>> Welcome to the podcast series of Raising the Bar Sydney. Raising the Bar in 2019 saw 21 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre and into bars across Sydney all on one night. In this podcast, you hear Anika Gouja's talk The Politics of Eurovision. Enjoy the talk.

[Applause]

>> Good evening, Sorry Hill's.

[Applause]

I'm just taking a very quick look at who's in the audience so I can work out what I can and can't say tonight. The results of the latest Eurovision fan survey were released today. Did anyone see those on social media? Okay. It's a survey of Eurovision fans in Australia and overseas. And the Australian results showed that the typical Eurovision fan is aged 18-24, male.

[Laughter]

Part of the LGTBQI community, and is single. So if you're not interested in politics, I don't know why you're here.

[Laughter]

I'll wait for it. So I'm going to take you back to May 13, 2018. It's 8:30 AM and I've been awake for more than 24 hours. I watched the delayed broadcast of the Eurovision first semifinal, the delayed broadcast of the Eurovision second semifinal. I watched the, you know, 50 Years of Eurovision documentary special. And I watched whatever ABBA retrospective was available. And that took me up to the grand final, 5:00 AM. I was at a Eurovision party with a group of friends like I am every single year. And the winner of the Eurovision Song Contest, Netta Barzilai with her song Toy was announced. And we had the most incredible reaction amongst the members of the group that were watching. One friend was really, really happy about the result. She loved the song. She loved the fact that it was a feminist song that heralded – it sort of aligned with the Me Too movement and heralded feminist power and social justice, as Netta herself claimed. Another friend was little bit more ambivalent about the performance. She was slightly taken aback by the appropriation of Japanese culture that was going on throughout it. And then a third friend at the Eurovision party said, "Okay, everyone. Get out. I'm never hosting a Eurovision party ever again. I'm not watching it next year. And if you watch it next year, you're no longer my friend."

>> Ooh.

>> Yeah, yeah. So Eurovision in Israel this year was always going to be a fairly controversial proposition and a very political one. So I thought as a political scientist, I've got to get myself over there, absolutely. And so I did. So flash forward a year to earlier this year, I arrive in Tel Aviv to the airport and greeted by some very, very enthusiastic Eurovision volunteers who are welcoming with

promotional material about the city, details about the song contest, transportation, so forth. I grab a cab into the city centre and there's only one major freeway that connects Tel Aviv Airport to the city centre. And I'm driving past and notice a huge billboard by the side of the road. On one half of the billboard is written the words, "Dare to dream," which as many of you know was the official slogan of this year's Eurovision with a picture of Tel Aviv's beaches behind it. On the other side of the billboard were the words "Of freedom" with a picture of the Gaza wall. And so I thought, "Wow, okay. This is already getting interesting." So I got to Tel Aviv, spent some time there and went and visited the Eurovision village which is an area that's set up usually quite close to the venue. This year it was about a two-and-a-half-hour walk from the venue, but anyway, that's another story. Visited the Eurovision village and outside the Eurovision village there was several armed guards guarding and patrolling the area, which for Israel it's not unusual to have a strong military presence. But there was a group of about eight or nine of them directly outside the village. And so I got talking to one of the female soldiers and I said to her, "Are you guys really excited about Eurovision being in the country?" And she said, "Look, it's exciting, but it's really bad because we have to work the entire time that Eurovision is on." The Israeli government was so concerned about the possibility of a terrorist attack that for the entire duration of Eurovision they mobilised Israel's Iron Dome missile defence system. And I did know but I didn't tell my father this before I got on the plane [laughs], that the week before Hamas had launched almost 700 rockets into Israeli territory that had been intercepted by the system. And a tentative ceasefire had been agreed between Israel and Hamas for the period of the Eurovision song contest. So I was wondering, "What the hell have I gotten myself into?" And to me this was something that is definitely a political event. It was a political scenario. And it surprised me when I started getting into Eurovision, possibly as much as it might surprise you, that Eurovision, if you look at the official rules of the contest, it's in no way a political event. So the rules clearly state that no images, no speeches, no lyrics, no performances that are overtly political are allowed. And the promotion of particular causes, organisations, institutions, products is not allowed during any Eurovision performance or in the venues. Now with all due respect to the European Broadcasting Union which runs the show, that's complete bullshit. And tonight I'm going to tell you why that's the case. So I'm going to concentrate on three themes where I think that politics and Eurovision intersect. The first is the politics of voting in the Eurovision song contest. The second is the politics of identity. And the third is the politics of process. But just to sort of take everyone back to the very, very first Eurovision – so I'm assuming that most people in this room are die-hards. So the proposition, the contest itself doesn't need too much explanation. And indeed I should just say that I know a fair bit about Eurovision but I also have a life.

[Laughter]

So I like to go out occasionally and do non-Eurovision-related things as well. So if I can't tell you who won in a particular year, I mean, that's probably more

your problem than mine.

[Laughter]

So with that in mind, just a few brief sort of remarks about how Eurovision started. Well, it obviously started in the aftermath of the Second World War. So 1956 was the first Eurovision contest in Lugano, Switzerland, where seven nations competed. And it always was from its very inception a political project. So it was designed by the European Broadcasting Union to unite the broadcasters of Europe through culture and through music to foster a project and a shared sense of European culture and European identity. So the basic premise of the contest hasn't changed at all since the very first time it was run. So the idea is that nations perform and write songs and they compete for the best song at the contest. And then the winner of the contest has the right to host the following year's event. And Eurovision is really big business, both in economic terms and also in terms of the viewing audience. So from a start of seven nations it's now expanded to more than 42 competing countries. That is more countries that members of the EU, but you don't have to be a member of the EU to be an entry in Eurovision, as we all sort of realise being Australians standing here.

[Laughter]

But it's also big business in terms of the viewing audience. So for the last few years the viewing audience has been more than 200 million people across the world. So the French once famously called Eurovision a pile of drivel. And if that's the case, it's a pretty big pile of drivel indeed. So let's talk about the politics of voting in the Eurovision song contest. Now this from an academic nerdy perspective is probably the largest area of Eurovision research. So there are a lot of political scientists, a lot of psephologists, people who study elections who don't have anything better to do than to plough through Eurovision results and to try to find relationships between countries. And the thing that comes up most is this idea of Eurovision blocks. So countries that constantly vote for other countries. So we have Greece votes for Cypress. We have Sweden votes for Norway, Finland. You know, Russia might vote for Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan gets in a lot of trouble if it doesn't vote for Russia. But the blocks that have been identified most in research have been the Scandinavian Nordic block, the eastern European former USSR states, the Balkan block and then sort of the neutral western European block as well. Now Australia's place in all of this is pretty interesting. Having said that I'm not a nerd, I actually looked at the voting patterns that Australia has been part of. And we actually do have quite a funny relationship with Sweden. We love Sweden and tend to award all of our 12 points to Sweden. For the first three years, Sweden loved us back. But last year all of that changed. And now Iceland has stepped in. So we love Sweden, but Sweden doesn't always love us. And we are not really part of a Scandinavian block because our voting patterns are a lot more disparate than that as well. I think we voted for Bulgaria, for Belgium, all of these wacko countries that aren't part of Eurovision Scandinavia. So that's the sort of blocks that theoretically exist. There's a lot of debate about Eurovision blocks because – I mean, conceivably,

you know, voting on the basis of politics isn't the only thing that could drive that sort of a geographic vote. It could be the result of things like shared language, culture, histories, identities. So it's very, very difficult to actually prove that politics is at the core of this voting. There have been other studies that have looked at the development of political institutions within countries and have suggested that those countries without developed political institutions are more likely to engage in this block, the pattern of block voting. But again, that evokes sort of a very westernised notion of what politics and democracy looks like. So that's sort of the idea of geopolitical voting. The other part of Eurovision voting that is not often talked about but I think is pretty interesting is the system itself. So the very first year, 1956, Switzerland – the city of Lugano, seven countries competed. Now for people who have sort of come to Eurovision quite recently, it might shock you to learn that for the first 40 or so years of the contest, voting took place exclusively by national juries. The public had absolutely nothing to do with it. And in 1956 this jury for each country comprised of two people. The results of the contest were never – well, apart from the winner the votes were never actually revealed. And Luxembourg didn't bother to show up. It decided to delegate its votes to Switzerland. And surprise, surprise, Switzerland won.

[Laughter]

And over the years I think Eurovision in some ways has become more democratic. So as I said, until 1997 the Eurovision winner was decided on the basis of national juries. And these juries were pretty interesting. There weren't too many conditions placed on the juries. Either you played around with a number of members of each national jury – but the only significant thing, at some stage a requirement was placed on juries that they actually had to reflect some diversity in the age of the population. So not necessarily just crusty old people voting. Some countries took it quite seriously in how they selected their juries. Places like the United Kingdom actually tried to integrate an element of geographic representation in their juries. So taking someone from Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Britain on board as part of their juries. In 1997 this all changed. So when the contest was hosted in Norway, the Norwegian broadcaster had the idea that perhaps we ought to open it up to a public vote. They trialled it and it proved to be so successful and popular that from 1998 to 2009 the Eurovision winner was determined exclusively by public vote. So this is interesting in a few respects. I mean, the argument from the EBU is that it was a way to sort of dramatise the contest, a way to get people involved. Which certainly it is. But it's also no coincidence that this period of public voting overlaps entirely with the height of referenda as a form of political decision making in Europe. So with the breakdown of the Soviet Union, a lot of constitutional changes within countries had to be voted on by referenda. And so studies have documented that this peaked around the end of the 2000's – sorry, during the 2000's, towards the end of it as well. It also coincided with the period where southern European countries dominated the contest. And I think one Asia or so out of nine years. And that caused a lot of tension and quite a backlash from the western European broadcasters who said that, "Look at this block voting. It's

unfair. The whole contest is rigged. It's becoming increasingly political. We need to change this." So in 2009 the EBU went back to a system of having both a public vote and a jury vote. And they were split 50/50. And when the juries came back onboard, something had changed with their composition. There was a requirement that the juries now had to comprise of people from the music industry. So music professionals. There was also a requirement that they be sort of representative in terms of age and gender and citizenship as well. So there's an interesting – just as an interesting aside, in order to compete for a country in Eurovision, you don't need to be a citizen of that country. In order to be a member of a country's national jury, you need to be a citizen. So the only citizenship requirement applies to judges, not performers or contestants. And we know that for people like Celine Dion who has represented Switzerland, Olivia Newton-John representing the United Kingdom. They're two very prominent examples.

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>> Okay, so we have juries now that compose of music industry professionals and a public vote. Again, this isn't really a coincidence if we think about the broader political climate in European nations. The reintroduction of the jury vote coincides almost perfectly with the election of technocratic governments in places like Italy and Greece in the aftermath of the global financial crisis. So whereas expertise comes back into play in Eurovision, expertise gets an increasing value in domestic and international politics as well. So we've had this 50/50 system. The last sort of change I want to mention with respect to the Eurovision rules was what occurred in I think it was 2015 when the results of Eurovision were reported slightly differently. And the jury vote was kept very, very separate from the public's vote as well. And so you have this scenario now that you can see who won in terms of the jury vote, who won in terms of the popular vote and who won overall. And what this has done is again it's created a dramatic tension in the broadcast of the contest. But it's also really pitted a popular vote against a jury or an elite technocratic vote. Which coincides quite poignantly with the rise of populism around the world, where we have political elites who stand in opposition to the general public. And we saw this I think very poignantly in 2016 when the Ukraine won with 1944 some by Jamala. Jamala didn't win the popular vote. Russia won the popular vote. Jamala didn't win the jury vote. Australia won the jury vote. So as Australians I think that we were all completely surprised that we did so well. But the Russians were certainly really, really pissed off that they did not win the contest because to them, they had the legitimate entry that won the popular vote. So you can see that sort of this idea of democracy participation in voting has always been part of Eurovision, but like democracy in real life, it's changed over time and continues to evolve. The other way that we see things developing in recent years is how countries select their acts. I think this is interesting from an Australian perspective, because for the last four years prior to this year, SBS selected the act exclusively. And this year we had Australia Decides which is the same title that's used I think by Channel 9 for their broadcast of the federal election.

[Laughter]

But this one was on the Gold Coast.

[Laughter]

I think if someone mashed the two up, it would make for a pretty good Saturday night's viewing. So we've moved to a system where the public now has a vote. Interestingly, the United Kingdom which for the past four years has gone with this Britain Decides or Britain Votes type competition, moved back to their act being selected exclusively by a jury. So whether or not, you know, this has anything to do with Brexit, whether it has anything to do with Boaty McBoatface, it sends a very strong suggestion that the UK public cannot make decisions that are in their own best interest.

[Laughter]

So let's move on to Eurovision and identity. And as I mentioned before, Eurovision is a really large contest in terms of the viewing audience. And it's a perfect opportunity for nations to be able to brand themselves, who they are, how they want to be seen in the eyes of the world. And there are several ways that they can do this. They can do this through the performances, and they can do this through the hosting. Things like the postcards that are shown before a performer comes on, and other things like the interval acts that they choose. So in terms of the performances, I sort of point to Australia as an interesting example of acts that have been selected I think quite deliberately by SBS to reveal the diversity of Australian society and also to pay particular attention to the fact that we do have an indigenous heritage. So we've seen Guy Sebastian born in Malaysia, Dar Mien born in South Korea, Jessica Malboy and Isaiah Firebrace with both indigenous heritage all representing Australia. And that is being done when SBS has had the exclusive right to select the performer. This year when the public had a vote, we had Kate Miller Heidke selected who is a very, very prominent artists, but for want of a better phrase, she's a white Australian. So in some ways we are looking forward to who is chosen next year to represent Australia. It's interesting to see whether or not that diversity can be maintained. The performances themselves – there's a lot that the EBU can't do to police how a country portrays itself and the sort of political aspects of the performances. But it's given rise to I think a particularly interesting genre of musical style, ethnopop, as I like to call it. Which in cases like I think Russia 2012 with the singing old Russian ladies. Bodonofky Babushke portrayed an ethnic minority in a very sort of creative party dance type way. The other way in which countries do this is through postcards. So I think back to the postcards that Israel had this year. They showcased things like Israeli culture, museums, arts, sporting accomplishments, sort of natural areas, Dead Sea, so touristy places. Industry, the financial district featured prominently. And even things like the solar power station in the middle of the desert. So really sort of, you know, showcasing Israel's tourist attractions and its clean energy policies as well. So that's another way. The third way in which they can do it is

through the performances. So Israel I thought was pretty interesting this year in terms of the interval acts that performed during the semifinals. So one of the semifinals, Dana International came back. And Dana International won the song contest for Israel in 1998, a transgender performer who was then sort of brought back to sort of highlight the progressive nature of Israeli society in developing diversity and showcasing its LGTBI population. The other interesting interval act was a band that comprised of musicians with disabilities, which is the first time that Eurovision has been used to showcase those artists in its history. So that was an interesting sort of step from Israel. The third thing that I want to talk about is Eurovision and protest. And again, I'm going to draw a lot on what happened in Israel this year. So I was at the contest. And it was always going to be a very, very controversial show from the outset. As soon as it was announced, Israel had a bit of an internal disagreement as to where it should be hosted. So Netanyahu, the government wanted it in Jerusalem. The broadcaster wanted it in Tel Aviv. Tel Aviv won out eventually. There was another disagreement as to whether or not it could be performed on a Saturday which is the Jewish day of rest. That caused massive, massive protests throughout Israel and particularly in Jerusalem, and backlash from the orthodox Israeli community. But the broadcaster won out again then and so it was performed on the Saturday. Apart from these domestic issues, the big sort of protest that occurred was the calls for a boycott of a contest from the BDS movement. And these were very, very prominent and very strong internationally with many international performers and bands signing letters, signing petitions, more than 30,000 people signed petitions to boycott the contest. There were demonstrations. The Australia Decides contest had a small demonstration outside of it as well, calling for people not to go to the contest in Israel. Protesting against Israelis' treatment of Palestinians and occupation of the Palestinian territories. The EBU's official line on this, and indeed this is the argument that was used by SBS and the BBC as well, is that Eurovision is not a political event. And so by participating in this boycott we are essentially politicising it. And so we will be sending performers to the contest. And no one withdrew from Eurovision as a result of the BDS pressure. The only country that withdrew was the Ukraine but that was over a spat with Russia. So the Ukrainian broadcaster selected its performer and imposed certain rights on the performer including that she could not give concerts in Russia which, you know, is a huge source of income for any Ukrainian performer. So she refused to agree to the terms and conditions that the Ukrainian broadcaster had set. And they tried several other people and the artists wouldn't agree also. So in the end Ukraine couldn't find an artist to compete in the contest because of the conditions they were putting on them with respect to the Ukraine's relationship with Russia. So the Ukraine didn't compete. Before the contest, there was one country, one act, Hatari – does anyone remember Hatari, the BDSM bondage act from Iceland whose mission is to bring down capitalism? But which I read own a for-profit company that sells its merchandise and very expensive carbonated water at its contests – sorry, at its concerts. They expressed their disappointment with Israel's foreign policy and suggested that they were going to do something during the performance. And

it was really interesting being at Eurovision. I went to one of the rehearsals which the audience for the rehearsals differ very, very much from the audience that attends the actual life semifinals and the final. So I would say that the people who go to the live shows that are going to be broadcast, quite an international audience. Those people that go to the rehearsals are predominantly domestic audience. The tickets are much, much cheaper, and there are many more families. It's more accessible. Hatari was really booed quite badly during their performance and after their performance. So it was something possibly that the nature of the act didn't resonate well with Israeli society. The threats of political activity possibly turned a lot of people off. There was nothing in the performance apart from sort of interpreting the lyrics and the costumes in a certain way that would suggest that it was overtly political. But during the announcing of the results, they held up a scarf with the Palestinian flag on it. And they were consequently fined by the EBU or breaching the rules of the contest. So Iceland could have been disqualified, but they were fined and the amount of the fine has never actually been revealed. So Hatari was quite controversial. Madonna was really controversial, probably not so much for political reasons.

[Laughter]

She was bankrolled to appear at the contest by an Israeli billionaire and flew in like, I don't know, maybe 24 hours before she was due to perform. There was a big saga around her signing the contract, her not signing the contract. Eventually she did. She performed Like A Prayer and one of her more current songs, Future. During Future, she had dancers who were dressed in gas masks who were slowly dying. And at the end of the performance, two of those dancers – one was wearing a Palestinian flag, the other was wearing an Israeli flag. They embraced at the end of the performance. And Madonna was, you know – comments were made about the nature of that. The EBU said that that certainly wasn't part of the rehearsals that were –

[Laughter]

That were ticked off by the broadcaster. Judging from the performance of Like A Prayer, I doubt she did any rehearsals whatsoever.

[Laughter]

It was – yeah. Yeah, you all know what I'm talking about.

[Laughter]

So Madonna was an interesting feature of the contest as well. I don't think she's going to be invited back anytime soon. The last sort of protest that took place was I think possibly one of the more significant. And this happened online. This happened to one of the broadcasts of the semifinal that was livestreamed on the EBU's website. Partway through the broadcast, hackers got into it and replaced the audio/video stream with a fake warning from the Israeli Defence Force basically saying that Eurovision venues and significant locations in Tel Aviv were being bombed. So there was like this Independence Day-type orchestral

music and an air raid siren going on for two or three minutes as they were sort of projecting pictures, satellite pictures of bombs going off all over Tel Aviv and their proximity to the Eurovision contest. Now no one ended up taking responsibility for that. But you know, the Israeli government believes it was some anti-Israeli protest coming from somewhere in the Arab states. I showed this during a lecture that I gave on Eurovision to students and after about a minute I realised that the seminar rooms across the other side of the building were being evacuated.

[Laughter]

Because of this bloody air raid siren that kept going off. But you know what? It was a pretty significant event. There wasn't a lot that the Israeli government did to obviously publicise it. They didn't want to let people know that this had occurred during Eurovision. Along with a lot of other street protests that occurred outside the venue and in the Eurovision village. But certainly it was a very, very controversial contest. So Eurovision I think definitely is a political event. The EBU has said that, you know, it's not about the politics; it's about the music. But the people who have worked on the show, the executive producers, say, "No, it is about politics. It's about patriotism. It's about nationalism. It's about being able to express yourself, your love for your country, being able to say that other countries suck." And their rationale is that if we didn't have that as an outlet for the expression of patriotism and nationalism, then there'd be far worse things going on in Europe at the moment.

[Applause]

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