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AUSTRALIAN ATTITUDES TOWARD THE JEWS

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Australia is a middle-ranking, English-speaking democracy, relatively prosperous and relatively isolated from the world's major trouble spots, which nonetheless has had a Jewish community of some significance literally since the first day of European settlement in 1788. Today it contains the largest Jewish community in the East Asia-Pacific region, an area increasingly important to the world's economy and geopolitics. Australian attitudes toward Jews and the Middle East are thus of some international significance beyond any intrinsic interest which any national measurement of anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism might possess.

Jews Arrive on the First Fleet

Between eight and fourteen Jews arrived with 1800 other British convicts in the first fleet -- the first permanent European settlement -- in 1788. The first synagogue was established in Sydney about 1828. Jews have comprised about one-half of one percent of the Australian population throughout its history. Down to the 1930s, most Australian Jews were English-speaking and of British background. They met little hostility and provided leaders in many fields, including the first Australian-born Governor-General (i.e., Head of State) Sir Isaac Isaacs (1855-1948) and (strange as this may seem) the

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Commander-in-Chief of Australia's forces in World War I, Sir John Monash (1856-1931). The older Jewish community was in grave danger of disappearance through assimilation. Many of its leaders were outspokenly anti-Zionist and they did little or nothing to assist Jewish refugees during the Holocaust period.(1)

Beginning in the 1920s, and especially after 1945, about 30,000 East and Central European Jewish Holocaust survivors migrated to Australia, transforming the community into one notably Zionist and socio-culturally distinctive. In particular, a system of Jewish day schools has been operating in Melbourne and Sydney since 1949 that is perhaps without parallel in the diaspora. The largest of 18 such schools, Mount Scopus College in Melbourne, has 2,600 students and is said to be the largest Jewish school in the world. There were 62,127 persons who declared themselves to be Jewish by religion in Australia in 1981, according to the optional religious question in the Australian Census (total population: 15.5 million), but demographers put the actual number of Jews at 80-95,000, mainly concentrated in Melbourne (40,000) and Sydney (35,000).

Australia is a stable, multi-party democracy with a left-of-center Labor party and a right-of-center coalition of the Liberal (urban middle-class) and National (rural primary producers) parties contesting for parliamentary government. It is in many respects strikingly similar to the United States. Three of the five television channels are commercial networks with strong links to America's channels and American, as well as British, news reports form the staple diet of the average Australian's knowledge of international affairs. There is also an "ethnic" television and radio network which includes Jewish programs. Sir Zelman Cowen, a distinguished Jewish academic, was Governor-General of Australia in 1977-82, and Jews have served most recent Cabinets.

Little Organized Anti-Semitism

There has been little organized anti-Semitism throughout Australia's history. A populist tradition, which was anti-Semitic, anti-British, and anti-finance capital, existed in the Australian labor movement in the Edwardian period. Small, extreme right-wing bodies which are anti-Semitic exist, especially the Australian League of Rights, but these are without any significance except perhaps in remote rural areas.

Since the 1960s, Australia, as elsewhere in the Western world, has seen the growth of anti-Zionism as a motivating ideology of surprising intensity among a part of the younger, Vietnam-era, far-left, especially in Melbourne where a major Australian Labor party left-wing figure, Bill Hartley, was employed by the Iraqi and Libyan governments and broadcast a steady stream of virulent anti-Zionism on a fringe Melbourne radio station, 3CR.(2) Student groups, radical trade unions, and the left intelligentsia often shared in this increasing anti-Zionism. There is also a small Arab community. More disturbingly, as elsewhere, much of the mainstream Australian media became increasingly critical of Israeli policy vis-a-vis the Palestinians, especially during Menachem Begin's period of government and particular during the Lebanon War of 1982.

Although disturbing to most Jews, these trends should not be exaggerated. The Australian government remains strongly supportive of Israel and there is virtually no overt anti-Semitism. The two most recent prime ministers, Malcolm Fraser (Liberal, 1975-83), who had a Jewish grandmother, and the well-known former trade union leader, Bob Hawke (Labor, since 1983), are particularly strong supporters of Israel, while Hawke has long been internationally noted for his support of Soviet Jewry.

Historically, Australia has lacked most of the fertile soil of classical European

anti-Semitism. Jews never "controlled" the economy and are not particularly visible as a group; no large group of poor Jews ever came to Australia, except briefly as refugees after 1945; and there is virtually no tradition of Christian anti-Semitism. By American or European standards, Jews are a virtually invisible minority in Australia, while the Middle East virtually never surfaces as a political issue.

The McNair-Anderson Survey

In 1984, the Australian Institute of Jewish Affairs, a newly-founded research body in Melbourne, commissioned the McNair-Anderson polling agency, one of the largest in Australia, to carry out a wide-ranging survey of Australian attitudes toward Jews, anti-Semitism, other Australian minorities, and the Middle East. This survey was carried out in March 1984 by professional polling of 2,112 Australians aged 13 or over, randomly chosen from throughout the country. It was, in fact, part of McNair-Anderson's monthly survey of voting intentions in any forthcoming election, which receives wide media publicity and upon which the reputation of the company for accuracy chiefly depends. A lengthy report on the findings was published in November 1986.(3)

Although the questions asked and the aims of the survey were broadly similar to other national surveys of anti-Semitism, the McNair-Anderson survey contained a number of features found less often in such studies. These included detailed questions on the religious background and current religious beliefs of respondents, questions surveying attitudes on both negative and positive images and stereotypes about Jews and about other ethnic minorities in Australia, questions on the Arab-Israeli conflict, and a series of unrelated political questions designed to elicit a clear-cut, left-right ideological division which were then correlated with attitudes toward Jews and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Positive Stereotypes of Jews

One series of question in the McNair-Anderson survey polled respondents as to whether they agreed with a series of both positive and negative images and stereotypes as applied to five ethnic groups -- Italians, Jews, British, Greeks, and Vietnamese. (Several hundred thousand Italians and Greeks have immigrated to Australia since 1945; about 150,000 Vietnamese have arrived since 1980 and have produced something of a racial backlash.) It should be noted that "British" are also included here -- the ancestry of the majority, but also the subject of frequent populist attacks as alleged "dole bludgers" (welfare freeloaders) and "whingers" (complainers). A total of 13 negative images (e.g., Jews, Italians, etc. "want something for nothing," "are tricky and unscrupulous in their business practices," "tend to stick together too much") and six positive images (e.g., Jews, Italians, etc. "are well-known for their contribution to science and medicine," "produce very few criminals or lawbreakers," "have suffered as a group too much in the past") were presented about each group.

Remarkably, when the positive and negative percentages were totaled, Jews scored better than any other group including the British. Jews were, in fact, the only group to receive an overall positive score. There was no evidence of more than a minority belief in any frequently-encountered stereotype, although other groups received majorities on a number of negative stereotypes (for instance, 51 percent of respondents believed that Greeks "tend to stick together too much.") In general, however, no group, including the Vietnamese, suffered from majority agreement to an overall negative assessment, according to this poll.

For Jews, the most disturbing results were that only 43 percent believed that Jews "are an asset to Australia," compared with 51 percent for Italians, 56 percent for British, 48 percent for Greeks, and 39

percent for Vietnamese (and 29 percent for "None"). There is, however, evidence of a fairly widespread degree of philo-Semitism, especially admiration for Jews' intellectual abilities and some evidence of sympathy for Jews because of anti-Semitism; 64 percent agreed that Jews "have suffered as a group too much in the past," a far higher total than any other group. It is the view of the author that popular philo-Semitism is a factor throughout the Western world which exists, is increasingly important, and can all too readily be ignored in studies of intolerance and anti-Semitism.

The Religious Dimension

The survey gathered extensive data about the religious background and belief of the respondents. Sixty-six percent "held religious beliefs in childhood" -- 30 percent were Anglicans, 36 percent were Roman Catholics, and about 28 percent members of non-Anglican Protestant churches. Fifty-five percent of respondents claimed to hold religious beliefs at the time of the survey, with 31 percent claiming to be regular churchgoers. These figures are broadly very similar to other surveys, which puts Australia somewhere in between the United States and contemporary Britain or Europe in religious commitment.

When correlated with negative stereotyping of Jews, it seems clear that neither past nor present religious beliefs act as a pathway or determinant of anti-Semitic beliefs. There is a very slight tendency for religious believers to register less anti-Semitism and more philo-Semitism than others. This would seem to provide some confirmation of the findings of Hans Mol, who researched this topic in 1966 and found that anti-Semitic attitudes correlated negatively with religious observance, i.e., regular churchgoers were less likely to be anti-Semites than others.⁽⁴⁾ Nevertheless, the differences today are small and almost certainly not significant.

Individual Christian denominations appear to show few differences in the holding of anti-Semitic images. There is a slight tendency for Presbyterians and

members of the Uniting Church (a 1977 merger of most Presbyterians and Methodists) to hold more positive images of Jews, and for Lutherans and members of the Church of Christ (amounting, respectively, to two and one percent of all respondents -- far too small to be statistically significant) to hold anti-Semitic views more frequently than others. There is no evidence of any deep-seated wellspring of anti-Semitic feeling among Australian Catholics or any other group. Equally, however, church membership does not act as a significant formulator of tolerant attitudes or to diminish anti-Semitism.

Attitudes Toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Separately from any other question, each survey respondent was asked whether "you strongly agree/agree/neither agree nor disagree/disagree/strongly disagree" with six questions unrelated to any specifically Jewish issue, which could clearly be placed along a left/right ideological axis. These included: "Australia should permit the mining and export of uranium." "In foreign policy, Australia should be a close ally of the United States." "Trade unions have too much power in Australia." And "Australia should remain a monarchy." A "strongly agree" response to each is closely associated with political conservatism in the Australian context; a "strongly disagree" response is associated with radicalism. The mood of Australia in early 1984 was quite conservative, with large conservative majorities on all of these ideological questions.

Respondents were also asked a number of questions on the Arab-Israeli conflict, most crucially "To whom do your personal loyalties lie?" Israel was supported by a 19 to 3 percent majority, with 14 percent of respondents stating "Both," 50 percent "Neither," and 14 percent "Don't know/Not stated." The high level of noncommittal may seem striking to Americans and even Europeans, but it must be appreciated that the Middle Eastern conflict is utterly remote from the experience or interests of

most Australians and virtually never surfaces as a political issue of real importance.

Conservatives Are More Pro-Israel

When cross-tabulated against the ideological questions, some of the most interesting findings of the study emerge. There is a clear-cut positive relationship between conservative ideological positions and support for Israel and an equally clear-cut one between radical ideological positions and support for the Arabs. The strongest support for Israel outnumbers support for the Arabs by 35-1, among strong supporters of the U.S. alliance (31-1) and among strong supporters of the monarchy (30-2) -- perhaps surprisingly, in view of the association of that position with a traditionalist conservatism which is not necessarily pro-Jewish in any sense. On the other hand, those who strongly disagree that trade unions have too much power in Australia support the Arabs by 14-10 (the only group with majority Arab support), while other strong pro-left respondents demonstrate greater than average support for the Arabs; those who are strongly opposed to the U.S. alliance, for instance, support Israel, but only by 17-10.

Significantly there is some evidence, although much less conclusive, that those with left-wing views are, in complete contrast to their attitudes toward Israel, likely to be more tolerant than average and to demonstrate lower than average assent to anti-Semitic stereotypes. Strong conservatives, in contrast, seemingly demonstrated greater than average assent to both anti-Semitic and philo-Semitic stereotypes (possibly because conservatives are more likely to think in stereotypic terms and possibly because conservatives actually perceive Jews as possessing both negative and positive qualities).

The close correlation between support for Israel and support for conservative ideological stances on other issues is probably the most interesting finding in this study. It closely follows the patterns

noted internationally in America and elsewhere, and is of course in keeping with the whole tenor of international events since 1967, if not before.(5) It is particularly significant that this phenomenon can be clearly demonstrated to exist in so remote a country as Australia, where many of the pressure groups and political "cues" significant in America and Europe seemingly exist only in a very attenuated form.

Although one may speculate as to the reasons for this, it may be that the relatively positive image of Israel in the mainstream media, very similar in Australia to those in the United States, as well as in popular films and novels, have influenced popular attitudes. It may well be that the relatively positive attitudes toward Jews vis-a-vis other Australian ethnic minorities also results from a popular, media-induced image of Jews as highly intelligent achievers who have suffered in the past. Both of these images derive, ultimately, from the American media and may be reflective of a popular, worldwide philo-Semitism in societies heavily influenced by American media. Popular philo-Semitism may well have replaced popular anti-Semitism among the mainstream as the most typical attitude toward Jews, in complete contrast to the past and in contrast to the pervasive hostility of the left and much of the intelligentsia toward Israel and its policies.

In general, the McNair-Anderson survey of March 1984 gave the Jewish community grounds for optimism, given the relatively low levels of assent to anti-Semitic stereotyping, the high levels of philo-Semitism, and the high levels of support for Israel compared with the Arabs. Perhaps the most disturbing findings are (by American or European standards) the extraordinarily high levels of ignorance or apathy about Jewish affairs or the Middle East, only some of which has been discussed here. Nevertheless, overall the Jewish picture in Australia seems extremely bright.

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Footnotes

1. On Australian Jewish history, see Hilary L. Rubinstein, Chosen (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987), and her The Jews in Victoria: 1835-1985 (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1985), and W.D. Rubinstein, ed., Jews in the Sixth Continent (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987), a collection of essays by fourteen historians.

2. See W.D. Rubinstein, The Left, the Right, and the Jews (London: Croom Helm, New York: Universe Books, 1982).

3. W.D. Rubinstein, "Attitudes and Opinions Towards Australian Jews and Jewish Affairs: A Detailed Report on the McNair-Anderson Survey of March 1984 Commissioned by the Australian Institute of Jewish Affairs," Australian Institute of Jewish Affairs, Research Report No. 2. This report is available from the Institute at P.O. Box 5402CC, Melbourne 3001, Australia.

4. Hans Mol, Religion in Australia (Melbourne: Nelson, 1976).

5. See, e.g., Nathan Pearlmutter and Ruth Ann Pearlmutter, The Real Anti-Semitism (New York, 1983).

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