

VICTORIAN JEWISH BOARD OF DEPUTIES DINNER

MELBOURNE, VIC.

26 MAY 1969

Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. John Gorton

Mr. President, Mr. Ashkanasy and all those here assembled:

You do my wife and I a very great honour tonight and we are touched by what has been said and by the welcome you have given us. We find it quite heartwarming and we thank you for it.

You, Sir, mentioned the espousal - or somebody mentioned the espousal of Jewish causes. I do not think that what motivates me or what motivates most Australians is a desire to espouse Jewish causes as such. I think that it is a belief that at this present time in history Jewish causes and the causes of Israel are right causes and are just causes and are honest causes, and are espoused by us for that reason rather than that they are the causes of some particular group.

Israel

And you, Mr. Ashkanasy mentioned what are almost 'half-forgotten things and battles long ago' - the years of 1937, 1938 and 1939 when, to our great advantage, we opened the gates of this country to those who were threatened in Europe. Sir, I can only assure you of this: that there are countries today who oppress citizens of the Jewish race living within them. There are countries today which conduct public executions, and we have taken such measures as we can to ensure that if those countries will open their gates to allow those who wish to emigrate from them, then we will again open our own gates to allow those immigrants to come in. And to this end we have already appointed Immigration Officers. We have already called upon Great Britain to act for us so that should these gates be opened for egress then we will be able quickly to make provision for ingress to ourselves - to our great ultimate advantage, as I think has been demonstrated since 1938 by those who came from abroad to be Australians and have so contributed to the Australian culture and the Australian way of life.

Immigration of Jews

I am privileged to be with you here tonight and the guest of such a representative body as the Victorian Jewish Board of Deputies, and particularly perhaps privileged because all of us here in this room have a special interest in two very vigorous, very sovereign, very independent countries - Israel and Australia. There is a bond between us which does stretch back over the decades, which does stretch back to battles shared. But it has been strengthened, I think, by increasingly close relationship in recent days.

It is my hope tonight that this year - Israel's 21st anniversary as a nation - may, God willing, see a permanent settlement, a real peace in the Middle East and in the Holy Land. It is magnificent to win a Six-Day War, but it is not the solution to the problems which face Israel, because that Six-Day War was won and yet those problems still press in upon her borders.

What surely must be required, what surely must be sought by the great powers of the world is that Israel and the other countries of the Middle East should sit down together, should discuss how they can live together, should - and I think in the words of your own President - draw lines on a map so that the Arabs say "This is the border" and the Israelis say "This is the border", and then there is an argument and a discussion about it. As long as it can finally lead to an agreed border and to a real enduring peace so that the people of Israel do not have continually to live with a plough in one hand and a rifle within their grasp, so that the country of Israel can contribute the savings it can make to the development of the desert and to the increasing of its industrial capacity instead of having to divert so much to the very very necessary present requirements of armaments and defence.

It is almost beyond my understanding that in a region where so much can be contributed by the example of Israel and the technology of Israel and the development of the desert which Israel has shown is possible - that this should not be availed of by its neighbours; and where its neighbours equally with Israel contribute so much of their effort to tanks and guns and aeroplanes and shells instead of to education and advancement of their own people.

I can only express the deepest hope that for the benefit of all those in the Middle East, there will be this year or soon an end to this strife, a beginning of a living in brotherhood, a beginning of a joint attempt to develop that area for the good of all. And this must come about by peace talks, by peace conferences, and small though we are in the councils of the world, our voice will always be raised to seek that end.

I speak to you tonight, too, as fellow Australians because I believe that all those here in this room are concerned in this country with providing a better life for those who are born here and for those who, for one reason or another, have come here or may in the future come. In our beginnings, our pioneers had to tame a harsh country, a dry country, an unfriendly country. And is it not true that this has been and is still true of Israel that the desert had to be watered, that the new towns and cities and kibbutzes had to be built where previously there was nothing but desolation? We can claim, I think, as Australians, some success in battling with a harsh environment. So, too, can Israel, and here again is a bond between our countries.

CIAR-Israel  
War

*Israel-Australia relations*

But there are differences. Here we sleep easily at night, as you, Sir, have said, and here we go about our work without threat, without danger, without the risk of grenades being thrown into our market-places, without the chances of buses carrying schoolchildren being blown up by landmines, without the possibility of plastic explosives being placed where they will damage innocent civilians. In Israel that is not the case. And all along the frontiers, until that peace of which I have spoken and for which I will work and for which we must all hope will come, that will be the great division between Australia and Israel - that here there is an opportunity to live without fear while in Israel there is not.

I hope that we can help to abolish this fear. Insofar as we can, we will. But in the meantime we can, and I believe we should, express our admiration and respect for the fortitude that the people of Israel are showing at the moment.

I like the symbols of the friendships between our countries. We both, as I have said before, have stars on our flags. We both have some affinity towards the eucalypt and the gum trees. I have some affinity for it because you gave me a grove, although I am not quite sure that it really belongs to me, but nevertheless you gave it to me. Somebody - I think my wife - told me that you are now exporting back to Australia gum tree seed, which I think is going just a little too far! And you have there, in Israel, these finite examples of the ties between us in Nachlat Victoria which has been established in the desert with funds subscribed - no doubt by many in this room and by many whom you represent outside this room. All these things remind us of the links we have with Israel.

You, Sir, in your opening remarks, were kind enough to say something about what my Government is trying to do. What we are trying to do here can come under three broad heads. We are trying to ensure our security against attack from abroad in the future, and who could understand that better than people close to Israel. We are trying to push forward our development and strength, and who would know about that better than the people of Israel. And we are trying to see that with the material advancement this will bring, we also have the spiritual belief in a requirement for the welfare of the ill, the unfortunate, the maimed, the handicapped amongst us. And isn't it true that Israel opened her borders to all, however unfortunate, from whatever part of the world they came, in order to provide what is the ultimate objective of welfare, a better life and a happier life.

These three things again are things which motivate this country and Israel, and these three things are of the essence of safety and of progress.

I would like to take this chance to acknowledge what the community of the Jewish race and the Jewish faith have done in Australia over the years. It is, of course, to the lasting credit of the Jewish people that they have maintained their spiritual values, that they have maintained their religion, that they have maintained their standards of conduct against the world ever since they were by the Romans thrown out of what was the first State of Israel. This has been true no matter where they have been born or no matter where they have lived. And they have done this in Australia too, although most were born here and although their integration into the Australian community has been, as I believe, total.

What have they given us? They have given us great riches, I think, as have other races who have come here. They have given us great advantages in developing our own culture and in bringing in and infusing and diffusing amongst us their rich culture which many Australians now think is their own and which in fact has become their own. I know, Sir, that this will go on.

You have all won an honoured and respected place in Australian life, and I am proud that even though sometimes it gets a little lonely, I am Prime Minister of a country where bigotry is at a discount, and where Australians accept each other for what they are. And I believe that you will all agree with me that we in this room as Australians are not troubled by what each man's faith might be or what form the worship of his God might take. We are interested only in - "Is this man a good man or a bad man? Does he contribute to the community? Or does he not?" This is the way it should be. This is the way it is and this, please God, will be the way it always will be in Australia in the future.

I thank you, Mr. Chairman, and all those in this room for the evening that you have tendered to my wife and I. It is a night that we will always remember, and the things of which we speak and the things for which we stand are eternal things and they will overcome.

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