

ECAJ ANNUAL REPORT 5765/2005

PRESIDENT'S OVERVIEW

This past year, the Council's 61st, has been an extra-ordinary one for Australia's Jewish community and indeed for world Jewry. Globally, the successful disengagement from Gaza and the encouraging signs of an emerging counter attack against the new wave of anti-Semitism dominate. In a year of many highlights the ones I wish to draw particular attention to from Australia's perspective are:

1. The State visit to Australia in February/March of the President of Israel, H.E. Moshe Katsav and Mrs. Katsav. It was my privilege on behalf of the Community to jointly host the communal aspects of the visit with my colleague Dr. Ron Weiser, President of the Zionist Federation of Australia. The President of Israel was hosted by Australia's political leadership, including a dinner at Yarralumla, hosted by His Excellency the Governor-General, Major-General Michael Jeffery AC CVO MC, a lunch hosted by Prime Minister John Howard, a cocktail reception hosted by NSW Premier Bob Carr and a formal lunch hosted by Victorian Premier Steve Bracks. The visit recognised Australia's ongoing support for Israel and the pursuit of a just, peaceful settlement between Israel and the Palestine people. Australia and Israel are both vibrant democracies, share many common values including respect for the rule of law, have successfully absorbed large numbers of immigrants from diverse backgrounds and have a strong interest in achieving and maintaining peace, stability and prosperity in their respective regions. Trade and cultural agreements over a wide range of topics embracing water and health management, agriculture and information technology.

President and Mrs. Katsav visited the Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne communities and received enthusiastic welcomes at well attended functions showcasing Australia's Jewish Community. They were particularly impressed with the extent of our day school system whose students provided impressive presentations at Sydney's Central Synagogue and Mt. Scopus Memorial College in Melbourne.

At both the political and communal level the visit was an unqualified success and reflected the ever strengthening ties between the two nations. My thanks and compliments to the many who contributed to the visit's organisation which was ably coordinated by Philip Chester.

2. The eagerly awaited arrival in January of Israel's new Ambassador to Australia H.E. Naphtali (Nati) and his wife Daphne. They have quickly immersed themselves in our Community and give willingly and tirelessly of their time. Nati has made a positive impact in his formal role which extends to New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Fiji. We are indeed fortunate to have such a professional, compassionate and charming couple as Israel's representative to Australia and the Pacific. Our Community continues to remind the Israeli Government of the need to re-establish consular offices in Sydney and Auckland as soon as resources permit.

In January, along with Council's Executive Officer Josh Landis, I represented Australia at a Plenary Assembly in Brussels of the World Jewish Congress (WJC). The meeting was most notable for the focus on the public dispute regarding alleged fiscal irregularities. An unfortunate consequence of this disputation was the alienation from the WJC of ECAJ Past President and Honorary Life Member, Isi Leibler AO CBE.. At the time of writing it is still not clear as to the outcomes of the allegations. While Isi remains widely respected for his contributions over a long period to Australia's Jewish Community, it was made clear that Australia's primary interests were that the WJC institute standards of governance appropriate to its role and standing. Undertakings to institute the necessary reforms to bring about this situation were given by WJC re-elected President Edgar Bronfman and newly elected Executive Director Stephen Herbits.

A related but separate review to revise the WJC constitution under the leader of Professor Yoram Dinstein who addressed the ECAJ 2004 Annual Conference is due to be considered next year. It is hoped one of the outcomes of this process will be a better defined role for Australia in the WJC recognising both the Australian Jewish Community's pre-eminent position in the Asia Pacific region and Australia's entitlement to direct representation on the WJC Governing Board.

Meantime, we continue to participate in the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress (see report page 202).

3. Security of our citizens and communal property remains a top priority. The level of alert remains high and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. The collective cost continues to escalate and despite many initiatives to seek some relief none have yet borne fruit and members, parents and donors continue to bear the burden. Meantime, we are indebted to the wonderful efforts of our largely volunteer Community Security Group under the expert co-ordination of Gavin Queit.

As is Council's usual practice a full and separate report edited by Past President Jeremy Jones AM on anti-Semitism in Australia for the year ended 30 September 2005 has been published. However, the introduction is included in this volume to provide a more complete overview of Council's activities (refer page 106).

A related Council activity is the prosecution at the federal level of relevant race hatred incidents and at present four cases are in progress. We are indeed fortunate to have had the services on a pro bono basis of Peter Wertheim and Stephen Rothman SC (now Justice) and more recently Robert Goot AM SC and Steven Lewis. Nonetheless the out of pocket costs associated with these prosecutions (up to \$25,000 each) is a major drain on Council's limited finances.

Finally under the broad heading of security I draw attention to the proposed upgrade of Australia's anti-terrorism laws which at the time of writing are about to be submitted. Until the actual proposed Bills are tabled it is difficult for Council to form a considered view beyond the need for an acceptable balance to be struck between the often conflicting needs of preventing terrorism and maintaining an acceptable standard of civil liberties.

4. An ongoing and priority function of the Council is to represent Australia's survivor community at the various Restitution organisations in working for the rights of survivors and their heirs and the true recording of the history of the Shoah. An important event in the annual calendar is the Claims Conference and

this year we were ably represented by Past President and Life Member Nina Bassat AM whose report commences on page 196.

5. Council's ongoing community relations programmes are one of our great success stories. We are indeed fortunate to have so many talented and committed volunteers in our community from both the rabbinical and lay sectors. This building of mutual respect, understanding and trust between our community and other faiths and ethnic communities is critical to the maintenance of open communication channels.

It is clear from the many reports this multi layered activity is a feature of many of the organisations which form part of our federation. I delivered an address to the Peace and Harmony Conference, held in Sydney and hosted by the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils. The address I gave at that time can be found at page 9. I also attended several IFTAR functions during the month of Ramadan.

At the national level, the reports of the programme led by Council Honorary Officers Rabbi John Levi AM DD, Hon. Secretary Josie Lacey OAM and Immediate Past President Jeremy Jones AM commence at pages 171 and 205. I also recommend reading Peta Jones Pellach's report on her visit to Indonesia last Chanukah as a member of an Australian Government Inter-Faith delegation (see page 185).

6. Most of the foregoing would not be as successful without the constant organisation of our Community's network with members of the Government, Opposition parties and senior public servants. In this endeavour the community is well served by the collaborative partnership with each of our Constituent bodies and the Australian/Israel and Jewish Affairs Council whose Executive Director, Colin Rubenstein acts as consultant to the Council.
7. As I have already indicated this year the already deep and strong bond between our Community and Israel was further strengthened by the visit of President Moshe Katsav. Coincidentally, President Katsav subsequently convened a *Consultative Meeting with Leaders of the Jewish World* in Israel last June.

Regrettably I was unable to accept the President's invitation but Australia was well represented by Mark Leibler AC who this year became Chairman of Karen-Hayesod United Israel Appeal World Board of Trustees and Ron Weiser President of the Zionist Federation of Australia. The *Concluding Statement* is reproduced on page 215 and it is the hope this commendable initiative will lead to practical proposals to meet the challenges confronting the Jewish people.

8. Jews only make up about 0.5% of Australia's population yet since the first fleet we have consistently "punched above our weight". Effective representative Councils at both state and national level are one of the keys to our continuing this proud record of contribution to our wonderful nation. In keeping with the times Council is reviewing its constitution to formally include standards of governance appropriate to today's requirements. This review includes the recommendation that Council incorporate under the ACT Associations Incorporation Act.

As is evidenced by the wealth of relevant and useful information in the appended reports, there are many other highlights to which I could have referred in this overview such as the 160th anniversary of the Hobart Synagogue (page 133), and the record Australian representation at the Maccabiah Games (page 149). Attention is also drawn to the listing of those Australian Jews who received awards within the Order of Australia during the past year (page 210). Included in Council's report for the first time, it reflects great credit not only on the individual recipients but also this Community of which they are part.

Grahame Leonard
President