



EXECUTIVE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN JEWRY Inc.

PRESIDENT'S OVERVIEW 5767/2007

Though not without its challenges, this past year was more positive for the Australian Jewish community than its predecessor. In this overview I draw attention to matters which I believe deserve emphasis.

1. Protecting our citizens and assets is always our first priority and there is much to report on this topic. After many years of campaigning we are now very close to achieving tax deductibility for donations to assist with the cost of providing security and protection for our community's members and institutions. The vehicle for this programme is the newly created Council for Jewish Community Security which is administered by the ECAJ. This initiative of the Australian government has bipartisan support from the ALP and we have good reason to believe the enabling legislation will be passed at the next sitting of the Australian parliament whether it be before or after the upcoming federal election. We are indebted to Mark Leibler AC for this ground breaking outcome.

The ALP, in addition to pledging support for the creation of the Council for Jewish Community Security 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.

While these initiatives are most welcome, it is distressing that in this magnificent country of Australia, Jewish children see as normal the need to have security guards at our schools, synagogues and institutions. I pray for the time when this will no longer be necessary and Australia's Jews enjoy the same security status as do all other Australians. Meantime I again pay tribute to the commitment and professionalism of our largely volunteer Community Security Groups. We are fortunate indeed to have such a wonderful group of young people looking out for

our well being. My special thanks to Gavin Queit who coordinates the Australia-wide CSG activities on behalf of the ECAJ.

It is worrying to report that the number of antisemitic incidents again increased across our nation over the past year. However, with some disturbing exceptions, the level of severity declined. We must temper this concern with the advice from Australian authorities that there has been an even greater increase in violent incidents of a racist nature in the general community. There was no repeat of the surge in antisemitic incidents at universities evident at some campuses during last year's second Israel/Lebanon war. It would appear the ECAJ's representation to the (then) Australian Vice Chancellors Committee was effective. The year's incidents are detailed in the companion volume to this Annual Report, the ECAJ's *Annual Report on Anti-Semitism in Australia* for the year ended 30 September 2007. My thanks to Jeremy Jones AM for his usual excellent work as coordinating editor of this important publication.

2. Australia is a rare oasis in a worrying world desert populated with increasing efforts to delegitimise Israel's right to continue as a sovereign state. These efforts range from the explicit and implicit threats from Iran, Syria and their sponsored Hamas and Hezbollah organisations to the failed boycott attempts in the United Kingdom and the plethora of anti-Zionist, anti-Israel rhetoric in many world forums including the United Nations Human Rights Council. I firmly believe Australia's Jewish community is the strongest and most pro-Zionistic in the Diaspora. Support for Israel is central to so many of the activities of our communal organisations. We are especially appreciative of the bipartisan support from the major political parties which we must never take for granted. The ECAJ works cooperatively with all sections of our community including our own constituents and ZFA, AIJAC, JNF and UIA and of course the Israeli Embassy staff to further our mutual agendas. It is particularly encouraging to see the expansion in the number of bilateral agreements being forged between Australia and Israel, both in the public and private sectors. Bilateral trade is about to pass the one billion dollar level and Israel's new ambassador, Yuval Rotem has, as I pen this report, foreshadowed the sealing of a free trade agreement between

Australia and Israel this coming year during which we will share in celebrating the 60th anniversary of the miracle of the creation of modern Israel.

I take this opportunity of welcoming Ambassador Yuval Rotem, Miri and their children as members of our extended family. A hearty welcome also to Embassy Deputy Chief of Mission Eli Yerushalmi and his wife Shuli. Under Yuval's leadership there is clearly a new spirit and energy in the whole embassy team. Their task is particularly daunting given the geographic reach which includes New Zealand, PNG and Fiji and with no apparent prospect of the New Zealand Embassy or the Sydney consular office reopening in the foreseeable future.

In June we farewelled Ambassador Nati Tamir and his wife Daphne. Nati represented Israel well during his tenure, particularly his untiring advocacy during last year's second Israel/Lebanon war. He and Daphne left many friends here in Australia and we wish them well in their future endeavours.

We were not able to put together an ECAJ leadership mission to Israel, due, I suspect to the large number of missions now regularly occurring. Ruth and I did, however, enjoy a wonderful Israel experience in June and my report is included at Appendix A. See also my article on the Arava, Appendix B.

3. The enclosed reports provide an indication of the multiplicity of interfaith and inter ethnic dialogues and activities in which our community engages. This continues a long tradition. While these "partnerships" are effective at the political and leadership levels, it is disappointing that it has not yet resulted in public support from our partners when it is often most needed. Recent examples include lack of public condemnation of antisemitic incidents and lack of support for Australian government initiatives to dissuade Iran from becoming a nuclear power, a clear and present threat to the entire free world.
4. Since my last report the World Jewish Congress has undergone significant change. Edgar Bronfman retired as president after dismissing Rabbi Israel Singer. The ECAJ accepted an invitation to attend a special board meeting in New York in June and supported the candidacy of Ronald Lauder as WJC President. He was

duly elected. ECAJ has provisionally rejoined pending the fulfilment of undertakings including a new WJC constitution – see my report, Appendix C. Unfortunately Ronald Lauder’s planned visit to this year’s ECAJ annual conference has had to be deferred.

5. The ECAJ believed that Rabbi Israel Singer should also no longer hold office with the Claims Conference and we wrote accordingly (see Appendix D). Rabbi Singer decided not to seek re-election at the Conference board meeting held in New York in July. I again represented the Australian community and my report is set out in Appendix E. The Conference has recently attracted considerable media criticism, much of it, in my view, ill informed. Nevertheless I did have some suggestions to improve the governance of the Conference. My exchange of correspondence with Conference Chairman Julius Berman is contained in Appendices F and G.

I am pleased to report that there are encouraging signs that Australia will become a signatory to the International Taskforce for Holocaust Commemoration. Following ECAJ representation to both the Government and Opposition there is bipartisan support for this proposal. Australia sent a diplomatic observer to the Taskforce annual meeting in Prague in June. The process will take about two years but once completed will ensure future generations of Australians learn the lessons of the Holocaust. This is highly relevant, indeed essential, for Australia with our large number of different ethnic and faith communities.

6. Held concurrently with our 2006 Annual Conference was the first Nahum Goldmann Fellowship Alumni Conference attended by former and prospective Fellows from Australia and New Zealand. A joint venture between the ECAJ and the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture and coordinated by NSW Councillor Yair Miller it was a successful first step toward building continuity in communal leadership. Consequently I attended a Memorial Foundation executive meeting in Israel (see Appendix H to discuss the project and possible next steps).

7. At this year's ECAJ annual conference we will be holding a workshop aimed at establishing an Australian Federation of Jewish Care organisations. Invitees will include those directly involved in the delivery of services. The objectives of what is proposed can be summarised as:

- Provide leadership and a national focus for the raising of important health and social issues confronting Australian Jewry.
- Enable access to expert lobbying and advocacy advice.
- Represent the interests of Jewish community agencies to Commonwealth and State Governments and the Australian Local Government Association.
- Enable the Federation to support the work of smaller Jewish Aged and Community Services organisations.
- Participate in meetings of peak bodies in the aged and community care sector.
- Provide a base from which to promote health and social issues as important to the Australian Jewish community, including issues relevant to small and/or isolated communities.
- Promote educational issues and staff exchange. This may take the form of inviting overseas scholars etc and the convening of meetings and discussions, including teleconferencing.
- Communicate regularly with all agencies and promote an annual national conference/workshop.
- Bring all Jewish Community agencies together.
- Sponsor and/or support research and evaluation of services relevant to the needs of Jewish communities.

I commend the project and thank Jewish Care Victoria and its President Robyne Schwarz for taking the lead on this initiative.

8. I have long advocated demographic research into our community, preferably nationwide. The first step is now being taken following the awarding of an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant being coordinated through the Australian Centre for the Study of Jewish Civilisation at Monash University.

The project will focus on updating previous studies into the Melbourne Jewish community carried out in 1967 and 1991 and the ECAJ is a partner. Professor Andrew Markus from the Centre is leading the project which will extend over three years. Titled *Understanding Identity, Social Change and Emerging Needs in Melbourne's Jewish Community: Longitudinal Comparisons over a Forty Year Period*, the research will incorporate the findings of the 2006 ABS census. Discussions to extend the project to NSW are progressing. The study will have national applicability for other traditions in Australia as well as our own.

Australia's Jewish community is one of the few Diaspora communities to have consistently grown in population over the past thirty years. This growth is due to the various waves of immigrants from the Former Soviet Union, South Africa and Israel. Current indicators are that this growth is unlikely to continue and indeed our numbers may begin to decline. The Israel based Jewish People Policy Planning Institute predicts Australia's Jewish population will decrease by 8,000 by 2020. If this eventuates it will present many serious challenges and this research will assist in addressing these strategic issues.

9. Particular objectives I set for my term were to make the ECAJ the truly representative organisation of Australian Jewry and to explore how our larger communities and organisations can better support Australia's smaller communities. Regarding the former, at the time of writing, observer members who have joined during this term are:

Federation of Australian Jewish Ex-Service Associations (FAJEX)

Jewish National Fund (JNF)

Council of Progressive Rabbis

During my term each of our smaller communities was visited at least once. This past year we visited Western Australia. I am pleased to report that the WA community is both in good health and in good hands. Its facilities are first class. After requests from the Carmel School and AUJS leaders, I

requested Philip Chester to arrange for the ZFA to provide materials for use by our youth when confronted with anti-Israel issues.

Following my visit of last year, Maccabi Australia initiated a programme in Queensland and as a result some 40 Queensland participants attended this year's Maccabi Junior Carnival in Melbourne.

The initiative to prepare a strategic plan for the South Australian Jewish community has been on hold pending resolution of the dispute between the AHC and Rabbi Yossi Engel. Despite many attempts, including a joint mediation by Rabbi Mordechai Gutnick (President, Orthodox Rabbi of Australia) and myself, the matter is still unresolved (refer ECAJ statement, Appendix I).

10. Each year our community inevitably loses several of its outstanding members. This past year our community has become the poorer due to the passing of two such leaders with whom I had an acquaintance, Walter Jona AM and Major-General Paul Cullen AC CBE DSO ED.

11. Following the ECAJ's incorporation in the ACT, with the much appreciated guidance of Arnold Bloch Leibler tax deductible status is now being investigated. If successful we can then accept the generous pledges from the Gandel and Pratt families charitable foundations to establish the Community Defence Fund to meet the costs of prosecuting race hatred crimes against our community. The efforts of ECAJ's prosecuting team of Robert Goot AM SC , Steven Lewis and Shane Prince, all of whom provide their services pro bono, are greatly appreciated. I take pride that during my watch, ECAJ's governance has been upgraded. The platform now established will allow my successor to continue to build on ECAJ's profile and capacity.

This volume of reports illustrates the wide ranging, high quality endeavours in which our community engages. Their breadth and depth I find amazing and demonstrate why our community enjoys such a fine reputation throughout the Australian political and general society. We can be rightfully proud of our collective achievements. I am

grateful for the support and contributions of our officers, councillors and committees. The professionalism, skills and commitment of Executive Director Geoffrey Zygier have been outstanding. Geoffrey has made a major contribution to improving ECAJ's image and profile and I wish him well in his future endeavours. It has been a privilege to serve as ECAJ President these past three years.

Grahame Leonard
October 2007