

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY AND THE 2010 FEDERAL ELECTION: MELBOURNE PORTS AND BEYOND

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The recent federal election included a discrete political debate about Jewish issues and concerns. Much of this debate was highlighted in the small number of electorates, including particularly Melbourne Ports, which have a sizeable number of Jewish voters. But there was also a more general debate beyond these electorates which focused overwhelmingly on the importance of the State of Israel to Jewish citizens. It would appear from this debate and associated voting trends that the unqualified pro-Israel position of the Coalition is highly attractive to Jewish voters.

Many media reports focus on the alleged importance of the Jewish vote, and the perception that Jews as a community exert a disproportionate influence on Australian politics.¹ This interest persists despite the fact that Jews comprise a tiny percentage (about 0.5) of the overall population estimated at 105,000–112,000 persons, and constitute more than three per cent of voters in only five federal seats: Melbourne Ports in Melbourne (12.71), Wentworth in Sydney (12.19), Goldstein in Melbourne (6.22), Kingsford Smith in Sydney (3.08) and Bradfield in Sydney (3.03).² It also assumes that Jews vote with a united voice.

In practice, we have little empirical information on Jewish voting patterns. There has been no national survey of Jewish voting preferences, and the limited existing surveys of either Melbourne Jewry or groups of Jewish students and community leaders date back to the early-mid 1990s. Nevertheless, the limited data available suggest that a clear majority of Australian Jews have supported the Liberal/National Party Coalition since the mid 1970s due to a range of political, cultural, religious, social and economic factors. It would appear that support for the State of Israel is the key factor driving this conservative voting preference.³

A number of studies of Australian Jewry confirm that most Australian Jews see support for Zionism and Israel as a funda-

mental component of their Jewish identity. For example, a 1991 survey of Melbourne Jews asked how they felt when international events put Israel in danger. Twenty-eight per cent stated that their feelings would be 'as strong as if danger was to self', whilst more than half (58 per cent) responded that they would feel 'special alarm because it is Israel'. Another 12 per cent indicated they would be 'more concerned than if it was another country', and only two per cent would feel 'the same as if any country was in danger'.⁴

A further study found that the centrality of Israel to Australian Jewish life and identity was reflected in and reinforced by the following communal structures and frameworks: the significant political influence of Zionist organisations, Zionist education in the Jewish day-school system, high participation rates in the Zionist youth movements, the pro-Israel activities of Jewish university student groups, regular coverage of Israel in the Jewish media, extensive fundraising for Israel, a high number of visits to Israel and a disproportionate rate of aliyah (the immigration of Jews to Israel), and significant political advocacy on behalf of Israel.⁵

Most recently, a study of Jews in Melbourne and Sydney found that 80 per cent defined themselves as Zionists, and 76 per cent responded to international events placing Israel in danger by feeling

a 'special alarm' or as if their own life was under threat. 63 per cent of respondents followed events in Israel 'a lot' or 'to quite a large extent', and 86 per cent had visited Israel including four out of ten in the last four years.⁶

It is therefore, not surprising that the question of attitudes to Israel took centre stage in Jewish community debates about the election. Much of this discussion focused on the record of the Labor Government good or bad. It should be noted that this debate was also influenced by the international context in which views of Israel have increasingly divided along the left-right spectrum.

Since the September 11, 2001 terror attack on America, political conservatives in the USA, Australia, Canada and elsewhere have identified Islamic fundamentalism as the enemy, and the State of Israel as a key ally in the global struggle against terror. Many have forged an unconditional alliance with Israel as reflected in their supportive positions on the 2008 Lebanon War, Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, and the recent Gaza flotilla episode. That alliance involves endorsing all Israeli government policies and actions without question, irrespective of the implications (good or bad) for the prospects of peace, and Israel's long-term interests.

In contrast, most western social democratic parties have tended to adopt a more balanced approach in favour of a two-state solution, and those on the far Left tend to be passionately pro-Palestinian. Nevertheless, compared to other parties of similar ideological ilk, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) government in its first term of office displayed an overwhelmingly friendly approach to Israel. This perspective seems to reflect a number of factors.

One is a Labor belief that the party and the Jewish community share common liberal democratic values, particularly in relation to foreign policy. In addition, Labor's support for Israel may be seen as a symbolic

confirmation of Labor's commitment to the electorally popular American alliance.

Another factor appears to be the Labor perception that some Jewish businessmen are generous and vital donors to the party, and that their support is dependent on a sympathetic position regarding the State of Israel. However, it should be noted that no empirical research exists to confirm that individual Jewish political donors act any differently to any other wealthy political donors. Many if not most may be driven primarily by business and ideological agendas, rather than by specifically Jewish motives.⁷

The ALP government's pro-Israel position was reflected in a number of key actions.

The first was the unprecedented resolution introduced into the federal parliament by the then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd in March 2008 congratulating Israel on the 60th anniversary of its foundation. This resolution praised the achievements of the State of Israel, and highlighted the historical and philosophical bond and friendship between Australia and Israel.

The second was the Rudd Government's defence of Israel's actions during the 2008-09 Gaza War. The Acting Prime Minister Julia Gillard stated on 28 December 2008: 'Clearly the act of aggression was engaged in by Hamas which commenced shelling with rockets and mortars into Israel. That is what breached the ceasefire and Israel responded'.⁸

The third was Gillard's leadership as Deputy Prime Minister of a delegation of 40 Australian MPs, business leaders and policy makers to Israel for the inaugural Australia Israel Leadership Forum in June 2009. During the Forum, Gillard praised both Israel's achievements and the outstanding contribution of Jews to Australian life. In addition, the government boycotted the Durban 11 United Nations anti-racism conference on the grounds that it would promote one-sided criticisms of Israel, and introduced tough

economic sanctions against Iran.⁹

The ALP's pro-Israel record was emphasised by its representatives during the election campaign. For example, during the 2010 election campaign, Julia Gillard, now Prime Minister, referred to the long-standing nature of her personal support for Israel often in opposition to the views of left-wing colleagues.¹⁰ She stated that Australia and Israel shared a 'unique bond that endures through good times and difficult ones' based on shared values and an unequivocal commitment to Israel's right to exist.¹¹

Both Foreign Minister Stephen Smith and former Western Australian State Labor Minister Bob Kucera addressed a large pro-Israel rally organised by the Friends of Israel WA in Perth.¹² In addition, the Labor Candidate for Wentworth, Steven Lewis, argued that the 'Australian Labor Party has been and remains a friend and strong ally of Israel'.¹³

Conversely, the ALP Government had taken some actions that were critical of Israel. These included the expulsion of an Israeli diplomat following the alleged use of Australian passports in the assassination of a Hamas leader in Dubai, the decision to vote in favour of three United Nations resolutions that affirmed Palestinian national rights and censured Israeli actions in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the condemnation of the violence used by the Israeli army against the Gaza Flotilla.¹⁴

The Coalition attempted to use these minor ALP criticisms of Israel to drive a wedge between the government and the Jewish community. They had earlier attacked the government for its expulsion of the Israeli diplomat, and its criticism of Israel's response to the Gaza Flotilla.¹⁵

During the election campaign, Liberal Party leader Tony Abbott accused the ALP of weakening the tradition of bipartisan support for Israel, and reiterated the strong alliance between Australia and Israel. He

emphasised the Coalition's 'unshakable commitment to Israel's security', and vowed that a Coalition Government would never support a one-sided United Nations resolution against Israel.¹⁶ In a further statement, Abbott promised to 'restore the Australia-Israel friendship to the strength it enjoyed under the Howard Government'. He argued that Australia and Israel were bound together by their common 'open cultures and western traditions', and described Israel as 'a bastion of western civilisation in a part of the world where the rights of minorities and the value of respectful dissent are not well appreciated'.¹⁷

Coalition frontbencher Malcolm Turnbull, the member for Wentworth, affirmed the importance of the alliance between Australia and Israel. He argued that Israel 'stands in the front line in the battle against terror—a battle we cannot afford to lose'. He promised that Israel would always have 'unequivocal support from the Coalition'.¹⁸ Liberal Party Deputy Leader and Foreign Policy spokesperson Julie Bishop similarly pledged that a Coalition Government would always oppose UN resolutions critical of Israel. She accused the Labor Government of changing government policy in order to win the support of Arab countries for Australia's campaign for a seat on the United Nations Security Council.¹⁹

In response, Labor Foreign Minister Stephen Smith accused the Liberal Party of trying to 'score a cheap political point'. Smith argued that the Labor Government had provided 'strong support and strong understanding' to Israel. He also defended the government's support for three UN resolutions critical of Israeli policies in the Occupied Territories on the basis that they conformed to Australia's official support for a two-state solution.²⁰

In contrast to the pro-Israel positions of the two major parties, the Australian Greens have long been regarded by the Jewish community as unfairly critical of Israel.²¹

The leading pro-Israel advocacy group, the Australia–Israel Jewish Affairs Council (AIJAC), acknowledged that the Greens supported a two-state solution, and did not explicitly endorse hardline Palestinian demands for a right of return of 1948 refugees to Israel. However, AIJAC accused the Greens of adopting a ‘one-sided, naïve and destructive’ pro-Palestinian approach to the conflict based on requiring unilateral concessions from Israel. Specific reference was made to their calls for a complete withdrawal of Israeli troops and settlers from the West Bank, and their request for sanctions to enforce this policy.²²

The Greens state that they support Israel’s right to exist, and not all Jews agree with AIJAC’s criticism. Ittay Flescher, a well-known teacher at a local Jewish day school, argued that the Greens were not anti-Israel although critical of some Israeli government policies. He urged Jews to vote for the Greens on the basis that their policies in support of asylum seekers and on other social issues such as climate change were particularly compatible with traditional Jewish values.²³ A number of high profile Jewish Greens including Peter Singer and Peter Christoff also expressed similar views.²⁴

However, the *Australian Jewish News* took a harsher line, reminding Jewish voters that the Greens had been frequent and unbalanced critics of Israel.²⁵ And former Labor Party Minister Barry Cohen published an advertisement in the *Jewish News* urging the Liberal Party and Liberal voters to refrain from giving preferences to the Greens that could potentially assist them (with their anti-Israel positions) to win seats in the Lower House.²⁶

MELBOURNE PORTS

The Jewish community’s pro-Israel agenda also appears to have specifically influenced the election debates and outcomes in those seats with significant Jewish populations.

We look firstly at the Melbourne seat of Melbourne Ports.

The seat of Melbourne Ports has primarily been held by the Australian Labor Party since Federation. Only six members have represented the electorate. For most of this time, Melbourne Ports was a safe Labor seat. However, a redistribution prior to the 1990 election brought some more prosperous Liberal-voting areas into the electorate, and changed it to marginal status. It is now one of the most affluent ALP-held seats in the country. The electorate includes the port suburbs of Melbourne south of the Yarra as well as areas to the south-east including Port Melbourne, South Melbourne, Albert Park, South Yarra, St Kilda, Balaclava, Elwood, Elsternwick and Caulfield.

In both the 1998 and 2001 federal elections, the ALP trailed the Liberal Party narrowly on primary votes, but held the seat comfortably by approximately five per cent after acquiring a high proportion of preferences from Democrats and Greens voters. In 2001, the combined Green and Democrats vote was over 20 per cent.²⁷ In the 2004 federal election, the ALP trailed significantly by over 3000 votes on the primary vote, but was still able to hold the seat by 3.74 per cent with the assistance of Greens preferences. The Green vote jumped to 14.10 per cent, but the Democrat vote fell away to 1.35 per cent.²⁸

In the 2007 election, the ALP raised their primary vote by 3.22 per cent to 42.47 per cent, and the Liberal primary vote dropped by 3.26 per cent to 39.68 per cent. The Greens vote increased only marginally to 15 per cent. The ALP received approximately 70 to 80 per cent of Greens preferences, and consequently secured a comfortable 7.15 per cent victory on a two-party preferred basis.²⁹

Melbourne Ports has a number of key voting blocs including the second highest number of Jewish voters in an Australian electorate estimated by the Australian

Bureau of Statistics at 12.7 per cent or 18,026 voters,³⁰ and a large gay and lesbian community. The Jewish community itself is highly diverse and ranges from the ultra-orthodox Hassidim to the mainly secular recent Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union. Many may be reluctant for historical and political reasons to identify themselves as Jews by religion in the census so it is possible that the real number of Jewish residents is much higher than the official figure. However, some Russian Jews may not yet be Australian citizens, and hence not eligible to vote.

Voters in the electorate have a reputation for holding socially progressive views in relation to issues such as the environment and asylum seekers,³¹ and protecting the rights of disadvantaged groups afflicted by mental illness, drug use, and/or involvement in street sex work. One of the major local councils—the City of Port Phillip—is renowned for its strong commitment to maintaining a socially-inclusive and tolerant harm reduction approach towards these groups.³²

The sitting member in Melbourne Ports is 55-year-old Michael Danby, who has been a long-time activist in the right-wing Labor Unity faction of the ALP, and within Jewish community politics. Danby attained pre-selection for the seat of Melbourne Ports in 1998, and is colloquially referred to as the ‘Member for the Jews’ due to his vigorous support of the State of Israel.³³ During the 2001 election campaign, for example, he published an advertisement in the *Australian Jewish News* which stated ‘Support Israel, Vote 1 Danby’. Danby has also defended Israel in Parliament on a number of occasions against attacks from members of his own Party such as Julia Irwin and Tania Plibersek.³⁴ Nevertheless, Danby argues that his agenda goes well beyond specifically Jewish issues, and has cited his strong support for human rights in China/Tibet, and his activism on child care,

education, and income security.³⁵

A number of commentators have suggested that the ALP only holds Melbourne Ports because of the sitting member Michael Danby’s strong personal following in the Jewish community. They point to two facts: that the Liberal Party’s Federal Senate vote for Melbourne Ports has been considerably higher than the ALP vote, and equally that the Liberal vote in the corresponding state electorates with a large Jewish population has also been much higher than that of the ALP. The implication of this analysis seems to be that if the Liberal Party preselected a Jewish candidate to neutralise Danby’s Jewish support, they may shift enough votes to win the seat.³⁶

The Liberal Party used this strategy with some limited success in the 2004 and 2007 elections. In 2004, they preselected David Southwick, a young Jewish businessman active in a local youth welfare agency. Southwick attempted to apply wedge tactics to his opponent by suggesting that Danby (despite his own unchallengeable pro-Israel credentials) had failed to effectively challenge anti-Israel sentiments within the ALP. Southwick’s aggressive campaigning on Jewish issues appears to have influenced his strong polling in the most heavily Jewish populated areas of the electorate. However, the strong Jewish pro-Liberal vote may also have reflected other factors such as the high popularity of Prime Minister John Howard in the Jewish community, and the general swing against Labor.³⁷

In 2007, the Liberals preselected Adam Held, a 45-year-old Jewish lawyer who had formerly been the Mayor of the neighbouring City of Stonnington. Held similarly campaigned on Jewish issues such as support for Israel and funding for Jewish schools. He also secured a majority of the vote in the nine major Jewish booths, but Danby’s vote this time was much higher than in 2004. Broader national factors may also have influenced this outcome including

the general swing to the ALP, and the strong pro-Israel record of the new Labor leader Kevin Rudd.³⁸

THE 2010 MELBOURNE PORTS ELECTION CAMPAIGN AND OUTCOME

The 2010 Melbourne Ports campaign did not feature the same polarised debate about Jewish concerns and Israel that had marked the 2004 and 2007 election campaigns. The Liberals preselected Kevin Ekendahl, a young gay businessman involved in not-for-profit work with disadvantaged young people. He stated his strong support for gay and lesbian rights, and implied that he was opposed to his party's position on gay marriage.³⁹

Although of part-Jewish background, Ekendahl did not overly emphasise Jewish issues or concerns in his campaign.⁴⁰ However, there were still some expressions of support for Jewish schools and Israel. For example, Ekendahl made visits — accompanied by prominent Party front benchers — to two ultra-orthodox Jewish schools to promise that the Liberal Party would match Labor Government funding commitments.⁴¹ In addition, Ekendahl reiterated the Liberal Party's strong support for the State of Israel, and criticised Labor Party attacks on Israel.⁴²

Michael Danby also broadened his election strategy. His campaign literature promoted personal and government achievements in a wide range of areas including housing, arts, human rights, economics, health and education. Danby was able to cite support for his campaign from a number of local community and business figures and ethnic and indigenous advocacy groups.⁴³ In his public statements, he articulated strong views in support of asylum seekers, same-sex marriage, action on climate change, and human rights, and at times implied that he was critical of official Labor government policy.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, Danby also emphasised his strong record on support for Jewish schools and Israel, placing a number of advertisements in the *Australian Jewish News* containing the phrase 'Michael Danby, Labor, the Jewish Community and Israel. Friends Forever'.⁴⁵ Danby had secured a major coup during the 2007 election campaign when he had persuaded the Labor Party to commit to extra funding to meet the security needs of Jewish schools.⁴⁶ In February 2010, the Victorian Jewish school community organised a public tribute to Danby's work in supporting Jewish education which was attended by a number of government high fliers including Julia Gillard.⁴⁷ Danby was able to proclaim during the election campaign that the government had introduced a 'golden era of investment for Jewish schools'.⁴⁸ Similarly, Danby boasted that Labor had introduced tough sanctions against Iran's anti-Israel regime. He also promised that the Labor Government would 'stand with Israel at its hour of maximum danger'.⁴⁹

There was only one Jewish-themed debate hosted by the *Australian Jewish News* during the campaign, and the tone of the debate seemed highly civil and polite.⁵⁰ There were few if any dirty tricks in the campaign which contrasted with the polarised elections of 2004 and 2007.⁵¹

The Labor and Liberal primary votes both declined to 38.19 and 37.79 respectively, whilst the Greens vote increased significantly via a swing of 5.63 to 20.66 per cent. With the assistance of Greens preferences, Danby was able to comfortably hold the seat with a two-party preferred vote of 57.15 (up 0.71 per cent) compared to 42.85 for Kevin Ekendahl (down 0.71 per cent).⁵² This swing is slightly smaller than the overall swing of 1.04 per cent to the ALP in Victoria.⁵³

The ALP won 32 of the 38 booths in Melbourne Ports. The Liberals still managed to hold five of the seven booths with

large Jewish populations which included the six booths in Caulfield plus the Special Hospital Team 1 which is the designated name for the Montefiore Homes for the Jewish Elderly. This led the *Australian Jewish News* to comment that the Liberals had won the 'Jewish neighbourhoods'.⁵⁴ But the ALP secured swings in six of these booths including a large 7.59 per cent gain at Special Hospital Team 1.

Danby's relative success contrasts sharply with both the Labor Senate vote in Melbourne Ports, and the Labor vote in the corresponding booths in the last state election. The ALP only scored 30.43 in the Senate compared to 35.89 for the Coalition and a high of 25.36 for the Australian Greens,⁵⁵ and the Liberal State Member for Caulfield, Helen Shardey, easily outpolled her Labor opponent in six of the seven Caulfield voting booths in the 2006 Victorian state election.⁵⁶

THE OTHER SO-CALLED JEWISH SEATS

The Liberal Party gained votes in all the other seats with significant Jewish populations. In the Victorian seat of Goldstein, the sitting member Andrew Robb secured a 0.42 per cent swing in his favour on a two party preferred basis. This is a good result for the Liberal Party compared to the overall Victorian swing to the ALP of 1.04 per cent. The NSW seat of Bradfield featured a 4.32 swing to the sitting member Paul Fletcher which was slightly below the overall swing of 4.84 per cent to the Coalition in NSW, but the NSW seat of Kingsford Smith held by Peter Garrett swung by 8.10 to the Liberal candidate. And the NSW seat of Wentworth saw a major 11.01 swing to the sitting member Malcolm Turnbull despite the ALP fielding a well-known Jewish candidate Steven Lewis.⁵⁷ The *Australian Jewish News* noted that Turnbull had achieved particularly high primary vote tallies in major Jewish polling

booths such as Cooper Park, Parsley and Vacluse. It was suggested that Turnbull's popularity reflected his strong support for Israel and other Jewish concerns.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

The 2010 election appears to confirm that most Jews vote for the Liberal Party, and that support for the State of Israel seems to be the key factor driving their voting preferences. This correlation is reflected in Jewish voting patterns in the five seats cited, in general Jewish community debates during the election, and in the appeals made by the major parties to Jewish electors. Support for the funding of Jewish schools may also influence some Jewish voters, but does not seem to be as important an issue as Israel. To be sure, Jewish voters are also influenced by broader issues such as asylum seekers and climate change, but there does not appear to be any united Jewish position on these issues.

Melbourne Ports does not present an exception to this rule per se given that the Liberals still won the majority of votes in the key Jewish polling booths. However, pro-Israel Labor MP Michael Danby has been successful in securing a higher proportion (albeit still a minority) of Jewish votes in the last two elections. This suggests that his personal vote significantly reduces the gap in Jewish support for the two major parties in Melbourne Ports. Given that Labor and the Greens combined scored 58.85 per cent of the votes in this election, it is hard to see the Liberals winning this seat.

The only long-term threat to Labor in Melbourne Ports may in fact come from the Greens. This threat could have been bolstered by the initial proposed electoral redistribution from the Australian Electoral Commission which would have sent most of the (Liberal-leaning) heavily Jewish areas of North Caulfield plus Elsternwick, East St Kilda and Elwood into the seats of Higgins and Goldstein. It would also

have brought the Labor-voting booths of Windsor and Prahran out of Higgins into Melbourne Ports.

On the surface, that redistribution seemed to favour Labor in party-political terms as Michael Danby acknowledged. But he publicly objected to the redistribution on the grounds that it would unfairly dilute the unity of Jewish community political representation.⁵⁹ Danby's opposition seemed to be based on the concern that his ability to present himself as a representative of Jewish community interests would be seriously reduced if Jewish voters are reduced to only four per cent of his electorate.

But a more subtle concern may have been that the redistribution would introduce a new group of left-leaning voters who could potentially swing to the Greens given the significant Greens vote of 17.90

per cent in Higgins, whilst removing a large group of Jewish voters who were unlikely to be sympathetic to the Greens given their perceived hostility to Israel. In short, that redistribution may have enhanced Labor's lead over the Liberals, but given the Greens a greater opportunity to leap frog the Liberals into second place and potentially threaten Labor's hold on the seat.

Instead, the Electoral Commission has decided, following Labor Party objections, to retain most of the existing Melbourne Ports boundaries which means that the electorate will only lose a small proportion of its Jewish constituency to Goldstein. These proposed changes, which are to be tabled in Parliament on 17 January, appear likely to make it harder for the Greens to secure the seat in the future.⁶⁰

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- ⁵⁷ <<http://vtr.aec.gov.au/HouseResultsMenu-15508.htm>>, accessed 8 October 2010. In 2007, Labor had also preselected a Jewish candidate, the well-known lawyer George Newhouse, in Wentworth.
- ⁵⁸ J. Levi and G. Narunsky, 'Turnbull the king of Wentworth', *AJN*, 27 August 2010; J. Levi, 'The Jews behind team Turnbull', *AJN*, 27 August 2010
- ⁵⁹ M. Danby, 'Danby to oppose Melbourne Ports changes', Media Release, 7 September 2010; S. Spalding, 'MP border skirmish', *Port Phillip Leader*, 21 September 2010
- ⁶⁰ N. Levin, 'Melbourne Ports likely to stay Jewish', *AJN*, 29 October 2010; M. Danby, 'Danby welcomes proposed changes to redistribution of the electorate of Melbourne Ports', Media Release, 22 October 2010