

The Hon Stephen Smith MP
AUSTRALIAN MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Speech at lunch hosted by the Executive Council of Australian Jewry at the Adele Southwick Centre St Kilda Hebrew Congregation

Australia and Israel

Introduction

Thank you for that kind introduction.

I also take this opportunity to congratulate Robert Goot, our host as President of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, on being elected as a Vice-President of the World Jewish Congress.

The 60th Anniversary of Israel's statehood, celebrated last year, was a time to reflect on and celebrate Israel's achievements.

It was also an opportunity to reaffirm Australia's ongoing support and friendship for Israel.

And from a personal point of view, I was pleased to be able to make my first visit to Israel as Foreign Minister during that anniversary year.

As Prime Minister Rudd said to the Australian Parliament on that occasion, Australia's relationship with Israel is both strong and deep.

Australia's commitment could not be more resolute, our friendship could not be closer.

We share a unique relationship based on Australia's historical support for Israel and our shared commitment to freedom, security and democracy. Our friendship will remain strong because our values are shared.

A shared history

Australia's support for the State of Israel goes right back to its creation.

Foreign Minister H.V. Evatt, one of my predecessors, played an important role through his Chairmanship of the United Nations International Commission on Palestine in 1947. Evatt understood the justice of Israel's right to full international citizenship at a time when many still did not.

When a vote was called that year on General Assembly Resolution 181 to establish

separate Jewish and Arab states, the Australian delegate was the first to vote. And the first to vote in favour of the proposal.

As you know, Evatt went on to be President of the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, and was prominent in the negotiations that led to Israel's creation.

Early the following year, the Chifley Government ensured that Australia was among the first nations to formally recognise Israel.

Evatt then presided over the historic May 1949 vote admitting Israel as the 59th member of the United Nations.

Following that vote, Israel's distinguished representative Abba Eban acknowledged the contribution that Evatt and the Australian Government had made to the international recognition of Israel, when he said:

'The manner in which you steered to a vote this second historic Resolution ♦ the warmth and eloquence with which you welcomed Israel into the family of nations, have earned for you the undying gratitude of our people.'

Australia is both proud and honoured to have these important historic links to the creation of the Israeli State.

We are equally proud of the enduring friendship we have built with Israel since its creation, a friendship built by our peoples as much as it has been bolstered by Australian Governments of all political persuasions.

Contribution of the Australian Jewish Community

As Minister for Immigration in the Chifley Government, Arthur Calwell pioneered a post-war immigration policy that welcomed Holocaust survivors to Australia.

The policy brought more survivors per capita to Australia than to any country except Israel itself.

In implementing the program, Calwell worked closely with the leaders of the Australian Jewish community to arrange passage for survivors to Australia.

Following the unimaginable horrors in Europe during the 1930s and 1940s, Australia welcomed approximately 35 000 Jewish refugees and survivors.

Well before the Holocaust, Jewish people had come to Australia, including as convicts on the First Fleet and attracted by the gold rushes of the mid-1800s.

These early members of the Australian Jewish community made very important contributions to Australian society.

Sir Isaac Isaacs, for example, had a distinguished career as a lawyer and Member of Parliament before serving on the High Court for 25 years, including as Chief Justice,

and as the first Australian-born Governor-General.

Sir John Monash, whose portrait adorned this hall, was another member of the Australian Jewish community who made an outstanding contribution to Australian life, both as an engineer and as the greatest of all Australian military commanders.

More recently, members of the Australian Jewish community have made their own important and highly valued contributions to Australian society.

There are extensive contacts between Australian and Israeli business, community, union and philanthropic organisations.

These, together with the broader Australian Jewish community, provide the bedrock of our ever strengthening relationship.

The bilateral relationship

The Australian-Israel relationship is underpinned by our shared values of democracy, pluralism and the rule of law.

My own first visit to Israel as a Member of Parliament was in 2001. I then saw for myself what those shared values meant.

On that occasion, our delegation was privileged to have as one of our guides Michael Oren, recently appointed as Israel's Ambassador to the United States.

I met for the first time then Prime Minister Sharon and then Foreign Minister Peres.

I travelled by helicopter up and down the country to see and truly appreciate the very compact nature of the State of Israel.

I also saw that like Australia, Israel is a multicultural state. Immigrants from all corners of the earth have come to both countries.

We are both societies in which an honest and robust debate on the issues of the day is as expected as it is respected, vital to the health of our democracies.

And so in October last year, as Foreign Minister, I was delighted to reaffirm Australia's longstanding friendship with and support for Israel, in meetings in Tel Aviv with then Prime Minister Olmert, then Leader of the Opposition Netanyahu and then Foreign Minister Livni.

During that visit I was again struck by the achievements and successes of the State of Israel.

Again I was able to spend time in both deeply sad and sober reflection at the Holocaust memorial at Yad Vashem.

And since Israel's recent elections I have reaffirmed Australia's commitment in

telephone discussions with Defence Minister Barak, Foreign Minister Lieberman and now Leader of the Opposition Livni.

Durban Review Conference

Australia's strong support for Israel goes hand-in-hand with our commitment to combat anti-Semitism and other forms of racism wherever they may occur.

Since taking office, both domestically and internationally, the Australian Government has made the advancement of human rights and combating racism a priority.

The Government has worked actively to advance the human rights of all Australians, especially those who have suffered from disadvantage, most notably Indigenous Australians.

The Durban Review Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Geneva last month should have been an occasion for the world to unite against racism in all its forms.

As I made clear in my comments to Parliament on 12 March, Australia wanted to ensure that the Conference did not see a repeat of the problems that marred the Durban World Conference Against Racism in 2001.

Australia worked with a range of countries in Geneva, including The Netherlands, to promote an acceptable outcome document for presentation to the Conference.

These efforts led to significant improvements in the document.

Ultimately, however, they were not enough.

Australia could not support a document which reaffirmed the 2001 Durban Declaration and Program of Action in its entirety.

The 2001 Declaration singled out Israel and the Middle East.

Australia expressed strong concerns about this after the 2001 Conference, and Australia's concerns remained in 2009.

As well, the Australian Government could not be confident that this year's Review Conference would not again be used as a platform to air offensive anti-Semitic views.

Australia joined Canada, Germany, Israel, Italy, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland and the United States in deciding not to participate in the Conference. The Czech Republic also subsequently withdrew.

The Government took this decision with regret as Australians are a people committed to eliminating racism and racial discrimination.

While Australia withdrew from this Conference, we remain determined to combat racism and racial discrimination wherever it exists.

Regrettably, while no vindication was needed, Australia's concerns over the Conference were borne out.

The Australian Government condemns yet again the anti-Semitic views expressed by Iran's President in his statement to the Conference.

Iran

Australia is profoundly concerned by the behaviour of the Iranian leadership.

The views expressed by the Iranian President at the Durban Review Conference, his earlier calls for the destruction of Israel and his questioning of the Holocaust, are abhorrent by any standard and are absolutely unacceptable.

The Australian Government's concerns in this regard are very clear, and I make them so again today.

The Australian Government is also deeply troubled by Iran's refusal to address the international community's grave concerns about its nuclear intentions. Australia has supported and reinforced international efforts to hold Iran to account on this matter.

That is why the Australian Government fully and rigorously implements UN Security Council sanctions, and why in October last year we adopted additional autonomous sanctions against Iran.

Australia supports efforts by the international community, particularly by the new US Administration, to engage Iran in dialogue. These initiatives must be given every chance to succeed.

I expressed Australia's support for the United States in its efforts to engage Iran in my meetings with Secretary of State Clinton and Ambassador Dennis Ross, Special Advisor to the Secretary of State for the Gulf and Southwest Asia, in Washington in April.

Australia itself will continue to engage Iran in bilateral and multilateral meetings to underline the importance of Iran responding clearly and constructively to these efforts at dialogue.

I met Iran's Foreign Minister Mottaki in the margins of the Friends of Democratic Pakistan Meeting in Tokyo in April, and Deputy Foreign Minister Akhondzadeh in the margins of the Afghanistan Conference at The Hague in March, and I conveyed this imperative directly.

Our approach is clear eyed and Australia consistently makes the point to Iran that it needs to change its policy approach.

We continue to encourage Iran to respond positively to the overtures from the United States.

Peace Process

A touchstone of the friendship between Australia and Israel is Australia's clear and unambiguous commitment to Israel's sovereign right to exist within secure borders, which we so strongly supported in 1948.

That is why Australia stood firmly by Israel's right to defend itself in the face of Hamas's rocket attacks into southern Israel last year.

The tragedy of that conflict for both Israelis and Palestinians reminded us all yet again of the need for a just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

As I said in January, when agreeing with UK Foreign Secretary Miliband, the international community also has to bear its share of the responsibility for the failure, not over weeks or months or years, but over decades, to bring about that peace.

The Australian Government is convinced that all efforts to secure a just and enduring peace must be made, and made now.

Addressing the Israel-Palestinian conflict serves to strengthen the position of those in the region who seek peace with Israel, and to expose those who do not.

Australia wants the Israeli people to be able to enjoy the fruits of a normal existence, within a Middle East that recognises Israel's right to live in peace.

The status quo, with all its ongoing uncertainties, insecurity and tragedies, is not acceptable.

The status quo is not in the interests of Israel, the Palestinians, the Middle East region or the broader international community.

As I said publicly just after the recent Israeli elections, Australia and the international community both want and need to see a wholehearted commitment to the Middle East peace process.

However complex the challenge of negotiations may be, only a negotiated solution can provide a just and enduring peace to the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

We welcome Prime Minister Netanyahu's commitment to work with the Palestinian Authority on political, economic and security issues, and his desire to resume the peace talks as soon as possible.

As in 1947, Australia today believes that a two-state solution must be the basis for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Australia welcomes the energy and commitment that the Obama Administration has brought to efforts to achieve a two state solution.

I said this directly to Secretary of State Clinton and the US Special Envoy for the Middle East, Senator George Mitchell, in Washington last month.

The Palestinian Authority has made some good economic and security progress and on that basis deserves support.

It is important that the parties, with the support of the international community, move forward and build on achievements already effected, including under the Annapolis process and the Roadmap for Middle East peace.

I made Australia's support for the Roadmap clear to Israeli and Palestinian leaders during my visit there last year, and since the election of the new Israeli Government.

Strong political leadership on both sides is and will be required to achieve progress. It is also going to require courage.

Both sides must honour the agreements they have entered into.

This means that the Palestinians must continue to dismantle terrorist infrastructure and to halt violence and incitement.

Equally, Israel needs to freeze settlement activity.

A way must also be found to ease restrictions on the movement of people and goods in the West Bank, while ensuring the safety and security of Israelis.

And a way must be found to relieve the suffering of ordinary Gazans until the Palestinian Authority is able to resume its responsibilities there.

Only by both sides taking substantive measures will we see the confidence and trust necessary for genuinely productive negotiations.

The support of Israel's neighbours and friends will also be essential to a successful negotiation.

This is why Australia has welcomed the Arab Peace Initiative as a constructive contribution towards a comprehensive peace.

We support those who are standing strongly against those offering the false hope of confrontation, violence and terrorism.

Overnight, Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu met President Obama in Washington.

Jordan's King Abdullah visited Washington recently for talks, and other regional leaders including Palestinian Authority President Abbas and Egyptian President Mubarak will also visit the United States soon.

We welcome very much the United States Administration's active and positive engagement in the peace process at the beginning of its term in office.

The engagement of the United States is crucial to effecting a long term enduring peace in the Middle East.

The Australian Government strongly supports the work of the Quartet (the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations) and the Quartet's principles, which require any Palestinian Government to renounce violence, recognise Israel's right to exist and accept agreements previously entered into by the Palestinian leadership.

As a committed friend, Australia will continue to stand in support of Israel as it seeks peace with security.

United Nations

Australia takes a principled approach to issues related to the Middle East in the United Nations.

We did so both in the context of our withdrawal from the Durban Conference, and of our consideration late last year of United Nations General Assembly resolutions on the Middle East, where there were changes to Australia's voting on two resolutions.

One resolution related to the application in international law of the Geneva Conventions within the Palestinian Territories and the other related to settlements.

I know that there are strong views on these issues within the Australian Jewish community, and I know that not everyone agreed with the Government's position.

The Australian Government treats each resolution on a case-by-case basis and considers them on their merits.

In all cases we are guided by the principles that I have outlined today, in particular our strong support for Israel's ongoing security, the Middle East peace process and a two state solution, and the striving for a just and enduring peace.

Conclusion

H.V. Evatt once said that through his work in the United Nations he sought to ensure that the a new State of Israel, whose people had in the past done so much for humanity, would be welcomed, not merely formally but with good heart and good conscience into the international community.

Australia will always stand with Israel as it strives for peace and security, using every opportunity we can to bring to a conclusion what Evatt, and so many others since, have worked so hard to achieve.

Australia's Jewish community does a great deal to promote, sustain and strengthen our enduring friendship with Israel.

I warmly thank you for your contribution.

I look forward to working with you into the future as Australia maintains its proud commitment as a true friend of Israel.

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