A personal note on the Australian Jewish Left and the Jewish Community’s tendency to Intolerance

1. This note covers the period from 1947, which is the period of my own recollection. It is written as a response to the current discussion over the possible disaffiliation of the AJDS from the JCCV. Since the AJDS was only founded in 1984 I have chosen to cover the Jewish Left’s activity over the longer period.

2. It is often stated that the Jewish Left is anti-Israel, sometimes even anti-Jewish. So I want to start by emphasizing the pro-Israel stance taken by my parents Norman and Evelyn Rothfield in the period 1947 – 48 when the state of Israel was founded. On 30 November 1947 Australian time when the UN decision on the partition of Palestine was taken, there was immense rejoicing in our family. My mother heard the news first and went banging on the door to inform my father who was at that moment sitting on the throne, but such was her excitement that she could not wait for him to come out in order to tell him the exciting news!

3. But my mother’s excitement was not confined to within the family. As a member of the executive of the Jewish Council to combat fascism and ant-Semitism she wrote two pamphlets in support of Israel’s statehood, WHITHER PALESTINE in 1947 and ISRAEL REBORN in 1948. A more detailed analysis is provided by Philip Mendes as follows:

“As early as 1945, the Council expressed its support for a Jewish national home in Palestine. A pamphlet by Evelyn Rothfield, the information officer of the Jewish Council, called for free Jewish immigration into Palestine, and the establishment of a Jewish Commonwealth. A further pamphlet issued by the Council in March 1947 titled Whither Palestine was issued with a supportive foreword by the Victorian Labor Government Attorney General William Slater. This pamphlet firmly attacked the British White Paper on immigration, defended the right of the large number of homeless and displaced Jews to enter Palestine, and attributed Arab-Jewish conflict to the malign influence of exploitative Arab landowners, and the extremist Mufti of Jerusalem who had collaborated with the Nazis. The pamphlet denied that there was any fundamental antagonism between Jews and Arabs, and called for Arab-Jewish friendship and cooperation in an independent Palestine.

The Council strongly supported the creation of Israel in 1948, and played a key role in promoting public sympathy for the fledgling state. The Council established a joint committee with representatives from the politically diverse Zionist Federation of Australia, Kadimah Cultural Centre and the CPA-aligned Jewish Progressive Centre to organize pro-Israel broadcasts, newspaper articles and other publications, and public addresses. Young people and churches were specifically targeted. For example, the Council organized a ‘mass rally for youth to support the Yishuv (Jewish community) in Israel in its struggle for freedom and independence’. This rally was addressed by Presbyterian Minister and peace
activist Reverend Alfred Dickie, Council President Norman Rothfield, and Building Workers Industrial Union Organizer (and brother of Wilfred) Clive Burchett. In addition, the Council organized a mass Jewish rally to demonstrate the Australian Jewish community’s solidarity with Israel.

The Council also distributed 25,000 copies of a pro-Israel pamphlet, *Israel Reborn*. The pamphlet argued that the only Arabs who opposed partition were the feudal landlords and chieftains from surrounding countries who ‘fear the progress and enlightenment which the Jews have brought to the Middle East’. These war lords were allegedly not representative of the broader mass of Palestinian Arab peasants, workers and middle classes. According to the pamphlet, ‘Arabs in Palestine have displayed little enthusiasm for the war. Many of them, to escape fighting, have tried to leave the country...The fact is that the large mass of Arabs inside Palestine have little quarrel with their Jewish neighbours’.

The Council organized a petition in favour of immediate Australian recognition of Israel which was signed by twenty four prominent left-wing figures including leading civil libertarian Brian Fitzpatrick; ALP figures Jim Cairns, William Slater, Doris Blackburn and Frank Crean; historian Manning Clark; church leaders such as Reverend Alfred Dickie; and a number of union leaders including Clarrie O’Shea and Jim Healy. The petition attacked the Arab invasion of Israel, stating that ‘those Arabs who have attacked the Jewish State are not Palestinians, but outsiders led by rulers from neighbouring countries. They have attempted to prevent the establishment, not only of the Jewish State, but of an independent Arab State in Palestine as well. They seek to divide the country of Palestine amongst themselves’.

The Council distributed 55,000 copies of a brief pamphlet based on this petition.


4. Fast forward to 1982. My brother David was serving in the Israel Defence Forces. He was driving a truck. And when he came to the Lebanese border he stopped the truck and got out, refusing to go any further. David was, so he believed, serving in an army for the defence of Israel, not for an invasion of Lebanon. News of this event got to Melbourne and caused considerable controversy. There was no move to disaffiliate AJDS because AJDS did not exist at this time. But some of the friends of my parents suddenly decided that they were friends no more. And it should be noted that the 1982 invasion of Lebanon led to the creation of Hezbollah. (Google “Hezbollah” and see the entry Encyclopedia Britannica)

5. But the move to disaffiliate AJDS currently before the JCCV is not the first time that the roof body had taken to this type of action. In 1952, at a meeting of the ECAJ management committee, a report was presented showing that thousands of Germans were coming to
Australia and Minister of Immigration Harold Holt had refused to guarantee that former members of the Nazi party would be kept out. The Jewish Council conducted a campaign against this German Migration and a public meeting was planned for 16 June in the Assembly Hall. The President of the Victorian Jewish Board of Deputies, Maurice Ashkenasy, demanded that the meeting be called off, threatening that the Jewish Council be disaffiliated if the meeting went ahead. The meeting did go ahead and the Council resigned from the Board. However Ashkenasy was not satisfied with the resignation and demanded that the Council be expelled from the Board. Ashkenasy got his way.

6. The year 1952 was at the height of the cold war. And this affected Jewish youth movements. I was a member of the Zionist youth organization Habonim and the Hanhaga had decreed that Habonim, alongside other Zionist youth movements of the time, would not have anything to do with the peace movement. A Youth Carnival for Peace and Friendship was being organized in Sydney and I decided to go along and compete in a swimming event. This displeased the Hanhagah of Habonim. On 25 March 1952, the day of my 16th birthday, I received a phone call from Issy Fine, the Merakez of Habonim. Issy informed me that I had been asked to leave Habonim. This was in effect an expulsion. And Habonim was my entire social life. I had no friends or activities outside Habonim.

The Settlements

7. I now move to the subject of the settlements, the issue which has led to this talk of disaffiliation.

In September 2007 I was in Israel to attend the wedding of my niece. I took the opportunity to visit some of the projects of NGOs funded by the New Israel Fund, an organization of which my father was a supporter. One of the NGOs was MACHSOM WATCH, a group of dedicated volunteers who endeavour to monitor the treatment of Palestinians by the military, particularly at the many checkpoints they need to cross when moving from one town or village in the West Bank to another. My brother David and I were escorted on a tour of the West Bank by two Machsom Watch activists and observed a number of situations which caused us deep concern, for example:

a. the village of Kalkilya which is almost completely enclosed by a concrete separation barrier 8 metres high with the villagers having limited access controlled by the army. The gate to the village closes in the evening and for emergency medical treatment the villagers have to shout to the soldiers who sometimes don’t come out. We saw a school age boy taking his donkey across rough ground, apparently going to fetch water for his family. Israel has taken control of all water supplies in the West Bank so that the settlers have water for their gardens while the Palestinians have to travel to get water for their everyday needs. The Supreme Court had handed
down a ruling two years earlier to move the separation barrier so that it would lessen the disruption to the lives of Palestinians, but the ruling had been ignored.

b. A farmer, Al Raqfiq was at the gate. He had brought 2000 week old chicks from the village and wanted to sell them elsewhere but the soldiers would not let his vehicle pass. He had been waiting for permission to cross with his chicks for two hours in the sun.

c. We saw a school age child aged between 10 and 12 years waiting at a gate some 50 metres from the checkpoint for a signal from the soldier to proceed. Daphne, our tour guide, spoke to the soldier who then allowed the child through. But Daphne explained that she not been there the soldier would have made the child wait half an hour in the hot sun.

d. Daphne told us the following disturbing anecdote. One day while driving she came across a stranded religious Jew and a Palestinian standing next to one another. The religious Jew had run out of petrol. The Palestinian, who had stopped to help the Jew, explained to Daphne that there was a settlement nearby which could sell petrol but that he, the Palestinian, would not be permitted entry. Therefore Daphne should go there and buy petrol on behalf of the religious Jew. She agreed to do this. When Daphne got to the settlement and bought the petrol, the settler who had sold it to her said, after realizing she was from Machsom Watch: “If it was for you, I wouldn’t help you even if you were dying.” Another settler said to Daphne: “A pity your family survived the Holocaust.”

e. At Elkanah we saw the house of a family of 8 Palestinians cut off from their village, Mas’ha, by the separation wall. The wall has been positioned for the convenience of the Jewish settlers below the offending house so as not to obstruct the view of the settlers on the hill. The family has a key to access the village through a yellow gate in the wall until 8 pm but none of the villagers are allowed to cross the wall and so the family cannot receive them as visitors. The positioning of the wall has thus made this family virtual prisoners in their own home.

8. The above are a few examples extracted from the booklet which I subsequently published entitled: *Challenges facing Israel at 60*. I was spared the more extreme examples of settler behaviour such as the burning of olive groves and acts of violence against Palestinian farmers as has been reported fairly recently. But I saw enough, including the daily humiliations of Palestinians as they try to cross check points when proceeding from one part of the West Bank to another, to convince me that the settlements are a thorn in
Israel’s side and must be dismantled if ever there can be a meaningful peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians.

9. Which brings me to the question “how do we go about dismantling the settlements”? I have always believed in a political solution but even with the US President Barack Obama declaring that he wants an end to settlement construction, new construction has gone ahead. Then how, I repeat, do we bring an end to the settlements? AJDS executive member Dr Jordy Silverstein has taken the initiative of drawing up a list of settlement products and asked people to not buy these products. Dr Silverstein has conceded that such boycott activity “will not work on its own, but it is one small step that we can take.” I commend Dr Silverstein for taking this bold step. If the JCCV executive is upset by this strategy may I suggest that they come up with an alternative?

Further examples of intolerance
10. On my return to Australia after my niece’s wedding I was invited to a Rosh Hashanah dinner. At the dinner I was asked about my trip to Israel. I narrated some of the experiences on the West Bank, sticking solely to what I saw with my own eyes. The man sitting next to me got up and moved to the other end of the table.

(The following further examples are not specifically related to my trip to Israel but have occurred over the last 10 years or so)

11. a. At a Pesach dinner I was busy following the service when suddenly, out of the blue, someone told me that I was a “boged” (Hebrew for “traitor”)
   b. A woman lawyer who was a friend at the time, on receipt of an email from me setting out some human rights violations against Palestinians - the information having been obtained from Israeli Jewish sources – accused me of spreading Palestinian propaganda and put the phone down on me.
   c. I sent out an email asking for support for East Timorese coffee, and someone replied that I should be concerned about my “mates” in the UK (this was at the time that a group of Moslem extremists in the UK were arrested on a charge of planning to blow up a plane mid-flight)

Robin Rothfield
30 April 2013

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Brian Fitzpatrick and 23 others, *Australia and Israel*, Jewish Council to Combat Fascism and Anti-Semitism, Melbourne, July 1948.

I am grateful to the two anonymous *Labour History* referees for their constructive suggestions.