

INQUIRY INTO ANTISEMITISM IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: The Great Synagogue

Date Received: 6 April 2025



THE GREAT SYNAGOGUE
- SYDNEY -
ק"ק בית ישראל

Committee Secretary
Portfolio Committee #5, Justice and Communities
6 Macquarie St,
Sydney NSW 2000

6 April 2025

Dear Committee Secretary,

**Submission from The Great Synagogue to the Inquiry into antisemitism in
New South Wales**

Introduction

The Great Synagogue is an Orthodox Jewish synagogue located on Elizabeth Street in Sydney's CBD. It has, since 1878, been home to a large and thriving congregation. It is a vibrant place of prayer, learning, support and celebration with a full range of services.

The Synagogue is unique in its location, its heritage and its history. Being sited on one of the busiest roads in the centre of Sydney and having such high profile in respect to both the Jewish community and the community at large makes it the most visible Jewish building in Sydney and perhaps Australia.

Unfortunately, this increased visibility means that there are considerable challenges to ensuring the Synagogue remains secure for its staff and can be safely used by parishioners and guests.

Since October 7

The Synagogue has not historically been subject to protest activity nor has its membership had concerns about their physical safety when they travel to and from the Synagogue. Since October 7, 2023 this state of affairs has changed significantly.

The Synagogue has received an increase in the number of threatening or harassing phone calls and emails since the commencement of the conflict. Some of these we have referred to the Police.

Concerningly, it did not appear to us that authorities in New South Wales initially took seriously the prospect of the events in this state as being part of a coordinated attack on Jewish communities globally. The international significance of attacking a highly visible and historical target like The Great Synagogue would be global in its impact.

Early policy responses to increasingly disturbing protest activity proximate to The Great Synagogue was viewed as a freedom of speech issue rather than as a series of escalating events leading to potential criminal activity.

Nuances in the protest movements with incrementally increasing calls for violence against Jews globally were not perceived by law enforcement or policymakers as being anything untoward and this lack of understanding, combined with a lack of appreciation about responses to this activity in other comparable jurisdictions like Canada and the United Kingdom led to the events described below.

The Caravan Incident

The Great Synagogue was one of the purported targets of the widely reported “Dural Caravan” incident. It is important to place on the record that while this was not under the law an act of terrorism, it was still an act of antisemitism which terrorised the Jewish community.

The events were allegedly orchestrated by a man who had a significant history of grossly antisemitic public commentary and we can infer that while his primary motivation may have been to negotiate with Police regarding his potential criminal prosecution, it is doubtless that his intention was also to sow fear amongst the Jewish community in Sydney to motivate a response by NSW Police to his orchestrated campaign.

It is cold comfort to us that the purported intention of the criminal who orchestrated these attacks and this event was only to bargain with the police. The effect was chilling and distressing to many of our congregation and it is only the lack of an immediate political, ideological or religious motive to these events which saves them from being terrorism despite antisemitism being like an ancillary motive.

Protest Activity near to the Great Synagogue

Persistent protest activity of a nature which is obliquely or sometimes overtly antisemitic now takes place proximate to the Synagogue on a near weekly basis at the Archibald Fountain.

While The Great Synagogue does not cavil with the rights of people to protest on any issue within the bounds of the law, we believe and have taken a consistent approach that this protest activity is inappropriate in such close proximity to a high visibility Jewish institution.

We raised these concerns with NSW Police and the NSW Police Minister’s office at a meeting in December of 2023 and were given assurances that there was no indication of protest activity escalating into anything more.

Unfortunately, in July of 2024 protest activity at the weekly march organised by the Australia Palestine Action Network (APAN) spilled over into an action against The Great Synagogue where protestors carried a large banner reading “Sanction Israel” to the front of the Synagogue. This was accompanied by small level vandalism of the front of the Synagogue’s facade.¹

This protest activity against The Great Synagogue took place on the first weekend that NSW Police had removed Police stationed at the Synagogue suggesting that the only

¹ <https://www.australianjewishnews.com/hate-at-the-gate/>

thing which was preventing protest action against The Great Synagogue was a physical police presence.

This underlines the importance of a physical police presence at Synagogues where protest activity is proximate or is likely to become proximate to the Synagogue.

We wish to place on record our thanks to the NSW Police, their command and the rank and file police officers who work to protect our community. We note the heavy strain on police resources that this additional policing places on frontline police.

In December of 2024, another widely reported protest took place at the Great Synagogue necessitating the lockdown of the Synagogue and the holding of staff, guests, members and parishioners inside while the protest was dispersed.²

In response to this particular protest the Government enacted the *Crimes Amendment (Places of Worship) Bill 2025*, which we believe to be reasonably calibrated and suitable for the purpose of preventing protests at The Great Synagogue. However, we note that the language “A person in or near a place of worship” is poorly defined in respect to proximity to a place of worship.

Given the regular APAN protest activity occurs not more than 200 metres from The Great Synagogue is this ‘near’ to The Great Synagogue? Would the presence of a particularly large pro-Palestine protest at the Archibald Fountain be a potential hindrance to visibly Jewish parishioners who may be attempting to arrive or leave?

While this may be a question of operational Policing, we encourage the NSW Police to err on the side of caution in respect of encouraging or facilitating future protest activity in Hyde Park which is in such close proximity to The Great Synagogue.

Recommendations

The protection of Synagogues in New South Wales does not merely rely on more gates, cameras and guards or laws which prohibit protests at their entrance, but on a society which regards protests against Jews in Australia as being an anathema.

We recommend that the NSW Government provide clearer statutory guidance on what constitutes being “near” a place of worship as defined in the *Crimes Amendment (Places of Worship) Bill 2025*. A fixed distance (e.g. within 500 metres) would ensure clarity for both law enforcement and protest organisers. This will help avoid ambiguity and ensure that places of worship remain safe and free from intimidation, even when protests occur nearby.

We strongly support the expansion of education programs in schools and workplaces to promote understanding of Jewish history, culture, and the ongoing impact of antisemitism. This includes:

- Integrating Holocaust education into the NSW school curriculum earlier and more comprehensively.

² <https://www.australianjewishnews.com/protestors-target-sydneys-great-synagogue/>

- Supporting education campaigns that explain the distinction between criticism of Israeli government policy and antisemitic speech or behaviour.
- Funding teacher training to ensure educators are equipped to address antisemitism sensitively and accurately.
- Enforcing the code of conduct relating to political impartiality in the NSW public service in particular where it relates to teachers and the activities of teachers in NSW Government schools.

We call on the NSW Government to review and, if necessary, recalibrate the legal thresholds for incitement to violence, ensuring they are fit for purpose in the digital age. Particular focus should be placed on:

- Online hate speech and the amplification of extremist rhetoric.
- Ensuring that 'coded' antisemitic language or symbols do not fall through legislative gaps.

We are happy to provide further information to the committee and would welcome the opportunity to present at the public hearings.

Sincerely,

David P. Lewis
President
The Great Synagogue

Rabbi Dr Benjamin Elton
Chief Rabbi
The Great Synagogue