The celebration of Australia's bicentenary in 1988 focused the country's attention on the issues that would continue to determine its progress and shape its society into the 1990s and the 21st century. Uppermost in the bicentennial national debate were some controversial and interrelated questions: How much Asian immigration should this predominantly European society accept? As an immigrant society, should Australia pursue multiculturalism or a more assimilationist "One Australia" policy? How could an essentially hedonistic and relaxed business and trade-union culture remain competitive in the fast-growing Asia-Pacific region? And, by no means least, should there be a formal treaty, 200 years after the first European settlement of the continent, between the Australian government and the aborigines who, for the most part, still remained the underprivileged minority?

For Australian Jews, the bicentenary proved to be a kind of turning point, the beginning of an attempt to understand the emerging Australian Jewish identity. Uniquely among Jewish communities in the West, Australian Jews were "present at the creation." Between 8 and 14 Jews were among the convicts Britain sent with the First Fleet which, in 1788, established the penal colony at what was to become the city of Sydney. Thus, Jews had a sense of continuous participation in Australian history from its European origins; at the same time, they were aware that the majority of the community was of recent—post-World War II—vintage and was continuing to absorb new elements. The occasion of the bicentenary inspired a burst of cultural activity related to the Australian Jewish experience—exhibitions, museum displays, and theatrical events—as well as the introduction of new Jewish studies courses at colleges and universities. There was an upsurge of creativity among local Jewish artists, historians and other academics, writers, musicians, and filmmakers. Through this intense creative and intellectual self-examination, Australian Jews began to see themselves more clearly as a community with a distinctive identity, one no longer derived primarily from its immigrant antecedents. What all this meant for the future, especially in relation to the place of Israel in Australian Jewish life, was by no means clear, however.

National Affairs

Since winning the 1983 elections, the Labor government of Prime Minister Bob Hawke had maintained continuity in Australia's foreign policy, most notably in...
keeping and extending traditional ties with the United States in foreign policy and defense matters. Unlike New Zealand, which elected the Labor government of David Lange at much the same time as Hawke came to power in Australia, Australia continued to allow ship visits by American nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed ships. New Zealand's refusal to do so had led to the effective breakup of the ANZUS defense alliance, but the bilateral alliance between Canberra and Washington was developed and expanded. The same could not be said, however, in trade relations, where Hawke and other Australian ministers and officials attacked, often in outspoken terms, both the U.S. Congress and the administration for adopting various forms of protectionist subsidies to American wheat growers, which adversely affected Australia's wheat trade.

In the domestic economy, the Hawke government had managed an increasingly difficult balancing act. Its policy of deregulation and incentives to business won it plaudits from the private sector; at the same time, it had maintained an accord with the trade-union movement which conceded regular, if constrained, wage increases in return for a measure of industrial peace. By the end of 1988, however, looming problems threatened this precarious exercise in economic management. A sharp increase in interest rates to around 18 percent, inflation hovering at 8 percent, and an inability to do much to boost exports and thus stem the draining trade and payments deficits raised questions about Hawke's ability to win again at the polls. He had already won three elections in a row, unprecedented for an Australian Labor leader, and remained personally popular in the opinion polls. But the Labor party had alienated many of its traditional supporters, who had been forced to bear the brunt of the high-interest fiscal policies. Thus, most observers believed that, unless the Liberal-National opposition parties again fell victim to the internal divisions that had bedeviled their recent election campaigns, there could be a change of government in 1989 or 1990.

Relations with Israel

While Hawke had won an international reputation as an eloquent, often emotional, champion of Israel and had personally negotiated with President Mikhail Gorbachev on behalf of refuseniks and Soviet Jews generally, he was quick to welcome the December 1988 statements by the PLO's Yasir Arafat in Geneva as a significant breakthrough in the Middle East diplomatic impasse. In addition, the criticism of Israel by Australian delegates at the United Nations for its handling of the intifada in the territories became increasingly one-sided and vehement in 1988. What did become clear was that Hawke's view was not the result of pressure from his left wing, as had been feared when Labor first took office, but stemmed from his own belief that, as a friend of Israel, he had to exert pressure on it to accept the PLO as a partner for talks. Echoing language used by some American critics of Israeli policies a decade ago, Hawke's approach was seen in the Jewish community as an attempt "to save Israel in spite of herself."
Although the Liberal-National opposition queried the Hawke government about the speed and extent of its tilt toward the PLO, there were few indications that, in office, it would differ substantially. Once Washington had agreed to deal with the PLO and had accepted that Arafat had recognized Israel, it would be virtually impossible for any Australian government, but particularly a Labor government, to try to be more pro-Israel than the United States.

Nazi War Criminals

There was, however, one matter on which an incoming Liberal-National government might well take a markedly different attitude to that of the Hawke government—war-crimes trials. After lengthy and often acrimonious debate, the Australian Parliament, in early 1988, passed legislation to enable the investigation, trial, and punishment of Nazi war criminals found to be resident in Australia. As with the United States, Canada, and more recently Britain, the proposed legislation and subsequent investigations proved bitterly controversial in some sectors of public opinion. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, Australia had accepted hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Europe with demonstrably inadequate screening techniques. Government investigators estimated that hundreds of Nazi war criminals, many from East European countries, could have entered Australia. Although the government's investigations unit was said to be concentrating its inquiries on between 70 and 100 Australian residents, only a handful of prosecutions were likely to be undertaken.

When the Hawke government sought bipartisan support for its war-crimes initiative, the Liberal-National opposition said it favored the legislation—in principle. However, under pressure from East European émigré communities, who denounced the legislation as a group libel against them, it did not support the measure in practice. The opposition claimed that the war-crimes provisions could be misused against Australian ex-servicemen and that prosecutions would be too dependent on evidence from Soviet sources. The investigations unit, led by a senior civil servant, Robert Greenwood, was understood to be preparing to launch its first prosecutions in 1990, if legal challenges to the legislation did not succeed. But some observers believed that if a Liberal-National government came to office it would, over time, disband the investigations unit and drop the whole process of war-crimes inquiry.

Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism

The widespread and drawn-out debate over war-crimes legislation exposed Australian Jews to a virulent, and mostly unprecedented, anti-Semitic campaign emanating largely from some of the East European émigré groups. Anti-Jewish statements and cartoons also appeared in sections of the Christian church media, where Jews were portrayed as seeking revenge instead of forgiveness, and in the mainstream media, where some editorialists and columnists accused Jews of abusing
their allegedly disproportionate political influence to push through the war-crimes legislation. In reality, while the Jewish leadership undoubtedly supported the government’s decisions to proceed with the legislation, the recommendations to proceed were made at every point by non-Jewish senior civil servants, in many cases retired, who were largely immune to political lobbying. Even though the prosecution of ex-Nazis was presented to the government by its panel of investigators as a matter of law and justice, it was widely portrayed as a “Jewish issue.” Some influential writers, especially among the conservative and neoconservative Right, who had traditionally been pro-Israel and sympathetic to Jewish concerns, not only attacked the war-crimes legislation but turned against Israel, world Jewry, and the local Jewish leadership. Jews were taken aback by the reversal, but it became clear that the critics were those with a strong anti-Soviet stance who identified with the émigré communities, such as the Australian-Ukrainian associations, who were the most opposed to the war-crimes legislation. The conflict led to bitter exchanges and the breakup of some informal political alliances which Jewish leaders and intellectuals had formed over the previous 25 years.

While there was an undoubted increase of “verbal” and “physical” manifestations of anti-Semitism—and in a country where such incidents had been rare they stood out—the evidence from public-opinion survey data continued to show that Jews were among the most accepted minorities in Australia. Still, the “old-style” anti-Semites, mostly organized around the League of Rights and its leader, Eric Butler, were using the growing resentment in some areas against Asian immigration to fuel anti-Semitism. The league’s approach tried to exploit the worsening economic conditions, particularly in rural areas, and to blame them on various combinations of Asian immigration, Japanese investment, and the Jews. In some Australian states, particularly semitropical Queensland, which was often called “the deep North,” the League of Rights had been successful in infiltrating some political parties. But it received a setback when a senior federal politician formerly associated with the group exposed its racist activities in a widely reported parliamentary statement.

Anti-Zionism, almost invariably spilling over into criticism of “Jewish influence” or “Jewish media control” or the “well-heeled Jewish lobby,” remained a concern, heightened by the media coverage of the intifada during 1988. The growing sympathy for the PLO shown by the Australian government and the increase in propaganda activity by PLO supporters in key public-opinion areas, such as schools and universities, had led to wider acceptance by public opinion of a pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel viewpoint.
Demography

The data from the 1986 national census showed an overall increase of some 12 percent, over the previous five years, in the Australian Jewish population. Allowing for those who did not reply to the elective question on religion, and the estimated increase in immigration since the census was taken, community demographers reached a figure of 90,000 for the total Jewish population. The estimated figures for the main cities were: Melbourne—42,000; Sydney—37,000; Perth—6,000; Adelaide—2,000; Brisbane and the Gold Coast—2,000.

The fastest growing community was Perth in Western Australia, whose size had almost doubled to 6,000 between 1986 and 1989. The growth was almost entirely due to immigrants from South Africa, who were attracted by Perth's Indian Ocean temperate climate, economic opportunities, life-style, and relative proximity to South Africa.

It was estimated that some 15,000 Jews from South Africa had migrated to Australia during the 1970s and '80s. Although more South African Jews were expected to seek entry, Canberra, ever sensitive to the political implications of its dealings with South Africa, had not made it easy for white Africans wanting to settle in Australia.

Russian Jews had also begun to come in growing numbers, after a decade of almost no migration from the Soviet Union. Communal welfare agencies were bracing themselves for a substantial increase in Russian Jews opting for Australia as an alternative to the United States or Canada. However, it was not certain how flexible the Australian immigration authorities would be toward those seeking entry visas outside the framework of family reunion and how liberally the refugee category would be applied, if at all.

Intermarriage rates remained relatively low—between 5 and 10 percent—in the main communities, though higher in the smaller centers. Although reliable figures on divorce were not available, the rate was widely assumed to be increasing, judging by the number of gittin (religious divorce decrees) given by the rabbinical courts and the evidence available from schools and welfare agencies. In a community still strongly influenced by traditional values, the agencies were just beginning to examine the implications of this trend.

Communal Affairs

Despite the downturn in the Australian economy, which was hard hit by the 1987 stock-market crash and a burgeoning balance-of-payments deficit, the Jewish communities in the main cities continued to expand their network of institutions, encouraged by the growth of some 12 percent in the Jewish population during the 1980s, due largely to the immigration of South African and Russian Jews.
Jews continued to make their mark in Australian public life, the professions, and business. In the latter field their success was particularly noteworthy, with at least 50 Jews reportedly among the 200 wealthiest Australians. The widely publicized success of many Jewish entrepreneurs was greeted with mixed feelings by the Jewish community as a whole. While Jews were generally better off than average, the community still had pockets of hardship, and many younger Jews were entering the salaried professions rather than going into business. But, taken as a whole, in economic terms, Australian Jews constituted a remarkable success story.

The Australian Jewish leadership and virtually all communal organizations remained strongly supportive of Israel, following the outbreak of the intifada in December 1987. There were some dissenting groups, based mainly around the Jewish Left, but they could muster only limited support in the community at large. Unlike American Jewry and, to an extent, some elements of European Jewry, no Australian Jewish leader of any standing publicly expressed criticism of Israeli government policies.

The coincidence of Australia's 200th anniversary and Israel's 40th formed the backdrop to many communal events during 1988. Among the more noteworthy was the reception, in August, to mark Israel's anniversary, organized by the House of Representatives and the Senate in the Australian Parliament. Arranged at the initiative of Mark Leibler, president of the Zionist Federation of Australia, the event was the first of its kind to be held in the new Parliament House after its opening by Queen Elizabeth in May 1988. It was attended by almost all of the more than 200 federal MPs, 20 ambassadors, and Jewish leaders from around Australia.

Although the South African influx caused a certain amount of tension between older residents and the newcomers, it transformed Perth's Jewish community, which had increasingly suffered from its static, no-growth limitations. The new migration—mostly younger people—boosted the number of students at Perth's Carmel School, the city's only Jewish day school, from 270 to 600 in two years. It was estimated that the school would have 1,000 pupils by 1992. South African Jews also made their impact in the main centers of Melbourne and Sydney. Coming from a community with a longer and more recognized tradition of Jewish professional service than in Australia, which had not yet produced its own cadre of Jewish civil servants, they were moving into senior communal service roles as rabbis, administrators, educators, welfare workers, and journalists.

The Jewish press experienced growth and change in the period under review. In August 1987, Melbourne businessman Richard Pratt bought the Melbourne-based weekly Australian Jewish News from the Rubinstein family, which had founded the paper and owned it for 53 years. In October 1987, the Melbourne paper joined the Sydney-based Australian Jewish Times, owned by the Klein family, in a joint venture to publish both newspapers. Over the next two years, both newspapers were redesigned and reorganized. The Melbourne paper, in addition to its English-language edition, also continued to publish Die Yiddishe Neyess, a 12-page weekly in Yiddish.

In Melbourne and Sydney, and to a lesser degree in the smaller cities, the Jewish
community also had access to multilingual and community radio networks for the broadcast of programs of Jewish interest. In Melbourne, community programs were aired a total of eight hours a week in English, Hebrew, and Yiddish.

Nobel laureate and author Elie Wiesel made his first visit to Australia in November 1988, his public lectures drawing large audiences. In Melbourne, in March, the first Jewish Concert in the Park, a musical presentation of Jewish singers, dancers, and massed choirs, drew a crowd of 7,000.

**Soviet Jewry**

Australian Jewry had a long and active involvement in the Soviet Jewry movement, dating back to the early '60s when the Australian government was the first to raise the question of Soviet Jewry and human rights in the United Nations. Since then the campaign for Soviet Jewry in Australia had brought together communal leadership, synagogues, women's groups, and students to give Australian Jewry an unusually high profile internationally on the issue. In the period under review, that involvement culminated in a cultural agreement signed in Australia between the Soviet Ministry of Culture and the president of the Australian Jewish community, Isi Leibler. Leibler, a vice-president of the World Jewish Congress (WJC) and active in the international Soviet Jewry movement for more than 30 years, had campaigned for many years for the release of the refuseniks. After a number of the leading refuseniks were released in late 1987 and early 1988, some of them due to the direct intercession with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev by Prime Minister Hawke, Leibler hosted 15 of them, who had come from Israel, at a gala reception in Melbourne in May. The evening—the undisputed highlight of the Jewish communal year—was attended by 3,000 guests, including Prime Minister Hawke, WJC president Edgar Bronfman, and many national and international dignitaries. As part of the program, a live radio-link to Moscow made possible a conversation between the Australian prime minister and remaining refuseniks.

The cultural agreement with Moscow, which followed a few months later, provided for the opening in the Soviet capital of the Solomon Mikhoels Cultural Center in February 1989, as a joint endeavor of Australian Jewry, the WJC, and the Soviet Ministry of Culture. The Mikhoels Center was to house a library, lecture hall, theatrical and musical facilities, and provide a meeting place for Moscow's Jews. It would also develop cultural exchange programs between Israel, world Jewry, and Soviet Jews.

**Education**

The emphasis on Jewish day-school education remained strong. A growing concern in Melbourne, where the Jewish day-school movement, with nine schools, was at its strongest, was the "drop-out factor" at high-school level. In recent years, even though an estimated 80 percent of the elementary-school-age population attended
Jewish schools, the figure had fallen to 50 percent in high school. Some Jewish educators expressed concern over the growing enrollment of Jewish students in private church schools. Although the reasons for this shift were not clearly understood, causative factors included dissatisfaction among parents and students over what was said to be excessive academic pressure in some Jewish day schools, the additional demands of Jewish studies, and in some cases the burden of high fees.

Despite these concerns, the overall picture was one of growth and development. Melbourne's Mount Scopus College, with 2,500 students one of the largest Jewish schools in the world, launched a five-year campaign to raise A$20 million for the upgrading of facilities and the introduction of new educational projects. Sydney's Moriah College began building a new campus to accommodate 1,500 students. On Sydney's North Shore, the rapid influx of South African immigrants placed severe strains on Masada College's campus, which was expanded to cope with hundreds of new students. In Brisbane, the only main center of Jewish population without a day school, plans were under way to open the first such classes in 1990.

In common with the trend internationally, there was an upsurge in interest in Jewish studies at university and college level. Melbourne University appointed Mark Baker the first Arnold Bloch Memorial Lecturer in Jewish History, and there were moves to introduce similar courses at Monash University. Sydney University extended the range of Jewish courses available through the Department of Middle East Studies. Victoria College, also in Melbourne, offered a bachelor's degree in Jewish studies, and a growing number of other universities and colleges were introducing courses in Holocaust studies, Israel and the Middle East, Hebrew, and Yiddish. Interestingly, many of the courses were more popular with non-Jewish students than with Jewish undergraduates.

A three-day international conference on the future of Jewish education in Australia drew 1,000 teachers, educators, and academics from around the country and from Israel, the United States, and the Asia-Pacific region.

**Personalia**

Several prominent Australian Jews received the Order of Australia in 1987 and 1988: businessman and philanthropist Richard Pratt, lawyer and former president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry Leslie Caplan, and lawyer and president of the Zionist Federation of Australia Mark Leibler.

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"College" is the term used for a privately funded primary and secondary school combined.