

OPENING OF THE NATIONAL JEWISH MEMORIAL CENTRE

CANBERRA

Speech by the Prime Minister, Mr. William McMahon

13 December, 1971.

Mr. Jacobson, Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This afternoon we are about to add something to the history of Canberra and something of enduring importance to the vast panorama of the Jewish story in Australia.

I wonder if I could, with some architectural licence - considerable licence in fact - describe this fine new building as a pillar. I do so because I see it as a pillar of faith in our national capital. A pillar of faith which will stand for a long, long time, as the national centre of Australian Jewry - the first of its kind - and as a meeting place, a House of worship, a school and a memorial to Jews who died for Australia.

I sometimes think we miss the sight of history in the making when we get mixed up in the process ourselves on a summer afternoon in Canberra with familiar sights and familiar faces around us. But history this is, and my wife and I are honoured to be with you on this very special occasion. I'm afraid we are both going to make speeches. We each know what the other is going to say and as I'm speaking first I have to be careful to keep in my own corner.

Sir, I think it is almost ten years since the foundation stone was laid here by Rabbi Brodie, Chief Rabbi at that time, you have built well as the result of your own energetic fund-raising and, I understand, some help from friendly governments. The Commonwealth's contribution to this centre, as you know, is a perpetual lease of the land for a rental of ten cents a year on demand. To my knowledge the demand has never been made, nor likely to be, it's just one of those curious things put in to make everything look legal. All this having been said, I do congratulate those who have worked so hard to make this centre. You should be well content and very proud. It is a handsome addition to the buildings in Canberra and, as I said, at the beginning, it is a pillar of faith in our midst.

Jewry has won an honoured and permanent place in Australia and I am proud to be Prime Minister in a country where bigotry is at a discount and where Australians accept each other for what they are. We are not troubled by what each man's faith might be or what form the worship of his God might take. And I take this opportunity of acknowledging here what the Jewish community has done for Australia.

It is to the lasting credit of the Jewish people and it is evidence of the durability of the spiritual values which bind them together that they have maintained their identity no matter where they have been born or where they have settled.

They have done this in Australia and their integration in the Australian community is complete. The Jewish community in Australia has given much to the development of an Australian culture by the infusion of elements of their own rich, rare culture. And its members are sharing, very fully, in Australia's great effort at nation-building.

I take just two names among many from the list of distinguished Jews who have brought honour to Australia. The late Sir Isaac Isaacs, our first Australian-born Governor-General and the late General Sir John Monash who led us in the first great war and gave so much of his talents to works of peace in this country when the battles were won. We remember them today because they were big men who thought and acted in a big way. They were national in their outlook and in their achievements.

I think, too, on this occasion, it is right that we should pay our tribute to the fortitude of the Jewish people in Israel who press on with nation-building though the shadows of war lie always along their frontiers.

There are three things, I think we should remember about Israel:-

- The first That Israel came to be because of the courage of its people. And the determination of a majority of nations that the Jews should be free, independent and able to live in the land of their fathers. Through its active membership of the United Nations Palestine Commission and the General Assembly, Australia helped to make this possible.
- The second That forbearance, courage, resolution and industry have made a nation in a timeless desert. And by that result the world is reminded once again that there are few limits to what men and women can do, given freedom and faith.
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The third That the future holds a tremendous challenge for Israel, for other countries of the Middle East - and indeed for us all. A challenge which has its dangers as well as its opportunities.

Sir, there is much in common between our two countries and in many ways we have faced the same hazards of nature in nation-building. It is distressing that the issues which divide Israel from its Arab neighbours, with all of whom Australia enjoys friendly relations, have not yet been resolved.

The Australian Government is convinced of the need for a settlement which ensures the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Israel and all other states in the Middle East. Without that there can be no lasting peace.

Sir, this year international attention is being focussed through the United Nations on prejudice and discrimination on racial grounds.

My Government has strongly supported, in the United Nations and elsewhere, the rights of people, including minorities, to freedom from fear and suspicion without distinction as to race, language or religion.

In the United Nations last month, we again urged, as we have in earlier years, that Governments which find it difficult to eliminate prejudice against, for example, Jewish minorities, should at least allow those people to emigrate if they desire to do so.

We hold strongly to the belief that people should be able, both in law and in practice, to pursue their cultural and religious heritage and traditions as they wish. This national centre, this pillar of faith, reflects that belief. It expresses, too, in a noble form the confidence of the Jewish people that while their ancient homeland lies faraway along the Jordan, they have a home here where they are part of one people inhabiting one continent. And where Australians of every faith and persuasion are free to walk the ways of peace together.

Now Mr. Jacobson, Ladies and Gentlemen, I understand I am to unveil the plaque and name this building. I am delighted to do so, and I name this building "The Mona and Louis Klein Building".

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