 2021, Amnesty became a champion of the politically charged Black Lives Matter campaign, a source of further controversy. Tim Gudgion, a former Amnesty member, says he resigned his membership at this point, regarding its involvement as "very, inappropriately, political".



An Amnesty International protest outside the US embassy in Brussels, projecting an image of George Floyd's face onto the building Credit: Nicolas Maeterlinck/Belga Mag/AFP via Getty

Then, the following year, an Amnesty report claimed there was apartheid across Israel and the occupied territories. It caused huge anger in Israel.

“Even if you agree the occupied territories are using a form of apartheid, none of us would accept that it is the same in the state of Israel,” says Malekar, who is one of a number of whistleblowers featured in a report by the campaign group, EiGHT, on alleged double standards by human rights organisations in their approach to Jews and Israel. “And we tried to argue that in making these two territories one land, they were actually joining hands with the most Right-wing Israeli politicians who want to annex the occupied territories.”

The head office in London didn’t appreciate the Israeli branch’s pushback, she says. “These are people who are very committed, and it surprises them if someone would dare to question them.”

And what happens when the perceived oppressor becomes the victim, as it did on October 7, 2023?

Malekar recalls an exchange of emails between head office and other department heads as she hid in bomb shelters not knowing how bad the war was going to get. “One of the things I remember from that horrible night was communicating with London as they considered how to phrase their condemnation. They could never just say, ‘this is wrong’. Not even for one minute. There were discussions over how to frame the narrative.”

Instead, the Amnesty message, even on October 7, was titled “Civilians on both sides paying the price of unprecedented escalation in hostilities between Israel and Gaza as death toll mounts” and blamed Israel for the “root causes” of the attack. Even in Israel’s history of being criticised by Amnesty, this was a shock, but also a sign of things to come.



An Amnesty report claiming there was apartheid across Israel and the occupied territories caused huge anger Credit: Leon Neal/Getty

Less than 20 days later Amnesty was officially calling for a ceasefire, but it said precious little about the Israeli hostages held by Hamas.

Instead, Amnesty released a report in December 2024 accusing Israel of carrying out a genocide. Amnesty claimed that the established use of the word was "an overly cramped interpretation of international jurisprudence and one that would effectively preclude a finding of genocide in the context of an armed conflict".

"Just as with the apartheid report, we pushed back and said this is a cherry-picking strategy. You have built a narrative and are finding facts to fill in," says Malekar. The day the report came out, her office issued a statement denouncing it.

A few weeks later, while at a conference, Malekar's phone blew up with messages: Amnesty had announced it was suspending its Israeli branch because of "anti-Palestinian racism". It has yet to be reopened.

For Malekar the saga caused a great deal of personal upset, but she sees this as a problem as much bigger than one office.

"As a longtime activist, it was very sad for me personally to be a witness to this tragic collapse of the norms and values that Amnesty should be holding, the leadership it should be taking," she says.

"We do all need human-rights protection, but we can no longer trust those like Amnesty who should be safeguarding them."

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