

AUSTRALIAN JEWISH DISSENT ON ISRAEL: A HISTORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN JEWISH DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Part Two

Philip N. Mendes

AJDS and intra-communal relationships and conflicts

Since the 1967 Six Day War and particularly since the Likud victory of 1977, Israel has been a divided society. About half the Israeli population favor some form of territorial compromise.

Almost inevitably, these divisions have spread to the Jewish Diaspora. Most Diaspora Jews identify strongly with the welfare of Israel, and regard the Jewish State as a second or alternate homeland. However, despite (or paradoxically because of) these close links, Diaspora Jewish leaders have sought to suppress debate on Israel's future and to line up unswerving support behind the Israeli Government of the day. Their argument has been that it is solely for the citizens of Israel who serve in the army and bear the direct consequences of their government's actions to make the decisions, and for their Diaspora brothers and sisters to support them. They have also claimed that Diaspora criticism of Israeli Governments will only divide the Jewish people, and give heart to those who wish to harm the State of Israel. Consequently, they have acted to silence and destroy American Jewish groups such as Breira which sought to present dovish or Israeli peace movement views within the Diaspora.¹⁴⁴ In Australia, similar arguments and methods were used to suppress the fledgling Friends of Peace Now group in the early 1980s.¹⁴⁵

An alternative point of view suggests, however, that this 'politics of silencing' bears grave consequences for the vitality of Diaspora Jewish life. Censorship (however well-intentioned) means the violation of basic principles of freedom of speech, the erosion of the Jewish intellectual tradition, and the alienation of many idealistic younger activists. This viewpoint also rejects as simplistic the argument that public criticism of the Israeli Government aids the enemies of Israel. On the contrary, it is argued that public Jewish debate strengthens international recognition of Israel's democratic quality and its diversity of views. In essence, the debate between censorship and pluralism represents the respective views of the ZFA and AJDS, and explains the long-standing conflict between the two organisations as documented in earlier parts of this essay.

A recent book by a young Jewish female academic Marla Brettschneider titled *Cornerstones of Peace: Jewish Identity Politics and Democratic Theory* (Rutgers University Press, 1996) sheds light on the motives and ideologies of those involved in the censorship versus pluralism debate. She identifies three different types of pro-Israel hawks:

1. Private doves who believed that support of Israel necessitated public support of Likud Government policies. Brettschneider gives as an example the case of the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee Director Thomas Dine who personally favored territorial compromise, but regularly labelled critics of Likud as 'anti-Israel'. In Australia, the principal leaders of the the anti-AJDS backlash — Zionist Federation of Australia leaders Mark Leibler & Johnny Baker — would also appear to have personally favoured territorial compromise. Mark Leibler later stated that 'a large section of the Australian Zionist Movement' supported the Israeli Labour Party.¹⁴⁶ Johnny Baker has also suggested that his personal sympathies lie with the Israeli Left.¹⁴⁷

2. Those who sincerely believed that a pro-Israel stance automatically equated with support for any elected Israeli Government whatever the policies of that government — the view that Diaspora Jewish leaders had to support the Israeli Government of the day was probably held by the overwhelming majority of Australian Jewish leaders irrespective of their personal preferences.

3. Finally, the true believers who actually sympathised with the Greater Israel ideology of Likud. A small number of Australian Jews led by Irwin Lamm and Eric Stock from Betar genuinely supported Likud. Whilst Likud was in government, they enjoyed disproportionate influence relative to their numbers. However, once the Israeli Labor Party regained power, they returned to their minority status.¹⁴⁸

The methods used by the ZFA in their attempts to suppress AJDS were highly similar to those employed by groups such as the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) to censor dovish Jewish views in the USA. Groups critical of Israeli government policies were labelled anti-Israel, and self-hating traitors. They were alternatively denounced as either marginal and unimportant, or as a dangerous threat, depending on the political exigencies of the time.¹⁴⁹ Sometimes, the critique was more sophisticated and subtle, but no less censorious. Attempts would be made to disengage mainstream Left Zionists from involvement in broader anti-Likud coalitions by documenting the alleged radicalism or pro-Palestinian bias of leading activists whilst acknowledging the legitimate views of some of their supporters. At no time, however, was any action taken to recognize the legitimacy of an internal loyal opposition which would openly and constructively espouse alternative perspectives within the Jewish community.¹⁵⁰

Similarly within Australia, attempts were made by the ZFA to dismiss AJDS as an allegedly insignificant or marginal anti-Israel organisation. For example, AJDS was described on various occasions as 'the Jewish anti-Zionist Society',¹⁵¹ 'a tiny splinter organisation who appears to be concentrated on attacking Israel's fundamental policies',¹⁵² 'the Australian Jewish Anti-Zionist Society representing a couple of handfuls of our community',¹⁵³ 'a tiny splinter group on the fringe of the Jewish community',¹⁵⁴ 'a tiny splinter organisation on the periphery of the Jewish community',¹⁵⁵ 'a pariah organisation',¹⁵⁶ and as a group 'held in total contempt by the vast majority of the Jewish community because they start from the basis of undermining whatever the government of Israel is doing'.¹⁵⁷

On other occasions, the ZFA painted AJDS as a dangerous organisation which needed to be actively censored. For example, following AJDS' meeting with PLO official Dr Nabil Sha'ath in October 1989, SZC President Johnny Baker called on the Jewish community to 'act vigorously in the face of activities which it considers despicable', and 'totally repudiate their shameful act'.¹⁵⁸ Similarly, the ZFA President Mark Leibler stated: 'As far as I am concerned an organisation like that has no place in the Jewish community and should be held in complete contempt'.¹⁵⁹

It is worth noting that the ZFA has never made any attempt to debate AJDS' views, or to articulate why they are unacceptable or wrong. The only explanation offered for the ZFA's hostility was that any public criticism of Israeli Government policies was incompatible with Zionist beliefs. Nor was any attempt made by the ZFA to engage in any dialogue with AJDS, or to search for any common ground.¹⁶⁰ Noticeably, however, much of the animosity dissipated following the signing of the Oslo peace accord. In November 1993, SZC President Johnny Baker even praised AJDS (in slightly backhanded fashion) for supporting a JCCV motion calling for united communal public support of Israeli Government policies.¹⁶¹ To be sure, conflict continued to exist between AJDS and some ZFA affiliates. However, this was generally restricted to friction with representatives of the minority Revisionist grouping who acted as hardline supporters of Likud, regardless of which political party was in power in Israel.

Having depicted the ZFA's hostility to AJDS in great detail, I would not like to leave the impression that the conflict between the ZFA and AJDS was totally one-sided. Certainly there was a number of occasions on which AJDS attacked ZFA viewpoints (on the Australian Council of Churches, Father Chakour, and dialogue with the PLO),¹⁶² and suggested (probably erroneously) that they were unrepresentative of the Jewish community. It would also appear that the ZFA and other critics of AJDS¹⁶³ had a legitimate point in suggesting that on occasions:

1. AJDS may have exaggerated the level of support they enjoyed in the Jewish community to external sources such as the daily press and/or government. Nevertheless, AJDS was quite right in pointing out that their views on territorial compromise enjoyed considerable support in Israel itself.

The question as to whether AJDS (in principle) should have provided dissenting views to the outside community, and given the perception of a divided community is a complex one. On the one hand, many Jews feel very strongly that Jewish unity (*am echad*) should be maintained at all costs since any internal divisions will be exploited by enemies of the Jewish people. This argument has obvious limitations, but appears to enjoy considerable support within mainstream Jewry, particularly amongst the older generation. On the other hand, it should be remembered that for much of its existence AJDS was denied the right to present its views in official Jewish forums such as the JCCV, and was left with no alternative but to turn to outside forums. In short, there is an issue here for the representative roof bodies of the Jewish community (akin to that faced by broad umbrella groups such as the ALP) as to how they can most effectively include diverse groups or factions in their leadership so that they

have an incentive to keep their policy criticisms in-house. The history of AJDS suggest that this issue has been handled very poorly by the JCCV and certainly by the ZFA which simply sought to exclude groups which did not share their views.

In addition, roof bodies often benefit from employing a range of lobbying techniques and emphasis with different audiences. It is quite possible that the utilisation of AJDS activists presenting dovish views to Left or labor groups may have achieved positive outcomes for both Israel and the Jewish community.

2. AJDS may also have erred in painting all mainstream Jewish organisations as favouring the Likud viewpoint. This was clearly not the case as became clear when most of the mainstream Jewish community including the ZFA endorsed the Israeli/PLO accord. However, it should be remembered that prior to the election of the Israeli Labor Government in June 1992, AJDS was the only local Jewish group willing to publicly challenge Likud policies. In a sense, the ZFA's constant hostility to AJDS succeeded inadvertently in making AJDS the centre of anti-Likud dissent in the Jewish community. The conflict (rightly or wrongly) was perceived by much of the Jewish community as Mark Leibler and Likud versus AJDS and Labor/Meretz.

In summary, there were certainly strategies and tactics employed by AJDS which may have justifiably provoked criticism from the mainstream Jewish bodies. However, the ZFA's campaign to marginalize and ultimately suppress AJDS' existence appears to have been undertaken independently of any such legitimate concerns. Moreover, no similar campaign was ever mounted by the ZFA to silence the right-wing Revisionists who consistently and publicly critiqued the policies of the Israeli Labor Government during the 1992–96 period.

The long-standing conflict between AJDS and AIP is in some senses more straightforward than that with the ZFA. In essence, AIP represents a committed neo-conservative political agenda within the Jewish community, based on a perceived alliance or coalition of interest between Jews and the political Right.¹⁶⁴ It is almost inevitable that such an agenda would come into conflict with an organisation such as AJDS which is committed to a diametrically opposed political agenda: that is to reviving traditional Jewish links with the Left.

It should be noted that AIP was not created to pursue such an explicitly political agenda. Under the initial leadership of Sam Lipski, it was a genuinely non-aligned and bipartisan body, committed to promoting pro-Israel sentiments on both sides of the spectrum. However, under the leadership of Michael Danby and Dr Colin Rubenstein in the mid-late 1980s, AIP arguably became a narrower and more dogmatic body, committed principally to promoting Jewish cooperation with the conservative side of politics, and to rigidly promoting support for the policies of the Israeli Government of the day.

The problem that arose for AIP at this time, however, was that Jewish and conservative political interests increasingly came into conflict over issues such as the Nazi War Crimes Bill, and the impact of Glasnost on Soviet Jewry. Conservative allies of AIP such as journalists Michael Barnard and Tony McAdam, academics Robert Manne and Frank Knopfmacher, *Quadrant*

magazine, B.A. Santamaria's National Civic Council, and the far Right Captive Nations Council began to express viewpoints which were not only contrary to (but often offensive to) mainstream Jewry.¹⁶⁵ The response of most mainstream Jewish leaders was to distance themselves from these erstwhile or former friends.¹⁶⁶ However, AIP chose to defend its conservative allies, and appeared (to many) to place its conservative loyalties ahead of its Jewish loyalties.¹⁶⁷ As a result, a number of Jewish leaders led by Isi Leibler, Johnny Baker, and National Council of Jewish Women President Malvina Malinek expressed concern about AIP's involvement in right-wing activities which had no connection whatsoever with Jewish issues.¹⁶⁸ AIP's response was to purge from its Editorial Board prominent Jewish academics Professor Bill Rubinstein and Dr Rodney Gouzman who shared these concerns.¹⁶⁹

The existing political dissension was exacerbated by the anomaly of AIP's structure vis-a-vis the elected communal leadership. As with the controversial Jewish Council in the 1940s/early 1950s,¹⁷⁰ AIP was granted a mandate to represent Jewish interests in the political arena, but retained its organisational and policy independence.¹⁷¹ Such an arrangement worked fine when the views expressed were compatible with and accountable to those of the elected leadership. However, the same problems that befell the left-wing Jewish Council in the early 1950s re-emerged in the late 1980s when AIP expressed views contrary to the communal consensus, yet was still perceived by most of the Jewish and non-Jewish public as speaking on behalf of the entire Jewish community.¹⁷²

The above explains the political and structural context that led to the friction between AIP and AJDS. Two associated issues arguably expanded tensions beyond those that existed with the ZFA. Firstly, AIP not only followed the ZFA in rigidly defending the policies of right-wing Israeli Governments, but also took conservative stands on other issues such as the Nazi War Crimes Bill and even liberation struggles in Central America which were totally unacceptable to AJDS. Secondly, AIP arguably had a greater vested interest than the ZFA in suppressing perceptions of Jewish disunity on Israel since its functionaries were paid professionals who were dependent on the effectiveness of their political interventions for their livelihood. For all these reasons, AIP and AJDS came into constant conflict in the post-1988 period. Arguably, neither side was blameless, and both political and personality differences were involved.

Both sides tended stereotypically to label their opponents in tit for tat fashion. For example, AIP branded AJDS an organisation known for its 'criticism of Israel',¹⁷³ the 'small Melbourne Socialist Left Group',¹⁷⁴ an organisation with the same views as 'the abolish Israel Democratic Socialist Party',¹⁷⁵ 'the radical fringe left-wing Australian Jewish Democratic Society',¹⁷⁶ and 'extreme left wingers'.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, AJDS labelled AIP 'the local pro-Shamir propaganda sheet',¹⁷⁸ 'a biased and partisan propagandist sheet',¹⁷⁹ and 'unreconstructed Likudniks'.¹⁸⁰

There was, of course, some partial truth in both labels. AJDS was a left-wing group critical of some Israeli policies. However, it was neither fringe nor radical, and certainly not anti-Israel. Similarly, AIP was a professional

propaganda outfit, but also claimed to have a broader and pluralistic agenda.¹⁸¹ Both sides justifiably felt their true aims and purposes were being distorted for political gain. What was more disturbing for AJDS, however, was what appeared to be the deliberate misrepresentation of its views by AIP in an attempt to inflict political damage. On one occasion, for example, AIP wrongly suggested that AJDS leader Norman Rothfield had endorsed the infamous United Nations Resolution equating Zionism with racism.¹⁸² In fact, Rothfield had campaigned for many years (almost single-handedly on the Left) against this very resolution and its local adherents.

On another occasion, AIP editor Michael Danby wrongly claimed that Israel's Peace Now movement had dissociated itself from AJDS.¹⁸³ Representatives of Peace Now quickly confirmed that this allegation was completely false.¹⁸⁴ On both occasions, AIP subsequently apologised for their promotion of blatant falsehoods. However, considerable political and personal damage may already have been done.

AJDS has also been highly critical of AIP. In September 1993, for example, following the signing of the Oslo Peace Accord, Norman Rothfield criticised AIP for its past support of Likud's Greater Israel policies.¹⁸⁵ Rothfield's critique earned a rebuke from AIP Editorial member Rabbi John Levi, who criticised Rothfield for pursuing an inter-communal disagreement in the mainstream press.¹⁸⁶ However, Rothfield was arguably left with little choice since AIP's rewriting of history required refutation in the publication where it had originally appeared.¹⁸⁷

On another occasion, AJDS President Norman Rothfield criticised AIP for adhering to the 'self imposed discipline of measuring truth by the single unwavering yardstick of the pro-Israel propagandist', and for 'defending Israel, right or wrong, at all times and without question'.¹⁸⁸ Similarly, AIP took potshots at AJDS for its critique of AIP ally Michael Barnard's views on the Nazi War Crimes Bill,¹⁸⁹ and for its invitation to Professor Noam Chomsky to respond to AIP's unbalanced comments regarding his views on Holocaust Denial.¹⁹⁰ Noticeably, AIP failed to publish either the basis of AJDS' comprehensively documented critique of Michael Barnard's offensive views which were not dissimilar to those later expressed by the infamous Helen Demidenko,¹⁹¹ nor any reference to AJDS' subsequent informed critique of Professor Chomsky.¹⁹²

On another occasion, AIP claimed (without any evidence) that AJDS had sought to aid 'the Arab campaign for Israel to be published, discriminated against and ostracised ... to threaten Israel's very survival'.¹⁹³ However, as noted elsewhere, those who defended the intransigence of Likud Governments and their unwillingness to exchange land for peace arguably worked more than anybody against Israel's long-term welfare.¹⁹⁴ In recent years, some attempt has been made to resolve the differences between AJDS and AIP, and to establish areas of mutual concern and possible cooperation.¹⁹⁵ However, it is unlikely that there will be any significant improvement in relations unless and until AIP broadens its political parameters, and its accountability to those Jews who do not share its neo-conservative agenda.

The JCCV is the roof body of Victorian Jewry which claims to represent all Victorian Jewish organisations, whether Left or Right, orthodox or secular,

Zionist or non-Zionist. The extent to which the JCCV (previously known as the Victorian Jewish Board of Deputies) can reasonably claim to represent all Victorian Jewry has historically been a controversial question. From 1952–1970, for example, the Jewish Council to Combat Fascism and Anti-Semitism — the preeminent Australian Jewish Left organisation — was not affiliated with the VJBD due to political and ideological disagreements.¹⁹⁶ Nevertheless, the JCCV has generally been recognised by most Jews and non-Jews as reflecting the breadth of Jewish opinion.¹⁹⁷

AJDS decided to seek affiliation with the VJBD in early 1987 following correspondence from Isi Leibler who suggested in a letter to AJDS activist Jack Kronhill: ‘An outlet for unconventional or radical views at the Board is important. You should try to get your Jewish Democrats to apply for direct affiliation. I believe such an application would be successful’.¹⁹⁸ The decision to apply for affiliation was not unanimous. Some AJDS activists feared that VJBD affiliation might inhibit their ability to speak out on controversial issues, particularly those relating to the Middle East. However, the consensus was that AJDS could potentially attain greater influence and recognition through affiliation with the Board.

An internal memo regarding representation on the Board suggested that AJDS delegates should seek ‘to win friends. We should not be apologetic or half-hearted in our approach, nor should we abuse reasonable lines of decorum. There is no place for the purest philosophy ‘all or nothing’. An association for a limited objective with the Bund, with Hashomer Hatzair, with Walter Lippmann or the Welfare Society, may be desirable. ... We have our policy. It is clearly outlined. We do not have to state it either aggressively or fearfully. We should look for the best opportunity and the best issue for stating it. We want to make friends not political enemies. We want to look where support can come from, and not antagonise it’.¹⁹⁹ A further memo drafted as a proposed ‘maiden speech’ for delegates firmly stated AJDS’ universalistic agenda: ‘We differ from many constituents of the Board in that our organisation is concerned not only with Jewish affairs, but also with questions affecting the wider national and world community’.²⁰⁰

The unfortunate fate of AJDS’ proposed affiliation with the VJBD is well known. On the night, Mark Leibler, the ZFA President and long-time adversary of AJDS, launched a passionate attack on the organisation. Leibler erroneously described AJDS as an anti-Zionist organisation, and quoted a number of statements critical of either the Israeli Government or Jewish communal leaders made by leading AJDS figures, some of which were actually made prior to AJDS’ formation.

The AJDS representatives in attendance — Dr Moss Cass and Jack Kronhill — were given no opportunity to respond to Leibler’s attack. Although the resolution to admit AJDS to the VJBD was supported by the Board Executive and the majority of Board delegates, it was not able to gain the two-thirds majority required for affiliation.²⁰¹

The VJBD’s rejection of AJDS’ application was strongly criticised by prominent Jewish journalist and later *Australian Jewish News* editor, Sam Lipski, who commented:

The critical question facing the VJBD was whether AJDS, which stands outside the majority/mainstream viewpoint of opinion in the Melbourne community, should be able to be a constituent of the Board. Former ECAJ and VJBD President, Isi Leibler, hardly known for his left-wing views, has argued it should and encouraged AJDS to apply for Board membership. He believes that the Board would benefit from the critical arguments AJDS would bring to debate and that meetings, not exactly inspirational as they are, would be enlivened if the consensus position had to defend itself occasionally ...

This is a scandalous state of affairs. If AJDS met the criteria of a Board constituent, and the Board executive had agreed that it had, it should have been accepted...I am not aware of anything AJDS has said which some Israeli members of the Knesset, editors and former generals have not also said. I cannot understand why the Board, august body though it may be, has to be *plus royaliste que le roi*, or for those who speak a more refined French, *frimmet vi der poips* ... I do not see how anything AJDS advocates falls outside the acceptable limits. Calling for negotiations with the PLO, it need hardly be said, is not the same as endorsing the PLO's policies ...

By rejecting AJDS, however, instead of merely its views, the Board delegates who opposed it have succeeded in perpetuating the view in the community, especially amongst a younger generation, of a self-perpetuating oligarchy, closed to any dissenting views, and intolerant of criticism of the leadership.²⁰²

Not surprisingly, the issue continued to fester. As AJDS became more and more involved in the Jewish mainstream, including some JCCV sub-committees, the absurdity and potential political embarrassment for the Jewish community of excluding a group that was actively involved in local Jewish affairs and associated with the dovish views of a significant proportion of the Israeli voting public became apparent to many.²⁰³ Moreover, AJDS' views and activities frequently became the subject of JCCV debates, provoking both support and opposition.

In mid-1988, for example, a proposal to directly elect some VJBD delegates was allegedly defeated out of fear that it might result in the election of AJDS representatives.²⁰⁴ The *Jewish News* editor commented sarcastically: 'Democracy should be resisted because, amongst other dangers which could befall the *ancien regime* if it actually trusted other Jews outside those approved organisations, it might lead to representatives from the Jewish Democrats having a voice at the Board's meetings. Shock. Horror. Probe'.²⁰⁵

In late 1990, the JCCV Chairman Robert Redlich addressed an AJDS forum on the problems facing the JCCV.²⁰⁶ Redlich was subsequently attacked by Zionist delegates Mark Leibler and Erwin Lamm for speaking to AJDS. However, other delegates such as Isi Leibler and Rabbi Danny Schiff defended Redlich's action.²⁰⁷

Following the election of the Israeli Labor Government and the signing of the Israeli/PLO accord, pressure mounted on the JCCV to follow the lead of similar Jewish roof bodies overseas in accepting for membership left-wing and dovish groups previously excluded.²⁰⁸ *Australian Jewish News* editor Sam Lipski commented: 'Quite apart from being wrong in principle, the deliberate politics of exclusion of dissent from the organised community during the Likud government era backfired. Keeping out Jewish Left groups, whose views were within the Peace Now framework in Israel, reinforced the perception of a

monolithic lobby that stomped heavily not only on any criticism of Israel in the mainstream of public opinion, but within its own community*.²⁰⁹

The eventual affiliation of AJDS took place in September 1993 with strong support from JCCV President Leon Rosen, and ECAJ President Isi Leibler.²¹⁰ The only opposition came from right-wing Zionist delegate Erwin Lamm who suggested that the JCCV should make the AJDS affiliation conditional on its giving an undertaking not to raise issues against the government of Israel in the outside press. This suggestion was rejected.²¹¹ Since being accepted, AJDS representatives have contributed actively and constructively to JCCV proceedings, and have initiated successful motions regarding Wik and Pauline Hanson.

Alongside the on-going conflicts with the ZFA and AIP, AJDS has succeeded in establishing positive relationships and alliances with a number of different groups in the Jewish community. For example, AJDS has consistently enjoyed friendly relations with the Australian Institute of Jewish Affairs through its Chairman Isi Leibler, and its various functionaries Professor Bill Rubinstein, Peter Adler, David Bernstein, and Leora Harrison.

Leibler has consistently supported AJDS' involvement in the Jewish mainstream under the belief that AJDS's dissenting views would help to sharpen the arguments and strategies of mainstream leaders. In addition, he also appeared to believe that such involvement could lead to a partial moderation or mainstreaming of AJDS policies. Overall, he believed that the Jewish community would benefit from both groups talking to each other, rather than just preaching to the converted.²¹² Equally positive relations have been enjoyed with the Australian Jewish Historical Society whose former *Journal* editor, Professor Bill Rubinstein, has commented jokingly that the *Journal* 'became a kind of unofficial publishing house for the Jewish Democratic Society. Indeed, our *Journal* probably published more material by members of the Jewish Democratic Society than any other source, including their own magazine...I understand that many on the Jewish Left saw the openness of our *Journal* to their contributions as evidence of a post-Cold War 'perestroika' to individuals and groups marginalised by the Jewish mainstream in Melbourne for forty years. This was not my explicit aim, but I am glad that we are perceived in this way.'²¹³

AJDS also retained a cooperative relationship with the *Australian Jewish News*, the weekly newspaper of Australian Jewry. With few exceptions, AJDS views and policies were given fair and commensurate representation, and editorial criticisms of AJDS were presented in a sober and constructive manner. The balanced and regular presentation of AJDS views by the *AJN* infuriated some Jewish conservatives. On one occasion, Michael Kapel, the editor of Australia/Israel Publications, rang the *AJN* to complain about the coverage given to AJDS views. Kapel claimed totally erroneously that all *AJN* feature journalists bar Sam Lipski were either members or supporters of AJDS.²¹⁴

AJDS also enjoyed particularly close relations with the Jewish Secular Humanistic Society with which it has a number of members and officials in common. Friendly relations have also been maintained with the Australian Jewish Welfare Society, and with consecutive JCCV chairmen Alan Goldberg, Robert Redlich, Leon Rosen and Geoffrey Green.

Perhaps most important for the long-term future of AJDS has been the question of its relationship with potential constituencies or sources of recruitment such as the Left Zionist youth groups Hashomer Hatzair and Habonim, and the Bundist youth group Skif.²¹⁵ Outcomes here have been mixed. For many, Skif and the Jewish Labor Bund seemed to offer natural sources of support for AJDS. Both the Bund and AJDS hold critical views on Zionism and the State of Israel. Both groups are also wedded to a secular Jewish identity, and to a strong and viable Jewish cultural presence within the Diaspora.

In April 1989, the author addressed a meeting of Skif, and offered the prospect of potential cooperation on a number of issues. The talk and suggestions were warmly received by the youth group. However, the adult leadership group of the Bund subsequently vetoed any such cooperation. Opposition seemed to be voiced on two grounds: First, the acrimonious memories held by some older Bundists regarding the activities of some veteran AJDS leaders in the pro-Soviet Jewish Council to Combat Fascism and Anti-Semitism in the 1950s. Second, the belief that the position and acceptance of the non-Zionist Bund in the Jewish community continued to be fragile, and that any association with the much-maligned AJDS would further erode that position.²¹⁶ The veteran Bundist leader, the late Bono Weiner, subsequently addressed an AJDS forum on 'Jews and Poland', and also supported the increased involvement of AJDS in the Jewish mainstream.²¹⁷ However, no further contact between AJDS and the Bund appears to have taken place since that time.

Contact with the Zionist youth movements has been somewhat more productive. In both 1989 and 1991, the author was invited to address meetings of Habonim. No further formal contact has occurred. However, AJDS views appear to have exerted considerable impact in that Habonim representatives have espoused similar opinions at ZFA conferences, and in other forums.²¹⁸ In addition, the short-lived Australian Labour Zionist movement (formed principally by Habonim graduates) invited an AJDS representative — David Rothfield — to address its inaugural public forum.²¹⁹ Contact with Hashomer Hatzair/Mapam has over time become more substantial. Friendly relations between AJDS and Mapam convenor Mervyn Cassidy have existed for many years. However, recently more formal cooperation has been forged between the two groups. A number of public forums on the Middle East and Aboriginal rights have been co-convened, and advertisements jointly placed in support of the peace process.²²⁰ In addition, younger Hashomer Hatzair leaders such as Daniel Wolkenberg have spoken out in favour of closer links with AJDS.²²¹

AJDS and the local Palestinian and Arab communities

One of the major challenges thrown at AJDS by mainstream Jewish leaders was that no equivalent peace lobby to AJDS existed in the local Palestinian and Arab communities. This assertion held considerable truth, although there were some notable exceptions.

The exceptions included: (1) The invitations regularly extended to

Norman Rothfield to speak at conferences of the Australasian Middle Eastern Studies Association which was viewed by much of the Jewish community as partial to the Palestinian cause. Rothfield generally used these forums as an opportunity to criticize Palestinian/Arab extremists undermining the peace process, whilst also attempting to encourage greater local Jewish/Arab dialogue.²²² (2) The occasional cooperation of Palestinian and Arab communal leaders such as Joe Wakim, Ray Jurideini, and others on matters of mutual concern such as opposition to racism, and the ill-fated Garden for Gaza project; (3) The recent involvement of Arab/Islamic schools and educators in the AJDS Peace Project including regular gatherings of a group of Jewish and Islamic women; (4) The friendly and constructive statements made by local Palestinian communal leaders at the time of the Israeli/PLO Peace Accord.²²³

None of these examples of Jewish/Arab cooperation were insignificant in themselves, but they did not alter the fact that no local Palestinian/Arab organisation publicly supported the peace process, and engaged in criticism of its own extremists in the same manner as AJDS.

There are probably three principal reasons for this absence of an Arab peace voice: two practical and one ideological. The practical factor is that many (perhaps most) Australian Palestinians lack confidence and/or competence in English, at least compared to the highly literate and articulate Jewish community.²²⁴ Jewish media observers would note, for example, that only a small number of Palestinian or Arab Australian leaders, as opposed to Australian pro-Palestinian academics, contribute to media debates on the Middle East. However, this situation is changing as a considerable number of first-generation Australian Palestinians enter tertiary institutions. In addition, many Arabs (coming from non-democratic regimes) may genuinely fear speaking out against hardliners.²²⁵ An associated concern of many Palestinian Australians is the possible presence of Israeli agents within the local community so that Palestinians returning home may face harassment or even arrest if they have been politically active here. Their families in Palestine may also suffer harassment.²²⁶ The other factor is that Palestinians still believe (with some justification) that they are the weaker party who lack a State of their own, and that it is Israel who should make the concessions and humanitarian Jews who should urge these concessions. For this reason, it was probably unrealistic to expect ordinary Australian Palestinians or Arabs to publicly urge support for the peace process and recognition of Israel in the same vein as AJDS urged recognition of Palestinian rights and aspirations.²²⁷

It would also appear that AJDS made little serious attempt to engage with or cooperate with the local Palestinian or Arab communities. A probable reason for this reticence was that earlier approaches to local Palestinian groups by Paths to Peace (the forerunner to AJDS) had been firmly rebuffed. At least in the 1970s and early-mid 1980s, representative Palestinian groups such as the United Palestinian Workers appeared to be dominated by hardliners who displayed no interest in any contact with the Jewish community.²²⁸ However, following the PLO's firm movement towards compromise in the late 1980s, there may well have been greater opportunities for AJDS to engage local

Palestinians on matters of mutual concern. Nevertheless, it is incontrovertible that the absence of a commensurate local Arab peace voice has made it harder for AJDS to convince local Jews of the benign influence of the other side.

The role of the Jewish Left in the Contemporary Australian Jewish community

The existence of AJDS has met two principal and complementary needs: to provide an outlet for those Jews who favoured a specifically Jewish role in broader universalistic campaigns as opposed to the non-universalistic agenda preferred by mainstream leaders; and to provide a forum for those Jews who felt alienated and unrepresented by the Jewish communal establishment's unqualified support for Israeli Government policies.

As already noted, these relatively objective factors have stimulated the establishment of similar Jewish Left groups overseas. However, the form and particular viewpoints adopted by AJDS also reflect a number of specific local factors including the long period of Jewish Left estrangement from the mainstream leadership dating back to the 1950s; the key role and ideological direction offered by Norman Rothfield; and the hostile reaction from some mainstream groups such as the ZFA and AIP.

Some analysts (particularly those critical of AJDS) may like to quibble about the actual size or support base of AJDS, and the extent to which it represents any significant constituency in the Jewish community. However, I believe such an emphasis largely misses the point. First, there is and is always likely to be some Jewish support for AJDS-type views. This is because Jews as a vulnerable minority group in a Christian-dominated society are predisposed towards the expression of alternative or dissenting views. Whilst these views may no longer take a socialist form as in the past, they are likely to include various forms of cultural and social radicalism including a unique and comprehensive opposition to all forms of racism.²²⁹ Second, whilst AJDS may well represent only a small minority of the overall Jewish community, it almost certainly represents a much higher proportion of those Jews who are politically active. It is noticeable that when AJDS engages in skirmishes with the ZFA or AIP, polemical involvement is almost always restricted to the same small group of people on either side. The majority of Jews almost certainly tend to be agnostically silent on such matters.

As to the question of effectiveness, I believe that AJDS has contributed significantly towards opening up a larger political space for debate and discussion within the Jewish community. To be sure, other organisations and institutions such as the rejuvenated *Australian Jewish News* which is a valuable forum for pluralistic discussion, the Australian Institute of Jewish Affairs which provides a balanced range of speakers from Left to Right, the journals *Generation* and *Without Prejudice*, the apolitical Australian Association for Jewish Studies annual conferences and the Australian Jewish Historical Society, and the Jewish Secular Humanistic Society with its alternatives to organised religion, have played an even more important role in widening this space.

Nevertheless, AJDS arguably continues to serve as an arbiter of tolerance and diversity in the community. The rejection by mainstream Jewry of recent attempts to censor or suppress alternative or minority views on the Israeli-Arab conflict suggests that a more inclusive public debate has won out over the old politics of silencing.²³⁰ In addition, AJDS appears to have encouraged mainstream Jewry to become more involved in universalistic activities and agendas.²³¹ It is now commonplace in a way that was almost unthinkable ten years ago for bodies such as the ECAJ, State Jewish Community Councils, the Australia/Israel & Jewish Affairs Council (AIJAC), and the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation Commission to publicly comment and campaign on issues as broad as Pauline Hanson and racism, Aboriginal rights, and multiculturalism.

Overall, AJDS can take credit for breaching the pseudo Jewish unity that surrounded issues such as the Israeli-Arab conflict, and universalistic interventions. Arguably, a broader pro-Israel consensus has now replaced the older narrow pro-Israeli Government hegemony in local Jewish discourse, and is contributing to a far healthier and more vibrant community. As to the future, AJDS faces the same challenges of regeneration and resourcing experienced by most Jewish organisations. Firstly, to survive in the long-term, AJDS will need to replace its ageing membership with a new generation of adherents. Secondly, AJDS will have to secure on-going and reliable financial support from members and/or generous benefactors. The extent to which AJDS is able to meet these exigencies will determine whether it continues to represent alternative Jewish views well into the 21st century.

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