
END OF AN ERA

Michael Danby reflects on a stellar parliamentary career

By Michael Danby

It's a miracle that I was born in Australia. As I said in my first speech, my grandmother, Margarete and grandfather, Bruno, were murdered by the Nazis in Auschwitz. Hauptman (Captain), Bruno Danzinger, Iron Cross First Class, 151 Regiment of Heavy Artillery, was actually the head of the German equivalent of the RSL, in his native Rostock. His brother was killed on the Western Front in the First World War, fighting for the German Reich.

On that theme, let me skate forward to 2013 to the brief 6 months I was junior Arts Minister, in the Gillard Government, and had been sent to Germany to supervise with indigenous leaders the return of our Aboriginal remains. It was the most poignant moment of my parliamentary career to stand and speak on Anzac Day in the Commonwealth War Graves in Berlin, with our indigenous delegation, in front of 700 plus international diplomats, soldiers and others of the Bundeswehr.

On that solemn occasion, I reminded them of the honour with which my Australian grandfather was treated in stark contrast to the criminal abuse my grandparents suffered at the hands of the German State. I stood there as their guest. An

Australian Minister, "one of those people," was back as a Minister in a foreign government; a reproach from history of the dark, but recent European past.

It's a miracle that I won pre-selection. Not being from a prominent political family and hated by the Socialist Left for my decades of pro-Israel activism, I was also opposed by my predecessor and a ghastly gang of what would today be Corbynistas. We won. We, a team of middle ranking union officials, led by a then very junior Bill Shorten, and hundreds of local Labor moderates. We beat them. I was selected, and then elected for the marginal seat of Melbourne Ports. So the story of 21 years in parliament began.

Of course, being a deeply ingrained social democrat I tried to work within the ALP and Parliamentary system, but I was always a maverick, having been involved in politics since I was 17. In 1998 I was the first Jewish MP in 12 years in Federal Parliament. Right away in 1999 with then Opposition Leader Shimon Crean, I organised the first parliamentary visit to Israel in more than a decade. That was the beginning of a total change in atmosphere in Federal Parliament.

Since those times, thanks to the wisdom of the philanthropists who support the Rambam Fellowship, nearly 150 MPs have visited Israel. I estimate I've organised over 200 meetings of the Friendship Group or the Falafel Faction in those 20 years. 21 years in Federal Parliament means I am the longest serving Jewish MP in Australian History.

Of wider significance to Australia, these visits to Israel have had an important transformative effect on our national politics. You don't have to explain to Australian MPs and Senators issues like Iran, Jihadism, counter terrorism, the extremism of Erdogan, of Hezbollah and Hamas' role as terrorist organisations and threat. From an Australian Jewish viewpoint, perhaps my most difficult days in Canberra were with former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, when he expelled the Mossad station chief in Canberra. This happened after the head of the Mossad, Meir Dagan, used Australian passports for the targeted assassination of the Hamas quartermaster, Mahmoud Al-Mabhouh, in Dubai. My office received a torrent of anti-Jewish hatred when I dissented from Rudd's decision even though I explained that I thought Israelis were wrong to have used such passports, Dagan

having given Australian security an undertaking that they wouldn't be misused. Removing Israeli security liaison would disadvantage Australia, publicly stated. My views have been subsequently vindicated with analysis showing that apparently 90% of the exchange of information between the two countries benefit Australia. Now security relations are restored, for instance Jerusalem did the right thing in alerting Australia to the plot to blow-up an Etihad flight from Sydney.

On the other hand, my years long campaign to try to get the Australian Government, especially the over-adulated, retired Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, to condemn Iranian ballistic missile testing has not been successful. This is despite a Senate Select Committee which I orchestrated, recommending that the Australian government should speak out against this dangerous Iranian aggression. Even those who don't agree with President Trump's decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), such as European Presidents and Prime Ministers Macron, Merkel and May, have condemned the Iranian rocket firings. Not Australia.

My worst political mistake was in all probability supporting Rudd for all those years between our election in

1998 and his election as PM in 2007 and not backing Kim Beazley. However, Kevin Rudd did honour his promise to fund the fortification of Jewish schools all over Australia. Every parent and grandparent can be assured that all of our children can freely attend to their education in the best of safety the Australian Government can provide. This is a great legacy.

Most importantly, I want to destroy the ABC/Fairfax stereotype that if you are involved with Israel or the Jewish community, you are a narrow self-interested fanatic. The Age actively censored me between the years 1998-2010. Despite offering them nearly 200 articles, they were all 'spiked', but I did get them published elsewhere. This is the anti-Israel Left's new modus operandi-deplatforming. Yet I'm proud of the two decades of hyper political activity that ignored and worked past these impediments that I have pushed through my parliamentary pulpit. I can do no better than to conclude with the words of my mate, Greg Sheridan, The Australian's esteemed Foreign Editor:

"But while Danby has been important in Australia's Israel debate, his effect on politics has been much broader. Because he doesn't just drift into parliamentary committees but

consciously fashions them to advance his issues, and because he is at heart always an activist, he has used the opportunities of parliament's committees to secure big results. He used his position on the electoral affairs committee to secure much simpler and more automatic registration of voters on the electoral roll and helped gain support for these reforms with the Senate crossbench. Perhaps hundreds of thousands more people are entitled to vote at each election as a result.

"Most significant of all has been Danby's activism on human rights and national security. The causes he supports, such as the Tibetans, or the Muslim Uighurs in western China, or the Baha'is, or the Darfuris, don't lead to promotion, lavish grants or remunerative post-politics career opportunities". (My political energy was directed at virtue, not virtue signalling).

Sheridan continues:

"Although he briefly served as a Parliamentary Secretary in the Gillard government, Danby's talents would have been wasted, or misapplied, as a generic minister for potholes and drains or some such. I thought he reached the zenith of his public influence when he was Chairman of the Foreign Affairs,

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Defence and Trade Committee. Very much like a powerful US congressman, he would call witnesses to highlight issues and achieve outcomes. His committee got Huawei to talk about the role of the Communist Party committee in its headquarters. It got the vice-president of the Chinese National People's Congress to testify about the South China Sea.

"When Danby was a member of the treaties' committee, he was a central player in getting Labor to oppose ratification of a mutual extradition treaty between Australia and China. He gave powerful speeches about the unreliability of the Chinese legal system, pointing, for example, to its higher than 99.6 per cent conviction rate. This was one of the most significant moments

in our recent history when the Australian polity registered in the starkest manner its objection to the operation of Chinese government law on Australian territory.

"A decade ago, with only the tiny resources of a backbencher's office, Danby staged in Melbourne a big international conference on human rights in North Korea. For two days in Melbourne, somebody cared about the unspeakably foul wickedness of the North Korean gulag. There was absolutely no political pay-off for Danby in this. It was at heart an expression of human solidarity. On another occasion, Danby introduced me to an activist for free trade unions in China. A Labor Party politician actively supporting free trade unions in China – now there's an idea.

"I have known Danby for more than 40 years and have greatly enjoyed his humour and his connoisseur's delight in ideological eccentricities, the strange and florid plants to be observed if you journey far enough into the labyrinths of political obsession. There is a Yiddish word perhaps designed to describe such as Danby. He is a mensch."

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The work goes on, the cause endures, the hope still lives and the dreams shall never die

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Ted Kennedy



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“The Jewish community has been blessed with numerous outstanding MPs over the years, and has had the support of many true friends on both sides of the chamber. Yet Michael was exceptional. In addition to looking after his constituents and advocating on a whole range of worthy causes, he has always been committed to speaking out against antisemitism and in defending the national rights of the Jewish people. He always did this with strength and moral clarity. The Jewish community owes him much gratitude. I wish him every success in the future.”

ANTON BLOCK

*President, Executive Council
of Australian Jewry*

“Michael Danby’s retirement from Federal politics is sad news for his many friends and supporters. Since becoming the member for Melbourne Ports, Michael has proven to be a politician with genuine convictions who places principle above all other considerations, even the advancement of his own career. On parliamentary committees and in the media, he has been a fearless champion for many human rights causes, most especially those which have not been fashionable or popular, or which have attracted the ire of powerful interests. Michael never took a backward step in his passionate advocacy for Israel and the Jewish people, calling out prejudice and falsehoods emanating from any quarter, especially among Australia’s purported intellectual leaders. For this Michael won the respect and affection not only of the Jewish community but of fair-minded Australians of all backgrounds. Australia needs more conviction politicians of wit and intelligence like Michael. His departure from the Federal parliament will leave a great void.”

PETER WERTHEIM AM

*Co-CEO, Executive Council
of Australian Jewry*

“My association with Michael precedes his time in the Australian Parliament. Then and since, he was, always and everywhere, an indefatigable supporter of and passionate advocate for, human rights and in particular the rights of Jews and of Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people. He was tireless in publicising those issues and causes he held dear, often at considerable personal expense and no doubt at some cost to his political advancement. His departure from the Parliament after a great innings will be a significant loss, including to the level of public discourse on important and defining topics. We all wish him well for the future.”

ROBERT GOOT AM SC

*Immediate Past President, Executive
Council of Australian Jewry*

“When I think about everything Michael has done for our community and in defence of Jewish human rights and national rights, often at great personal cost, I wonder: has one individual done more for Australian Jewry than Michael Danby? I think not. And for that we owe him a tremendous debt. I will always recall with fondness and pride working alongside Michael on so many vital issues for the community, from saddling up to fight media bias on Israel to exposing and countering antisemitism in Australian politics. Michael was always across the issues and could present his arguments with charm, wit and rigour. I will cherish that Michael launched my first book in Melbourne and will always be grateful to him for his advice, his leadership and the example he set of fearlessly standing up for what is right. I wish him many, many more years of contribution to public life.”

ALEX RYVCHIN

*Co-CEO, Executive Council
of Australian Jewry*





“A stauncher and more passionate advocate for Israel and the Jewish people than Michael Danby would be hard to find. Let alone someone who has stood up publicly and in the Australian parliament consistently, over seven parliamentary terms. Michael was always a delight to work with and a reliable insider to consult and to learn from.

And on a personal level, Michael was simply a mensch.”

DR RON WEISER AM

Past President, Zionist Federation of Australia and Honorary Life President of the Zionist Council of NSW

“Michael was untiring and passionate in supporting those causes close to his heart, always said what he thought, had an unreserved love for Israel and the Jewish people and at times was refreshingly unorthodox and not politically correct!”

JILLIAN SEGAL AO

Deputy President, Executive Council of Australian Jewry



“During his 20 years in Federal Parliament, Michael Danby has always energetically, and unequivocally, argued that Australia’s national interest lies in supporting and building close ties with democratic Israel. His staunch advocacy within the ALP and parliament for Israel and Australian Jewish community interests has been very significant, while his long standing involvement in the Australia-Israel Parliamentary Friendship Group has contributed to that body’s prominence . His efforts on other worthy human rights causes, such as the Tibetans, the Uighurs, and North Korea, as well as his commitment to maintaining and strengthening the crucial Australia/United States alliance, have been commendable priorities in his widely respected parliamentary career.”

**MARK LEIBLER AC
& COLIN RUBENSTEIN AM**
*Australia Israel Jewish Affairs Council
National Chairman & Executive Director*

“Michael demonstrated passion, commitment and integrity. He championed issues because they were important and right, not because they were popular. His integrity and his commitment to values are hallmarks of his service, of which the community can be proud. Michael is an uncompromising friend of Israel and the Jewish community and gave a principled voice to issues of concern to the Australian Jewish community and to Israel in Parliament during his time there. Michael also distinguished himself as a voice for human rights in the Australian Parliament and on the world stage including his sustained advocacy for Tibet. I wish him well as he embarks on the next chapter in his life, anticipating and hoping his continued involvement with Israel and the Australian Jewish community.”

JEREMY LEIBLER
*President, Zionist Federation
of Australia*



“Throughout his political life, in particular during his 21 years representing the residents of Melbourne Ports in the Australian Parliament, Michael Danby has been a passionate and dedicated activist for many causes of importance to both the Jewish and broader communities. Michael is well known for the vocal role he has played as an advocate for the State of Israel and the Jewish community in the Australian Parliament. Michael embodies the spirit of Tikun Olam, providing a voice for victims of discrimination and oppression around the world. I had the privilege of Michael’s advice and experience as a student politician, and he has encouraged many younger members of the community to become actively involved the political sphere. I am sure that the end of this stage in his career will not see the end of his contribution as an activist, and I wish him all the best for his future endeavours.”

JENNIFER HUPPERT
*President, Jewish Community
Council of Victoria*

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“For 20 years both Australian Jewry and Israel itself have been fortunate to have Michael Danby as an MP who was a tireless warrior who never hesitated to go to the barricades in support of the Jewish people and the Jewish nation-state. He did so fearlessly and in a principled and selfless manner. The NSW Jewish community salutes Michael for his two decades of stellar service to the Australian people and his outstanding support of our community.”

LESLI BERGER & VIC ALHADEFF
*President and CEO, NSW Jewish
Board of Deputies*

“During his seven terms in Parliament Michael has been a staunch ally of Israel and the Jewish community of Australia. His willingness to stand up for his principles and to advocate for these causes has provided great support to the Australian Jewish community and Israel. His contribution both to the Australian Parliament and to our community has been enormous.”

SHARENE HAMBUR
President, Zionism Victoria