

ANNIVERSARY OF INDEPENDENCE OF ISRAEL

Festival Hall, Melbourne

22 APRIL 1969

Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. John Gorton

Mr. President, Mr. Ambassador and Fellow Australians of Jewish Faith or Jewish Descent:-

We stand here to give greetings to you all on a stage from which those bright banners have just been carried - banners which symbolically bore the stars of the Southern Cross and the Star of David. And how proper that is, for this association is not a recent one.

Back in the 1914-18 War, Australian soldiers, many of Jewish descent, rode and fought with Jews in Israel. In the last Great World War, two of the best-known Jewish soldiers today served with Australians in the Syrian campaign. I am told, and I believe it is true, that General Moshe Dayan lost his eye while with an Australian patrol in the Syrian campaign. He was using a pair of binoculars to help his Australian comrades, and was hit by an enemy bullet.

And I know that Brigadier General Allon served in a little-known but gallant action where he guided and led an Australian patrol behind the enemy lines to hold and seize a bridge and prevent its destruction so that Australian and other troops coming along from behind could cross that bridge. They were to hold it for eighteen hours. They held it for four days.

This is the sort of association in fighting, in war, that has gone on between Australians and Jews in Israel, so how right it was that today the flags should bear the stars of both our nations.

And what a special cheer there was, of course, for the reference to the Six-Day War, a war which, I suspect, must have benefited the Israeli Treasury immensely because I know that a third of the budget of Israel is spent on defence - but I imagine that at least another third of its defence material has been made available from other sources!

But that was some years ago, and while it did what wars can do, and that is settle immediate problems - and fighting and wars can do that, no matter what anyone may say - it has not settled the continuing problem. And since that time I think there have been one-quarter as many casualties as occurred in that Six-Day War, many of them children blown to pieces or maimed by button mines,

many of them peasants working in their fields suddenly the target of mortar or machine gun attack, for Israel is still a beleaguered nation. That nation still must work, wherever it may be working, with the tool of its trade in one hand and the sword and the rifle within grasp for the other. It still must seek to hear all the time above the noises of the market place the possible call of the tocsin to defend what has been won, because that must be defended.

War is horrible. Fighting is horrible. But they are not the worst things that can happen, and who could possibly know this better than the people now in Israel, with the thousands of years of persecution in all the lands in which they sought to make their home, having been driven out from their own. With all those years of persecution culminating in Nazi aggression - who could know it better?

And who could know better that if the choice eventually has to be made between a battlefield and a Belsen, then free men and women must choose a battlefield every time.

What we all want is for it to be recognised throughout the world that Israel is there to stay, and that Israel is a free and sovereign and independent nation as of right. And we want Israel to be allowed to divert that money that now must be put into defence to be used for the further increase of the miracles it has wrought in the arid land to which it has gone.

Sometimes, it almost makes one despair when one thinks of what has been wrung from the desert, when one thinks of the forests which have grown and are growing, where previously erosion held sway, where one sees the factories and industries springing up where previously was nothing but nomadic wandering, where one sees not two but ten blades of grass where only one grew before. It almost makes one despair to think that that example can be the subject of such threat and such attacks rather than be followed for the benefit of all those who live in that region of the Middle East.

What all Australians want, I believe, is that it should be possible for an enduring peace to be made; that the Arab nations should sit down and talk and discuss and reach agreement. What that decision or result will be, I do not know or seek here to indicate, as long as it brings to all those people living there the chance to progress, the chance to live in peace, the chance to take care of refugees, the chance to give human beings in that part of the world happiness, confidence in the future and a knowledge which you have and which I have which is quite ineradicable. That is that though the State of Israel may be 21 today and has attained its majority, it will go on forever.

What I have outlined could be achieved if the two great powers - not four great powers but two great powers in the world - the United States of America and the U. S. S. R. , were to say, "Enough of this. Turn your swords into ploughshares. We are strong enough to see that one will not be attacked by the other and we in concert will help to hold the peace." This could be done.

For ourselves - for myself, for my Government, for Australians, we are small and therefore perhaps sympathetic particularly to Israel which also is small. But that which we can do we will do to support it. That which we can say we will say. That influence we can bring to bear, such as it is, will be brought to bear for this end.

And I cannot better express that approach than by reading to you part of a message sent by us to the Executive Council of Australian Jewry in the Sydney Town Hall some time ago. And this is our belief as a Government and my belief as a Prime Minister:-

"We believe that all parties to the dispute should without delay sit down around the conference table and begin discussions aimed at restoring peace and stability to the Middle East. Any such settlement must be formally based on the acceptance of Israel as a sovereign nation, existing as of right, entitled to live and develop in security, free of constant threat, posing no threat to its neighbouring countries and using for the good of all, rights and opportunities so dearly bought."

I thank you.

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