

INQUIRY INTO ANTISEMITISM IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Jewish Women for Peace Action Ready Group (JW4PARG)
Date Received: 4 April 2025

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Introduction - who we are: Jewish Women 4 Peace (JW4P) Action Ready Group

JW4P Action Ready Group (JW4PARG) is the activist arm of Jewish Women 4 Peace, an online community of Australian Jewish women opposed to the excessive retaliatory actions of the Netanyahu Government, taken in response to the 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel.

Our purpose is to plan, deliver and evaluate collective actions that contribute towards the goals of a permanent ceasefire, the return of all the Israeli hostages and a just peace where all Israelis and Palestinians can live in peace and security with equal rights.

Context and Overview

It is our understanding that this Inquiry is a response to the escalation of antisemitic and other racist incidents in NSW.

There are several working definitions of antisemitism contested within the Jewish and wider community. Some definitions risk limiting critical geopolitical discourse, especially regarding issues that may influence antisemitism. While the eight Terms of Reference (TOR) warrant consideration, they must be understood within a broader systemic and geopolitical context, which must also be explored as part of this inquiry. Effectively addressing antisemitism requires a holistic approach, incorporating it into a broader anti-racism framework. This approach will promote social cohesion and equality. Therefore, alongside the given TOR, the following key concerns should be addressed.

We are concerned that the Inquiry has been established in a defensive tone. Our work is about community building which focuses on “calling in” rather than “calling out” members within the Jewish community and more broadly across communities.

Please note that this submission addresses five of the eight TOR, namely, a, b, c, d and h. We believe that JW4P Action Ready Group is well placed to address these TOR, and we see these four as foundational to a relational community-building approach.

Key Concerns

1. Definition of Antisemitism

The IHRA definition has faced substantial criticism for conflating legitimate political discourse with antisemitism, particularly in discussions concerning the State of Israel. Its adoption remains contested and risks hindering, rather than supporting, efforts to address

antisemitism. If this definition is used to underpin the inquiry, it must be critically assessed to ensure it does not hinder legitimate criticism of Israel's actions or suppress open discussion on the causes and effects of antisemitism.

2. Overton Window and Geopolitical Considerations

The TOR primarily reflects concerns from conservative Jewish community members, while broader geopolitical factors, such as the war in Gaza, are often overlooked. The conflation of Israeli politics with Jewish identity frequently fuels antisemitism. This inquiry, however, appears to ignore these dynamics. By focusing on politically “acceptable” narratives and sidelining more complex discussions, the inquiry risks producing an artificial and unsustainable outcome. A more inclusive approach should include diverse voices and acknowledge how societal perceptions of antisemitism shape both Jewish and non-Jewish communities in NSW.

3. Politicisation of Antisemitism

Exclusive focus on antisemitism may inadvertently amplify the issue, creating a hierarchy of racism and politicizing the debate. It risks diverting attention from broader anti-racism initiatives. The government has already made efforts to combat racism, including appointing Special Envoys for Antisemitism and Social Cohesion and commissioning studies by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC). This inquiry must ensure it complements, not detracts from, these ongoing efforts.

4. The AHRC as the Appropriate Body for Addressing Racism, Including Antisemitism

The AHRC is an independent, evidence-based institution with a strong track record in addressing racism, including antisemitism, through research and policy recommendations. Creating a separate Commission of Inquiry risks duplicating efforts, undermining the AHRC’s role, and adding unnecessary bureaucracy.

5. Need for a Comprehensive Anti-Racism Strategy in NSW

Antisemitism must be addressed within a broader, intersectional, human-rights-based strategy that combats all forms of discrimination, including Islamophobia, anti-Palestinian racism, and anti-Indigenous racism. This approach will foster unity and dialogue among diverse communities, rather than isolating antisemitism as a singular, politically charged issue.

6. Acknowledging Trauma and Polarisation

JW4PARG recognises that antisemitism is present in Australia, as it is globally. The tragic events of October 7, 2023, have led to a heightened sense of insecurity in Sydney’s Jewish community, exacerbated by the ongoing hostage situation in Gaza. The trauma resulting from these events, alongside the lack of recognition of their severity in our broader society, contributes to increased polarisation in Australia, including in New South Wales. Further, many NSW Jews are descended from Holocaust victims and survivors and as such, experience intergenerational trauma.

Incidents targeting Jewish individuals and properties—whether intended as antisemitic or not—have been perceived by many in the Jewish community as acts of racial hatred. The experience of antisemitism reported by many Jews in public life must be acknowledged and addressed. All racial hatred is unacceptable, and there is a strong perception in parts of our community that hatred of Jews is different and somehow more socially acceptable than other forms of racial hatred.

This underlines the need to address both the perception and reality of antisemitism in a way that acknowledges it as a form of racial hatred and respects the complexity of Jewish migrant community experiences. Given this context, we caution against adopting a formulaic and reactive one-size-fits-all approach that reflects the views of some in the NSW Jewish community.

7. The Complex Relationship Between Jews and Israel

The belief among many Jewish communities that the State of Israel is inseparable from their identity can contribute to tension in the broader social fabric, especially when opposition to Israeli policies is perceived as antisemitism. We assert that criticism of the State of Israel's actions should not automatically be equated with antisemitism. This distinction is crucial for fostering open, meaningful discourse without resorting to censorship or punitive actions.

8. Psychological Safety and Lateral Violence

Within the NSW Jewish community, there are strongly contested views on the legitimacy of the actions of the Israeli government. As a result, many of those who believe that the pre and post 7 October 2023 actions of the Israeli government are legitimate have gone to significant lengths to shut down community discussion and debate. Families and sub-communities have been split, which has resulted in many Australian Jews who do not agree with the actions of the Israeli government to stay silent to keep their jobs, or the peace, or both. This lateral violence facilitates fear and division, rather than fostering the necessary conditions for respectful inter-community dialogue.

9. Bridging Divides: Intercultural and Interfaith Dialogue

We believe in fostering dialogue between communities, particularly between Jewish and Palestinian or Muslim groups. Recognizing the complexity of views on Israel and Palestine, efforts should be made to create platforms for these communities to engage in respectful, solution-oriented conversations. Moreover, we recommend that the government support genuine initiatives for intercultural and interfaith dialogue across all levels of society, beginning with universities, schools, and cultural institutions like the Museum of Sydney and the Sydney Jewish Museum.

Recommendations

1. **Develop a holistic anti-racism strategy** that promotes dialogue and mutual respect among diverse communities, ensuring that all forms of discrimination—including antisemitism, anti-Palestinian, Islamophobia and anti-Indigenous racism—are

addressed equitably.

2. **Avoid isolating antisemitism** as this could be counterproductive. Instead, incorporate antisemitism within the broader context of racism and discrimination to foster a more comprehensive understanding.
3. **Critically evaluate the IHRA definition** of antisemitism and consider alternative frameworks that differentiate between antisemitism and legitimate political discourse, ensuring that political discussion is not stifled.
4. **Maximize the potential of existing institutions** such as the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) to lead independent, evidence-based efforts to combat all forms of racism, including antisemitism. Avoid duplicating efforts by creating a separate Commission of Inquiry.
5. **Fund and implement inter-cultural, inter-faith, and inter-community dialogue** at every community level, with community leaders driving and supporting these efforts to foster mutual understanding and social cohesion.
6. **Foster regular dialogue between representatives** of opposing communities, ensuring a balanced approach to addressing contentious issues and promoting actionable outcomes.
7. **Avoid over-policing perceived antisemitism** as a stand-alone phenomenon. While antisemitism is a unique and longstanding issue, it should not overshadow other forms of racism, which deserve equal attention and response.
8. **Adopt an inclusive, open approach** to addressing antisemitism and racism, avoiding heavy-handed or exclusionary measures that risk exacerbating community divisions. A more collaborative approach will help to prevent further polarisation and build stronger, more cohesive relationships across communities.
9. **Incorporate diverse community perspectives** in the fight against antisemitism and racism, ensuring that all voices, including those from a wide range of Jewish groups, are represented in efforts to combat racism.

By following these recommendations, the inquiry can promote a more nuanced and effective strategy to address antisemitism, while also addressing broader issues of racism and discrimination in NSW.

Conclusion

This submission calls for a balanced, evidence-based approach to addressing antisemitism in NSW, one that avoids politicising the issue and supports open, respectful dialogue across communities. Antisemitism must be addressed within a broader anti-racism framework that:

- Does not limit discussions to the Terms of Reference (TOR) reflecting primarily conservative Jewish perspectives, which may reinforce narrow perceptions of antisemitism.
- Acknowledges the geopolitical and socio-political factors that influence the rise and fall of antisemitism.

By investing in intercultural dialogue and maintaining a careful balance between free speech and other human rights, NSW can build a more inclusive, cohesive society that upholds the dignity and rights of all its people. A truly effective response to antisemitism requires inclusive, nuanced conversations and policies that consider it within the broader context of combating all forms of racism and discrimination.

Jewish Women 4 Peace Action Ready Group