



PRIME MINISTER

EMBARGOED UNTIL 8.00 PM SATURDAY 16 MAY 1992

**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP
TO THE 35TH BIENNIAL CONFERENCE OF
THE ZIONIST FEDERATION OF AUSTRALIA**

GRAND HYATT HOTEL, MELBOURNE - 16 MAY 1992

AUSTRALIA, ISRAEL AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Thank you for inviting me to the 35th Biennial Conference of the Zionist Federation of Australia.

I am very pleased to be here.

The fact that, as Acting Prime Minister, I spoke at your last conference in 1990 can only be read as proof of the constancy of both of us.

In those two years extraordinary events have occurred, extraordinary changes have taken place.

So it is important that some things are constant.

It is important that we talk together and understand each other.

The Zionist Federation of Australia and the Australian Government have enjoyed a long and mutually productive relationship, and I have no doubt that we will continue to do so.

You can be sure that the Australian Government values the Federation's opinion - just as you can be sure of our belief in the Federation's cause, Israel.

This is a commitment of long standing. It is as old as the state of Israel, and it is as strong now as it was in the beginning.

We are also well aware that very often issues of concern to the Jewish community properly concern the Government on a broader front.

We are conscious of the role the Zionist Federation plays in keeping policy issues before the Government and the public - and we admire you for it.

The Jewish community, of course, has long been in the forefront of Australian public life.

In business, academia, science, arts and letters, politics and the law, the Jewish contribution to this place has been remarkable.

The Jewish connection goes back to the First Fleet. It is present throughout the last two hundred years.

Shortlists of the greatest Australians of this century always number among them two Jews - John Monash and Isaac Isaacs - and others could easily be added.

Jewish Australians have played such a leading role in shaping this country in a sense it is not appropriate to distinguish them from other Australians.

Beyond their individual contributions, there is a broader cultural influence - I might even say, a civilising influence.

By that I mean not just the obvious contributions of Jewish Australians to the life of the mind in Australia, or their enrichment of Australian culture by the traditions they brought with them.

I also mean the lesson in tolerance which, by their presence here and their tragic history elsewhere, Jewish Australians have taught Anglo and Celtic Australians.

As an outpost of British civilisation on the other side of the world, Australia was always prey to xenophobia and intolerance.

Jewish Australians and intending Jewish settlers sometimes felt that before the War.

During the War, when many of them were shamefully interned as enemy aliens, they felt it even more strongly.

Australia was then a narrow, insular society.

It is therefore one of the more amazing features of our recent history that we have become a nation which rightly prides itself on the diversity of its cultures and the tolerance of its outlook.

I might say in parenthesis that, of all the lessons to be learned from this transformation, none is more important than the capacity of Australians to embrace change.

We are not as conservative as we sometimes think.

We have achieved more in nation-building than we sometimes think.

The Jewish community has played no small part in this - in widening our horizons and keeping our minds open.

They have been great settlers. Great Australians.

Their success underlines the wisdom of committing this country to the principle of tolerance, and actively supporting cultural and religious diversity.

I might say that I am very much of the view that, in pursuing these multicultural policies, we should in no way be compromising the principle of loyalty to Australia.

Both the vitality and the cohesion of this society substantially depend on the right of all to express their cultural heritage and to receive equal treatment, regardless of race, culture or religion.

But its essential strength must derive from an overriding loyalty to Australia, its interests and its liberal democratic values.

In the end it is only this which will guarantee tolerance.

Our strongest weapon against discrimination and racial or cultural vilification is the idea of Australia itself.

While recognising that a great deal remains to be done to combat all the forms of exclusion which confront Australians of non-English speaking backgrounds, and that Aboriginal Australians still contend with discrimination, we can say that we have made great progress.

Last year's Report of the National Inquiry into Racist Violence showed that Australia's experience of racist violence, intimidation and harassment is well below the levels of most other countries.

But we must be vigilant, and we must actively promote the cause - here and abroad.

Domestically we are now examining possible terms of legislation to proscribe acts of racial vilification.

Australia was the first country whose Parliament passed a motion in support of rescinding the infamous United Nations Resolution 3379 which equated Zionism with racism.

And Australia was a co-sponsor of the UN action which led to the rescission of the Resolution.

The overwhelming vote in the General Assembly to overturn 3379 sent a clear signal that the UN will not be used as a vehicle for propaganda, or for the promulgation of doctrines which are racist or unjust.

Our support for the UN action sent a signal that Australia will express publicly its abhorrence of racism in all its forms, and will actively support international action to focus attention on the unacceptability of racist doctrines.

The UN decision was particularly timely, in view of some worrying political developments in Europe, where right-wing groups with anti-Semitic platforms appear to be growing in influence.

I think it was also evidence that there is a new determination in the international community to take a more balanced approach to the problems of the Middle East.

Above all, rescission of Resolution 3379 was a positive step towards removing the obstacles to peace in the region.

Partly to mark the overthrow of the Resolution, we were visited this year by Mr Simcha Dinitz, the Executive Chairman of the World Zionist Federation and the man responsible for organising the emigration of over 400,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union.

Mr Dinitz explained to me the importance of continuing migration to Israel, bringing as it does highly trained people to contribute to the development of Israeli society.

Naturally we found common ground on this - we too depend on migration to stimulate economic growth and add vitality to society.

Mr Dinitz and I also had the opportunity to frankly exchange views on current developments in the Middle East peace process.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is important that the Australian Government continue this valuable dialogue with the Zionist movement.

It is important for the specific reason that Israel is a great cause.

It is important for the general reason that we recognise, as a principle of tolerance, the right of ethnic groups to take a close interest in the affairs of their cultural homelands.

We expect of all Australians an unequivocal loyalty to Australia, but we do not expect the bonds of culture to be cut, or old sympathies to disappear.

We know that for Jewish Australians those bonds are very strong.

Israel is a cherished place, a natural focus of attention.

The Australian Government takes the view that these sentiments are natural and, in any case, inescapable and irreversible.

We expect from Jewish Australians some active lobbying on foreign policy issues, particularly now as Israel faces a fluid international outlook and is reinvigorated by a massive influx of Jews from the former Soviet Union.

We are attentive to your representations.

But of course we have to decide Australian policy on the basis of a wider view of Australian interests.

As you are all aware, the Australian Labor Party has been consistent in its commitment to Israel.

This dates from strong links between the Australian Jewish community and Labor Party in office through the 1940s.

Like many others, my party saw the establishment of Israel in moral terms. As international redress of the shameful horror of the Holocaust.

The Chifley Government and Dr Evatt, as Chairman of the UN Committee on Palestine, gave important political support to Israel at the time of its creation at the United Nations.

Since Israel's achievement of independence and modern statehood in 1948, Australia has been proud to support its fundamental right to security, territorial integrity and its freedom to pursue its national development in peace.

Let me assure you, in unequivocal terms, that Australia remains, as we have been over the past 44 years, wholly committed to Israel's independence and territorial integrity.

In commenting on contemporary Australian policy towards the Middle East, I should say at the outset that our approach is tempered by realism.

Australia is not a major player in Middle Eastern affairs.

We do have significant trading interests in a number of Middle Eastern countries.

The region lies across some of our principal communication routes.

Like other responsible countries, we are concerned at the implications for global security of conflict in the region.

But we do not have any illusions about our influence in the region, or any pretensions to assume anything other than our traditional support of international stability and efforts to find a just and lasting peace.

Australia's policy towards the Israel-Arab dispute is a balanced one which takes account of political realities in the region.

As a non-participant, our broad policy objective is to encourage all parties to recognise that long-term peace and stability in the region can only be achieved through negotiated settlement.

This must be based on mutual respect of the national interests and aspirations of both Israelis and Arabs.

As we see it, Israel's independence and security are ultimately dependent on its being able to find a stable accommodation, a modus vivendi, with its Arab neighbours.

Australia is not only committed to Israel's security, but also recognises the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination.

This allows, logically, for the possibility of their own independent state if they so choose.

The Australian Government seeks to encourage, wherever and whenever possible, dialogue which offers hope to all those, Israelis and Arabs alike, who have a genuine desire to live in peace.

Over the years, Australia has been willing to play its part in a number of peacekeeping operations in the Middle East.

We have also been consistent in raising concerns about human rights violations throughout the region.

During the two years since I spoke to you at your last conference, there have been momentous changes in international relations.

The end of the Cold War has provided an opportunity to restructure international security arrangements, to define a new approach towards collective security.

This was demonstrated forcefully by the international community's response to Iraq's aggression against Kuwait.

For the first time, the United Nations functioned effectively in enforcing international law, as it was originally intended to do nearly half a century ago.

The unprecedented international consensus and cooperation in responding to Iraq's invasion were only possible in the new international climate created by the dissipation of the superpower rivalry between East and West.

For its part, Australia recognised the wider international ramifications of Saddam Hussein's criminal actions.

I was part of the Australian Government's decision to make a substantial commitment to the multinational naval force in the Gulf.

During the Gulf War, Australians were horrified at the indiscriminate targeting of Israel's civilian population by Saddam Hussein.

The Australian Government expressed at the time its condemnation of the brutality of the Scud missile attacks on Israel, and of the crude attempt by Iraq to undermine international efforts to expel it from Kuwait.

We were impressed most of all, however, by Israel's restraint in not becoming involved in the conflict, despite direct attacks on its territory and people.

The aftermath of the Gulf War has provided a rare opportunity to start on the long road towards peace in the Middle East.

The new environment of international rapprochement has encouraged Israel and its Arab neighbours to take a fresh look at the issues dividing them.

The Australian Government's sincere hope is that the Middle East peace talks which began in Madrid last October will enable the parties to the dispute to take full advantage of this historic opportunity, and negotiate a truly just and lasting peace.

We recognise that progress on substantial issues is not likely to be rapid.

But the process itself of dialogue and negotiation should, incrementally, improve the political and security climate between Israelis and Arabs.

This, the world still hopes, will gradually build mutual respect between Israel and its neighbours, without which no permanent trust can ever be established.

It is only upon such trust that a lasting peace can be built.

We have been disappointed that much of the peace discussions so far have been taken up with procedural wrangling, and that violence has continued, especially in Lebanon and the Occupied Territories, while the peace talks have been underway.

The Australian Government has consistently called on all parties to exercise restraint, to give the negotiations a chance.

One encouraging aspect of the peace process so far has been a degree of moderation on the part of the Palestinian negotiators.

We have also observed that the Palestinian Liberation Organisation has played a more positive role in encouraging the peace process over the past six months.

In recognition of this development, the Australian Government recently announced that we would restore our policy on official contact with the PLO to what it had been before the Gulf War.

In response to the PLO's support for Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, restrictions were imposed in January 1991 which barred Australian Ministers and officials from initiating contact with the PLO. Those restrictions have now been lifted.

The restoration to our earlier policy on contact with the PLO is consistent with our long-established aim of encouraging the forces of moderation rather than extremism within the PLO.

I am aware that this issue is one of considerable sensitivity to your Federation, and one you will no doubt want to continue discussing with us.

Let me assure you that the Government's recent decision is neither an endorsement of the PLO, nor an absolution of the organisation's past actions.

Nor has there been any change in the government's basic policy towards the PLO.

We do not accept the PLO's claim to be the sole representative of the Palestinian people, but we do accept that the organisation represents the view of a significant proportion of them.

Accuracy of the record also requires me to mention another issue on which our views may differ.

Along with many other countries including the United States, Australia has long expressed its opposition to Israel's continued settlement activity in the Occupied Territories.

As friends of Israel, we have to say that we regard such activity as an obstacle to peace.

I discussed this question at some length with Mr Dinitz during our meeting in Canberra last March. He acknowledged there is a range of opinion on settlement policy in Israeli political circles.

As an outside party, Australia respects the complexity and sensitivity of the various questions involved in the Middle East peace talks.

We simply urge all parties to exercise the courage and resourcefulness necessary to make the most of the current relatively favourable international environment.

The Australian Government has taken a strong interest in the plight of Syria's Jewish population.

Australia has been making direct representations to Syria for several years on discrimination against Jews.

It is pleasing to note recent reports that the Syrian Government has lifted restrictions on travel abroad by Syrian Jews, and on the disposition of property by the Jewish community there.

The Government will, of course, be monitoring the situation closely to see whether in practice whole Jewish families are able to leave Syria.

I should add here that the Syrian Government's decision represents a significant confidence-building measure in the context of the Middle East peace process.

It is exactly the kind of step Australia has been urging on all parties to the process to follow in order to promote a spirit of moderation and flexibility in the current negotiations.

One of the subjects your Federation has actively pursued with the Australian Government is the Arab economic boycott of Israel.

Australia has consistently opposed the boycott, and has repeatedly urged Arab governments to dismantle it as a gesture of goodwill.

The boycott, apart from being morally untenable, is a barrier to progress in the Middle East peace process.

Earlier this year, the Government reminded Australian Chambers of Commerce that they do not have, and should not claim to have, any official authorisation for issuing certificates which effectively comply with the Arab boycott.

We are not persuaded that legislation against the boycott is appropriate, but the Government is keeping that possibility under active review.

As I noted earlier, Australia and Israel are nations built largely on immigration.

We each grapple in our own way with a constantly evolving process of reconciliation among different cultural, social and political groupings within our societies.

It is characteristic of immigrant nations, that we draw strength from our diversity, from our need to be conscious always of new perspectives and new ways to achieve our national priorities.

We draw strength from exercising tolerance.

Nations such as ours are uniquely placed to be receptive to change, to embrace it and profit from it.

This is why I feel it appropriate to speak to you about the need now for Israel to make the most of international change, and to persevere in dialogue and negotiation with its Arab neighbours.

Equally, Australia urges Israel's Arab neighbours to come to terms with Israel and recognise its right to exist as an independent state.

My comments have been offered in the spirit of frank and vigorous dialogue which characterises the Australian Government's close relations with your Federation.

We have a long relationship, and a productive one.

You can be sure the Government sets a very high value on it.

Thank you once again for having me. I wish you well with the conference.