



## **PRIME MINISTER**

**UNDER EMBARGO UNTIL 9.45PM**

**SATURDAY 1 JUNE 1996**

**INAUGURAL YITZHAK RABIN MEMORIAL ORATION  
37TH BIENNIAL CONFERENCE OF THE ZIONIST FEDERATION OF  
AUSTRALIA, 1 JUNE 1996**

Mrs Ann Zabrud, President of the Zionist Federation of Australia  
Mark Liebler, President of the United Israel Appeal Refugee Relief Fund  
His Excellency Mr Shmuel Moyal, Ambassador of Israel  
Government colleagues and members of the Opposition  
Rabonim  
Distinguished guests  
Mr Malcolm Cohen (Master of Ceremonies)

It's a great pleasure to be here with you this evening, to enjoy your company  
and warm hospitality at this 37th Biennial Conference of the Zionist Federation  
of Australia.

I feel especially honoured to be asked to deliver the inaugural Yitzhak Rabin  
Memorial Oration for the United Israel Appeal Refugee Relief Fund.

My last address to your Conference was eight years ago, on that occasion as Leader of the Opposition.

It's been a big eight years for both of us.

I'm very pleased to be here tonight, both as prime minister and as a longstanding friend of Israel.

I'm pleased to have again the opportunity to say how much I value the role and friendship of Australia's Jewish community and the strong links between Australia and Israel.

I count as one of the valued things of my life a deep affection and respect for the Jewish people stretching back long before my entry into public life. Can I say, not to coin a phrase, that I feel relaxed and comfortable among you.

The world has changed enormously in those eight years, including in the Middle East. Eight years ago we might all have dreamed of an end to the long and bitter conflict, of finding peace for Israel and its neighbours in the region. But there was little reason then to foresee the progress which has since been made.

That dream is now within reach, although its final shape is yet to be resolved. None of us underestimates the difficult challenges that lie ahead still.

Many forces were at work in driving the peace process: the end of the Cold War and demise of the Soviet Union, the Gulf War and, not least, the sustained commitment and vigorous role of the United States in the Middle East.

But there is no doubt that a decisive force in turning the region from fear and despair, in bringing hope for peace, was the leader we honour tonight, Yitzhak Rabin.

### **Yitzhak Rabin**

On the night of his death, speaking at the peace rally in Tel Aviv, Yitzhak Rabin told the crowd of more than one hundred thousand people that he had always believed that the majority of the people wanted peace, and that they were ready to take risks for peace.

As the Zionist Federation's report says of him, Rabin was a selfless and heroic leader who was himself prepared to take great risks for peace.

He was not prepared, of course, to take risks which would jeopardise the security of Israel.

Rabin's support for the peace process was hard-headed and hard-nosed. He made the strategic judgment that only a negotiated peace would secure Israel's future. As the well-known Israeli author and commentator, Amos Oz, said after the assassination, Rabin was an unsentimental dove.

Rabin understood the uncertainties, fears and hopes of many Israelis in embarking on the path of making peace with their erstwhile enemies - those same who had threatened Israel's survival from the moment of its birth in 1948.

His commitment to Israel's survival as a nation, as a safe haven and refuge for the Jewish people, was the cornerstone of his life.

But he also realised the opportunity presented by the end of the Cold War.

He appreciated the significance of the changes taking place in Israel - in particular as a consequence of immigration and the growth in the Arab population - and in neighbouring Arab societies.

Like Israel's founding father, David Ben-Gurion, Rabin recognised the need for Israelis and Arabs to build mutual respect, as the necessary foundation for living side by side with each other as neighbours. As he said, speaking to Palestinians, in his inaugural speech to the Knesset in July 1992 "we have been fated to live together on the same patch of land ... We lead our lives with you ..."

Rabin's commitment to a negotiated settlement was bolstered by his convictions about the nature of the Israeli state and society.

Like Ben-Gurion, Rabin believed in the essential Jewishness of Israel and in the importance of its democracy. For Rabin, ruling by force over the Palestinians was fundamentally incompatible with the democratic character of Israel - it would, he said, cause many of Israel's friends to view Israel as no different from its enemies.

#### **Rabin and Progress Towards Peace**

Yitzhak Rabin became prime minister in 1992.

As prime minister, he brought to the pursuit of peace as a politician the same personal courage and strategic vision he had shown as a soldier - during Israel's war of independence and as the commander of Israel's forces during the 1967 war.

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He was at the heart of Israel's drive to ensure Israel's future security through peace, just as he had been at the critical moments in defending Israel's security militarily.

On becoming prime minister, he picked up and pushed ahead the peace process which began with the 1991 Madrid Conference

Under his leadership, Israel negotiated with the Palestinians the Oslo Declaration of Principles which was signed on 13 September 1993. We all remember that slight hesitation as he shook hands with Yasser Arafat - no doubt a small visible sign of the competing emotions tugging within his heart and the competing judgments tugging within his mind.

He signed with King Hussein the peace treaty with Jordan in October 1994.

Then, just over a month before his death, there was the signature on 28 September 1995 of the Interim Agreement governing the transitional period of Israeli/Palestinian relations and setting the framework for the permanent status negotiations.

The tremendous progress which has been achieved was not due to Rabin alone. He had partners for peace, in King Hussein and Yassar Arafat. The constructive and creative support of the United States was also necessary.

But it was Rabin's vision, courage and - above all - the trust the Israeli people had in him that kept the process moving.

## **Australia and the Middle East peace process**

The Government hopes - I hope - that this momentum will not be lost.

Newly elected prime minister, Mr Benjamin Netanyahu inherits a valuable legacy towards a comprehensive settlement. He also inherits a heavy responsibility to see that legacy fulfilled and help create a future in which all peoples of the Middle East can live in peace with security.

He brings a new era to the Israeli prime ministership. He is the first prime minister of Israel to have had no personal involvement in the tumultuous events surrounding the foundation of the Jewish state.

Alexander Downer will talk to you more tomorrow about the Government's policies on the Middle East. Tonight I want just to mention the basic principles which underpin those policies.

Eight years ago I promised you that a government led by me would be a true and understanding friend of Israel. My commitment to that promise has never wavered and I am pleased to repeat it tonight.

The security of Israel within recognised and respected borders is at the core of our policy.

Australia and Israel will, of course, sometimes have differences, but they will be resolved in the context of Australia's staunch support and friendship for Israel and the Israeli people.

A just outcome for the Palestinian people, in which their legitimate and political rights are respected, is clearly also necessary for the achievement of an enduring peace.

As Rabin said not long before his death, the nature and final shape of the Palestinian entity will be defined in the permanent status negotiations. The settlement is for the Israelis and Palestinians to decide. It's encouraging that the first round of those negotiations was held on schedule in Egypt last month. The PLO's recent decision to remove from its Charter the offensive provisions rejecting Israel's right to exist was also a most welcome step.

I would like to see a sovereign Lebanon, free of all foreign forces, with the Lebanese people being able to live in peace and continue to rebuild their country after the long years of civil war and strife.

A comprehensive settlement will require Syria to join in further negotiations with Israel.

The Government condemns the terrorism that seeks to wreck the peace process: the attacks on Israeli citizens by the Hamas suicide bombers and by Hezbollah.

There can be no compromise with terrorists, in the Middle East or elsewhere. Much of the terrorism that plagues the world has its roots, and its sponsors, in the Middle East. Iran's support for terrorism is unacceptable.

In the end, only the achievement of a comprehensive settlement will ensure the defeat of terrorism in the Middle East. It will also help defeat the activities of terrorists throughout the world.

Australia's support for the peace process is backed by practical contributions of resources and expertise. We have made longstanding commitments of Australian defence personnel to United Nations peacekeeping forces and the Multinational Force and Observers group in the Sinai.

Australia is active in the working groups on arms control and regional security and on water resources. Australian expertise and technology can be useful in helping manage the scarce water resources of Israel, Jordan and the Palestinians.

We have contributed since 1993 to rehabilitation and development projects for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank

#### **The impact of Rabin's assassination**

Having spoken about Yitzhak Rabin's role and his legacy for the peace process, I would like to reflect for a moment on the impact of his assassination.

In his final speech, Rabin told the crowds: "Violence erodes the basis of Israeli democracy. It must be condemned and isolated ... In a democracy, there can be differences but the final decision will be taken in democratic elections."

That Rabin was killed by a Jew was a transfiguring event for Israel. It prompted much questioning and discussion about the nature of Jewish society and, more widely, about the conduct of political debate and the role of free speech in a democracy.

In a similar way, the massacre at Port Arthur six weeks ago invited Australians to take a close look at our values and to reflect on the sort of society we want to live in.



In the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin, we saw the consequences of the hate-filled language of fanaticism, language which creates a climate of violence and intolerance and hopelessness.

Australians, like Israelis, are not backward in expressing opinions about any subject, often in pithy and colourful language. The idea of plain speaking and give and take is an accepted part of political debate.

But politicians have a responsibility to protect standards and institutions. In recent years, I have emphasised the importance of restoring respect for Parliament and its procedures.

During the election campaign and since, I have emphasised the importance of restoring the faith of the electorate in their political representatives. In my own case, I regard it as a matter of personal honour my commitment to deliver on promises made during the campaign.

For democracy to work it is vital that there be mutual trust between government and people.

Following the tragedy at Port Arthur, the clear national will was that the Government act to control guns more tightly. Responding to that demand has been an important acquittal of political responsibility.

The tragedy also raised questions about the influence of violence in films and other media on how we think and act - and especially on the attitudes of our children. The role of government in responding to such community concerns requires careful consideration.

As you would all know, I am against the unnecessary intrusion of government into people's lives, especially where such intrusion impinges on people's personal freedoms and choices.

It is a matter for fine judgment and honest debate as to where the line should be drawn between rights and controls. We have seen that words and images have awful and sometimes unintended consequences. On the other hand, for democracies like Israel and Australia, the protection of free speech is of fundamental importance.

I know that this community has a particular interest in these issues, and that the Coalition's position on the Racial Hatred Act was a matter of concern to the Federation.

You should be in no doubt about our abhorrence and rejection of all forms of racism. The Federation is aware of my support for the Australian Parliament's unanimous rejection in 1986 of the UN resolution which equated Zionism with racism. We shared your pleasure when that resolution, with Australia's support, was overturned in the United Nations in 1991.

But tolerance of the views of others, at least their right to express them, is essential if our society is to retain its democratic foundations. As I have said before, drawing on Voltaire, I may not agree with what another person says but I defend his right to say it.

For the Coalition parties including criminal sanctions in the Racial Hatred Act would have been to go past where we judged the line should be. The Act has only recently come into force. The Government will retain it and monitor its operations. We shall be happy to maintain a dialogue with the Federation and with other interested community organisations in that process.

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Racism will be eliminated only when the ignorance and lack of understanding which are its breeding grounds are overcome. The Government's \$10 million two-year education and information programme will, I hope, help reduce racist attitudes in the community and foster tolerance and fairness.

#### **Australia and Israel**

My first letter to a foreign leader after I was sworn in as prime minister was to Mr Peres expressing my concern about the Hamas bombings. I have today sent a message to Mr Netanyahu congratulating him and reaffirming Australia's commitment to the relationship with Israel.

Those links between our countries and our peoples go back a long way, to the participation of Australian soldiers in the liberation of Jerusalem in the First World War, and Australia's early recognition of the new state of Israel in 1948.

More can be done, however, to deepen the links, especially in the commercial field. Trade between Australia and Israel has been growing, but has not yet reached its full potential.

I know that many of the guests here tonight are actively pursuing the opportunities presented by Israel as an export market. There is scope for more joint ventures, especially in areas such as information technology, telecommunications and agriculture, where Australian and Israeli companies have much to offer each other in research and technology capabilities.

I was pleased to hear of the successful participation last month by a large Australian delegation in Agritech '96, Israel's international agricultural

exhibition. I heard that delegation found good prospects for cooperation in agricultural technology.

The private sector is obviously best placed to identify and pursue the opportunities. My government will do what it can to assist the competitiveness of Australian exporters by reforms in the labour market, telecommunications, energy and the waterfront.

#### **Immigration and the United Israel Appeal Refugee Relief Fund**

Australia and Israel share the challenges and opportunities of welcoming migrants to our shores.

When I last spoke to you, Soviet controls on emigration still prevented many from exercising their right to leave. Since then nearly 700,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union have rebuilt their lives in Israel.

As Rabin said in his Rosh Hashana message last year, this is a matter for pride but also no easy undertaking.

In this context, I would like to pay tribute to the United Israel Appeal Refugee Relief Fund for its work in helping young refugees from Ethiopia, the former Soviet Union, and former Yugoslavia settle in Israel.

We admire the Fund's creativity and the success of its well-designed projects - in particular, its work with Ethiopian student refugees, many of whom are orphans and come from very deprived conditions. These students have begun new lives through the training and other support given them at special boarding schools.

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I would like to compliment Mark Liebler for the energy and commitment he has shown as president of the Fund. No-one who is aware of his ten years as former president of the Zionist Federation would be surprised by his achievements at the Fund.

#### **Jewish community and Zionist Federation of Australia**

The Jewish community in Australia is the most important link we have with Israel.

The Jewish community has made an outstanding contribution to Australia's national, cultural, business and intellectual life.

The Zionist Federation of Australia has a respected role in communicating to the government and the wider Australian public the Jewish community's views on Israel and the Middle East, and on social and other issues in Australia. It does great work, as your report shows, in fostering the Jewish religion and culture, and in supporting the Jewish community, including through its education and youth programmes.

I would like to thank the outgoing President of the Federation, Mrs Ann Zablud, for her invitation this evening. She has made a distinguished contribution to the Jewish community. I offer my best wishes to her successor, Dr Ron Weiser.

#### **Conclusion**

I think it's appropriate for me to conclude by returning to what must be the principal theme of this evening in honour of Yitzhak Rabin - peace in the Middle East.



The violence of his death adds poignancy to his comments on signing the peace accord on 13 September 1993: "We should not let the land flowing with milk and honey become a land flowing with blood and tears".

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It is, as Rabin said, "impossible to erase 100 years of hostility and bloodshed with the stroke of a pen and single handshake. It is an ongoing and often painful process."

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How painful Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East know better than we here tonight.

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But we can dedicate ourselves to supporting those who continue Rabin's search for a comprehensive settlement.

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I assure you my government will be a constant friend to Israel as it continues that search.

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