



PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP

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I am always grateful to be invited to speak to the biennial meeting of the Zionist Federation of Australia.

This is the third time I have had the opportunity to address you. As a record, it doesn't go near matching Mark Leibler's but it is enough to make me feel at home here.

It is particularly good to be talking to you this year, when so many of the Federation's long-standing goals seem closer to realisation, and when the signs for a more peaceful and secure future in the Middle East appear better than they have for years.

The changes in the world since the end of the Cold War have sometimes startled even the most hardened sceptic.

What seemed impossible is now familiar – the democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe and Russia; the pace of economic growth in China and Vietnam as they have dropped the old tenets of central planning; the progress towards settlement of apparently intractable conflicts in regions such as Cambodia.

And most recently, of course, we have seen Nelson Mandela's historic election as President of South Africa.

None of these changes has been accomplished without difficulty. All of them generate new sets of problems.

But the astonishing thing, when you look back ten years, is that they have happened.

So it is with the Middle East.

Mark Leibler uses the right phrase in his President's Report to you this year when he says that, with the Madrid Peace Conference in October 1991, the Middle East entered a new epoch.

The lessons of history – and the lessons of history in the Middle East more than elsewhere – are that we would be wise to temper our optimism with realistic caution.

And for the key participants, the stakes are so high that prudence is always called for.

However, with agreement on the Declaration of Principles between Israel and the PLO on 13 September last year, and the signing of the agreement for autonomy in Gaza and Jericho, it is possible to have expectations, as well as hope, for a more peaceful future in the region.

As I said in Parliament on 5 May, Australia warmly welcomed the autonomy agreement.

It is a real milestone in the quest for a peaceful settlement in the Middle East and a tribute to the leadership of Prime Minister Rabin and PLO Chairman Arafat, who held their nerve in the face of terrorist attacks by violent opponents determined to disrupt the process.

Anybody looking for a reason to break off the negotiations would have found many. It was no time for faint hearts.

The result is also, of course, a tribute to the untiring work of other peacemakers, like Shimon Peres.

Now we look to the next stages of the process – to agreements which will bring a lasting peace with Israel's neighbours, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, and to the successful completion of the next round of Palestinian autonomy negotiations.

With some contrast, Australia's international interests lie overwhelmingly in the Asia-Pacific region. That is where we do three-quarters of our trade. That is where our key security interests are engaged.

That is where our future lies.

But we cannot and should not ignore the Middle East. The stakes there in both strategic and human terms are so great as to impose their significance on all the areas and members of the international community.

That is why the Australian Government is keen to see the cause of peace so actively supported.

And our help has been of the most practical kind.

It is seen in our three-year, \$15 million program of assistance to economic development in Gaza and the West Bank for such things as training, health, sanitation and water resources.

The success of autonomy will depend heavily on whether these basic services can be delivered.

It is seen in our participation in the working groups on Arms Control and Regional Security and on Water Resources, which have been set up as part of the peace process.

It is seen in our military commitment to the Sinai MFO, now under Australian command, which helps maintain confidence on the border between Israel and Egypt.

And, not least, it is seen in the work of individual Australians and Australian non-government organisations who have dedicated themselves to improving conditions on the ground for ordinary citizens.

It is a welcome truth – and a reflection of the changes at work in the region – that the views of the Jewish community and the Australian Government on issues facing the community and on the Middle East have probably never been closer.

Nor have the views of the Australian and Israeli Governments.

But even when in the past we have disagreed with particular policies of individual Israeli Governments, we have never wavered – and will never waver – from our commitment to Israel's right to exist within secure and recognised borders.

And, beyond that familiar phrase, we will never waver from a deeper conviction – that the international community is a better place, a more decent place, for the contribution Israel has made and will yet make.

That is why we have been so willing to work to ensure Israel's full engagement in the mainstream of International activity.

It is why we worked so hard with Israel to rescind the odious United Nations resolution 3379, which equated Zionism with racism. We voted against its adoption in 1975, and we co-sponsored its rescission in 1991.

It is why we have supported Israel's efforts to broaden its diplomatic ties in the Asia-Pacific.

It is why we continue to be active in making representations to the Syrian Government regarding the welfare of Jews in Syria.

It is why we urge Arab governments to lift their anachronistic and counterproductive economic boycott of Israel.

Like any strong relationship, our friendship with Israel is given weight and value by the ties which exist beyond the actions of Governments, between the people of our two countries.

The Zionist Federation of Australia has been an essential element of this facet of our relationship, of course.

I want to note here the major role which Mark Leibler and the Federation played in keeping the problem of UN Resolution 3379 at the forefront of public debate in Australia and before the Australian Parliament, where both Houses voted unanimously in favour of the efforts to rescind the resolution.

Similarly, your Federation has done important work in sensitising Australian opinion to the injustice of the Arab economic boycott of Israel.

But a lot of the Federation's most important work has been in relation to our own society.

On these questions, our views are close.

For this Government, the promotion of tolerance and respect for cultural and religious differences, and a decent concern for the other members of this diverse society, is at the core of our view of what it means to be Australian.

The Government continues to believe in the importance of involving community groups in the development of policies.

Some of you will know that the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Senator Bolkus, will be appointing in the near future a Multicultural Advisory Council. Helene Teichmann will be well aware of this, because I was delighted to hear that she has accepted an invitation to be a member.

The Council will advise the Government on specific matters such as the cultural diversity dimensions of the Centenary of Federation and the Sydney 2000 Olympics, as well as on the means of fostering greater debate and better understanding about Australia's cultural diversity.

I should note, in speaking of Senator Bolkus, that this Government continues to regard Immigration and Ethnic Affairs as sufficiently important to warrant the attention of a senior Cabinet Minister.

We are preparing to take a further step to safeguard our record of tolerance with the introduction shortly of national legislation on racial vilification.

The Australian concept of tolerance embraces freedom of opinion and freedom of expression. These are fundamental to our sense of ourselves.

However, some forms of expression are sufficiently offensive to be intolerable in a decent society.

This was brought home to me when I opened the Children of the Holocaust exhibition at the Australian War Memorial in February. The suggestion by some that the Holocaust never happened fosters incipient racism and, in the eyes of the Australian community, is obnoxious.

Another example was the jailing of people for a series of violent attacks in Perth inspired on racial grounds.

While most Australians are offended by the racial aspect of those crimes, the perpetrators were jailed under laws which do not recognise that aspect of their behaviour.

Racial vilification and racial violence are offensive to the Australian community. Our laws must reflect that.

The racial vilification laws will dissuade those who seek to incite violence and hatred against particular groups defined by ethnic origin.

The existence of a legal prohibition should of itself persuade most of the intolerant to think twice before parading their prejudices.

It will ensure that those invited to publish racist slurs have a legal ground for refusing.

But there will still be breaches of the law, and the Cabinet is considering how they will be dealt with.

We are not interested in elevating racists to the status of martyrs.

But the vicious and the reckless who would attack individual groups must be made to know that they are assaulting the values of the entire community and that there is a price to pay.

The very existence of such a law is a public and collective statement by the community that there are types of behaviour it will not tolerate.

By taking such a step we will reassert the value our community places on tolerance and respect.

For the past ten years, Mark Leibler has been at the forefront of the Zionist Federation of Australia's efforts to promote the cause of closer ties between Australia and Israel, and the aspirations of the Jewish community in Australia.

I first met Mark about eight years ago, talking not about the Federation or about Israel, but about taxation reform in Australia. The work we were engaged in then and since was not quite as difficult as reconciling the interests of Israelis and Arabs, but it sometimes seemed the views of the participants were just as resistant to change.

Ten years is a long time at the top of an organisation like this.

It is a tribute to Mark's skill and his commitment that the Federation has remained throughout that period so lively and influential an organisation. If the Government has not always agreed with Mark and the Federation, no-one should ever think it was because your President and his team failed to carry your views forcefully – even relentlessly – to us in Canberra.

So I want to add my voice to all those congratulating him.

The contribution he has made over that decade has not been simply to the Federation and the Jewish community. It has been a much broader contribution to public debate in Australia about some of the key issues affecting the nature of this society.

It is a contribution he can be proud of, and for which we are all grateful. We look forward to just as productive a relationship with his successor, and to our continuing dialogue with the Zionist Federation of Australia.