

WHY THE LEFT ABANDONED ISRAEL

Gary Johns





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This paper is part of The Centre for Independent Studies research program, The New Intolerance: Antisemitism and religious hatred in a fracturing civic compact. The program of antisemitism research has been made possible by the generous support of Simon Mordant AO and the Luminis Foundation.

 LUMINIS FOUNDATION



Analysis Paper 111

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Foreword

In this report, Gary Johns makes an authoritative contribution to The Centre for Independent Studies' research project into antisemitism and social cohesion in Australia and is uniquely placed to do so.

A minister in the second Keating Labor government, Johns writes about the political Left not as an outside critic but as a man formed within the labour tradition. This is a tradition that, from H.V. Evatt's advocacy of partition in 1947 to Bob Hawke's steadfast friendship, once counted support for a Jewish homeland among its settled convictions. However, this support has curdled into something colder, and at times openly hostile. It is this puzzle that the report sets out to explain.

Johns's answer is that the Left's abandonment of Israel was prepared long before 7 October 2023. Decades of intellectual drift — which included the discounting of the nation-state, the retreat from democratic confidence, the revival of anti-colonial theory and a multiculturalism that excused disunity rather than demanded a common life — primed Western publics to read Israel's success as evidence of its guilt.

The interpretive machinery was already in place when Hamas breached Israel's borders on 7 October. Johns argues that the Left could not abide a former underdog that had built a prosperous, democratic and militarily capable nation. In other words, success disqualified Jews from sympathy.

Johns has written a pungent paper with the eye of an insider. The reader may not concur with every judgment he makes;

and nor should they need to. Its value lies both in tracing how a party's electoral arithmetic and the intellectual fashions of an intelligentsia converged upon the world's oldest hatred, and in insisting that the response cannot be delegated to legislation alone.

It is here that Johns's argument converges forcefully with a consistent finding of this program's research: Australia's antisemitism crisis is, at root, a failure of institutions and of political will rather than a deficiency in our statute books. Laws that are not enforced corrode trust; laws that overreach harden the attitudes they seek to suppress. As Johns writes, the debate must ultimately be won by engaging openly, and not by shutting opponents down.

The questions Johns raises go well beyond the immediate crisis of antisemitism — questions about the conditions of civic loyalty, the obligations of political leadership and the intellectual currents that erode both. They will not be settled here; but they can no longer be evaded, and this forthright paper makes evasion harder.

At stake is not only the security of Australia's Jews, but the question at the heart of this program's work: how we are to live together. A nation that cannot protect its Jews has already begun to answer it badly.

Peter Kurti

Director – Culture, Prosperity & Civil Society program

The Centre for Independent Studies

Introduction

The extraordinary pro-Palestinian response by the West to the Hamas invasion of Israel on 7 October 2023 and the slaughter of 1200 Jews and others — and later Israel's response and the need to secure its borders against further attack — were perplexing and unsettling. The liberal West, including Australia, is among the least supportive of Israel.¹ This paper contends that national populations have been primed by decades of intellectual dissembling against those things in which Israel has succeeded and Palestinians have failed. The invasion and its response have brought to the surface deeply troubling veins of ignorance about what the West has achieved.

The priming was prepared by the political Left. In Australia, the Left, as represented by the trade union movement and the Australian Labor Party, was once a strong supporter of Israel as a Jewish homeland. That is no longer true. Jews were the underdog; they are no longer, so they no longer rank among traditional Leftist concerns. The Left's default position is that the

successful must be to blame for the ills of the unsuccessful. This aligns with Labor's egalitarian philosophy. The Left prefers to remain ignorant of how some people succeed and others do not. Doing so would undermine its ideology of redistribution, a central tenet of socialism.

The nation-state and the loyalty that sustains it are no longer deeply appreciated by an electorate that has never experienced its loss or the threat of loss. Jews without a homeland have suffered; bizarrely, they now suffer even with a homeland, because their success in establishing and defending a democratic state has brought them into conflict with the Palestinians, arguably the champions of a losing cause. Sustained for generations by international aid, Palestinians have elected murderous regimes to rule over them. The Left has often sided with genocidal regimes, from Stalin and Pol Pot to Putin and Xi. None were so bereft of a path to nationhood as the Palestinians.

'From the River to the Sea'

The extraordinary surge in wealth in the West following World War II, together with the rise of a postmodern worldview that discounts the importance of secure national borders and favours the romance of internationalism, created space for personal indulgence and ego, which has grown and been given voice by radical identity theories dressed as human rights.

The result is deference to ideologies untethered from real lives and consequences. 'From the River to the Sea' is a catchy phrase. Wearing the keffiyeh is fetching, a sort of ragged chic. So let us, for a brief moment, excuse the enthusiasm of youth for the Palestinian cause. The young may be unaware that 'From the River to the Sea' is a call to wipe out the state of Israel. They may also be unaware that it is a call for Jewish genocide.

As Jonathon Hall KC, who reviewed the UK government's terrorism legislation, remarked,

For human rights defenders, the possibility that destroying Israel will result in the deaths of individual citizens is neither acknowledged nor regretted.²

Intellectual fashions can be incredibly thin and misunderstood by those who echo them. What changes on the ground, and which ideas in particular, support praising the Palestinian cause and condemning Israel, as Alan Dershowitz labelled it, Palestinianism?³ Many ideological fashions, whether of the Left or the Right, are not predisposed to Israel. The demonisation of Israel, as Hall reminds,

is a vehicle for hatred of Jews ... if you don't deal with anti-Israeli hatred, you leave wiggle room for those who indulge in anti-Semitism but formally disavow it.⁴

Early Israel garnered sympathy among Left intellectuals, with the kibbutz's idealism symbolising a new way. More powerfully, the dread of the Holocaust shifted minds towards a Jewish safe place, a homeland. As those horrific events faded from collective memory and were replaced by an economically, democratically and militarily successful nation, Israel fell out of favour. At least since the victory in the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel has been portrayed as a colonial oppressor, however unlikely, an 'agent of Western Imperialism'.⁵

Jews are vastly outnumbered and, in many ways, an easy target. They also embarrass the failed states that surround them. In Israel, living standards have improved substantially over the past two decades. GDP has more than doubled to \$US557 billion in 2025,⁶ employment rates have risen, and unemployment remains low at 2.8%.⁷ By contrast, the surrounding nations and the Gaza Strip are failing due to corruption.⁸

The colonial-oppressor theme is deeply embedded in Arab Muslim thinking, so much so that the idea of building a nation within present boundaries never occurs to them. Polling by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Qatar found that in 2024-25 87% of citizens across 15 Arab countries opposed recognising Israel.⁹

Those who opposed recognition cited Israel's 'colonial, racist, and expansionist nature and its continued occupation of Palestinian territory'. The research found that 'cultural or religious explanations were largely absent'.¹⁰ It may be that the 'colonial' reference draws on radical theory and is unlikely to be the language of the Arab public, and that cultural or religious reasons for Arab attitudes towards Israel were unduly masked in the survey.

These broad views from Arab countries towards Israel and, by implication,

Jews, are strongly reflected in Australian political allegiances. The Scanlon Mapping Social Cohesion 2024 survey found that 51% of Australians on the Right hold negative attitudes towards Muslims, compared with only 25 per cent on the Left. Negative attitudes towards Jewish people were strongest

among the Left at 16 per cent and weakest among the Right at 10 per cent.¹¹ It is a safe political bet for the Left's critique of Israel, given that the Muslim constituency in Australia, heading towards one million, is concentrated in Labor electorates.

What changed within Labor?

How have Israel's success and Arab and Muslim enmity played out in Australia? The Australian Labor Party draws much of its historical impetus from the United Kingdom Labour movement. The UK Labour Party, for example, consistently reaffirmed its support for the Jewish national home between World War I and II. It was not a universally held view, though. Beatrice Webb, one of the Fabian Society's founders, characterised the conflict over Palestine as a struggle between "Arab natives and Jewish exploiters with superior wealth".¹²

The UK Conservatives were not all of a piece either, but the Conservative government accepted the recommendations of the 1939 MacDonald White Paper, which effectively halted Jewish immigration to Palestine. The paper cited Arabs' fear that "this influx will continue indefinitely until the Jewish population is in a position to dominate them has produced consequences which are extremely grave for Jews and Arabs alike and for the peace and prosperity of Palestine".

While condemning Arab terrorism against fellow Arabs and Jews, it gave in to Arab terrorism and vowed "to permit further expansion of the Jewish National Home by immigration only if the Arabs are prepared to acquiesce in it". The government declared "unequivocally that it is not part of their policy that Palestine should become a Jewish State".¹³

Herbert Morrison, who served as Deputy Prime Minister in a Labour government, spoke strongly against the MacDonald Report. He accused the government of condemning the Jews to becoming "another permanent minority problem in the world" by specifying that their numbers must not exceed one third of the population of Palestine and by providing no guarantee of their protection.¹⁴

Only the tragic events of World War II changed minds. As the Australian Labor Foreign Minister Herbert Vere Evatt said in 1947:

*We really have to choose between recommending a scheme of partition on the one hand and a complete Arabian unitary state on the other: the latter state puts 600,000 Jews at the mercy of the Arabs.*¹⁵

Evatt understood the deadly situation in which partition was to take place. The Arab states confirmed his suspicions within days of the declaration. Despite being at war with most of their neighbours since 1948, Jews have managed to build a thriving nation.

By contrast, the Palestinians have failed to establish a successful state despite being offered statehood five times.¹⁶ The denial of specific parcels of land has not contributed to their failure. Palestinian leaders have, for generations, taught

their children to hate Jews and to rely on UN handouts.¹⁷ When elections were held, they elected evil, corrupt governing entities no better than gangs,¹⁸ with the Palestine Liberation Organisation as the early model and the Palestinian Authority and Hamas as the later models. Imagine a Palestine as intent as Israel on building a better society. Instead, wherever they occupy land in the Middle East, Palestinian leaders seem to want a one-state solution, with no Israel.

While Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke was a strong supporter of Israel, each victory over Arab states made the Left increasingly uneasy about Israel's success. This shift reflected a changing intellectual climate in which Labor MPs operated.

The West's complacency had come to take liberalism, democracy, and the nation-state for granted. Instead, it became a cheerleader for international institutions, identity politics, multiculturalism, and an obsession with human rights unrelated to merit or responsibility. In other words, the beneficiaries of the wealth of the political revolutions that created liberalism, democracy, and the nation-state neither understood nor appreciated them.

Evidence of this is a growing and active tolerance for 'undemocratic alternatives' among young Australians.¹⁹ A recent survey of political attitudes among Australians found that young people placed a lower value on core democratic safeguards, including tolerance of political violence, bending the rule of law, and even voter fraud to prevent a disliked party from winning.²⁰

The shift against Israel was greatly aided by the presence of more left-wing Labor MPs, reflecting the ALP's capture by university graduates, who, in turn, were tutored by those who had taken over key universities in the West from the 1960s onwards. This capture has been most pronounced in the social sciences and law, from which many MPs

are drawn.²¹ In 1990, the Hawke cabinet consisted of 12 Right and six Left.²² The Albanese cabinet consists of 12 Left and 11 Right. Working-class solidarity was long forgotten, replaced by solidarity with particularist causes linked by threads of collective grievance — all imbued with animosity towards Western civilisation, the very civilisation that created the conditions in which each of the groups claiming to be oppressed gained their voice.

Both the ideological shift in the ALP and the change in the number of members with such a bent were aided by constituency numbers shifting in favour of Muslims within ALP-held seats. Thirteen ALP seats have significant Muslim populations. Tony Burke, the Minister for Home Affairs, holds Watson in NSW, which is 25% Muslim. This drift has been a long time coming. In reviewing *Let My People Go: The untold story of Australia and the Soviet Jews 1959-1989*, Gerard Henderson recounted this exchange between Hawke and Paul Keating:

*"Alright for you, and your Jewish mates in Israel. But I've got a whole lot of Muslims in my electorate and it doesn't help me," Keating said. And Hawke replied "Well, Paul, I'm sorry about that, but that's the way it is, mate."*²³

The forces arrayed against Jews, insofar as they stem from the ALP, are in addition to the historic distrust between Islam and Judaism, which has been made acute by Israel's fight for survival, particularly the Hamas invasion of Israel on 7 October 2023. Labor, gradually, has given up on Israel. The party has abandoned a policy of support for the Jewish home state, dating back to Evatt, in favour of an intolerant attitude that included banning Israeli politicians from speaking in Australia,²⁴ supporting war crime charges against Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and the defence minister,²⁵ voting for recognition of a Palestinian state,²⁶ and doing little to stem antisemitic attacks.

Perhaps the earliest and worst failing was that of the NSW government, in taking no action after a vile protest on the steps of the Sydney Opera House at an event on 9 October 2023 celebrating the slaughter of Israeli innocents by Hamas; although Labor Premier Chris Minns, who later admitted the inaction had been a mistake.²⁷ The anti-Israel shift continued with recent changes to the ALP draft policy to be voted on at the party's national conference in Adelaide which weakens its earlier demands that Hamas disarm and for the Palestinian Authority to reform and guarantee Israel's security.²⁸ The Leftist view is now so strong within the party that former supporters of Israel on the Labor Right, still seeking the comfort of the party, have shifted.

In an article for *The Australian* newspaper, Gerard Henderson recounted that Bob Carr, then the Labor Premier of NSW, said, not long after the September 11 2001 Islamist attack on the US, that he had concluded the creation of the state of Israel was a mistake. Carr reportedly said the Arab world would never accept the creation of a Jewish state and that Islamist groups would continue to target Western nations. Polling in Arab states suggests Carr is right about the Arab public.²⁹ He is, of course, wrong about Arab leaders in some states, particularly those that have normalised relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords. More recently, the near destruction of Hamas in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, along with Iran's degraded nuclear and military capacity, would suggest Carr has been too pessimistic.

Perhaps the most comprehensive statement on Palestinian recognition by a senior Labor figure on the Right is that of Gareth Evans, the long-serving Labor Foreign Minister. In a 2023 lecture to the Parliamentary Friends of Palestine, he said:

What unites me and Hawke and Carr, and ... other Labor figures going back

*to Evatt, is ... that Israel should ... fully respect the rights of Palestinians to live alongside it in peace and dignity in a state of their own.*³⁰

Evans argued that, morally, the Palestinians deserve a homeland, as do the Jews. But he failed to ask what if the Palestinians do not want to live alongside Israel in peace? Evidence spanning more than 80 years suggests they do not. The moral case for recognising Palestine is conditional on their laying down their arms and renouncing their murderous intent. Evans goes on to reflect:

*In the pursuit of national self-determination, some of those most passionate for their causes have sometimes done things that have been misguided and counterproductive, and sometimes indefensibly terrible.*³¹

He mentions the short-lived acts of terrorism by Jewish forces against the British in 1947, omitting that they were anti-colonial acts. He also omits that some of the most brutal acts by Israelis were committed by Ben Gurion's forces against Jewish breakaway groups in 1948.³² Evans does not reflect on decades of appalling Palestinian terrorism.³³ His lecture was delivered on 13 June 2023. One wonders whether he changed his mind about the moral case following the 7 October 2023 massacre and, indeed, the Bondi massacre of Jews on 14 December 2025.

On the legal question of statehood, Evans argued that it is sufficient that many other nation-states recognise a Palestinian state, now including Australia, even without recognised borders.³⁴ There is, of course, no law in this, only the collective thoughts of those who congregate at the UN, which regularly passes resolutions against Israel and has done so for close to 80 years. Evans addresses political arguments against recognition, including the claim that recognition would undermine the peace process:

No one doubts that the quality of Palestinian Authority leadership has been less than ideal, nor that Hamas's formal (if not practical) position on Israel's right to exist has been manifestly unhelpful.³⁵

However, in his view, the threat and reality of violence, whether by Hamas or anyone else, diminish rapidly when Palestinians "see a path to genuine hope for a just and dignified settlement [and it] escalates equally rapidly when they do not".

This is precisely the opposite of what happened. Israel was edging towards an accord with Saudi Arabia when Hamas invaded. It was a deliberate tactic to stall a settlement. It deliberately had every Leftist in the Western world, including Australia's Foreign Minister Senator Penny Wong, urging Israel to 'exercise restraint',³⁶ that is, not to defend itself.

Evans also considered domestic politics and, like Carr before him, railed against the "formidable lobbying power of the Israeli support organisations". He says:

Maybe recognising Palestine's statehood will put at risk some of our strongest traditional sources of party fundraising. But sometimes those considerations just have to take second place to decency.³⁷

Evans failed to mention the large Muslim constituencies within the ALP. This led many to question Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke's decision to rush 3000 Palestinians into Australia after October 2023, and more recently, ISIS brides, as a move to keep faith with his constituency. If this was not the case, on what basis was the decision made? It would be difficult to argue that it was in the national interest.

Different intellectual layers

It should be noted that the ALP never stooped to the antisemitism exhibited by Jeremy Corbyn, who, when leader of the British Labour Party, welcomed groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas to parliament as legitimate representatives of the Palestinian people.³⁸

The ALP's shift against Israel rested on changes in the real world, particularly Israel's success as a liberal democratic nation, and in the world of ideas. In the latter, layers of intellectual prejudice and ignorance combined to make Israel and Jews targets, despite, or in some views, because of these successes.

It is worth distinguishing them. Some could apply to any group deemed outlawed in the Leftist canon; each may apply differently to Israel and Jews, but

each lends weight to the Left's vicious campaign against them.

The intelligentsia, those whose tools of trade are ideas, have shown themselves to be poor observers of the real world. Hans Rosling, a global health professor, travelled the world, among other things, to test his audience's knowledge of the state of the world. He found high levels of ignorance about basic issues, such as the proportion of the world's population no longer living in poverty, the proportion of children vaccinated, and the proportion of women educated.

Rosling found that among the most highly educated, including university lecturers, scientists, medical scientists, CEOs, and senior politicians, a majority were wrong and systematically so. The

errors all tended to be in one direction. "Every group of people I ask thinks the world is more frightening, more violent, and more hopeless — in short, more dramatic — than it really is".³⁹ He asked why ignorance of the state of the world was so widespread and persistent. The world has made tremendous progress, yet the most educated refuse to believe it. Rosling posited 10 ways in which most people, especially the well-educated, misread the state of the world. Only three concern us here.

The first distortion is the tendency to divide the world into poor and rich — a strong, dramatic instinct towards binary thinking. Israel transitioned from poor to rich.

The second is the blame instinct. In our debate, we frame it as good and evil, oppressed and oppressor, Palestine and Israel. Why must Palestine be oppressed because Israel is rich? This thinking is binary, dramatic, blameful and wrong.

The third is a negativity instinct. Rosling's surveys found that the majority across the world thought the world was getting worse. He attributed some of this to empathy, a feeling that it would be heartless to say things are getting better. Empathy is not a guide to good policy, but it is common on the Left.

Experts and activists like to feel knowledgeable and useful. They often want to be part of the state's apparatus and to reshape society in its image. The following ideas, championed by the Left, have been among the most prevalent drivers of animosity towards Israel:

- Islam tested liberalism's defences
- Democracy fell out of favour
- Diminishing national patriotism and the rise of internationalism
- Anti-colonialism made a comeback
- Multiculturalism excused disunity.

Islam tested liberalism's defences

To the extent that liberalism has drawn its foundation from Judeo-Christian teachings, and that politics is downstream from culture, and culture is downstream from religion, the base for liberalism is declining. Muslim immigration to the West, particularly in Europe, has ensured that Islam has flourished. As Christianity's hold on the West has loosened, liberal nations are less aware that Islam poses a very real challenge. Islam projects a very different set of values from Christian values.

Mark Durie has outlined the most important of the values.⁴⁰ Islamic cultures do not separate powers, for example, the church and the state; they combine them. Islam does not teach that all people are equal before the law. It ranks Muslims above non-Muslims and men above women. Islamic law does not recognise freedom of conscience. Some Muslims reject democracy on theological grounds, because it is the rule of people rather than the rule of God. Islam does not have a doctrine of love for non-Muslims. Islam tends not to distinguish between people and the ideas they hold. There is no doctrine of 'love your enemies'.

Islam also teaches collective culpability. We have seen this in the reaction of radical Muslim groups in Australia, which have blamed Australian Jews for the war in Gaza.⁴¹

To the extent that Arab immigration to Australia reflects these attitudes, an anti-Israel constituency is bound to emerge. Moreover, Arab Centre polling found that, in response to the question, 'Would you accept a political party with whom you disagree taking power through free and fair elections', up to 50% answered no or declined to answer.⁴² Neither is democracy favoured by Arab Muslims, attitudes that may also transfer to Australia and be anathema to Israel. At

the very least, Israel's achievement as a successful democracy in the Middle East would be discounted.

Evidence from a 2019 national survey on Islam in Australia offers further important insights. The survey found that 65% self-described as liberal, 10% as political Islamists, and 3% as militant.⁴³ What values are at risk among the illiberal minority? While 10% agreed that 'countries ... that implement classical shariah laws are more just and fair than Australia', 53% of militants and 32% of political Islamists did so; 53% of militants and 37% of political Islamists disagreed that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men. Meanwhile, 73% of militants and 65% of political Islamists agreed that establishing a caliphate is a religious obligation; 10% of militants and political Islamists said that Islam generally permitted attacking civilians or non-combatants.⁴⁴ These figures indicate that liberalism is under siege from Islam, and the Left seems indifferent at best.

Democracy fell out of favour

Democracy also fell out of favour not only because of its association with the Islamic faith or a lack of attention among young Western liberals to their inheritance, but also among the elite, some of whom are too willing to argue that democracy is to blame when a rift emerges between elite and mass opinion. The intellectuals decry those who stray from the elite consensus as populists. This slight on democracy ignores the record of elite opinion on issues such as mass migration, multiculturalism and the climate change response.

A recent Grattan Institute paper cited numerous problems in Australia, but rather than seeking the answer many Australians look for, alternative political representation, for example Pauline Hanson One Nation, it instead suggests 'future-proofing' democracy.⁴⁵ The paper

described the Uluru Statement from the Heart as a "powerful statement of deliberation in action", yet it was flawed in deliberation⁴⁶ and decisively defeated in the most democratic process in Australia, a national referendum. The old saw about youth representation was dragged out, with the observation that "the median age of parliamentarians is about a decade older than the median age of voters."⁴⁷ Maturity is an important component of democracy, as is paying taxes and experiencing the foibles of living and earning, which youth lack. The paper suggested an independent review of parliament, but who would undertake such a review — parliament, Independents, judges? Austerity policies were blamed for the Brexit vote in the UK, with no mention of immigration, which was far and away the key driver.⁴⁸ A desire to limit immigration is cast as racist, and so on.⁴⁹

Democracy is not the problem; rather, it is the intellectuals who insist on mass immigration without an explicit commitment to integration. Of course, many Australians are upset about the state of the nation, but recommendations to re-educate the public through 'inclusiveness', 'public-interest journalism' and 'long-term thinking' are classic Left-wing memes. If government is the solution to market failure, what is the solution to government failure? According to the paper's authors, a better democracy is the answer. They do not consider changing elite opinion.

The elite's conditional support for democracy appears reflected in a decline in the civics and citizenship basics among Australian students. The National Assessment Program's Civics and Citizenship Report 2024 shows that, at the national level, student results in civics have fallen since the last assessment in 2019 and are at the lowest levels since the assessment began in 2004. Just 28% of Australian Year 10 students met the proficient standard in 2024, compared with 38% in 2019.⁵⁰

In the Victorian curriculum, the secondary school subject Australian Politics has been replaced by Politics, which incorporates Australian and International Politics. Fewer than 200 students were enrolled in Australian Politics. The change has been attributed to 'cultural change', which led to a lack of interest in the subject, as Australian studies generally aligned with cultural nationalism in the post-World War II era up until the 1980s. It was suggested that "globalisation and students' more international orientation", driven by access to the digital world, led to a greater interest in 'grappling' with the wider world.⁵¹

The questions in the Victorian 2025 exam, for example, focused on international politics — climate change, foreign aid, global economic instability, and weapons of mass destruction. Unfortunately, the tools that might have helped students grapple with the world are absent.⁵² The topics of gloom are no more than press headlines, often generated by activist groups pushing their ideological barrows. Nothing in the politics course would lead to an understanding of the machinery that allows a democracy to function, of how voices are heard, or of who pays for the nation's defence. The result is an undervalued democracy.

Diminishing national patriotism and the rise of internationalism

Closely aligned to the loss of faith in democracy, or at least a loss of the electorate's faith in elite policies, is that the only credible scale at which democracy can function, the nation state, also fell out of favour, in favour of internationalism. As Yoram Hazony observed:

*We are watching the growth of a generation of young people that, for the first time in four hundred years, does not recognize the national state as the foundation of our freedoms.*⁵³

The answers in a recent Lowy poll to the question, 'If Australia were attacked directly by the military of another country, and you were physically capable of doing so, would you be willing to fight to defend Australia?' reveal a strong demographic imbalance. Those too old to fight answered 73% yes; those of prime age for recruitment, 18 to 29 years, were 31%.⁵⁴ By contrast, answers to the question, 'How important is the United Nations to Australia's national interests?' also revealed a strong demographic imbalance; 78% of those aged 18 to 29 believed the UN to be important and 63% of those over 60.⁵⁵

A further indication of a loss of interest in national politics among the young is that Australian politics is receding as a field of study in Australian universities. Students want to study international relations. They think it will get them a job overseas, preferably at the United Nations. The United Nations does not have to deal with the messy business of asking voters for permission and taxing them. It does not raise an armed force in its own right, and while it deploys peacekeepers and provides foreign aid, it does so at the behest of nation-states. At the UN, much of the hard work of governance is taken out; the easier part is spending the money and deciding priorities, which, of course, is hopeless because it has no way of testing its limits as would be done in a national election, where promises are made, and budgets are reviewed.⁵⁶

International law has come into its own. Scores of international covenants, initially gifts from the West to guide the rest towards a more liberal world, have instead been used by the Left to undermine national processes, whether in environmental, indigenous, or war crimes contexts. The most recent and egregious example is the Republic of South Africa instituting proceedings against Israel for alleged violations of obligations under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip.⁵⁷ The process will take more than three years to commence, by which time,

hopefully, Israel will have destroyed all vestiges of Hamas and returned the Palestinian people to the strip, which will be run as an administrative state under international supervision. This process is likely more beneficial for the Palestinians than the 'criminal' proceedings.

The shift in focus from the national to the international may well have contributed to Australian sentiment aligning with the UN's record on Israel. From 2015 to 2024, the UN General Assembly adopted 173 resolutions against Israel and 80 against other countries.⁵⁸ In 2025, the General Assembly adopted 15 resolutions on Israel and only 11 on the rest of the world. The majority of UN members are not liberal democracies.⁵⁹ Many states downplay the importance of liberalism and democracy and regard internationalism, at least as exercised through the UN, as a chance to milk wealthy nations, predominantly liberal democracies.

Anti-colonialism made a comeback

Blaming Israel as a colonial power is false. In addition to its 1948 boundaries, the state of Israel occupies the West Bank, the Golan Heights, and parts of the Gaza Strip. The tug-of-war between Jews and Arabs over Israel is beautifully and succinctly explained by Noa Tishby.⁶⁰ For our purposes, recent history is sufficient.

As a result of the Six-Day War in June 1967, Israel took the Golan Heights from Syria, the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, and the West Bank (including the old city of Jerusalem) from Jordan. The Sinai Peninsula and Gaza were returned, but parts of Gaza were taken again as a result of the 7 October invasion of Israel by Hamas. The West Bank and the Golan Heights remain. Israel will probably occupy southern Lebanon for some time until the Lebanese government can guarantee it remains free from Hezbollah control.

This is hardly the stuff of a colonial power, let alone that of an empire builder. Israel defends its borders against murderous attacks and then maintains only a minimal presence to protect itself from rocket fire or other incursions on its own soil; beyond that, it has shown no interest in expanding its borders. It has no empire. And yet the Left has now entered the state of Israel on the ledger as a colonial power. It would be more accurate to say that the colonial powers handed the region to the Palestinians and the Jews, each to create a state. The Palestinians failed to do so.

In *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning*, Nigel Biggar observes that "History contains an ocean of injustice, most of it unremedied and now lying beyond correction in this world".⁶¹ The Left's obsession with the ghosts of past ills has no moral basis, as it rails only against European empires, blind to all other empires and their deeds, most of which have been appalling. The Left, for example, decry slavery as if it were an invention of the West, rather than an intricate part of all societies sufficiently advanced to take and hold slaves. Only the West, particularly England, abolished slavery in its country and then around the world.⁶² The Islamic world has been very reluctant to give up this vice.⁶³

Biggar makes the important argument that while all humans should be regarded with equal dignity, not all humans are equal, nor are all societies or cultures. Belief in the basic equality of human beings does not imply that all cultures are equal. For example, "a culture that can write is superior in that technical respect to one that cannot". A culture that "knows the earth is round is superior in that intellectual respect to one that does not". A culture that "abhors human sacrifice to the gods and female infanticide is superior in that moral respect to one that practises them".⁶⁴ The Left is so enamoured with equality that it is afraid to make these moral judgements.

More importantly for our purposes, it fails to distinguish the moral basis of war.

Biggar argues that “maintaining just law and order sometimes requires physical coercion”. He contends that “whether or not a policy that involves killing ... is morally right or wrong is not determined simply by its effects or consequences [but by] the motive and intention of the agent and the proportionality of its means to its ends”.⁶⁵ Yet the Left ignores the fact that Israel is defending itself — which is morally justifiable — rather than seeking to destroy another society, in this case Palestine.

Multiculturalism excused disunity

Identity politics supercharged multiculturalism, offering a more radical and assertive rationale than the needs of settler nations to grow and of people from post-war nations to find a home. Radical identity theory favours the underdog, the excluded. All readers will be familiar with the revolution in identity politics,⁶⁶ but for our purposes, once again, winners do not count. Identity politics should theoretically favour Jews, perhaps the most excluded identity in history, but it does not do so because they created a successful nation and continue to defend it with force.

When the Australian Productivity Commission considered Australia’s migrant intake, it concluded that “the social impacts of immigration are likely to be positive as long as immigrants continue to be willing to integrate ... and the concept of a multicultural community is still embraced by the Australian community”.⁶⁷

In other words, the social impacts of immigration are likely to be positive until they are not. Into this sensitive climate steps a Royal Commission, led by the Hon Virginia Bell AC. The Bell Royal Commission is “to understand antisemitism in Australia in the light of the murders of 14 December 2025 at Bondi, and to address antisemitism

within the Australian community, including since 7 October 2023”.

The Bondi attack is alleged to have been inspired by ISIS. The 7 October attack was carried out by Hamas. Neither was named in the Letters Patent to the Commissioner. Instead, the Letters Patent assert that social cohesion will provide “the strongest defence against antisemitism and other forms of religious and ideologically motivated extremism”.⁶⁸ This is a tautology. If Australia were socially cohesive, there would be no antisemitism. The Commission will no doubt hear from Islamic groups about Islamophobia. It will hear from the Australian Human Rights Commission about racism. It will find that the Commonwealth has already passed laws to restrict the sale of weapons and speech promoting violence, but not to address calls to violence against Jews in passages of the Koran and Hadith.

There are three strong clues about the submissions the Commissioner will receive — recommendations from the Australian Human Rights Commission’s anti-racism report and from Special Envoys Jillian Segal and Aftab Malik. The Human Rights Commission will no doubt be prominent in its submissions, but judging by its 2024 report on anti-racism, its stance will be tantamount to giving licence to the overwrought fear of Islamophobia. For example, the Human Rights Commission wants “more effective action by all Australian governments to address far-right extremism and white supremacy”.⁶⁹ This was in 2024. There was no mention of Islamic extremism. More sinister, the Human Rights Commission called on the Australian government to ensure that migration and citizenship laws comply with international human rights law, with particular attention to “inequities experienced by negatively racialised people seeking asylum, and refugees and migrants”.⁷⁰ This is tantamount to outsourcing Australian security to the UN, the Human Rights Commission, and human rights advocates prominent in anti-Israel protests.

The Segal report began with considerable strength, citing actual events, including firebombing. Malik's report, by contrast, cited survey attitudes and academic opinion on slights to the Muslim ego. Where did Segal end up, though? She advised strengthening legislation to address antisemitic and other hateful or intimidating conduct. The Commonwealth Act seeks to do this, but, as we have seen in the Commonwealth and NSW, it is political will to prosecute that counts. Prosecutions may help, but they may also harden attitudes. Ultimately, the debate has to be won, not by shutting down opponents, but by engaging openly.⁷¹

Segal recommended embedding Holocaust and antisemitism education in school curricula.⁷² This is reasonable, but beware. Every group will want a piece of that action; many have suffered state-sanctioned massacres. Australia does not want a contest for the greatest grievance. Segal also recommended that the government enhance education on Jewish history, identity, culture and antisemitism in high school curricula.⁷³ Malik wanted much the same on his side of the equation.⁷⁴

Segal wanted government support for "Jewish cultural festivals, education programs, and the re-establishment of a Jewish Arts and Cultural Council".⁷⁵ Malik wanted much the same on his side of the equation.⁷⁶ Every lobby wants government funding to tell its story. This, in itself, provides a reason why Australia should bury multiculturalism, not have it government-funded.

Malik recommended establishing a commission of inquiry to "investigate the main drivers, causes, impacts, and lived experiences of anti-Palestinian, anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia".⁷⁷ He presented polling evidence showing negative attitudes among Australians towards Muslims. For example:

I believe that there is nothing more difficult than being a hijab-wearing Muslim [woman] ... she automatically

*becomes a target for hate and prejudice.*⁷⁸

Malik endorsed the Human Rights Commission's National Anti-Racism Framework to protect against religious discrimination. This is code for a blasphemy law. It does not understand that, while religion is free from the law, it is not above it. It should fall foul of the law if it incites, promotes or celebrates violence. He omitted the fact that Islamic teachings threaten Jews.

Conclusion

The Australian Left abandoned Israel because Israel became successful. Too many strands and layers of intellectual discourse were moving against what the West and Israel represented, indeed excelled at — liberalism, democracy, wealth creation, and openness. In short, progress.

Five major shifts in intellectual thinking influenced the public, widely predisposing it to a pro-Palestinian stance when Israel sought to defend itself following the Hamas invasion. Islam tested liberalism's defences; democracy fell out of favour; diminishing national patriotism and the rise of internationalism; anti-colonialism made a comeback, and multiculturalism excused disunity.

The Left could not abide liberal success; it wanted equality at the expense of everything else. This, coupled with the historic mistrust between Islam and Judaism, which remained unresolved because Islam failed to reform as the Reformation and the Enlightenment did in the West, and with Islamic immigration to the West, left the West vulnerable to anti-Israel and anti-Jewish hatred. The labour movement in Australia, while not as radical as UK Labour, is nevertheless swept up in Leftist thinking and Muslim voter influence.

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For decades, many on the Australian and British Left regarded Israel as a democratic success story and a necessary homeland for the Jewish people after the Holocaust. Today, much of that support has disappeared. Following the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023 and the subsequent war in Gaza, sections of the Western Left have become among Israel's fiercest critics. What explains this dramatic political and intellectual reversal?

This paper argues that the answer lies not only in events in the Middle East but also in profound changes in Western political thought. It contends that Israel's success as a prosperous liberal democracy has become a liability in an intellectual climate that increasingly interprets politics through the lens of oppression, identity and historical grievance.

It traces the Australian Labor Party's evolution from the strong pro-Israel stance championed by H. V. Evatt and Bob Hawke to its markedly different position today. Johns argues that this transformation reflects broader changes within the Left, including the growing influence of identity politics, anti-colonial thinking, internationalism and multiculturalism, together with changing electoral and intellectual trends.

Drawing on political history, polling, economic evidence and contemporary debate, the paper examines how declining confidence in liberal democracy, national sovereignty and Western civilisation has reshaped attitudes towards Israel. It argues that Israel is increasingly portrayed as a colonial oppressor despite its record as a democratic nation defending itself in a hostile region.

The paper also explores the influence of changing ideas about democracy, patriotism, religion and human rights, arguing that these developments have fostered a political culture that is often reluctant to acknowledge Israel's achievements while overlooking the repeated failures of Palestinian political leadership. It considers how these intellectual shifts have influenced Australian politics, public policy and responses to antisemitism.

About the author



Dr Gary Johns is chair of Close the Gap Research and previously served as a member of the House of Representatives and was the Special Minister of State and Assistant Minister for Industrial Relations in the second Keating government. He also served as an Associate Commissioner of the Commonwealth Productivity Commission, an Associate Professor of Public Policy at the Australian Catholic University, and as the Commissioner of the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission. Dr Johns received the Centenary Medal and the Fulbright Professional Award in Australian-United States Alliance Studies, served at Georgetown University, Washington DC. His recent books include: *The Burden of Culture*, *Public Health: an unhealthy conceit* and *Australian Apartheid: the Aboriginalisation of a Nation*.

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Analysis Paper 110(AP108) • ISSN: 2209-3753 (Online) 2209-3745 (Print) • ISBN: 978-1-923462-56-4

Published July 2026 by the Centre for Independent Studies Limited. Views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre's staff, advisors, directors or officers.

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