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REPORT FROM DOWN UNDER: AUSTRALIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

Colin Rubenstein

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An Economic Recession Hurts the Labor Party

To understand what is going on in Australia these days, we first need to understand something of the overall background of the players in the political arena. Underlying Australian politics today is a very severe economic recession that has become patently obvious over the last few months and is continuing to worsen. The economy is in free-fall because the Labor government cannot really self-correct; it is beholden to the trade unions. The Australian trade union movement is actually built into the structure of the Labor party and it has leverage over the government. But this has meant trouble for Labor, which controls both the federal government and those in all the states but one. The largest state, New South Wales, has a Liberal government

and a very good premier, Nick Greiner. He is very supportive and very close to the Jewish community. But all the Labor governments, state and federal, are in great disarray with sinking popularity.

The next elections are not due for another 2 to 2 1/2 years. If they were held today all the Labor governments would be decisively thrown out. The Labor governments in the states are not all alike. Some are quite ideological and left-wing as in Victoria, and have made a huge mess of the economy. The polls are showing that the Victoria Labor party will be lucky to win any seats in the next election.

The last federal elections in March 1989 resulted in the reelection of Bob Hawke, a very astute and popular politician. He managed to camouflage the serious state of the economy and snuck

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor
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back in only by a very narrow margin. He took some very deft political action by replacing an unpopular Labor premier in Western Australia with a fresh young professional woman, Dr. Carmen Lawrence, and Labor was able to avoid losing seats in that state, giving him his margin of victory.

The Labor government headed by Bob Hawke is a principled government. Hawke in particular certainly does have an affinity for Jewish interests, but more than that, he has promoted the positive dimension of Australia as a multicultural society. This concept is a bipartisan one that has developed strongly over the last twenty years, but it has also come in for a lot of criticism from the extremes, not only from the right but from the left, who are upset by the realities that values and ethnicity are much more important than class conflict in a successful democratic society like Australia.

Australia is a land of migrants, a free and open democratic society, and Hawke, to his credit, is a right-wing Laborite who fought the left. He is a true social democrat, not a rank ideologue. But Hawke and his Treasurer, Paul Keating, have done a magnificent job in destroying the Australian economy. Keating is a brilliant politician, fast on his feet, very tough and very shrewd. He and Hawke made a formidable pair and won the March 1989 election under almost impossible odds, but now they are turning on each other. Keating is in line to succeed Hawke, but Hawke really does not like him. Keating has made no secret of his wish to succeed Hawke and not wait another term. Hawke is already 60 and has been prime minister for 7 years, but he has said he intends to lead his party in the next elections.

Pursuit of War Criminals

There is no question that Hawke is very supportive and friendly toward the Jewish community. He has done a number of things for which he has to be given credit, one of which has been the pursuit of war criminals in Australia and steering

war crimes legislation through the Parliament. The parliamentary debate was exhaustive and exhausting and the passage of the legislation took a long time. It has come in for a lot of criticism, especially from the conservative right. To Hawke's credit, he has stood firm on this very controversial issue.

This issue was very costly, in a way, for the Jewish community because there was a certain psychological trade-off in Hawke's mind. He felt he was doing the Jews a favor, though it is not really a Jewish issue; it is a question of Australian justice. But in return for this perceived favor, for which the Jewish community was grateful, Hawke seems to have felt psychologically justified in hardening Australia's policy toward Israel.

In the end, the legislation was passed and a special investigations unit was set up in the Attorney General's Department with very considerable resources. The first prosecution of a suspected war criminal in Australia was finally brought early last year in Adelaide against Ivan Polyukovich. On the eve of his hearings, he shot himself. He recovered and the prosecution will continue, but the first act of the defense was to challenge the validity of the legislation. During the end of 1990 there were hearings before the High Court of Australia and the court's judgement will be handed down soon. Unfortunately there are some strong legal arguments suggesting that they may declare the legislation invalid. If that is the case we will have gone through a very long and costly process -- financially, politically, and emotionally -- without a good result, but really through no fault of the government. It would be expected that the government may then drop the whole issue because the Opposition, while they are very good on Israel, have been basically lukewarm in their support of this legislation.

Increasing Criticism of Israel

Hawke has progressively soured on Israel over recent years. When he first took office in 1983, he issued a statement

on the Middle East which represented a very serious erosion of the Australian government position. He invited the Arab League to open an office in Australia, enhanced Australia's relationship with the PLO, and called Jewish settlements in Judea, Samaria and Gaza illegal as well as impediments to peace. The Australian Jewish community fought a rear-guard action to try to water down those positions, but we faced a Foreign Affairs Department that was clearly Arabist. Most of Hawke's advisors have come to the opinion that the PLO is really moderate and a force for good and progress. So this drip-drip effect from various sources within the bureaucracy, on Hawke's personal staff, on the socialist left, within the Labor party, as well as the general media bias against Israel, have meant that Hawke has progressively gotten tougher on Israel.

This was seen very clearly in 1989 when while Egypt and even the PLO did not automatically reject the Shamir-Rabin peace plan, Hawke did. He was very quick to criticize it as being quite fraudulent because it did not allow for immediate negotiations with the PLO and the immediate prospect of a Palestinian state.

Liberal Party More Pro-Israel

What are Israel's prospects within the major opposition party -- the Liberals? For most of the period 1986-88, John Howard was the leader, a very staunch supporter of Israel. But he became unpopular within the country and was dumped by his own party eight months before the election. During his term as leader of the opposition he helped to establish a very proper policy on Israel and the Middle East for the Liberal party. At least we had a genuine debate between the two major parties so that it was not a bipartisan beat-up on Israel.

The successor to Howard, Andrew Peacock, was also 100 percent supportive of Israel and very anti-PLO. While Peacock went down in the election, his policy did not and his successor is a man we will be hearing more about because he will proba-

bly be prime minister in a few years. Dr. John Huston, 44, a professional economist, only came into Parliament in 1987 and very quickly became the shadow Treasurer. In the election campaign he was shown to be fresh, articulate, quite tenacious, and handled the media very well. He was elected from a district in Sydney with a very strong Jewish constituency. As an academic and having lived in America, he knows Jews. His instincts are very good but he knows very little about the Middle East or Israel.

There are some up-and-coming Australian politicians to be watched, two of whom came into Parliament in the last elections. Professor David Kemp, a political scientist from Monash University, immediately became the shadow Education and Science Minister. He is very supportive of Israel and Jewish community interests. Then there is Peter Costello, 34, today shadow Minister of Industrial Relations, who visited Israel about ten years ago. He was brought with a student group that included Michael Kroger, today the President of the Victoria Liberal party. These two cut their teeth on campus politics in fighting the PLO in 1974 when the Whitlam government, a Labor government, brought PLO representatives to Australia. It was very nasty and at times a very violent conflict. The Trotskyites had taken over the Australian university student body and these two people, together with a few from the Jewish community including Michael Danby, fought the Australian Union of Students and broke it. Today these people are the kernel of the next Liberal government.

Australia's Weight in International Affairs

In December 1988, Australia voted on key UN resolutions against Israel and in opposition to the position of the United States. When someone like Hawke, who is identified as being a great friend of Israel and the Jewish people, votes in favor of Arafat at the UN, this carries certain weight, a fact about Australian foreign policy and leverage that many people do

not really understand. Without exaggerating the significance of Australia, which is not great, it is a country that is democratic and has traditionally been pro-Israel. When countries like Australia desert Israel and side with the jackals, this is bad news and particularly for Washington. The last thing that Washington wants is to stand alone. One of the reasons that the U.S. changed its policy on talking to the PLO was that it was so hard for them to be completely alone.

More than that, there is a personal empathy between Australian and American leaders. It varies, of course, but Bob Hawke had a close relationship with former U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz, and to a lesser extent with former President Reagan. They talked regularly. In a situation of ambivalence and uncertainty, where the U.S. is not sure which move to make, a phone call or a vote from a friendly country, a staunch ally like Australia, can swing the balance one way or the other.

The Egyptians understand this and have invested enormous efforts in Australia over recent years. It has been a very effective policy with mutual benefits all around. But the PLO and other Arab countries have also employed this strategy and have made some progress.

Attitudes Toward the Gulf Crisis

On the Gulf crisis, Hawke understands the threat Saddam Hussein represents to the world. If he gets away with it the 1990s will be nasty, and not just in the Middle East but also in the Pacific. The Australian government is astute enough to understand that this precedent could create problems for Australia, that if we do not contain him, then Vietnam, North Korea, and all the other wild cards in our part of the world could also become unhinged. And if the U.S. does not establish itself in fact as the world's superpower, this also affects Australia. Hawke has been very pro-American and for a strong defense and foreign policy relationship with the United States, totally different from erratic coun-

tries like New Zealand, for example. To maintain such a policy it was necessary for the right within Labor to defeat the left, but they did and that is to Hawke's credit.

Australia has committed three large destroyers in the fight against Saddam Hussein. While there has been some criticism at home, nonetheless, according to public opinion polls, the common sense of the average Australian is still quite sound, and better than that of much of the media and academia. The Australian public has been completely opposed to the groveling from ex-politicians going to Saddam to petition for the release of the 40 Australian citizens who were held hostage. Through no thanks of theirs they were all released, largely because of the threat of the use of force. This group of ex-politicians includes some very pro-PLO and anti-Israel people, left-wing Laborites such as Tom Uren and Al Grassby, and Democrat Janine Haines.

The Democrats are a small party which holds the balance of power in the upper house, the Senate, which is not as powerful as the lower house but which is still significant because all money bills must go through the Senate. In the Senate, each state has 12 senators. Because the Senate is based on proportional representation, parties that can get 7-8 percent of the vote get a senator. The Democrats, who started off as a small liberal split off from the Liberal party, have been taken over by the left and their foreign policy now is to the left of the Labor party, violently anti-American and overwhelmingly anti-Israel. Their founding leader, Don Chip, an embittered former Liberal minister, is very pro-Israel, but he retired a few years ago. His successors have been anti-Israel and have become a bit of a problem in general for Australian politics in that they are a very irresponsible element.

End of the Libyan Threat in the Pacific

Not long ago Australia moved to end a major Libyan campaign of subversion in

the Pacific, shutting down their People's Bureau in Canberra, which had been the center of their wide-ranging activities in the early 1980s. The Libyans had tried to recruit mercenaries in Australia, tried to buy embargoed C-130 aircraft, and organized terrorism throughout Southeast Asia from Australia. They were quite inflammatory with their rhetoric, bringing people to Australia such as Ahmed Shahati of the Libyan Foreign Liaison Bureau, and from America Louis Farrakhan's number two, not just to Australia but also throughout the region, particularly in countries like Papua-New Guinea. Libya also threatened to open a People's Bureau in Vanuatu, but the pro-Libyan number two, Barak Sope, was arrested when he attempted to take over the government. Had he won, he would have established offshore of Australia a pro-Libyan and at that time pro-Soviet government that would have been capable of importing anything into the region and probably would have done so, thereby presenting a serious threat to mainstream Australian defense and foreign policy interests. Fortunately, Mr. Hawke took the Libyan threat seriously. The strong Australian stand had a demonstrative effect on all the states in the region and as a result the progress of the Libyans and the radical Arab lobby has now more or less been arrested in this part of the world.

Since we have gotten access to the Stassi files in East Germany, it has been revealed that the East Germans programmed the Libyans. By themselves they would not know where Australia or these islands were. So the collapse of East German intelligence has also slowed down the Libyan campaign. Israel is countering by building up very good relations with Fiji, and through Fiji to countries like the Marshall Islands.

Arab Influence in Australia

One cannot overlook the danger from radical Arab proxies within Australia proper. One of the bad things the Australian government has done is to grant

citizenship to a firebrand Libyan-trained Islamic cleric, Sheik Hilaly, who heads the major mosque in Sydney. He has been very inflammatory, anti-Semitic, and the government put him on notice. There was a whole hue and cry, not just from Jews, about having him thrown out, but both Liberal and Labor ministers kept on extending his visa and finally they gave him citizenship. He never publicly repented for his very blatant anti-Semitism, let alone anti-Zionism, and this is simply a reflection of the political muscle that the government senses that the Arab community has.

All the Arab governments continually pump money into Arab communities in Australia, but it often backfires. The Saudis pumped money in and then would not buy Australian meat, a major export. The Libyans pumped a lot of money in and then they got thrown out. The Iraqis had cultivated a clean image in Australia with a lot of trade and then they invaded Kuwait. They still pump a lot of money into the various mosques in the local Arab communities so they certainly have their proxies in Australia.

A substantial Arab delegation went to Baghdad to try to obtain the release of Australian citizens held hostage. In fact, this group was much more effective and professional and much more restrained in their comments than the former politicians who went. They did not grovel, nor did they criticize Australian government policy.

The figures on the size of the Arab community in Australia have been clouded. The claims range from 300,000 to 500,000, but the reality is closer to 300,000. The imagery that people have is of a monolithic community that is both Moslem and Arab and internal distinctions are not made. In fact, the majority of Moslems in Australia are clearly non-Arab -- Turks, Indonesians, Malaysians, Yugoslavs. The majority of Arabs are in fact Christians who have come from Lebanon over the last decade. Yet the politicians believe that they are all violently anti-Israel and

all Moslem. The truth is that the majority of Arabs in Australia, as Christians, are critical of Saddam, and they are not that hostile to Israel. There clearly are radical anti-Israel elements in the Arab community, reinforced by media and academia and the left wing in Australia.

Jewish Immigration to Australia

South African Jews are now generally blocked from coming to Australia. Immigration in general has been curbed, partly as a result of the reactionary impact of the progressive lobbies such as the environmental movement who claim that Australia is overcrowded and there is no room left for any immigrants. South African Jews came in the 1960s, 1970s, and the early 1980s and there are probably about 10-15,000 South African Jews in Australia today, mostly in Perth, Sydney and Melbourne.

Australian interest in Soviet Jewry goes back to the early 1960s when the Menzies Liberal government raised the question in the UN for the first time. There has been consistent bipartisan support, with the aberration of Mr. Whitlam from 1972 to 1975, on the question of Soviet Jewry. Hawke has continued that interest and involvement, being personally, emotionally involved. The problem today, however, is that with the opening of widespread emigration from the Soviet Union, the Jews are no longer considered refugees. So Australia has cut back except for strict family reunions or a few prize visitors. There must be about 10,000 Soviet Jews in Australia now. They have been coming in small groups for a long time.

The Battle for Public Opinion

The organized Jewish community in Australia is basically very consensual. It is very supportive of the Israeli government of the day, very aggressive, and quite effective. It is a strong Jewish community, especially for its size. Its image among the general population is, fortunately, much larger and more powerful than it really is. The average Austral-

ian may say there are 2 or 3 million Jews in the country when in fact there are only 100,000 within a population of 17 million.

There are very few Jewish politicians. In fact, for the first time in over 100 years, there is no Jewish member of the federal parliament. The last one, Senator Peter Baume, a Liberal from New South Wales, just resigned at the end of December. There are still some in the states, but often these are people not at all involved with the Jewish community, and usually people from the far left. Of course they get exaggerated media coverage. For example, there has been a recent controversy on the pages of the major daily financial newspaper, The Australian Financial Review, after they published a piece on the editorial page by two leftist professors entitled "Jews for a Palestinian State," as if the whole Gulf crisis had not even occurred.

In fact, part of the pro-Arab lobby in Australia is an Arabist academic front organization, the Australasian Middle East Studies Association. It was established by an American anti-Zionist Jew, Irwin Herman, who galvanized all the anti-Israel academics into this association. Fortunately, the group has been exposed for what it really is and it receives no government support or credibility.

There are Australian Jewish Democrats who are a bit to the left of Shalom Achshav (Peace Now), but the real Shalom Achshav people in Israel have been made aware of what some of these Australians were up to and have pretty much disassociated from them. It is one thing to take public positions in Israel and quite another to do so in Australia. When Jews in the diaspora start pushing for positions for which they will have no moral or physical responsibility, this is an entirely different proposition. Their complete misrepresentation of the position of Shalom Achshav, as they were doing, is very dangerous. Of course it is picked up and distorted in the media and reinforces the worst among the academics, politicians, and journalists.

In addition, left-wing Israelis who

should know better create some of our worst problems with people like Hawke and moderate Labor people because all their fantasies and criticisms are reinforced by the judicious comments made by the Israeli left. These may be appropriate when made in Israel, but when they are said to people who are looking at things from an entirely different perspective and when they are used by people whose interest is not to advance peace or make Israel make more concessions but whose interest is to destroy Israel, they do not realize how much damage they are really doing. When Hawke's Israeli friends tell him Begin is bad, Shamir is obstinate, and the Israeli peace plan is nonsense, he thinks he is doing them a favor by attacking Israel and the peace plan and saying the PLO is moderate. This is the most damaging

problem for Israel's standing and image in Australia. It is a bit less right now, probably due to the impact of the Gulf crisis and Israelis having pulled together, but in normal times it is devastating for those of us sitting abroad. We can put up with all the PLO rhetoric. We can put up with all the criticism from enemies at home. But when credible, articulate Israelis make more or less the same points, it is very hard to contest.

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Dr. Colin Rubenstein, Senior Lecturer in Politics at Monash University and an Associate of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, is Editorial Chairman of Australia-Israel Publications, the main organ of the Jewish lobby in Australia.