

Pearls and Irritations

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Police and synagogue attendees shaken to the core by democracy

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Social cohesion is supposedly the order of the day. Our rights are being steadily eroded in its honour. One would hardly imagine that a religious institution would host a political figure for whom fear and division are lifeblood. Yet, on Thursday, 20 February, Emanuel Synagogue hosted Peter Dutton.

Dutton's current shtick is weaponising antisemitism for political gain, specifically to intensify the persecution of immigrants, asylum seekers, welfare recipients, environmental defenders, and, of course, pro-Palestinian activists. For Jews who quake at the growing influence of the far-right in this country, his welcome into a synagogue is profoundly unsettling.

In the looming shadow of the proposed (since passed) laws against protest near places of worship, three anti-Zionist Jewish women decided to challenge this egregious abuse of the sanctity of the synagogue. Surely, a place of worship relinquishes its status as a sacred space when it becomes the venue for a political event.

Two of us, Judith Treanor and Suzie Gold, stood several metres from the synagogue entrance, holding small innocuous signs. Quickly, the head security wrangler arrived, and asked why we were there and if we were part of the community. Judith pointed out that the latter wasn't his concern, but confirmed our Jewish identity and our intention to protest Dutton's attendance at the synagogue. She found it deeply enjoyable to tell him her name means "woman of Judea". All this took place on a public footpath.

He approved as long as we maintained our distance. When our third activist, Michelle Berkon, arrived, we moved slightly closer but still away from the entrance. The security phalanx offered more obstruction to pedestrians than we did, but the security guy felt compelled to protect the community from the trauma of democracy. He forbade us from approaching further and from walking past the synagogue, threatening to call the police if we didn't move on. We stayed put.

Within a few minutes, a police car and a patrol wagon arrived. Mention keffiyehs and the crisis in police response times evaporates. The officers conferred with security and synagogue officials before approaching us and asking our purpose. We reiterated our intention to protest a political event and reminded them that the law restricting protest had not been passed. The sergeant said we were "causing fear and alarm" and issued a "move on" order, warning that if we didn't comply we'd be put "in a cage", taken to Waverley Police Station, and charged. We complied, albeit in a non-compliant manner. Two "Duttons-in-waiting" strained at the leash, barking orders to "MOVE!" One made a valiant attempt to intimidate Michelle.

We considered remaining at our designated spot, the corner of Ocean and Oxford Streets but, anticipating Dutton's exit, headed for the rear entrance of the synagogue. A security guard spotted us, alerted her team, and said we weren't permitted anywhere in the vicinity. Suzie asked her, very nicely, to take our photo, but she declined. We hung about for a while, and then returned to our corner.

Within a few minutes, a different posse of police arrived. The sergeant explained he was issuing another "move on" order to protect the good burghers of the synagogue from "alarm and distress". We explained again that we were Jewish ourselves, and were protesting a political event. Michelle recounted her childhood connection with Emanuel and her parents' funeral services there. The sergeant demurred that they would have taken place at Chevra Kadisha. His "gotcha moment" was short-lived. He now knows it's not okay to tell Jews about Jewish cultural practices. He did have the grace to look sheepish. Heeding the call of his earpiece, he wandered away.

The two constables were interested in hearing our views on Palestine, Judaism vs Zionism, and family Holocaust histories. Judith fought back tears as she expressed her heartbreak that a far-right politician was speaking in a synagogue. They were clearly disheartened by what was unfolding. The sergeant reappeared, fortified by new arguments. He asserted boldly that we only objected because we don't like Dutton. We replied, truthfully, that we were defending people's right to protest any political event.

He then said our keffiyehs were "causing intimidation and harassment," but when we removed them, he said it was "too late", and anyway, it was actually our signs. Suzie staunchly informed him that she had been using that sign for 16 years without issue. He then narrowed it down to Michelle's sign because of its

"German-looking font". She gave him a short lesson on her right to Holocaust memory. If it weren't so deplorable, it would have been pure farce.

The good sergeant instructed us to move on, as people were leaving the synagogue. We dallied until he threatened, "We don't want to take this further but we will", and told Michelle she'd be charged with breaching the peace if she didn't hurry up. Apparently, her expression was too loud because he said warningly, "Don't look at me like that." As a self-respecting citizen, she replied, "I'll look at you any way I want," and, to make it perfectly clear that she understood both the implied threat and her privilege as a white woman, she remarked, "I'm not Black so you won't shoot me." The sergeant blustered that this was "intimidating", reflecting the vacuity of the entire raft of police allegations.

He then warned that if we didn't provide our identities there'd be trouble, and appeared somewhat deflated when we proudly complied. Judith, seeking once more to impart knowledge, mentioned the Gaza genocide. Probably believing that at last he had logic on his side, the sergeant retorted, "we all have different views on that", and received another short lesson, this time on the fact that international law wasn't a matter for his opinion.

Ultimately, we were forced to disperse or risk arrest. Attendees were walking past, scowling and muttering. One man accused Suzie of harassing him and his wife and, to be fair, she was walking in the same direction. Another foamed that we were "shameful and disgusting". It was utterly absurd. Michelle took a photo of a woman who had been particularly nasty. She turned around looking utterly deranged, and shrieked, "shanda (shame)!" Her husband told us to "piss off" and called us "shit".

A few days later, we learned that a Jewish officer in the Australian Army has been stripped of his security clearance. He did not consider Israel a foreign state and was willing to share classified information with the Israel Defence Forces. This officer spent nine years with Sydney Community Security Group, which provided security for Emanuel Synagogue for this event. He was trained in Israel by former members of the Israel Security Agency through an organisation funded by the Israeli Government. Via grants disbursed by the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, CSG has received millions in Australian Government funding.

Antisemitism thrives on dual loyalty tropes. The Jewish establishment's support for Israel and consequent bromance with the Zionist far-right thereby cultivate antisemitism, putting Jews at risk. We insist not only on our democratic right to protest any political event, regardless of the venue, but on our obligation to protest the use of our synagogues as networking centres for ideologies inherently injurious to minority communities, and supportive of a foreign state engaged in egregious criminality.

Judith Treanor

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