

INQUIRY INTO ANTISEMITISM IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism

I'm grateful for the opportunity to make a submission to NSW Parliament's Inquiry into Antisemitism. It is at once a saddening and frustrating exercise to do so. Firstly that such an inquiry is necessary, and secondly due to the depressing state of the current discourse around antisemitism, which has been polluted by agendas unrelated to the aim of ensuring safety and equality for Jewish members of the Australian community.

By way of background, I was born in Sydney, and have lived my life within and alongside the Jewish community of this city, including having served as a youth leader, and in Jewish social action projects. I am the grandchild of Holocaust survivors who came to this country as refugees, and rebuilt their lives under the shadow of deep trauma and unimaginable loss. I am also a citizen of Israel by descent, and which is where the majority of my extended family lives. A young cousin of mine, recently come of age, is now being conscripted into the Israeli military. Another cousin of mine was a hair's breadth from being caught up in the Hamas-led attacks of October 7th 2023. I have heard antisemitic sentiments and conspiracies spoken by fellow Australians around me, as well as the occasional slur, and seen more than enough antisemitism online. Fortunately, I have never been a victim of antisemitic violence or harassment in real life – a fact which speaks to the successful multiculturalism that Australia has nurtured so well.

It is my view that the current direction that the NSW government, and the Commonwealth more broadly, is taking in relation to antisemitism is misguided, dangerous, and requires correction. In this submission, I endeavour to explain why.

Antisemitism and anti-Zionism

The definition of antisemitism and its boundaries have been a subject of controversy and contention in recent years. Let me offer my own: antisemitism is a politics directed against Jews and Jewishness, simply for being Jews and Jewish. Like all politics, and similar to all forms of racism, it involves both ideology and power – both prejudice against Jewish people, and persecution and exploitation of them. Anti-Jewish politics has a long history, and has been especially embedded in Western/European Christian traditions. It takes many forms

- Jews as the rejectors, and even killers, of Christ
- Jews as the other, suspicious in our difference, an enemy within, saboteurs
- Jews as polluters of the wider (Christian/European) community, undermining its purity, poisoning its bright (and white) future
- Jews as scapegoats, and pressure valves, to distract subjects from whatever the ruler or government wants to hide
- Jews as the puppetmasters, greedy, power-hungry, pulling the world's strings from the shadows

The flexibility of anti-Jewish politics can be seen in the contradictions in the claims that have been leveled against us. We have been blamed for both the evils of Communism and the greed and exploitation of Capitalism; for undermining 'white' nations by supporting immigration, and also for keeping other minorities down; caricatured as weak and impotent and degenerate, and yet also somehow secretly the true power controlling world history. Anti-Jewishness – probably because we are so few in number, so dispersed, and yet strongly committed to maintaining our particular differences – have been an all-purpose target for anyone needing an enemy to blame or a scapegoat to sacrifice. And we have, many times throughout our history, paid for this privilege with our lives.

I want to emphasise this last point – antisemitism isn't just sentiment, but has real consequences. It isn't just prejudice, it is the exercise of power at the expense of Jewish people. For all that may be objectionable and unjust in whatever bigoted views ordinary people

may hold, it is the powerful – leaders of government, business, and society – who are in the position to cause the most harm by engaging in anti-Jewish politics. I am far more troubled by what a politician thinks they can gain by invoking the Jewish community – whether in opposition or even in our defence – than I am by some hateful stereotype someone who has never met a Jewish person may believe. That is not to excuse ignorance, but to be realistic about power and how it is wielded.

Now that I have outlined what antisemitism is, I want to note that I have not mentioned Israel once. Let's be very clear, Israel and Jewishness are not synonymous. To be anti-Jewish does imply anti-Israel, and to be anti-Israel does not imply being anti-Jewish. There are those in far right and neo-Nazi politics, for example, who both hate Jews and yet support and respect Israel, seeing in Israel both their ideal of a powerful ethnocentric state, but also as a place to send away Jewish people who live in their countries. And there are people who oppose Israel as it is currently constituted, but who bear no ill-will toward Jewish people. I personally know many such people, including Palestinians, other non-Jews, and also fellow Jews. I myself am one. To understand this, we must understand Zionism, what it is, and what it isn't.

Zionism is a concept that is also bitterly contested, but it is really not complicated at all: Zionism is simply that current in Jewish culture that yearns for our ancient home and promised land, the land of Israel. It is found in many places, in prayers, in (Jewish) law, in traditions, in myths and fantasies. Zion means, simply, Jerusalem. We face it when we pray, we declare that we will return 'next year', we await the Messiah who will usher in a world of peace at the end of days, and gather all Jews home to the Holy City. Zion represents the land of our ancestors, the towns and temples of ritual observance, the seasons of the Levantine climate that our festivals mark each year. It is a promise that we must work to be worthy of. Zionism is just one part of Jewishness, one thread of a rich tapestry, but an important one. And as one would expect for an element of culture over 2000 years old, there are many ways to engage with Zionism. Some engage purely religiously, observing what Jewish Law holds in reference to the Holy Land. Some engage spiritually, meditating on the meaning of Zion. Some engage culturally, relishing the concrete connection and reality of lifeways in the lands of our ancestors. And some engage *politically*, seeking to regain Jewish control over the lands that once were ruled by the tribes of Israel, to reconstitute an Israelite polity – once governed by judges, then by kings, and now, after so long in 'exile', by a parliament of elected members.

Of all the flavours of Zionism, it is clear that this last one, the political project that became the State of Israel, has proven the most consequential. Israel the modern nation-state is a regional power, a leader in technology and innovation, a close ally of the global hegemon. It is also home to half of the world's Jews, and the only current polity controlled by a Jewish community. And yet, the other half of Jews on this planet choose not to live there. Whether they see themselves as ardent supporters of Israel or determined opponents of it, they have declared, with nothing less than their choice of home, that Zionism for them does not mean living in a Jewish nation state in the Holy Land. It is true that as societies across the world have become more secular, many Jews have replaced religious observance with national identity, with Israel as the homeland and standard bearer of that nation. However, Israel is not *sacred*, and to advocate for this is, many have argued, a form of *idolatry*. A golden calf.

The sanctity and centrality of the State of Israel for some Jewish communities is not a requirement of Jewish law but reflects the success of political Zionism and its ideology. And like all ideologies, it contains a lot of untruths. Zionist politics have convinced many Jews that Israel is their only safe haven, though objectively it remains one of the most dangerous places for a Jewish person to live. It has convinced many Jews that Israel is every Jew's birthright, when in fact those lands have been inhabited by generations of different peoples, Jews and non-Jews, for thousands of years. Zionist ideology is clearly dominant in most Jewish communities, but there are, and have always been, dissenters. From the ultra-orthodox who believe only the Messiah can rebuild the Jewish homeland and object to man's attempts to pre-empt the divine plan, to diasporist Jews who reject even Jewish nationhood, to those like myself, who

recognise the centrality of Zion to Jewish tradition, but reject the project of political Zionism. And let us be clear-eyed about what the tenets of political Zionism are: that Jewish people should maintain control over the ancient lands of Israel, and that this right to control supersedes the rights of non-Jews who lived and still live there. Though Israel is constructed as a liberal democracy, wherever the values of democracy conflict with Jewish rule, Jewish rule prevails; where the values of liberty and equality collide with Jewish control, Jewish control overrules. These are not just my interpretations of Israeli policy – human rights groups from Amnesty International to Israel's own B'Tselem have thoroughly documented the systems of inequality that maintain Jewish rule in Israel and the occupied Palestinian Territories. Modern political Zionism is not just about Jews living in the holy land, but ruling it.

The IHRA definition of antisemitism, which so many institutions have now adopted, list as an example of antisemitism the denial of Jewish right to 'self-determination' by questioning the legitimacy of the State of Israel. In the common discourse, this refers to Israel's 'right to exist'. As many experts in international law have observed, there is no legal 'right to exist' for states. People have rights to live in peace and security; a state has no such legal right. Nor does it have the moral right to do so: no state has inherent moral legitimacy, but must inherit this legitimacy from the justness of its behaviours. An oppressive state, a belligerent state, a state that does not guarantee peoples' rights to peace and security has no legitimacy. And yet, the IHRA definition, and the definition of antisemitism that many advocate, see questioning the *legitimacy* of the State of Israel as *antisemitic*. That I reject Israel's 'right to exist' – as I reject any state's right to do so – makes me antisemitic in the eyes of many defenders of Israel. That I reject the Zionist political project, a position that is referred to as anti-Zionist – not because I am opposed to Jewish 'self determination', but because I oppose to the project of maintaining Jewish power at the expense of the other communities who share that land – makes me, as per the IHRA, an antisemite. To state such an argument is to refute it, such is its absurdity.

To summarise a long argument, anti-Zionism is not antisemitic. Opposing Jewish supremacy in Israel is not antisemitic. Organising against Israeli policies is not antisemitic. Calling for equality and freedom for all people who live between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean sea is not antisemitic. Political Zionists will claim that equality for all will mean death for Israeli Jews, that without Jewish rule, Jews in the holy land will be slaughtered. That Palestinians hate Jews, and are simply waiting for the chance to throw all Jews in the holy lands into the sea. This, they claim, is why calling for equality is antisemitic: because equality will mean death for Israel's Jews. I cannot see the future, so I cannot say with certainty that this nightmare could not come to pass. What I can offer are three points against it. First, that this is always the argument of the oppressor, from whites in the US south, to Afrikaaners in Apartheid South Africa, to the Nazis themselves – that if we give the lesser caste their freedom, they will destroy us. Second, that it represents a wilful refusal to accept culpability, to recognise the wrongs that Israel has committed. My grandfather, who moved to Israel as a young man in 1949 to live in Jerusalem, would in his later years say "Do you know why they hate us? Because I'm sitting in his house". It is easier to imagine you are hated for who you are, than to accept that others may be angry at you for what you have done. And thirdly, it is simply not a morally defensible position to declare that real injustice is necessary today, to prevent hypothetical injustice tomorrow.

The toxicity of the current discourse

It should be clear then that I object to a large part of how antisemitism is currently conceived, in particular the way it is conflated with anti-Zionism. More to the point, defenders of Israel and political Zionism freely throw accusations of antisemitism at anyone who questions Israel's 'rights' to maintain Jewish power, or supports Palestinians' rights to return to their homes and live in peace, security and freedom. It is not just that the Commonwealth government has adopted the IHRA conception, or that Australian universities have ratified a definition similar to it, the conflation of anti-Israel and anti-Jewish has become common and widespread. When the words 'fuck Israel' were graffitied on walls in Woollahra, it was automatically assumed to be antisemitic (later graffiti by this same alleged conspirators did reference Jews). When two

nurses at Bankstown Hospital told an Israeli provocateur online that they would kill Israelis who came to their hospital, it was reported everywhere as the latest antisemitic attack, despite the fact that the words 'Jew' or 'Jewish' were not mentioned by them even once. They were wrong to say those things, and their statements were unacceptable and abhorrent, but their hatred was directed at Jewish *Israeli*, not Jews writ large. For defenders of modern political Zionism and Israel, animosity toward Israel must be because those setting Israel's policies are Jewish, not because of what those policies are, even if those policies had, at that time, resulted in the deaths of some 15,000 innocent children in Gaza.

Unfortunately, political Zionists are not the only bad faith actors in the current moment. Others have also used this misuse of antisemitism as a concept for their own purposes. The leader of the opposition, Peter Dutton, has been regularly joining in on this weaponisation of antisemitism to further his own political plans. For example, to demonise Arab and Muslim immigrants, as part of his overall project against (non-Western) immigration. He has also used it as a wedge, to try and peel off Labor and Greens voters by painting those parties as antisemitic. Mr Dutton has even promised millions of dollars in support for Australian Jewish communities to help combat this 'growing threat'. The NSW government under Chris Minns has also exploited antisemitism in order to pass new, more draconian laws limiting the protest rights in the state, rights that have in recent years been exercised most aggressively by climate change activists, but also over the last 18 months by supporters of Palestinians' rights. Even though the government was aware that the recent spate of attacks targeting the Jewish community were driven not by protest movements but by organised crime for completely unrelated aims, the government led parliament to believe that more restrictions on protest were urgently needed.

These are misguided and dangerous developments. Misguided because they support this conflation of what antisemitism isn't, and dangerous because they reinforce the structures of what antisemitism is. When the antisemitism is weaponised against political opponents, it trivialises it and undermines our ability to fight actual antisemitism, which still exists. When the wider community sees antisemitism dominating political discourse, sees significant resources and prime-time promises of millions in new funding directed to the Jewish community, it reanimates dormant conspiracies of Jewish power and special treatment. Jewish communities should receive funding that we need, as all communities should – we don't need to be a publicity stunt, a political football, or a wedge. When people see their civil and political rights curtailed, for the apparent purpose of protecting the Jewish community, this creates resentment. When people who are moved by their consciences to speak out against the injustices of Israeli policy – which currently include the dispossession of villages, the massacre of civilians, the denial of humanitarian aid, the very real possibility of a conviction of genocide in the International Criminal Court – but are then told that their objections are *antisemitic*, they may indeed decide that antisemitism must therefore be the moral position to take.

Australian politicians' and institutions' acceptance of the Zionist conception of antisemitism has the very real risk of creating more actual antisemitism. The exploitation of antisemitism in service of advancing parties' politics and election politicking endangers Jewish Australians. And let's not forget that it is Jewish people's rights that are being curtailed also. We have here in Australia, and NSW, a healthy and open democracy, with the freedom to speak up against injustice. These are the qualities that ensure the safety of minority communities such as ours, and I, as both a citizen, and as the grandchild of people who survived the fascism of the Third Reich, oppose any and all attempts to curtail our civil rights, or censor criticism. NSW Jews will never be safer in a state with fewer civil rights, and we will be decidedly less safe if politicians continue to instrumentalise us as political footballs, wedges, and justifications.

I call upon this Inquiry to reject the exploitation of the concept of antisemitism by all parties, Zionists and others, and to commit to fighting the politics of anti-Jewishness alongside all other forms of racism.

Sincerely,

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