



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

STATEMENTS ON INDULGENCE

Australia-Israel Relationship: 70th Anniversary

SPEECH

Wednesday, 20 February 2019

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Speaker	Vamvakinou, Maria, MP	Question No.	

Ms VAMVAKINO (Calwell) (11:51): I'm pleased to be making a statement today on the 70th anniversary of Australia's diplomatic relationship with Israel. I refer to the opposition leader's speech in the parliament yesterday in which he referred to the personal connections that members of this House and Australians in general share with the people and nation of Israel.

On that note, I want to reflect on my own personal connections to the Jewish people, which date back to the 1960s and specifically 1963, when my family and I moved to Carlton, an inner-city suburb in Melbourne, where I grew up. It was a time of mass migration to Australia, and it was a suburb that had very many migrants from southern Europe in particular. More importantly, a large Jewish refugee community, Holocaust survivors, had preceded us there. We lived amongst that community. My mother, in particular, formed a friendship with a Polish Jewish woman whose name was Rosa. Mum and Rosa worked together in the local factory. Rosa was one of the many Jewish women whom my mum and our neighbours worked with. Rosa would come to our home, if not every day after work, certainly on many occasions. I would serve as the interpreter. Rosa spoke English and I spoke English but mum didn't, so I would interpret for the two women as they sat down and had coffee together.

I was a young girl at the time and I've never forgotten Rosa's face. The impact on her from her time in Auschwitz was so profound that that's all she ever talked about. She showed us her tattoo on her forearm—it was the first time that I had ever seen this—and she always carried with her photographs of members of her family who had perished. This was the essence of Rosa's grief. For my parents but for my mother in particular, the fact that she had met a Jewish person was quite fascinating. My parents had lived on the island of Lefkada, in the Ionian Sea. They were there as 10-year-olds during the Second World War. My island of Lefkada was the only one of the seven islands in the Ionian Sea that had German soldiers occupying it, and that was because it was a strategic place for them. They had their radio antennas and so forth set up there. My parents always talked about the Germans in the village, and they had heard the stories about what Adolf Hitler was doing to the Jewish people, but of course in those times there was no media and no newspaper; no-one had access to anything. These were by and large things that they remembered being told, and it was incredible that they came to Australia and finally met Holocaust survivors. I guess in many ways it's a reflection of the kind of country that we had built over those years that they finally did meet people whom they had learnt about and heard about during the Second World War.

That intersecting of the Jewish refugees in Australia was part of the bigger Arthur Calwell migration program. As the member for Calwell I would like to acknowledge that, despite the difficulties around the White Australia policy, Arthur Calwell did oversee a migration and refugee program that welcomed, among others, Jewish refugees. They were included in that program here in Australia. I want to acknowledge Arthur Calwell. Certainly, the Jewish community acknowledges the support that he gave them. I also want to acknowledge Mary Elizabeth Calwell, his daughter, who has maintained a strong relationship with the Jewish community here in Australia.

Australia and the Labor Party have a historical relationship with Israel. As many members here have said, Doc Evatt, as President of the General Assembly of the United Nations, participated in voting for the creation of the Jewish state. Also, the Australian Labor Party, as the Leader of the Opposition affirmed, has always pursued and supported a two-state solution. On this day, the 70th anniversary of the State of Israel, we also need to acknowledge the creation of the Palestinian state. The right of the Palestinian people to have their own state, as agreed to with the two-state solution, needs to be fulfilled. Peace and security in the region, and ultimately for Israel, depends on the actualisation of the two-state solution.

After 70 years of statehood, Israel has grown into a very vibrant country. It is a leader in many areas of technology and it is an innovative and exciting place. But Israel's peace and security still lies in the need to make peace with its Palestinian neighbours through a two-state solution—two peoples, recognising each other's rights to exist in peace within secure borders. The great former Prime Minister of Israel the late Yitzhak Rabin knew this. He understood profoundly that peace and security for Israel lay in making peace with the Palestinians. That's what

drove him to make the decision to move in the direction of partnering with Yasser Arafat to participate in the Oslo process, in the hope that that peace could be achieved.

Sadly, all the hopes and expectations of that process and that time ended abruptly with the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and then the death of Yasser Arafat. Since then, things have not gone very well for either people. It is heartening, however, to see that there still is a will for peace among Israelis and Palestinians. I say that having been to the region, most recently with the member for Flynn, and having spoken to many Israelis and Palestinians as well. There is still a hope and a desire for peace. They said to us that making peace is something their politicians can't seem to find a way forward on but they have a strong will to do so. They look to Australia, knowing our history and relationship with Israel. They look to us again to help in this process. I believe that Australia can lend a hand again, just like we did 70 years ago.

I would like to leave the chamber with this thought, something that has been impressed upon me in all of the time that I have pursued this issue in this parliament: pursuing the rights of Palestinian people and defending them doesn't make you anti-Semitic; on the contrary, it is a genuine desire to see how we can assist in helping to achieve peace in that region. But we are told that the time is running out for a viable two-state solution and a genuine peace. There is a lot of anxiety and concern in Israel and Palestine—and it should concern us—that a failure to find a way forward soon will risk Israel's future security and its democracy. So to fail will risk continued tensions and conflict in the region, it will risk the security of the State of Israel and it will risk the stability of the region. As the Leader of the Opposition said yesterday, the Labor Party has always supported bipartisanship in pursuit of a two-state solution. We continue to support that and we will do whatever we can to treat this issue with the sensitivity that it requires.

The member for Eden-Monaro made a very strong point about the complexity of this issue and the need to understand its many layers, to treat it sensitively and to treat it with understanding. I want to say that the Prime Minister's hurried announcement—a bungled announcement, actually—about moving our embassy to Jerusalem wasn't well thought through. To be honest and frank with you, I was in the region in January, and people there weren't very happy with it either. It wasn't very helpful. The best way we can continue to contribute is to work together in bipartisanship to realise a two-state solution.