

# JEWISH IDENTITY, ANTISEMITISM AND MEDIA RESPONSIBILITY

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## Foreword

This paper by Michael Gawenda occupies an important place in the Centre for Independent Studies' research program on antisemitism and religious intolerance in Australia. It is not a conventional piece of research. It advances no formal methodology, nor does it seek to adjudicate competing empirical claims in the manner of academic scholarship.

Instead, it offers something both rarer and, in the present context, indispensable: a reflective account from one of Australia's most experienced journalists on how the craft, culture and ethics of journalism have changed, and why those changes matter for the coverage of Jewish affairs, Israel and antisemitism.

The decline of trust in mainstream journalism, both as a profession and as an institution, forms an important part of the story. It is, in effect, a practitioner's account of institutional change written by someone who has both shaped, and been shaped by, Australian journalism at its highest levels.

This perspective is especially valuable at a moment when public debate about antisemitism is increasingly shaped by media framing, narrative selection and the very credibility of journalistic institutions themselves. As Gawenda makes clear, the transformation of journalism over the past two decades has been both economic and intellectual.

The collapse of the traditional business model, the contraction of newsrooms and the disappearance of specialist expertise have coincided with a deeper shift in professional norms and the practice of ethical journalism — from reporting to advocacy, from balance to moral positioning and from institutional authority to individual branding.

These changes have had specific consequences for the way Jewish issues are understood and represented. Gawenda's central argument is not simply that coverage has become less accurate or less fair — although he argues that it often has — but that the underlying conception of what journalism is *for* has altered.

In a professional culture that increasingly defines its task as giving voice to the 'powerless' and addressing instances of

perceived 'injustice', Jews are frequently recast not as a minority with legitimate concerns, but as figures who wield disproportionate levels of economic and political power. This reframing shapes what is reported, whose voices are amplified, and how claims of antisemitism are interpreted.

It is in this context that Gawenda's insistence on the importance of 'context' acquires its full significance. Context, in his account, is not merely background; it is the discipline that prevents journalism from collapsing into advocacy. Without context, complex realities are reduced to moral binaries, and the obligation to test competing claims is replaced by the impulse to affirm preferred narratives. The result, he argues, has been coverage not only of Jewish affairs, but of the surge in antisemitism since October 7, 2023, that is frequently partial, unbalanced and dismissive of the lived experience of Australian Jews.

This paper should therefore be read as a contribution to the broader analytical task of the CIS antisemitism project. That task is to understand not only the scale and character of antisemitism in Australia, but also the institutional conditions that shape how it is perceived, reported, and contested. Journalism is one of those institutions, and so its norms, incentives and failures matter.

Michael Gawenda writes with the authority of long experience and the clarity of someone who has witnessed these changes from within. He raises important questions that cannot be avoided if we are to understand the relationship between media, public trust and the health of Australia's civic compact. For that reason, this work is an important and timely contribution to the project.

**Peter Kurti,**

**Director – Culture, Prosperity & Civil Society program**

**The Centre for Independent Studies**

## Introduction

The crisis in journalism began almost 20 years ago when the economic model that had made media companies — newspapers in particular and commercial television networks — among the most profitable businesses was broken by the internet. Advertising, especially classified advertising, migrated to websites not operated by publishers. In the US, most regional newspapers shut down and, if their readership was lucky, they maintained a skeleton online version of papers that had existed for a century or longer. Streaming services and cable news made commercial news on free-to-air television a failing business.

Over a decade, thousands of journalists in Australia were made redundant. An example: in the late 1990s, the editorial staff of *The Age* was over 400. It is now down to under 200. And the daily print edition of the paper is a slimmed down version of what it once was. Many media analysts believe that within a decade, few print newspapers will still be publishing. The crisis in journalism is not over. Media companies regularly shed staff. Some are close to net zero profit — especially regional companies.

The decline of mainstream media, the fact that thousands of journalists have lost their jobs — and are still losing jobs — is one important thing to remember when examining how journalists have covered

Australia's Jewish community and the alarming increase in antisemitism since October 7, 2023. In the 1990s, *The Age* and *The SMH* and *The Australian* had full-time correspondents in the Middle East. None do now.

Then there is the way journalism has changed. What was once a trade with few, if any, tertiary-educated journalists, with many journalists who were working class men and (a few) women, has been professionalised with most journalists now graduates of university journalism courses. These journalists, in the main, do not want to be reporters but rather want to write long features that will uncover perceived injustices, give voice to the voiceless — the powerless — which they have been taught is the goal of all good journalism.

This is particularly important when it comes to the way journalists have covered the Jewish community and the explosion of hostility and even hatred in Australia towards Jews. For many journalists, Jews are not powerless and voiceless. They are not victims. For many journalists, they are victimisers.

This paper explores how journalists have covered the Jews and antisemitism, and why it has often been inaccurate and appallingly unbalanced, with the focus of journalism shifting from reporting to advocacy.

## Journalism and Jews in the recent past

In September 1997, I was appointed editor of *The Age*. I had worked at the paper, on and off, for almost three decades.

Neither the announcement of my appointment as editor nor the announcement that I was appointed editor-in-chief in 2003, mentioned the fact that I was a Jew, although in the Jewish community the fact that I was the first Jew to be appointed to that position in its 150-year history was cause for some celebration.

In the decades before I was appointed editor, there were few instances when the fact that I was a Jew was an issue, not when I worked for *The Age*, not when I worked for the *Herald* and *Weekly Times* and not when I worked for *Time* magazine. Not even when, for instance, in 1988, I

wrote a cover story for *Time*, *Echoes of a Darker Age*, about the proposed war crimes trials in Australia of alleged Nazi war criminals. This was a deeply divisive issue, the proposed trials welcomed by the Jewish community leadership but greeted with hostility by members of the ethnic communities from which the alleged war criminals came.

I had spent months on the story. I spoke to members of all the communities with a stake in this issue — Croatian Australians, Lithuanian Australians, Ukrainian Australians — as well as Jewish Australians. I talked to them face to face, sitting with them, listening to them as they challenged some of the assumptions with which I had come to this story. At times I was puzzled, even bewildered by what I heard. At times I was worried that the issue was

too big for me to convey the complexity and the challenges of these proposed war crimes trials. And the goal was not for me to decide whether the trials were a good or bad idea. This was a piece of reporting to which all the ethical rules of good journalism applied — open mindedness, fairness, accuracy and something approaching balance.

The idea of balance is often misunderstood. It is not giving every view on any issue equal weight. What it means is avoiding giving preference to voices that you find agreeable and in line with your thinking, but rather making sure that you have given, not equal space, but sufficient weight to the arguments and experiences of people with whom you might disagree, even vehemently so.

The fact that I was a Jew was not an issue. Not among my fellow journalists and not in

## Journalism and Jews now

Let us now fast-forward to August 2025. The Sky News presenter and journalist Sharri Markson had just interviewed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu when Linton Besser, the host of *Media Watch* on the ABC called. He wanted to know whether I would be prepared to comment on the interview for his program. He had asked Ray Martin and Kerry O'Brien to comment as well. I agreed to do it, although I knew that all of us would be critical of Markson because it was a 'soft' interview.

And so it proved. I criticised the interview because Markson had not asked the obvious questions about Netanyahu's recent criticism of the Australian government and specifically, of its failure to deal with what was, Netanyahu said, an explosion of antisemitism. Indeed, Albanese was exacerbating the antisemitism problem, he said. This was an extraordinary intervention in Australian politics. The Jewish community leadership criticised Netanyahu for his intervention. So why no questions about this?

Martin and O'Brien more or less agreed with me on this, but O'Brien went on to say Markson should have challenged him over the war in Gaza and this should have been the main thrust of the interview. I thought he was wrong — Markson had a few minutes and the issue of his intervention in Australian policies was clearly the main

the letters that came flooding into *Time*.

Consider this astounding fact, given where we are now: a long article by a Jewish journalist about proposed Nazi war crimes trials in Australia, bitterly opposed by ethnic communities from which the alleged war criminals came, with conservatives like B.A. Santamaria vehemently opposed to the trials, and no-one accused me of bias in the reporting. I had struggled the way reporters always should do to keep an open mind, understanding that the truth is complicated, full of contradictions, and only partly knowable. The best reporters are humble.

This was once what great journalism was about. Deep reporting during which the reporter's pre-conceptions are put aside in order to get as close to the 'first rough cut of history' as possible. The identity of the reporter was unimportant.

issue for Australian audiences.

Before *Media Watch* went to air, Linton Besser called to read to me how he was going to characterise me on the program. Was it okay if he described me as a veteran journalist and a Zionist? I asked how he knew I was a Zionist. And how was this important? Wasn't it important that I had been a senior editor at *Time* and editor-in-chief of *The Age*? Was I not a Zionist, he asked? When I asked to be called a former editor-in-chief of *The Age* and nothing else, Besser said it was important to acknowledge my views on Israel. What was used eventually, was that I was a former editor of *The Age* and a contributor to *The Australian* who has written about his deep feelings for Israel.

What did it mean that the host of *Media Watch* wanted to refer to me as a Zionist? That question is at the heart of the way a large section of the media, a large number of journalists, have reported the rise of hostility and hatred towards Jews in Australia over the last couple of decades and which exploded after October 7, 2023. It is the question which has to be answered in light of the attacks on Jewish institutions and assaults on Jews growing and culminating in the Hannukah massacre at Bondi on December 14, 2025.

Answers to this question need — that dreaded word — context.

## Universities and the growth of personal narratives

In 1970 when I started at *The Age*, the majority by far of journalists on the paper, including the legendary editor Graham Perkin, were not tertiary educated. Nor were there journalism degrees on offer at any Australian university. University-educated journalism in those days was an oxymoron. Many of the journalists I knew were working class men — there were few women in journalism —including the sub-editors on the papers for which I worked, who in the main, were masters of plain, grammatically-correct English. There were no celebrity journalists. Few talked about changing the world, rotten as some things were. They were reporters, wonderful reporters many of them, out there most afternoons and nights — for that was when we worked — in search of a story.

All now have a university degree. They come, in the main, from the middle class, many of them from private schools. Most of them have done undergraduate degrees in journalism. Some have done a Masters of Journalism. I know something about the sort of journalists that come out of the university courses. I saw them when I was *The Age* editor and choosing trainees for the paper. Young men and women who were ferociously ambitious — no bad thing — and who did not read the popular press, who did not see themselves as police reporters or lower court reporters or really reporters of any (lowly) kind. They wanted to make a difference. They wanted to write long feature articles, mostly about

the disadvantaged and the powerless. They wanted to write commentary that would change the world. That was journalism for most of them.

I also know something about university journalism courses because when I left full-time journalism, I was hired to set up a journalism centre at Melbourne University and during my time at the university, I helped plan a Master's program that started after I had left. The Centre for Advancing Journalism is thriving, I'm told, and the Master's program apparently is doing okay, although it is not the program I had wanted: one aimed at mid-career journalists who wanted to sharpen their skills, learn new skills, and have the time to think about journalism in a digital age, when most media companies were in crisis, their economic model destroyed by the internet, their future cloudy at best.

This Master's program didn't happen. What happened can be summed up by the fact that one of the senior lecturers in journalism and international journalism in the Master's program at Melbourne University is Jeff Sparrow, a former editor of *Overland* magazine which published an open letter, to which he was a signatory, titled *Stop the Genocide in Gaza* on October 21, 2023, 14 days after the October 7 Hamas attack and before there had been any ground invasion by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). The letter was signed by hundreds of writers and artists.

## Ethical codes and balanced reporting

To understand the significance of Sparrow's position and that of journalists who signed his letter, one needs to understand the ethical conflict this created. For a year after I became editor of *The Age*, I worked with the publisher, who was also editor-in-chief, to develop a code of ethics for the paper. The staff was included in this process. What we aimed for was a document that our journalists developed with us and that we all could agree was the basis of our journalism. The Code of Conduct was finalised in late 1998. It was published in *The Age* and can be found today through a search online, but here are the most important points:

- The code gives guidance as to the high ethical standards expected of *The Age*

- The overriding principles are fairness, integrity, openness, responsibility and a commitment to accuracy and truth
- It is in the best interests of *The Age* that real and perceived conflicts of interest be eliminated
- Staff involved in a story who believe they have an interest that could be seen to influence their views on the issue at hand should acknowledge that interest during preparation and at publication of the story
- Staff have the right to join any community or political organisation but should be aware that such participation may create or be seen to create a

conflict of interest and reflect on the credibility of *The Age* and the staff member. However, staff participation in protests and demonstrations or in decision making in organisations that could generate news should be declared where their involvement could be an issue.

These principles of what constituted ethical journalism were — and remain, it must be emphasised — widely shared by most newspapers, the ABC, commercial television networks news services, the Australian Press Council and by the journalists' union, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA). The ABC editorial policies document is clear and unequivocal about this. Its journalism must be independent and responsible and practised with integrity. The ABC has a statutory duty to be accurate according to 'recognised standards of objective journalism'. And its journalism must be impartial and include 'diverse perspectives'.

This focus on fairness and accuracy is at the centre of the Australian Press Council's statement of principles and of the code of ethics of the MEAA, although the code does acknowledge "basic values often need interpretation and sometimes come into conflict. Ethical journalism requires conscientious decision-making in context. Only substantial advancement of the public interest or risk of substantial harm to people might allow the code to be overridden". This vague get-out-of-jail clause has meant that the MEAA has been able to support group letters from its members calling for a sort of activist journalism that on the surface, the code forbids.

All these codes were written before the internet destroyed the economic model that had made newspapers and television and radio profitable businesses. And it was before social media took hold and journalists became brands and the young journalists, armed with a journalism degree, came to view the old ethical rules as quaint and outdated.

The result of this general abandonment of the old ethical rules by many journalists, which, it is true, were hard to enforce — given the way the internet and social media had forced news organisations to become mainly concerned with how fast they could post a news story, how little time they had to check whether it was accurate, how they

were being asked to do more with far fewer reporters or sub-editors — changed the nature of journalism.

The drastic reduction in journalist numbers across the mainstream media — the ABC is the exception because it is publicly funded — has had a profound effect on the quality of journalism. When I was editing *The Age*, there was an editorial staff of more than 400. That number is down to under 200. Added to that is the fact that most journalists were graduates of journalism courses that, in my view, did not equip young men and women for the real world of journalism. Then there were the consequences of the internet and social media and all of this together produced the sort of coverage of the October 7, 2023, massacre of Israelis by Hamas terrorists, their taking of 251 hostages and the subsequent war in Gaza most of which only newspaper editors and television executive producers who are wilfully blind and wilfully deaf would be proud.

This is particularly true when it comes to the way the rise and then the explosion of hostility to Jews and Jew-hatred after October 7 was covered in large sections of the media. I mean by this the ABC and the Nine newspapers, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, and the *Guardian Australia*. In my view, *The Australian's* coverage of these issues, I mean in particular, how the rise in Jew hatred had affected the lives of Australian Jews and threatened Australian multiculturalism, has been pretty good. I must declare that I write for *The Australian*. I am happy to do so, but I would have liked to reach the readers of the paper I wrote for and edited, but *The Age* has not wanted to publish me. Not a single piece by me has been published since October 7, 2023.

Senior journalists at *The Australian* like Cameron Stewart remained committed to reporting, to going out and actually talking to people, to Jews where they lived. But for all the talk of the power of News Corp Australia, *The Australian* does not have the reach of the ABC and the Nine papers combined and its tabloids do not influence elite opinion, although in my view, the *Herald Sun* has covered the explosion of antisemitism reasonably well.

## When the rot set in

To examine the consequences of the changes in journalism and the way many journalists see their role (which in summary means that they reject the old ethical principles as the basis on which they work) for the coverage of Israel and the Palestinians and the rise in hostility towards Jews, we need to go back to 2021, two years before October 7, 2023.

In May 2021, a letter signed by 400 journalists and publishers during the short war between Hamas and Israel that year, started with a preamble that these journalists and publishers presented as a guide to the way the war should be covered.

Here are the main points:

- Israel's government led by Benjamin Netanyahu had unleashed an unprovoked brutal war against the besieged population of Gaza
- Seventy- five years after the Nakba — the expulsion by Israel of 750,000 Palestinians — Israel was maintaining an apartheid regime against the Palestinians, in the West Bank and Gaza and *inside Israel* (my italics).

This was the potted history — the context — that the letter signers wanted journalists covering the Israel-Palestinian conflict to sign on to and use whenever they reported on any aspect of the Israel-Palestinian story and importantly, when it came to covering the Australian Jewish community and its formal leadership, a community that was overwhelmingly attached to Israel and its central role in Jewish life.

The preamble ends with this:

*We believe that the coverage of Palestine must be improved, that it should no longer prioritise the same discredited spokespeople and narratives and that new voices are urgently needed.*

The letter went on to say that journalists must prioritise the voices of the oppressed, the Palestinians and avoid 'both siderism' that equates the victims of the 'military occupation to its instigators'. What is more, media organisations must respect the right of journalists to publicly and openly express personal solidarity with the Palestinian cause without penalty to their

personal or professional life. How all this would not compromise their reporting is wholly unclear, as if such old-fashioned considerations no longer mattered.

Then in October 2021, Monash University Publishing, as part of a series of small books on government policy, published *Dateline Jerusalem: journalism's toughest assignment* by the ABC senior editorial executive John Lyons who was head of investigations and oversaw some of the ABC's high-profile programs, including *Four Corners* when he wrote *Dateline Jerusalem*. By the time it was published he was the ABC's global affairs editor.

The thesis of his book was that a powerful lobby, variously referred to as the Israel Lobby or the Jewish Lobby, had exercised its formidable powers to bend editors and journalists to its will, to make them too frightened of retaliation to properly and vigorously cover the Middle-East, especially what Israel was doing to the Palestinians. My analysis of this thesis and its shortcomings as a piece of journalism is in my book, *My Life as a Jew*. This 'exposure' of a powerful Jewish lobby and its nefarious work by Lyons was not new. For decades sections of the left had worried about the way 'powerful' Jews forced weak-kneed Australian governments — prime ministers and foreign ministers — to act against our national interest when it came to Israel. Now Lyons exposed how these powerful Jews had nobbled editors and journalists, bent them to their will, made sure that the truth about Israel remained unreported.

Lyons had been a long-time Middle-East correspondent for *The Australian*. He also had overseen iconic ABC programs and investigations. How it was appropriate for him to write about the way powerful Jews were distorting and censoring the journalism of reporters under his control is beyond me. Instead, Lyons was given the softest interviews on the ABC. He was clearly a hero to many ABC journalists. He went on to become an award-winning journalist for his coverage of the Gaza war. He continued to argue that the Israel Lobby was desperately trying to silence him.

The letter signed by hundreds of journalists in May 2021 — similar letters were signed by thousands of journalists in the US and the UK — and the Lyons' book in which he argued so fiercely against the Israel Lobby/Jewish Lobby, became the blueprint for

how journalists would cover the October 7 Hamas massacre of Israelis and the taking of hundreds of hostages, and the subsequent Gaza war. Journalists in the left-liberal media and in the ABC thought it was right to privilege some voices over others, to ignore the tired old narratives of the Zionists, to silence them in fact and that it was right to be activists for the Palestinian cause.

The goal was to expose the nefarious doings of the Israel/Jewish Lobby, that bunch of powerful Jews who were trying to silence journalists and were using the exaggerated threat of antisemitism as a weapon to counter criticism of Israel's 'genocidal' war in Gaza. The journalists who signed the letter were, in the main, the product of university journalism

## Union declarations of bias

In the weeks after the October 7 massacre of Israelis, men, women and children and the taking of hundreds of hostages, including children who were still toddlers, a dozen or so letters signed by hundreds of journalists and supported by the journalists' union, the MEAA, were distributed. The first of these letters was released and distributed to all media organisations on November 10. The signatories to the letter, hundreds of them, identified as members of the MEAA. The letter condemned the Australian government's support for "Israel's genocidal assault on Gaza". The letter went on to demand that the government change its policies and condemn Israel for its 'genocide' of the people of Gaza.

At the same time, a group of 200 or so ABC journalists met with senior news executives to demand the right to label the war in Gaza a genocide being committed against the Palestinian people. There was no mention in any of these letters or at the ABC gathering about what had happened on October 7.

Some of the letters urged journalists, with the support of the MEAA, to give equal weight to statements coming from declared terrorist group Hamas to those from the IDF. Scores of letters and petitions were circulated and signed by thousands of journalists in the Anglosphere that not only called on governments to end their support for Israel — journalists urging a change in government policy — but urged journalists to side with the Palestinians, preference

courses in which they were instructed by academics like the aforementioned Jeff Sparrow. Days after the October 7 attacks, the letter signed by hundreds of writers — including Sparrow — urged the massacre by Hamas of 1200 Israelis to be seen as an act of 'resistance'. He was teaching journalism and what constituted good, ethical journalism in the Masters course at Melbourne University. It was a prime example of what Dimitri Burshtein described as a transition in universities from institutions concerned with the preservation and transmission of accumulated knowledge to something more closely resembling advocacy, as detailed in his recent CIS paper, [\*The Legislative Fantasy. Hate Speech, Culture, and Institutional Failure.\*](#)

their voices and implicitly silence the voices of Zionists and Israel defenders. Defenders of a 'genocidal state'. There was hardly a mention of what happened on October 7 inside Israel in these letters and petitions from journalists and, if it was mentioned in passing, it was contextualised and implicitly justified.

I do not intend in this paper to examine in detail the coverage on the ground of the war in Gaza or for that matter, the war with Iran. But all those signed letters by journalists about how the Gaza war should be reported must surely have had an impact on the actual coverage. Still, the conflict and its impact locally was covered as well. Thousands of opinion articles have been published about the war itself and its impact on Australian government policy and on the Australian community. Articles and television news programs including on the ABC, have extensively if superficially, covered the years-long protests by the pro-Palestinian marches that have closed the CBD every weekend.

Rather less extensive was coverage by the ABC and the Nine papers of the increase in violence against Jews and Jewish institutions and the widespread feeling in the Jewish community that an act of mass violence felt more and more inevitable. It felt to me as if many reporters and commentators had subscribed to the view that the Jewish Lobby was a shady bunch of powerful Jews who were trying to 'weaponise' antisemitism in order to shut down criticism.

There was only cursory coverage of the studies undertaken by well-known researchers that showed that attacks on Jews and Jewish property had grown exponentially since the October 7 attacks. Individual acts of violence — a synagogue set on fire, a preschool centre vandalised — got coverage. The fact that these events are part of a trend that has left Jews feeling traumatised and unheard was not reported. What this represented for many Jews was a denial of their 'lived' experience.

Perhaps the starkest illustration of this was the news coverage and the commentary that followed the release last July of the report by the government appointed envoy to combat antisemitism, Jillian Segal. The report was released by the Prime Minister at a solemn press conference. There, too, was Tony Burke, the Minister for Home Affairs and the Arts. Anthony Albanese spoke about the importance of Segal's work and how the government would carefully examine the report's recommendations and act accordingly as soon as possible to curb rising antisemitism.

The actual report and its recommendations barely had any coverage on the ABC and in *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*. The plan had taken 12 months to prepare, with significant contributions from major Jewish institutions like the Executive Council of Australian Jewry. The recommendations in the report came out of the mainstream of the Jewish community.

Not long after the press conference, social media was full of hate and abuse directed at these Zionists who had conjured up this plan to protect and provide cover for 'genocidal Israel'. The posts maintained these people were powerful Jews, Zionist Jews, supporters of genocide and adherents of an ideology that was evil and racist and was designed to oppress and eventually ethnically cleanse the Palestinians, the indigenous people of Palestine.

In *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, a Jewish lawyer, Josh Bornstein, wrote of the way the plan was designed to subvert Australia's legal system. Bornstein is an anti-Zionist who believes that an Israel Lobby of powerful Jews has worked in the interests of Israel and not Australia. In the *Guardian Australia*, Louise Adler, another anti-Zionist Jew, wrote about the way the plan weaponised antisemitism —

surely a shocking and grave accusation — in the service of Zionism and Israel. And she saw in the plan the work of the dreaded and dreadful Israel Lobby

Both Bornstein and Adler are on the advisory board of the Jewish Council of Australia. The JCA represents a very small proportion of Australia's Jews when it comes to attitudes to Israel and Zionism and is openly anti-Zionist and aligned with some of the most radical groups in the pro-Palestinian movement. Its spokespeople are the preferred Jews to whom the ABC and the Nine papers have regularly given space, as opposed to Jews — those Jews of the 'tired narratives' who consider Israel a 20th century miracle, given when the state was established, just three years after the Holocaust in which six million Jews were murdered. The JCA is given space as if it represents a significant Jewish voice in Australia. It does not.

Not only has *The Age*, *The SMH* and the ABC given the JCA space beyond what could be considered fair, but editors of oped pages, when it came to giving space to Jewish commentators who may not be anti-Zionist, but who hate Netanyahu, believe that Israel has committed major war crimes in Gaza — if not quite genocide— and believe that somehow, if there has been a real rise in Jew hatred, Netanyahu and his criminal government is responsible.

The writer Richard Flanagan wrote this in *The Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald* in response to the Segal plan:

*The report creates an attractive template that could be broadened to silence dissenting voices that question the state's policies on other issues ... Despite the Segal report's claims about rising antisemitism, some of which are contested as exaggerated [by leading Jewish figures](#) (he is referring to Louise Adler in particular) it fails to provide a single citation in evidence.*

And he goes on to attack Segal's credibility because her husband had made donations to the lobby group Advance which, Flanagan writes, "advocates anti-Palestinian positions ..." This attack was subsequently amplified by other journalists who considered Segal a creature of the Israel Lobby, given she had once been the president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry.

In its coverage of the plan, the ABC concentrated on one recommendation, that the ABC and SBS as publicly funded broadcasters, should be monitored to ensure the coverage of the Gaza war and of the Jewish community in Australia was fair and accurate. In a major interview on 7.30, Segal was vigorously interrogated about this recommendation and nothing else in her report, by Sarah Ferguson who was clearly outraged by Segal's 'attack on the independence of the ABC'.

The government, it is fair to say, buried the report it had commissioned. There was obfuscation about when it might consider the recommendations — one senior cabinet minister said there was no hurry, that the government will wait for the report from its appointed Islamophobia envoy, although how the two were connected in terms of government action he did not say. In fact, the government acted as if antisemitism was not an urgent issue despite warnings from Segal and all the Jewish community leaders that antisemitism was out of control and a threat to Jews in Australia — such warnings had been issued by ASIO months earlier — of a serious, even murderous attack that was mounting.

It was not until after the Bondi massacre on December 14 last year that Albanese met with Segal and announced that the recommendations in her report would now be implemented as a matter of urgency, an announcement that was greeted with little enthusiasm by most journalists and commentators in left-liberal media and on the ABC, despite their professed shock at what had taken place in Bondi on the first night of Hannukah just days before. Nor was there great enthusiasm about the reluctant and late decision by the Albanese government to set up a Royal Commission into antisemitism and what it called 'social cohesion', although *The Age* in an editorial did offer support. Ironically, on the same day, the paper published a cartoon by Cathy Wilcox which suggested that the outpouring of support for a Royal Commission from people in business and professional sport was not spontaneous but the work of a certain powerful group whose conductor was the evil Benjamin Netanyahu.

Nothing much changed after the December 14 Hanukkah massacre. The consequences

of the then Adelaide Festival board's decision to remove the Palestinian Australian academic and activist Randa Abdel-Fattah from the Writers Week program resulted in scores of writers withdrawing from the program in protest and the resignation of the festival's director, Louise Adler. The withdrawal of the writers meant the event had to be cancelled. The protests about the festival board's decision grew, Adler was treated like a heroine, interviewed by the ABC on radio and television as a free speech martyr and treated that way by many journalists and writers — Richard Flanagan called her the fearless and peerless advocate for free speech — for writers persecuted by the usual suspects. Inevitably in my view, the festival board resigned, a new board was appointed, and the cancellation of Abdel-Fattah, whose views on Zionism and Australian (Jews) are, to say the least, problematic, was rescinded. She was offered an apology. She joined Adler as a free speech martyr.

It was only in *The Australian* that Abdel-Fattah's views were reported in any detail. It was only *The Australian* that gave real weight to the fact that Adler had urged the Festival board two years ago — as had Abdel-Fattah — to cancel the *New York Times* columnist Tom Friedman's appearance at Writers Week. Friedman did not appear. And those who watched only the ABC and read only *The Age* or *The Sydney Morning Herald*, would have concluded that yes, Jews, powerful Jews had a hand in getting Abdel-Fattah cancelled. Weak politicians had bowed to their will.

Whatever comes out of the Royal Commission — and however the commission is reported in the left media and the ABC — the demands of the journalists and publishers who signed that letter back in 2021, and the subsequent letters and petitions in recent times that demanded the preferencing of pro-Palestinian voices and the dismissal of pro-Israel voices, have been met. And the Jews with an almost magical power in subverting Australia's national interest and subverting journalism, that too is now a widely held view by many Australian journalists, especially at the ABC and the Nine mastheads.

## Conclusion

All of this has been a long time coming. The nature of journalism itself has changed, in some fundamental ways. The old ethics no longer matter to many journalists. Indeed, many believe the old ethics were designed to favour the powerful over their victims by insisting on a 'both-siderism' that amplifies the voices of the powerful. Many journalists no longer believe that journalism is about reporting the world as it is. They do not consider themselves reporters — they are not much interested in the slog of reporting — but rather they see themselves as advocates for a better world.

And, it seems, the editors and editorial executives of the left-liberal media and the ABC, are powerless to assert the old ethical principles to which they sometimes give lip service. Some of them, it must be assumed, support this new journalism. For a brief moment back when the letters of protest were signed by hundreds of journalists, *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* and even *Guardian Australia* issued statements that said journalists who had signed such letters would be barred from covering any aspect of the conflict between Israel and Hamas and its effects on Australians.

That lasted a few weeks and was quietly abandoned. The editors and executive producers and the boards of media companies were simply unable to maintain this fundamental ethical principle. The ABC, and increasingly the newspapers, are run by their staff. And there seems to be no changing the way journalists see their role and their idea of what constituted ethical coverage of Israel, the Palestinians, Australian Jews and Muslims and the explosion of hostility and even hatred of Jews in particular. It has been a long road to where we are now.

There was a time when journalists were faithful servants of the institutions for which they worked — the ABC and the

large newspapers in particular — by which I mean they were proud of these institutions and felt privileged to work for them. That time has gone. The decline of trust in institutions, generally, has infected journalists. Many journalists now see themselves as individual 'brands' who happen to work for the ABC or *The Age* or *The SMH*. There is little pride — or trust for that matter — in their employers.

It is important to know how we got here for there to be any real hope of reasserting the ethical principles that once governed what was considered good journalism. What is needed is brave editorial leadership; for editors and ABC senior editorial executives to reassert their authority, to consistently insist that journalists adhere to the ethical principles of the organisation. They must be the enforcers of ethical best practice. They must do the work they are paid to do.

What is more, media companies need to become more involved in the education of journalists. They must get involved in course development; they must offer feedback to the academics running these courses in terms of the sort of journalism graduates they would be keen to hire. They might even urge young people, like I do, who want to be journalists to do degrees other than in journalism — science degrees or even medical degrees — because academic courses in journalism might be a waste of time.

Mainstream journalism is in decline. The way journalists have covered the Australian Jewish community and the rise in antisemitism is proof of that decline. But I believe it can and must be arrested and even turned around. Good journalism is vital for an informed citizenry in a liberal democracy. Pessimism about the future is easy but unproductive. There is work to be done. We must all do it.



Mainstream journalism is in decline. The way journalists have covered the Australian Jewish community and the rise in antisemitism is proof of that decline. There was a time when journalists were faithful servants of the institutions for which they worked — the ABC and the large newspapers in particular — and felt privileged to do so. That time has gone. The decline of trust in institutions, generally, has infected journalists. Many journalists now see themselves as individual ‘brands’ who happen to work for the ABC or *The Age* or *The SMH*. In the course of a few decades, the focus of journalism has shifted from reporting to advocacy, with disastrous consequences when that advocacy is misplaced. Michael Gawenda draws on his own experiences as a journalist and editor — and as a Jew — to provide a unique perspective on these changes and how the ethical principles that once governed what was considered good journalism can be reasserted.

## About the author



Michael Gawenda is one of Australia’s best-known journalists and authors. In a career spanning more than four decades, he has been a political reporter, a foreign correspondent based in London and in Washington, a columnist, a feature writer and an editor. A recipient of numerous journalism awards, including three Walkley awards, Michael was editor of *The Age* from 1997 to 2003 when he was appointed editor-in-chief. The author of five books, his latest — *My Life As a Jew* — was published in October 2023, three days before October 7. Michael is a regular contributor to *The Australian* and has contributed op-ed pieces to *Haaretz*, *The Australian Financial Review* and *The Saturday Paper*.

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