

AUSTRALIA'S JEWISH COMMUNITY AND THE FEDERAL ELECTION

Communal security, support for our schools, further developing Australia's unique model of cultural diversity, learning the lessons of the Holocaust and continued bi-partisan support for Israel are the key issues of special relevance to Australia's Jews in this month's federal election. Our colleagues from the Zionist Federation of Australia have dealt most adequately with issues relating to Israel. Our focus is on domestic national issues.

It is not the role of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, the community's elected representative organisation, to suggest how members of Australia's Jewish community should cast their vote. Indeed, the ECAJ has always maintained a strong relationship with the major political parties and carefully avoided being, or perceived to be, supportive of one party or another, during election periods or otherwise.

Australian Jews are exactly that, namely both Australians and Jews. We share the same concerns and are affected by the same issues important to all Australians, be they economics, climate change, health, education or immigration. Sometimes our views mirror those of the larger Australian community, with no discernible Jewish interest. At other times, however, our Jewish identity shapes our views and hence our expectations of our political leaders.

The security of our community is our first priority. All Australians are affected by the threat of terrorists, more specifically radical Islamists. Australia's federal authorities confirm that Jews are particularly vulnerable as a major defined enemy by radical Muslim groups. Accordingly we welcome the commitment by both the Coalition and the ALP to enact the necessary legislation to enable the creation of the Council for Jewish Security administered by the ECAJ and which grants tax deductibility for donations to nominated communal security activities. We seek confirmation that the incoming government will ensure the speedy passage of this legislation at the earliest opportunity.

The ALP also has promised to provide \$20 million in cash grants to meet the recurrent security costs for schools over the next four years and an additional \$16 million to overcome anomalies in the impact of SES scores on Jewish schools, thus ensuring fair funding outcomes. We urge the Coalition to similarly commit to this necessary initiative.

While these steps are most welcome, it is distressing that Australia's Jewish children are accustomed to seeing as normal security guards at our schools, synagogues and institutions. We pray for the time when this will no longer be necessary and ask Government to ensure that Australia's Jews enjoy the same protection as all other Australians.

Over this past twelve months the ECAJ has been in discussions with both the Government and the Opposition to encourage Australia to become a signatory to the International Task Force on Holocaust Commemoration and Education. This Task Force was formed after the Stockholm Conference in 2000. By becoming a signatory Australia's future governments will be obligated to ensure all generations of Australians are made aware of the lessons of the Holocaust. In our immigrant society this is essential. While we are pleased to report that there is bi-partisan support for this proposal it will require the incoming government to commit resources in both the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Education and we seek undertakings that this will occur expeditiously.

We oppose any attempt by either side of politics to abandon or dilute the principle of non-discrimination in immigration and refugee policies. A request to settle in Australia should be determined solely on its merits, not by reference to the applicant's race, religion or country of origin. We want those gaining refuge here to feel safe and supported, enabling them to make their own contributions to their new home. To this end, Government must ensure access and equity in the provision of services, including mechanisms to address the barriers faced by immigrants still unfamiliar with Australian culture and language. This includes continuing policies that respect the right of all Australians to express their individual cultural identity, to maintain and share their cultural heritage, within an overriding commitment to Australia, its way of life and its values. As part of this package we consider it necessary to strengthen the punitive provisions of the Racial Discrimination Act. Recent years have seen a worrying increase in the number of antisemitic incidents as part of a broader rise in incidents of a racist nature throughout the Australian community.

Finally we seek undertakings that the incoming government will do all possible to ensure that the United Nations 2009 Durban Review Conference will not see a repeat of the disgraceful events that occurred at the Durban World Conference Against Racism 2001. Despite the commendable and much appreciated efforts of the Australian government delegation at Durban 2001, the Conference degenerated into an anti-Israel and anti-Jewish propaganda rally.

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